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PREPUBLICATION VERSION

The swing to early intervention and prevention and its implications for social work¹

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Abstract

Social investment does not yet appear to have entered the social work lexicon yet reflects a shift toward early intervention and prevention and policies relating to early childhood education and care across the world. Recently, the Prime Minister of Australia announced new measures relating to child care to ease the burden on working families and ensure high-standard care for preschool children. Also announced was a mental health check to be administered by general practitioners for children as young as three years old. This change in social policy follows closely on the heels of the backlash against ameliorative welfare and move toward the preventive end of the social care spectrum. This paper examines developments leading to the social investment approach. It begins by defining social investment and providing an overview of key theorists contributing to our understanding of what 'social investment is investing in' and ends with a discussion of its implications for social work.

Keywords: early intervention and prevention, neoliberalism, social inclusion, social investment, social work

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During the Blair (1997–2007) years the UK saw a shift to the policy of social inclusion, which began to influence Australian policy when the Rudd Labor government came into power in 2007. This policy sought to bring the most marginalised groups into mainstream society to make them socially and economically productive in neoliberal terms and full participants in society in social inclusion terms. At the same time, changes to social work's role, as Parton and O'Byrne (2000) highlighted, led to it becoming highly defensive, overly proceduralised, and narrowly concerned with assessing, managing, and insuring against risk. Accountability regimes subjected social work practice to ever more detailed reviews, inspections, audits, managerial oversight, and prescription. While social inclusion fit well with social work values centred on championing the rights of poor, marginalised, oppressed, and socially excluded groups in society, it was juxtaposed against neoliberal stringency and punitive welfare-to-work programs. Even as an instrument of social inclusion, social work's role was tightly prescribed. Like social inclusion, social investment proclaims a focus on human and social capital – capitalising on human and community strengths, capacities, and capabilities and leveraging potential to overcome disadvantage. Third Way social inclusion policies based on active citizenship and communitarianism (Stepney and Popple, 2008) became the core of David Cameron's 'Big Society', which further embeds notions of family and community responsibility in social policy along with austerity measures to reduce welfare costs. Like social inclusion, social investment seeks to strengthen the capacity of the third sector to deliver a 'new spirit of enterprise and innovation to *early years support*' (Goddard, 2012, n.p. emphasis added).

While social inclusion came with the rhetoric of social and community participation, in contemporary policy it increasingly came to mean 'in work' or 'on benefits but on the way to work' in a reformed welfare system designed primarily to ensure that all economically active members of the population were in employment and 'contributing' to or 'participating'

economically in society. Hence Jenson (2010) observes how key elements of the social investment discourse herald a shift from old welfare concerns with protecting people *from* the market, toward encouraging their integration *into* the market (see also Featherstone, 2006). Known as ‘active welfare’, these activation policies seek to eliminate so-called ‘passive welfare dependency’, while social investment promises to build human and social capital to make people full contributors to the economy. Founded on psychological research on human cognitive and personality development, social investment moves the focus of social policy away from remedial welfare to early childhood education and care. It is consistent with policy and service initiatives in the UK since 1997, wherein ‘investing in children’ and developing ‘responsible parents’ have become core features of the political landscape (Fawcett, Featherstone, and Goddard, 2004; Featherstone, 2006; Frost and Parton, 2009).

Defining social investment

The notion of welfare as an *investment* in human potential arose as a counterweight to vociferous and strident attacks on the welfare state said to encourage human dependency on the State resulting in an ever-burgeoning welfare debt. Hence social investment is generally regarded as a policy option ‘beyond the brute neo-liberal prescription of welfare cuts and structural adjustment’ (Mahon, 2010: 172, see also Jenson, 2010; Peck and Tickell, 2002; Perkins, Nelms, and Smyth, 2004). According to Jenson (2010), it:

represents an approach to social policy different from the social protection logic of post-1945 welfare regimes as well as the safety-net stance of neoliberals ... [who] downplayed the role of the state and promoted ‘structural adjustments’ that would make markets distributors of well-being, families responsible for their own opportunities, and the community sector the final safety net (p. 62).

Neoliberals envisaged a reduced role for government and opted for privatisation, enabling competition, contracting out, driving an internal market for public goods and services, and supply-side economics making industry less dependent on state support and subsidies. In its stead, this new Conservatism emphasised the autonomy of the individual while:

Cuts in local authority funding and inadequate specific grants paid to social service departments [in the UK] to support community care services for those with mental health problems had a detrimental effect on the ability of providers to meet the needs of a growing number of people in the community seeking help (Taylor, 2000, p. 374).

The Third Way ‘enabling state’ designed to empower non-state agencies to deliver services was further entrenched in Cameron’s notion of the Big Society (Gray, Healy and Crofts, 2003; Jordan, 2011; Taylor, 2000). It redefined the State’s role ‘as one of supporting *investment* in individual human capital through education and ... lifelong learning, with the aim of promoting labour market participation and individual employment opportunity’ (Clarke, 2006, p. 702 emphasis added). In short, social investment was seen to take hold when it became obvious that the predicted neoliberal solution had not materialised because governments’ continued involvement in welfare and social spending did not decrease nor did the market take care of social problems. Instead, child poverty rates escalated. The ‘polysemic’ nature of social investment increased its appeal to different sides of politics and enhanced its diffusion (Jenson, 2010). Unlike the ‘enabling state’, the ‘social investment state’ posits a future-oriented role for the State in redirecting social policy, social institutions, and social programs toward *investing in human capital*. In a nutshell, social investment seeks to reduce the need for welfare by investing in children and families to make them productive contributors to society (Lister, 2004; Sen, 2003; Young, 1995) and, to this end, sees economic and social policy as inextricably linked. It sees high investment in skills, research,

technology, childcare, and community development as essential for sustainable growth. As Lister (2004) observes, it emphasises ‘economic opportunity in the name of social justice as well as of economic prosperity and ... the achievement of security through investment in and redistribution of “opportunities rather than just ... income”’ (p. 158). Lister (2004) lists eight key factors in social investment as follows:

1. A discourse of social investment in place of ‘tax and spend’.
2. Investment in human and social capital: children and community as emblems.
3. Children prioritised as citizen-workers of the future with adult-citizenship defined by work obligations.
4. Future-focused.
5. Redistribution of opportunity to promote social inclusion rather than of income to promote equality.
6. Adaptation of individuals and society to promote global competitiveness and to prosper in the knowledge economy.
7. Integration of social and economic policy but with the former still the ‘handmaiden’ of the latter.
8. A preference for targeted, often means-tested’ programmes (p. 160).

There are, however, two major strands to social investment thinking emanating from the US-influenced World Bank and European influenced OECD (Mahon, 2010). The US social policy model remains largely conservative and neoliberal even though it attempts to ‘integrate elements of social liberalism, such as Sen’s emphasis on developing capabilities, into a residual social policy discourse refashioned to meet the demands of economic globalization’ (Mahon, 2010, p. 173). Its overriding emphasis is provision through the market, with public support and residual welfare targeted at the very poor. Influenced by the work of Nobel prizewinning economist James Heckman’s cost-benefit analyses of human

capital formation, this US thinking had a major influence on the World Bank's (1995) focus on early childhood development bolstered by psychological and neuroscientific research on the significant influence of the first three years in shaping human development. It strongly favoured investment in the young over adults.

The US-influenced World Bank approach might be seen as an entrenchment of neoliberal economics rather than a move beyond it for it led to cuts in government provision and a focus on the development of private initiative seen to enhance consumer choice. As Sherraden (2003) noted, it heralded a shift in social policy from the welfare state to the social investment state, that is, from income support toward social and economic development (see also Gray, 2010; Midgley, 1995).

The European-influenced OECD likewise focuses on the very poor, and especially those of the next generation. Its discourse reflects the influence of Western European, especially Scandinavian, experience, where the norms of universality and gender equality remain central. It promotes the preservation of minimum levels of nutrition, income, and services along with the 'serious restructuring' of social services to achieve the 'maximum cost effectiveness and internal efficiency' through 'creative reliance on community action and the informal sector' (Jolly, 1991, p. 1810); and the need to scale back existing welfare regimes to make way for programmes targeting the poorest, especially children (Mahon, 2010). The OECD envisages an important role for cost-effective 'family and community interventions' (Mahon, 2010, p. 175). As noted by Newman et al. (2004:), 'governments – in the UK, the USA and across much of Western Europe – have attempted to shift the focus towards various forms of co-production with other agencies and with citizens themselves through partnerships, community involvement and strategies of "responsibilization"' (p. 204). Like the World Bank approach, it sought to downsize government and increase private sector involvement through responsible citizenship. Both approaches sought to transfer

responsibility to individuals and communities with the primary aim of enhancing employability and economic competitiveness of those ‘on the margins and on those “at-risk” of social exclusion’ (Jenson, 2010, p. 63). With the solution for poverty laying in increasing the possibilities of people’s integration in the labour market (Lister, 2003), social investment buys into the inescapable neoliberal goal of targeted welfare, of finding the most effective means of delivering services and benefits to those who need them most. It galvanises macroeconomic policies around ‘people-centred’ economic outcomes, such as enhanced employability and income-earning capacity. However, its ‘human capital investment push’ depends largely on a ‘child-centred social investment strategy’ (Riesco, 2007, p. 3), which rests on three principles:

1. *Learning is the pillar of future economies and societies*: This leads to significant policy attention to preschool children through early childhood development.
2. *Assuring the future is a better option than ameliorating conditions in the here and now*: This leads to social spending on children to break the intergenerational cycle of poverty.
3. *Successful individuals enrich our common future and investing in their success is beneficial for the community as a whole, now and into the future*: This leads to child-centred policy interventions (Jenson and Saint-Martin, 2006: 435).

Like the welfare state and social inclusion models preceding it, the social investment perspective still recognises a legitimate role for state action but shifts the focus from social *spending* to social *investment* calling for proactive, inclusive social policies *investing* ‘in people’s capabilities and the realization of their potential, not merely insuring against misfortune’ (Jenson, 2010, p. 63). The shorthand term for these policy initiatives is ‘activation policies’ following the neoliberal emphasis on ‘the importance of paid employment and other forms of market income’ (Jenson, 2010, p. 63). However, the social

investment approach softens the blow, since – unlike neoliberals promoting market participation as the main solution – it acknowledges the limitations of the market and need for some state action to ensure an income for everyone. It sees poverty and social exclusion as ‘real problems’ noting ‘a mere job’ is not the solution.

The focus on human capacity in economics has its grounding in the work of psychologists studying the development of cognition and personality traits and their relationship to people’s eventual earning capacity (Bowles et al., 2001). As Borghans et al. (2008) note, ‘There is ample evidence from economics and psychology that cognitive ability is a powerful predictor of economic and social outcomes’ (p. 972). This research has led to a focus on early childhood development, family life, and the conditions needed for the development of motivated, healthy, economically productive adults. As a result of this psychological research, economists have begun to use personality inventories. Most prominent has been the Big Five first proposed by Goldberg in 1971, namely, Conscientiousness, Emotional Stability – also called Neuroticism, Agreeableness, Openness to Experience – also called Intellect or Culture, and Extraversion. The Big Five Personality Inventory has established ‘over the life cycle, the development of cognitive ability is influenced by personality traits such as curiosity, ambition, and perseverance’ (Borghans et al., 2008, p. 974) that influence people’s earning potential. Underlying this research is the belief that cognitive ability (IQ) is affected by personality factors which most define as situationally-specific patterns of thought, feelings, and behaviour that evolve through the life cycle and persist over time (Borghans et al., 2008).

Economists have embraced this scientific data as pointers to the kind of education programmes needed, beginning in early childhood, to develop economically productive citizens. As Lister (2004) notes, ‘child as citizen-worker of the future has emerged as an icon of the social investment State’ (p. 158). Heckman’s work, in particular, shows the value of

investing in early childhood as a viable alternative to increased welfare. In fact, Heckman (2000) notes that, without supportive social services, increasing welfare benefits to problem families merely throws good money after bad. A downside is that much of the policy embrace of Heckman and others' (2007) work on early childhood focuses on the costcutting side of the equation while neglecting the important proviso of the need for inclusive and supportive social services to families across the lifespan and not just in early childhood.

Key theorists of social investment

Highly influential in the social investment approach is Sen's (2003) theory of 'human capabilities' which helped to marshal ethical claims in support of programmes investing in human capital (Mahon, 2010). For Sen (2003), 'the capabilities ... adults enjoy are deeply conditional on their experiences as children' and 'a securely preparatory childhood can augment our skill in living a good life' (p. 78). His capabilities approach became part of structural 'adjustment with a human face' leading the US-influenced World Bank to focus exclusively on the poor and disadvantaged.

To bolster Sen's human capabilities approach, Heckman (2000) made the utilitarian case for early child development with his research on human capital formation showing 'the rate of return to a dollar of investment made while a person is young is higher than the rate of return to the same dollar made at a later age ... Learning begets learning; [and] skills ... acquired early on facilitate later learning' (Carneiro and Heckman, 2005, p. 90).

As in social inclusion economic analysis in social investment is all about people at the margins of society (Carneiro and Heckman, 2005). Work to date on the harmful consequences of bad family environments raises important questions on the right to intervene in these families to reverse these outcomes. What Heckman and his colleagues have done is highlight the importance of noncognitive skills development in the preschool years – hence

the importance of strong families in the early years – in a policy context where schooling has focused mainly on cognitive ability (see also Cunha and Heckman, 2006, 2007, 2009; Cunha et al., 2006). The noncognitive skills that are so important are those personality and motivational traits uncovered in the psychological research discussed above.

Influential in the European OECD discourse has been the work of Esping-Andersen which seeks to retain Leftist pro-welfare views while combining them with broader notions of social investment more palatable to Right-wing critics of the costly welfare state. Esping-Andersen and colleagues (2002) have added a strong emphasis on measures to invest in children and the time-pressed adult-earner family (Mahon, 2010). Drawing mainly on the Scandinavian welfare-state model, they favoured policies facilitating a balance between work and family responsibilities, including parental leave, which encouraged working-age women and men to remain active labour market participants. Esping-Andersen et al. (2002) saw a child-centred social investment strategy as one which would make it worthwhile for parents to remain in the labour market and thus reduce workless households. For Esping-Andersen et al. (2002) a child-centred strategy drew attention to the family and earning capacity of adults to foster healthy child development. He argued investments of this nature reduced need and resulted in cost savings in the long term. This led to his broader focus on issues relating to women's work, child care, and other situational or structural considerations.

Giddens (1998), to whom the original naming of the social investment approach is attributed, took a different view (Lister, 2004). He saw the 'social investment state' as *entrepreneurial* and future-oriented. It was one that would invest in human and social capital rather than merely ameliorate problems arising from past failed social programmes. Social investment was part of his 'Third Way' adopted by the New Labour Government in the UK (1997-2010) which sought a middle path between neoliberalism and postwar welfare statism in an 'enabling state' (Taylor, 2000). Rather than the passive welfare the New Right

associated with dependency, Giddens's (1998) favoured rational choice theory in his notion of positive welfare which envisioned a citizenry of 'responsible risk takers' or consumers choosing among a range of alternatives. This provided the central platform of consumer choice (for neoliberals on the Right) or service-user participation (for welfarists on the Left). State-led social investment included lifelong education, social entrepreneurship, and public-private partnerships. Thus Blair's New Labour Government frequently described its actions as social investments as it embarked on its program of privatising welfare services now continuing under the Cameron Coalition government.

Giddens' use of the idea of social investment was more supply-side oriented and limited in its proposed interventions than were Esping-Andersen et al.'s (2002) proposals. It is not surprising, therefore, that Esping-Andersen was critical of New Labour and called instead for his own 'truly effective and sustainable social investment strategy ... biased towards preventive policy' (Esping-Andersen et al., 2002, p. 5). Visible here, in other words, is not only a battle between two well-known European intellectuals struggling for policy influence but also the range and ambiguity of the notion of social investment. Policy communities could appeal to one version or the other or even combine the two, as the European Union did in its preparations for the renewal of the UN's Millennium Development Goals adopted in 2000. Their revision between 2006 and 2008 as the Lisbon strategy (Jenson, 2008) followed the European Commission's (2004) declared intention 'to become the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustaining economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion' (p. 10). With the eradication of poverty as their aim, the MDGs provided impetus for poverty alleviation policy from North to South and East to West. Across the globe the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank guided national action plans, poverty reduction strategies, and social inclusion programs (International Development Association and IMF, 2002; Noël, 2006).

However, there have been many critiques of this approach and it is to this the discussion now turns.

Some critiques of social investment

Derails the feminist project

In the UK, Sure Start epitomised New Labour's social investment approach and promoted 'a view of mothers as principally responsible for children's development and well-being', risking a 'slide into a moral discourse of social exclusion blaming parents for poor outcomes' (Clarke, 2006, p. 699). Women in social investment discourse figure primarily as maternal agents to be enlisted (and trained) to ensure the development of the next generation: 'Their role as workers, while not unimportant, is clearly secondary' (Mahon, 2010, p. 177). Beyond its adherence to prevailing middle-class conceptions of motherhood and the women's role in the family and society more broadly, social investment has been critiqued for overlooking gender inequalities as it shifts the focus to 'levelling the playing field' between boys' and girls' 'access to education' (Mahon, 2010, p. 176). Of particular interest are 'females as girls (human capital in the making) or as mothers able to affect the quantity and quality of future human capital (World Bank, 1995). Construing malnutrition in young children as the product of traditional childcare practices and the 'environment to which the child is exposed' (Psacharopoulos, 1995, p. 31) rather than a structural or material problem ignores structural adjustment policies that have exacerbated poverty. Hence those engaged in research and policy analysis relating to the impact of social investment argue for a more compassionate 'political ethics of care' (Featherstone, 2004, 2006).

In commending non-formal, community-based programmes and public-private partnerships as less expensive forms of early childhood development, the World Bank's *Investing in Children* also sees such programmes as offering local women 'employment

opportunities' when rather than provide genuine early childhood education and care they also result in the underemployment of parents, income inequalities, insufficient transfer payments, and a lack of social support programmes (Mahon, 2010; Penn, 2002).

Despite the differences between the World Bank and OECD, both emphasise macroeconomic realities essential to economic globalisation and new public management's focus on the expansion of private provision, including cheaper forms of childcare. This supports the argument that the post-Washington Consensus social policy discourses directed to the advanced capitalist countries – as well as to the Global South – can both be described as inclusive liberalism, seen as a form of 'roll-out' neoliberalism (Craig and Porter, 2004; Mahon, 2010). The US variant especially leaves the majority of those in need to fend for themselves in the market while the European iteration still supports universality. A critical difference, however, is the treatment of women. The World Bank, departing from current USA practice, if not from the 'family values' of the USA New Right, emphasises women's (current and future) maternal role. In contrast, the OECD echoes the European Union's commitment to women's equality with men in the labour market and concomitantly, the importance of shared parental leave (Esping-Andersen et al., 2002; Mahon, 2010).

Double standards on development

While the OECD is broadening its reach, its membership consists primarily of advanced capitalist countries, i.e., those considered 'peers', taking European social models as exemplars but when it and the World Bank addresses the South, the tone changes. The World Bank's soft loans come wrapped in policy advice admonishing dependent countries in the South to follow the 'best practices' of the advanced capitalist countries when these countries face quite different circumstances, for example, the ready availability of informal care – nannies for the upper classes, kin and neighbours for the poor – reduces the immediate

demand for childcare. Nevertheless, given early childhood education and care is needed in all contexts (Rosemberg, 2006), the answer is to expand public early childhood education to ‘the urban and rural poor’ (Mahon, 2010, p. 188).

Focus on supply-side economics: Early childhood development and human capital

The emphasis on breaking the intergenerational transfer of poverty leads to a focus on *investments in human capital* mainly through education and, as a result, income-tested conditional cash transfers require certain behaviours with respect to schooling and healthcare for children. These are seen to ‘hold promise for addressing the intergenerational transmission of poverty and fostering social inclusion by explicitly targeting the poor, focusing on children, delivering transfers to women, and changing social accountability relationships between beneficiaries, service providers and governments’ (De la Brière and Rawlings, 2006, p. 4). Thus future-oriented social investment policies stress the long-term advantages of public support early intervention programmes since they provide:

an unequalled opportunity for investment in human capital ... A basic principle is that learning in one life stage begets learning in the next.... ‘The rate of return to a dollar of investment made while a person is young is higher than the rate of return for the same dollar made at a later age’ (OECD, 2006, p. 37).

In economic terms, the emphasis on access to lifelong education and training ‘retains a supply-side focus’ (Jenson, 2010, p. 72) generating educated, employed, and active citizens able to participate in competitive labour markets (Dobrowolsky, 2003). The idea that ‘social spending is not a burden but an investment in economic growth’ (Jenson, 2010, p. 72) depends crucially on the government’s ability to provide adequate services to ensure all

sectors of the population get access to education and work. But, being forward looking and seeing ‘investment in human resources through health, education and population ... [as] good for growth’ (Hall, 2007, p. 155) cannot work if there is a problem in the supply of social services.

Links with neoliberalism

According to Noël (2006), social investment is not new but has always characterised neoliberal thinking on welfare which should not be about ‘spending’ but about ‘investing’ in the future labour force. Thus work – or active labour market policies and productive labour – has always featured heavily in neoliberal welfare thinking. Its aim has been to ‘manage’ rather than ‘deal with’ poverty (Schram, 2012; Soss, Fording, and Schram, 2011). The turn toward poverty and social exclusion, especially in Europe, was an extension of this neoliberal agenda, wherein unemployment was seen as ‘the primary cause of poverty and social exclusion, and gave rise, in particular, to concerns about new forms of poverty’ (Noël, 2006, p. 315), especially increasing child poverty. Tackling poverty and social exclusion was to be achieved primarily through activation policies and labour market integration. Noël (2006) discerns three variants to the argument about neoliberalism:

1. *Poverty reduction policies remain at the margins of basically orthodox economic policies:* The EU’s focus on reducing unemployment, poverty, and social exclusion is anchored ‘firmly within a general policy commitment to economic orthodoxy, tight control of public finances, and priority to anti-inflationary rather than full employment targets’ (Kleinman, 2002, pp. 189-190), a situation which privileges welfare-to-work more than redistributive policies. They are reforms at the margins’ (Pollack, 2000: 281).

2. *The very design of poverty reduction policies is neoliberal:* The new activation and targeted policies of Europe are meant to improve the labour supply and selectively reduce poverty in the way of the prevailing neoliberal consensus (Barbier, 2002). Likewise, in supporting economic growth and social stability, the poverty reduction strategy promoted by the World Bank and the IMF is ‘a “Third Way” re-morphing of neoliberal approaches’ (Craig and Porter, 2003, p. 54) placing global economic integration first, good governance second, and limited poverty reduction third.
3. *The very project of reducing poverty may be portrayed as a neoliberal idea:* Neoliberalism replaced the post-war period ideal of equality with the more limited notion of solidarity and made poverty and social exclusion, rather than social inequality, the central social issues (Jobert and Théret, 1994, p. 64).

Further, social investment is closely aligned with neoliberal thinking that devolves responsibility for social inclusion and well-being onto individuals, families, and communities. International development organisations promote the latter through NGO involvement rather than state action. For example, the World Bank, in its exclusive focus on the severely disadvantaged, favoured the growth of private schools as they would let the ‘elite’ pay for their children’s education, thus thereby freeing spaces in public schools for poor children (World Bank, 1995, p. 11). Thus the World Bank’s social investment discourse holds to the original neoliberal thrust of the Washington Consensus, while conceding a role for the ‘right kind’ of social policy now seen as child-centred development while leaving present-oriented welfare bound by stringent and punitive neoliberal work-to-welfare measures relatively untouched. Social investment policies emphasising the development and mobilisation of human capital – or leveraging potential – mainly through early childhood and childhood education and claiming to safeguard the future needs of the knowledge-based economy are doing little to deal with the real social problems facing social workers now.

They are, in effect, deflecting attention away from the hard-to-reach welfare client, families living with mental illness and disability, households unable to pay their bills though both parents are working, the ravages of addictions, and such stuff confronting social workers on a daily basis.

Social investment: Implications for social work

The key focus on ‘investing in children’ and developing ‘responsible parents’ has ‘considerable implications for policies and practices in the arena of family support’ (Featherstone, 2006, p. 5). However, the move to early intervention and prevention characteristic of the social investment approach is unlikely to position social workers in the frontline of preventive family intervention (Stepney and Ford, 2012). This argument is not new. Littlechild (2001) noted the ‘curtailment of social workers’ opportunities to undertake preventive work, and increasing emphasis on investigative, accusatorial and risk assessment work within what frequently become situations of conflict (n.p.) in statutory child care in English and Welsh social services departments. Though they have always known the importance of preventive intervention and family support, a thorough understanding of what social investment entails and where it stems from in contemporary policy might better position social workers to ‘balance protection measures and plans, alongside prevention strategies as part of a wider commitment to CP [child protection]’ (Stepney and Ford, 2012, p. ix, see also Featherstone, 2006 for an analysis of family support policy).

Heckman’s belief that more is needed than pouring extra resources into poor households resonates for social workers who have always known that social interventions must accompany income support. Yet support for families in the community and community care generally is not always a sanctioned focus for social work. In fact, in the UK the:

modernisation of the welfare state and recent policy reforms in mental health, child care and the personalisation of adult social care, whatever merits they have brought to the protection of 'high risk' service users, have not assisted social workers to develop more preventive community based strategies. Similar trends in the tension between child protection and family support, together with the rise of a more child focussed orientation, can be found in other European welfare states, as well as in Australia, Canada and the USA (Stepney & Ford, 2012, p. ix).

In Australia, these functions fall to community services, often contracted to government, who attempt to maximise short-term government funding by employing volunteers or lower-paid workers. This often means untrained people, usually women from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds providing support for families with complex needs, while social workers are based largely in government services, like health (hospitals), child protection and welfare-to-work programmes. Community-based support and care often falls outside the parameters of professional social work. Where prevention is possible, it 'is more likely to be seen ... as a "Big Society" issue offering scope for volunteering and self-help' (Stepney & Ford, 2012, p. ix).

Possibly the most prolific writers on social investment within the social work literature are James Midgley (1999) and Michael Sherraden (2003) from the USA. Midgley's (1995) pioneering work on social development saw social investment as a productivist approach within a statist model emphasising investments in human capital, cost-effective social programmes, employment, social capital, individual and community assets, and the removal of barriers to economic participation. Sherraden developed the assets-based development approach and has been a key advocate of government investment in matched savings plans for the poor (see Midgley and Sherraden 2000). While Midgley and Sherraden

pushed the development barrel, they also highlighted the beneficial outcomes for the *economy of social* investment along with targeted government spending and ‘increasing cost effectiveness in social welfare’ (Midgley, 1999: 9). As Midgley (1999) noted:

Rather than using scarce resources to maintain needy people on income transfers, the [social investment] approach favors programs that help them to find employment or become self-employed. In this way, they not only earn money but become self-respecting citizens who work, pay taxes, and contribute to economic development (p. 13).

Thus Midgley (1999) calls for social investment in the creation of job opportunities for those outside the open labour market along the lines of the micro-enterprise development programmes in Asia and Africa. There has been an increasing trend within social work to embrace the burgeoning literature on social development but not all of it is couched within the social investment perspective proposed by Sherraden (2003) (see Gray, 2010). Nevertheless, Midgley and Conley (2010) have attempted to outline investment strategies in developmental social work (see also Midgley and Sherraden, 2000).

In Europe, Esping-Andersen’s (1992) contribution to productivist social policy is much-cited in the social work literature as is the Swedish model on which he drew, extolling its social expenditure on adult training and education, employment, job mobility, and family support to maximise economic participation. But where, asks Spratt (2009), ‘are social workers located within strategies to invest in children and families?’ (p. 436)

In many contexts, but especially in the UK and Australia, social work has become pigeonholed at the remedial end of the service continuum (see Carey, 2012; Wrennall, 2010) and plays a minimal role at the supportive early intervention and prevention end of family work. In fact on this continuum, early intervention involves identifying a child in need, which

all too quickly becomes a child, a potential delinquent and so on. Through each point of intervention the child of social work becomes further trapped in the system. Social work, too, is trapped in a 'care' system that 'plays a significant role in the criminalization of children and young people' (Wrennall, 2010, p. 308) rather than seeing them into further or higher education. Many have shown how social work with families, rather than provide assistance to those in need or at risk, does little more than investigate, assess, and subject families to punitive monitoring and surveillance (Jones and Novak, 1993; Lonne, Parton, Thomson, and Harries, 2009; Parton and Frost, 2009, Wrennall, 2010). As Jones (2001) notes, social workers in social services departments tend to take a punitive approach and, 'in many disadvantaged and marginalised working class places, social workers are seen as part of the problem and not as part of the solution' (p. 558). In such a system, the potential of social work to play an emancipatory or future-oriented preventive role is seriously diminished. Hence Spratt (2009) aptly asks: 'How well placed are social workers to manage both present child protection priorities and future-orientated investment strategies?' (p. 436). More pertinent to social investment policy, how likely is it social workers will be relocated to offer early intervention services *investing* in children and their families? For the most part, early child education and care services have been located in the educational sector, where social workers play a relatively minor role. If social workers were to be relocated, what would happen to those suffering the consequences of social exclusion, including poor educational attainment and health, increased risk of criminal behaviour and unemployment, and economic deprivation? In a contemporary environment of austerity, financial stringency and neoliberal paternalism, how will measures for investment be created if returns will only be realised at a future date? Even within contemporary policy with targeted intervention for socially excluded, multiproblem families, Spratt (2009) acknowledges that the threat of taking children into care may be the impetus for families not to engage with services: 'the

calculation of future significant harm to children will become based on a refusal to accept services in which a multiplicity of problems are indicated ... [and this] begins to locate the issues more firmly in the province of child and family social work' (p. 446). However, with multiproblem families, there remains a high probability of poor long-term outcomes. How then might social work survive in short-term environments where the likelihood is poor long-term outcomes?

Clearly, as many social work writers have noted, social work is being marginalised in areas of remedial action and in implementing conditional and punitive welfare. How social workers might reposition themselves to be working in a way consistent with the normative goals of social investment is a crucial question. How can social workers be effective and successful within these highly constrained and conflictual practice contexts? The weight of opinion seems to be they cannot. Nothing short of a drastic change in direction can save the profession from a dismal future. Perhaps social work needs to flee the heat of the child protection kitchen and claw its way back to taking ownership of its early investment in families and children (Wood, 2001). This is where social work began though even then it all too easily became an instrument of distinguishing the deserving from the non-deserving poor in the Victorian era. It seems history is repeating itself. The work of social work in contemporary days of punitive neoliberal welfare seems to have come full circle. There are ample new areas opening for social work's value-based focus, not least the more popular cause of social and environmental justice (Besthorn, 2013; Gray and Coates, 2012; Gray, Coates and Hetherington, 2013; Lysack, 2012). While social work in the UK and Australia has not followed the USA's predominantly clinical social work bent, there are social workers doing good work in the areas of aging, disabilities and mental health. Perhaps further expansion into these areas of the privatised Big Society is worth exploring and rebuilding the

profession's leadership – in professional associations nationally and internationally – to carry social work into domains where its contribution will be valued rather than vilified.

Conclusion

This paper introduced social investment – a heretofore unexplored area in social work – to a social work audience. Since this policy reflects a shift toward early intervention and prevention and early childhood education and care across the world, the thorny question is raised as to how social work might position itself in relation to investing in human and social capital. Given the backlash against ameliorative welfare and child protection, which has pigeonholed social work, some suggestions are made for a move toward the preventive end of the social care spectrum. The paper has examined developments leading to the social investment approach, defined social investment, and provided an overview of key theorists contributing to our understanding of what 'social investment is investing in'. Notwithstanding variations in social work theory and practice across the world, and within the USA, Australia and Europe, an attempt is made to discern future directions for social work toward social and environmental justice and areas of perpetual need within the privatised welfare of the Big Society.

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