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***Abstract***

British social work has been undergoing a series of radical transformations from the 1980s onwards. The main shift has been a move away from the parochial professionalism of the 1970s to a profession that is being constantly reshaped by the impulses of the new managerialism to meet the needs of the neoliberal state.

From the vantage point of Marxian alienation theory this article analyses the experiences of 16 social workers of being alienated and estranged from how they desire their labour to be. The main finding to emerge from qualitative semi-structured is that the logics of new managerialism lead to a loss of the object of labour (the service user) by substituting that object with another: the case report. That report requires none of the creativity and skills that the social workers wish to exercise in the labour. Instead it dominates and structures their work whilst distorting their subjectivity.

**Key words: alienation, social work, paperwork, labour process, product, Marx.**

***Introduction***

British social work has undergone a series of deep transformations in the wake of various neo-liberal projects introduced by a succession of Conservative and Labour administrations since the late 1970s. As Harris has attested social work is now a business structured by the hyper-rationalist impulses of the new managerialism. It is no longer, what he terms, the 'parochial professionalism' of the 1970s, where social workers could exercise considerable autonomy in their interactions with service users, with very little oversight from careerist managers or the strictures of state bureaucracy. A number of social work academics have made claims that contemporary social work is not a rewarding place in which to work. The likes of Carey (2003, 2007,2008, 2012), Harris (1998, 1999, 2003), Jones (2001), Postle (2001) and Smith et al (2017) have developed over several decades an analysis of social work that uncovers a workplace that is pressured, unrewarding and demoralising.

What I wish to add here is to interpret and analyse what it is like to be a social worker in the contemporary United Kingdom from the perspective of Marxian alienation theory (Marx 1977, 1990, 1993). Ferguson and Lavallette (2004) have previously speculated on the usefulness of alienation in analysing contemporary social work. More recently they have claimed that

alienation theory is equipped to deal with the challenges and maladies of contemporary capitalism (Lavalette and Ferguson 2018). They argue that alienation theory offers an analysis of the powerlessness of service users and the lack of control over their work experienced by social workers. By understanding their parallel situations as that of alienation they argue that move can lead to a more emancipatory direction of travel for social work that reaches beyond the horizons of postmodernist discourse analysis with its tendency to lapse into the individuating impulses of neoliberalism. This article builds on their work by providing empirical insights into the alienation experienced by social workers and the exact historical, as opposed to logical, form of alienation found in the social work labour process. The three articles should, therefore, be read as an invitation to debate and discuss alienation in social work, both for service users and for social workers.

My analysis is based on 16 qualitative semi-structured interviews conducted with participants who are social workers employed in the British state social work sector. The article begins by sketching out the study design of the research, where the use of abduction as a mode of inference and a Lakatosian (1980) research programme is highlighted. Attention then moves to summarising the key elements of alienation theory. The four expressions of alienation are outlined with special consideration given to defining the object of production in social work. The article then turns to an analysis and discussion of the data.

***Study Design***

As Meyer and Lunnay (2013) have noted a clear and present danger exists with theory-driven research. It can lapse into a form of system building, where the data is gathered with the intention of proving the theory and no thought is given to how that theory can be further enriched and developed nor are any real empirical insights established. They advocate, as do Timmermans and Tavory (2012), the use of an abductive mode of inference, as originally devised by Pierce (1992), which allows for an approach that can avoid that pitfall plus offering a more creative approach to data analysis. Space forbids a deeper discussion of abduction, but more detail on how the process of abduction was carried in this research can be found in a separate article (Authors own, 2018).

Some basics points can be made though. Abduction operates as an iterative process between theory and data. The process of data gathering is often a recognised method given the object of study. In this instance, semi-structured interviews involving questions covering various aspects

of the working experience of social workers were used. The data is then analysed using the conventions of that technique, such as coding and identifying themes. Critically though, the data is analysed in *its own right* and not coded for the theory, a safeguard against system building. A dialogic process then occurs where the data and the theory are matched and interrogated Danermark et al. (2002 p90). What does and what does not support or match the theory is then identified. If data emerges that is challenging for the theory then that is welcome. As Peräkylä (2011) observes deviant cases are gold dust for the researcher. They act as a prompt to refine, develop and calibrate the theoretical frame.

The process just outlined is akin to Lakatos' (1980) research programmes, which are built around first principles or certain hard-core assumptions. The core theory of a research programme is not rejected by falsification, *pace* Popper, or ignored, *pace* Kuhn, rather, there is adaptation and development, which develops new insights and generates new knowledge. Marxist Burawoy (1998) calls on Lakatos in his extended case study technique for this very reason. As he says:

> '…we seek reconstructions that leave core postulates intact, that do as well as the preexisting theory upon which they are built, and that absorb anomalies with parsimony, offering novel angles of vision'. (1998 p16)

Ollman (2003, 2015) highlights one final aspect of Marxist methodology that is relevant for this research: the relationship between the logical from and the historical[i] form of alienation. What he means is that alienation theory, as outlined by Marx in his writings, is a high-level abstraction that isolates alienation to its simplest the purest logical form (as outlined in the following section). The historical form is how that set of relations is instantiated in the flow of human history, how it is actually experienced by, for example, as I discuss here, social workers. In its historical form alienation will share the fundamental relations of the logical form but will take a lived material from that is much more complex than the logical form.

Recruiting participants was conducted through contacts in the local trade union movement. Despite initial enthusiasm it proved difficult to translate that enthusiasm into actual interviews. Time was cited as being the main challenge. However, after offering a voucher, participants did come forward and the group of 16 provided a range of experiences and length of service in social work. Figure one below lists their anonymised names, biographical details and anonymised workplaces.

**Figure 5: A summary of participants by gender, age and location**

| Name | Gender | Age | Service | Notes |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Charlotte** | Female | 40s | City Centre | Experienced social worker who has worked in a variety of services including Outreach Services |
| **Richard** | Male | 50s | City Centre | Came to social work later in life mainly due to his socialist beliefs |
| **Joe** | Male | 20s | City Centre | Not long in practice, graduating a year before the interview |
| **Sarah** | Female | 40s | City Centre | Came to social work later in life to find a more fulfilling life |
| **Kate** | Female | 20s | City Centre | Newly qualified |
| **Rebecca** | Female | 20s | City Centre | Newly qualified |
| **Lee** | Male | 30s | South City Services | Came to social work later in life and has circa six years experience. |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Craig** | Male | 20s | Beachside | Has been working in social work for over five years in a variety of services |
| **Bob** | Male | 50s | Beachside | Long-serving social worker with nearly thirty years experience |
| **Nathan** | Male | 40s | East Central Services | Long-serving social worker who has worked in a variety of locations |
| **Jennifer** | Female | 20s | Farside | Recently qualified |
| **Rachel** | Female | 20s | Farside | Recently qualified |
| **Frances** | Female | 50s | Outreach Services | Long-serving social worker, who has worked in a variety of locations |
| **Peter** | Male | 40s | Outreach Services | Came to social work later in life and has been in practice for a few years. |
| **Sheila** | Female | 50s | East city | Came into social work later in life |
| | | | | but has been a basic grade for over ten years. |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Fiona** | Female | 50s | West city | A long-serving social worker with thirty year's experience in both the voluntary and statutory sectors. |

***Alienation***

At the core of Marxian alienation is a theory of human nature (Marx 1977). That theory states that humans as natural sentient, emotional, material and embodied beings possess a variety of needs and capacities that, as Geras has developed, allows for the human species to transform both nature and itself. That human nature is fundamentally expressed through conscious, reflective and social labour which acts on the external world. When that labour is allowed free expression with workers in control of the flow of their labour self-actualisation is achieved and the human worker can create an objective realisation of their talents, creativity, and the use of the mental, emotional and physical energies in the world and lives of others around them (Yuill, 2005, 2011).

As Marx (1978, 1990, 1991, 1993) argues that labour occurs in a historical context that is framed however by certain dominant social relationships that define the activities and labour of social agents. Under capitalism the dominant and core relationship is between worker and capitalist. That relationship entails a distinct historical form of labour, where labour is undertaken to valorise profit for the capitalist and not the self-actualisation of workers. As a result of the asymmetry of power in this relationship the natural capacities, creativity and embodied energies of the worker are distorted and damaged. As Wood (2004 p21) makes clear alienation is the *negation* of human potential:

> 'Marx often speaks of alienated life as one in which the human beings fail to 'affirm' (*bejahen*), 'confirm' (*bestätigen*), or 'actualise' (*verwirklichen*) themselves.

In capitalist societies alienation is expressed in four modalities:

*Product alienation* – the worker becomes estranged from what they have produced and loses control over what they make. Even though it is their time and embodied emotional and physical energies that are invested in the object of production, they derive no use from it as the capitalist

retains ultimate control. The object of production in turn also gains control over the worker. It presents itself as an alien object that is not the material instantiation of what the worker is capable of but rather as an inverted distortion of those capabilities.

*Process alienation* – the worker has no control over the process of production on any level from actual ownership of the physical means of production to setting how fast they work or how the work flow is organised. This form of alienation is the most severe for Marx. He refers to how it denies humans the opportunity for self-realisation leading to a squandering and distortion of the capabilities, talents and abilities of the worker resulting in poor health and wellbeing.

*Other-human alienation* – the worker becomes estranged from other humans, who do not appear as kindred subjects, whose needs, identity and self are accorded recognition as equal and autonomous human beings. They are instead seen as the alienated objects they have produced. Bonds of inter-subjectivity are in turn corroded, divided and damaged, and other social agents in the nexus of capitalist valorisation become sources of competition or reduced in their humanity.

*Human nature alienation* – the worker becomes separated from the core capacities that are natural to humans in their ability to creatively and consciously labour to bring about positive change.

It is useful to clarify the object within a Marxist framework that social workers produce before proceeding further. Their object of production is, after all, the positive transformation of a vulnerable and marginalised human being, at an individual, familial or community level. The noun 'object' by itself may strike a utilitarian or instrumental note since it is people who are being referred to in the case of social work, but for Marx the objects of human production are imbued with the consciousness of the maker and stand for much more than a simple thing or presence. Lefebvre (1968 p128) captures how the object in Marxian thought exceeds mundane definitions:

> 'For child and adult alike, objects are not merely a momentary material presence, or the occasion of a subjective activity; they provide us with an objective social content. Traditions (technical, social spiritual) and the most complex qualities are present in the humblest of objects, conferring on them a symbolic value or 'style'. Each object is a content of consciousness, a moment'.

The last point raised by calling on Lefebvre to clarify what an object is leads to another important aspect of defining what Marx meant by labour. Constant reference to objects and objectification, as Sayers (2007) notes, could be interpreted to mean that Marx had a very

distinct 'productivist' model of work in mind when he deploys the term labour, implying steel bashing, factory production line and concrete physical objects. The charge against Marx here has been led of late by Hardt and Negri (2005). They assert that a post-industrial world is now in operation that relies on what they term 'immaterial labour'. This new form of labour refers to computerized production, software programming and similar new technologies that do not produce material entities but immaterial entities such as knowledge and information. This perspective, according to Sayers (2007) does not withstand scrutiny. Labour was for Marx not so much about *making* objects but rather about *forming* them. Marx's emphasis on forming is an example of his Hegelian heritage, where the stress is on the dynamic progression of human labour and it achievements as opposed to isolating human labour at a particular point in time.

The object of labour additionally does not necessarily have to be a physical concrete object. It can be anything as long as it involves forming some*thing*, with that something being *any*thing that effects a material change in the world and in the subjectivities of all involved. Sayers (2007 p445) puts it thus:

> 'It is wrong to believe that "symbolic" work creates only symbols or ideas — effects that are purely subjective and intangible. All labour operates by intentionally forming matter in some way. Symbolic labour is no exception: it involves making marks on paper, agitating the air and making sounds, creating electronic impulses in a computer system, or whatever. Only in this way is it objectified and realized as labour. In the process, it affects — creates, alters — subjectivity. *All* labour, it should be noted, does this.'

The same can be said for emotional labour. There too no concrete entity is formed. However, some form of labour is objectified in the form of the marks on paper and making sounds as mentioned above, but emotions are also drawn from within and then objectified in the external world. This line of reasoning is also apparent in Hochschild's (1983) thesis of emotional labour, where she argues that emotional work is not so different from conventional physical labour in that the physical body (or 'labour power' in Marxist coinage) is drawn upon to perform the job and to create an object, while in emotional labour the physical body is still drawn upon (but this time the emotional part of the body) to produce the required object: a satisfied customer.

The central point of the above discussion is that for Marx, labour is about objectification but the emphasis should be on forming rather than producing what is objectified, with that object being anything from a concrete physical entity, to a series of symbols, or emotional display. The discussion above is crucial for understanding the labour of social workers. Their work is forming relationships with service users that in turn form new emotional selves for the service

users where they can move beyond the damage in their lives, albeit as much as possible in social structures that are far from ideal or actually toxic in the first place.

**Results and analysis.**

*The compassionate self and the choice of social work as a profession*

One of the first questions that the interview sought to elicit were the reasons why the participants had chosen social work as a profession. As the subsequent coding indicated, a 'compassionate self' emerged from the interviews. The core of this compassionate self was a concern for the welfare for others and an 'other-directedness' where the positive enhancement of the situation of people experiencing some form of distress or disadvantage was crucial to self-identity. For the majority of participants in the interviews, the compassionate self was a life-long commitment to other people that emerged out of childhood experiences of either being from a family which worked in the care sector (not just social work but also professions such as nursing), or from witnessing a close friend or other family member not receiving support they required during a time of distress or hardship. That experience in turn prompted and influenced their choice of career later in life, by selecting an occupation that provided the opportunity to offer the help that they thought was missing and should be there, or to carry on a family tradition of being involved in one of the many caring public services. Such an experience had become core to their subjectivities and sense of self, as the following extracts typify:

> *I think that it was experiences that I had had when I was younger. I had seen a lot of people in need and there wasn't any response to that and I felt that I wanted to be with that person. To fill in that contradiction...* **Jennifer**
>
> *Yeah, all through school I wanted to do a job meeting people and working with people and helping people. My mum was very much focused on that area as well .... I didn't want to be stuck in front of a computer all the time, superficial contact, the more in-depth not working in that kind of area you know, but in-depth touch with people.* **Rachel**
>
> *I suppose my mum, she had a social 'workie' background. She wasn't a social worker as such but she was sort of helping people with learning difficulties, residential care home settings. ....Just seemed like an obvious choice really*. **Kate**

That personal narrative was also strongly voiced by Rebecca who recounts her very personal experiences of family separation where a social worker, from her perspective at the time, failed to identify and act on the subtleties of her situation. This combination of both experiencing personal distress in her own biography coupled with her perception of the shortcomings of a particular social worker had prompted her from the early age of twelve into wanting to become a social worker in adulthood:

> *I didn't think that the social worker really picked up on any of the things that I was saying so it kind of frustrated me a wee bit, you know, that this woman has come and asked me questions but not really seeing what I'm trying to tell her. So I suppose from that moment onwards I kinda knew from the age of twelve that I kinda wanted to be a social worker so that I'd be understanding of what children you know the kinda situation like that again I'd kinda want to make sure that I wouldn't do what that social worker done*. **Rebecca**

Those that did not indicate a personal experience or familial tradition of working in care indicated that the main impulse for them was not to work in an office but instead to engage in some form of meaningful work with people:

> *I wanted to work with people, like I say, get away from computers…It's probably because just that I have a caring sort of nature, and I just like relating to people, working with people. Like I enjoy time with clients, hearing about their issues and helping them find ways of resolving their issues… I suppose it's something in my nature maybe*. **Sheila**

The urge to work in an environment free of computers recurred throughout Sheila's interview. Sarah and Fiona, who both wished to work in a profession that offered some form of meaning, also shared that dislike of office work voiced by Sheila. Fiona noted that she wanted to get away from, '…*computers, nine-to-five, not having a sense of function or purpose as such*.' Whilst for Craig he sought a job that offered the opportunity to help and work with people that contrasted with the industrial work into which other males in his family had entered.

Richard, who had come into social work later in life, did not record some form of personal experience or familial tradition of caring for others. In his case, it was his socialist beliefs that

provided his motive for becoming a social worker. Those socialist beliefs for him implied a set of guiding ethical norms that being other-directed and working for the benefit of others was a positive, socially useful and intrinsically morally good path to follow, as the passage below indicates:

*Like I said if you dig deeper, I'm quite socialist in ideology and I just ken that there should be a state-provided back up. You know, I think societies are judged by how well they look after the people who are least able to function in society.* **Richard**

What we therefore find is that becoming a social worker was motivated by a core aspect of self. That core being formed here by childhood experiences, family traditions, political beliefs or the wish to engage in activity that held some form of meaning. The desired object of labour is the positive improvement in the life and wellbeing of another social being. It is that core aspect which forms what becomes alienated in the labour process, the impulse to make positive change and to find meaning in labour.

Why the participants decided to become social workers strongly shaped their relation with the product of their work and this provenance exerts an influence on their subsequent experiences of alienation. In the personal narratives of the participants a strong desire and motivation to help and improve the lives of other people was highly evident: as the 'Compassionate Self' category. The desire to help was therefore a core part of the participants' ideas of who they are: an essential element of their self and identity, acting as an animating motivation both behind their career choices and in their personal lives, becoming a central feature of their consciousness, their way of being in the world (or *dasein* in Heideggerian terms). It was not just in the opening phase of the interview when the interviewees were directly asked why they wanted to become social workers, but an orientation that was visible and evident throughout the interviews.

The compassionate self requires to be abducted into Marxist alienation theory. It can be in three ways. (1) The participants' talk of a deeper caring self and the desire for labour to be meaningful is congruent with Marxian anthropology and theory of human nature, where the quality and purpose of work is important in terms of, recalling Wood, reaching some form of self-actualisation where the rewards of labour are more than financial. A further connection with Marxian anthology can be made (2) in that the participants' wish for their work to involve the intersubjective transformation of social agents – it is therefore other directed and social, a critical part of how Marx understands humans to be. The compassionate self, finally, also (3) provides what it is, in this particular instance, from which a worker is estranged and alienated. How the compassionate self fares in the hidden abode of work is tackled next.

*The Disappointed Juggler and the realities of social work*

The social workers expected that they would be able to exercise their compassionate self in their work, and for their labour to act as a medium for the realisation of their compassionate self. In reality that opportunity to exercise their core beliefs and construct of self did not happen to the extent for which they had wished. The 'disappointed juggler' theme emerged from the interviews taking its name from the reference to work being akin to a juggler having to keep an eye on many different functions without letting any of them drop.

Throughout the interviews the overwhelming presence of report writing was noted by all of the participants (*'nature of the beast'* as Kate said) and that the report writing dominated all other concerns to the point of reducing available time that could be spent working with service-users.

> *I used to think when I first left university that most of my time would be spent with clients. But in actual fact most of your time is spent doing the paperwork and doing case notes. So you maybe get a third of your working week actually with people and the other two thirds taken up just by purely with paperwork*. **Sarah**
>
> *…this paperwork is too much, it's ridiculous. …You don't stop. This is crazy, this is ridiculous. Look at all these forms look at the length of all these forms they're repetitive. Some of this care plan is irrelevant to what we provide now, eligibility criteria for example. For me it doesn't really change things for the better as far as I can see.* **Kate**
>
> *Paperwork and stuff? It's disproportionate! I was trying to work it out the other day. It's probably about, with the adult protection thing, it's increased a bit. Probably of the five days a week, probably, there is some assessment clinics like meetings to go to. Probably only two days a week I'm seeing folk out the five...* **Richard**

A feeling of frustration at the extent of paperwork and how all other aspects of work were subordinated to it was palpable:

> *When I first went into social work here is the stuff that you want to actually do with the families and you do not get so much of an opportunity to do that.* **Rachel**
>
> ***It's not what I signed up for**. We obviously do assessments, I think a lot of the time the assessments we've identified what we need but there's not always access to what we say we need.* **Jennifer** (emphasis added)

*I thought it was going to be more about contact with clients, you know, motivating change in people's lives, rather than being on a desk writing out reports that are due in a certain time/ timeframe.* **Peter**

The importance of actively and consciously producing some form of object in the external world is an essential tenet of Marxian philosophical anthropology and where the influence of Hegel is most keenly felt. So, the question then arises: what was the product, the object of labour[ii] on which the participants laboured (or, as we shall see, were supposed to labour)? It was either the damaged lives of people living on the margins of society, people with long-term health issues and disabilities, or those who had in some way violated social norms. To that extent the interviewees were not working with the classic objects of material labour (making cars or working in factories) but instead were working with the new forms of immaterial labour as described by Hochschild (1983) and Sayers (2007, 2013): the emotional states of other human beings. Thus, the objectification of creative labour for the social workers was some form of change in the lives of the service-users with whom they worked where the service-user would be better placed to cope with the problems that were presenting in their lives. The labour power required of the social workers takes the form of the exercise of emotional resources such as empathy, alongside the practice of a number of learned skills such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) and other similar techniques.

In practice the historical form that alienation took here, the object of labour was not effecting change in the life of a service user but the completion of paperwork, in particular the case report. The case report is meant to document the situation of the service-user, identifying their needs and so forth, working in parallel with the actual casework performed by the social worker. From what the participants indicated in their interviews the report in effect *replaced* the service-user to whom it referred and became the object of work, the completion of the paperwork taking precedence over the actual person on who it was based, becoming an end in itself as opposed to a means to an end:

*I had a false image in my head of what social work would be about, there would be tons of resources available, to just be able to throw at people who needed them or wanted them. The reality was quite different. Having to go in front of panels to request things. It's just not a case of doing an assessment and requesting funding, you've also got to then justify it to a panel of people because funding's so tight just now. That is the situation the whole country is in and maybe jump through hoops sounds a bit kinda em performing for your payment. There are a lot of steps to go through I suppose I didn't even consider before hand.* **Joe**

Probably one of the more telling remarks about the dominance of paperwork and bureaucracy and how it shaped their working lives was Frances' reply when asked about the clients or service-users in her daily work, as she had not mentioned them that much in the interview referring in the main to paperwork and tight budgets: '*They got lost'*, she replied.

A report should not be mistaken for a neutral bureaucratic task. It needs to be understood as the distillation of various power relations that shape both the lifeworld of the service use *and* the social worker. As Fahlgren (2009) and Munro (2004, 2011) point out, the report is constructed by forces external to professional social workers. They have little say in the context, format and structure of the report. Instead, it is government agencies that create a document that is in line with dominant ideologies and political responses to moral panics elsewhere in society. Under current neoliberalism the report institutionalises the accelerated improvement of a service user in a linear temporal trajectory that does not allow for the complexity of service users' needs and lives (Pösö,& Eronen, 2015). The report with its armoury of Likert scales and milestones also serves as a disciplinary restraint on the social worker. Their autonomy and decision making latitude is reduced to a narrow instrumental horizon.

The report, not the service-user, therefore becomes the *de facto* object of labour: the product of what they do. So, the removal of the product here is not achieved by the product leaving the factory gates containing all the workers' expended labour power (the input of mental and physical skills, talents and abilities) but rather by a substitution of the desired object of labour, the one that would lead to them realising the reasons why they wanted to be social workers, with one that negates and denies that desire.

If we note what the participants said about the impact that report writing had on their time, their wellbeing and how it occupied the temporal horizon of the workplace and their consciousness, it matches Marx's description of the effects of product and process alienation in the *Manuscripts*. He describes there how the product becomes more important than the worker: a reified entity looming over the worker, negatively absorbing their energies (whether physical or mental or both) and not replenishing them with anything in return. Many of the interviewees reported that they could never get on top of their paperwork, feeling that it could never be tamed or controlled, and that it was the cause of many of their problems with work.

> *I find it stressful and demanding and exhausting. I came in with a real positive outlook but now: it is very negative.* **Frances**

> *I think there are a lot of people who don't verbalise how busy they are, how stressed they feel. They do go unchecked and unnoticed and you sometimes find their... caseloads, you know, increasing the level of their bitterness, increasingly you notice that they can't lift their head*

*from their desk even for five minutes. They get sort of physically unwell and they sort of fatigue*. **Peter**

*Sometimes you are aware of being pressured at other times not… but I think you have to be robust physically and emotional within yourself just to do this job… I had three/ four months off and felt I was ready to come back to work, but when I did you realise very quickly that you can still be quite fragile…* **Nathan**

One deviant finding was identified during the analysis that was not a neat fit for alienation theory. Just about all of the participants - and often spontaneously - noted that they also enjoyed social work. Rachel provides a typical example of this response:

*I want to be a social worker. I sound so negative…., I do enjoy the work. I cannot imagine not being a social worker.* **Rachel (20s, newly qualified)**

The classic interpretation of alienation is that it is a constant condition where the worker is instantly alienated in the workplace and beyond. Now that may be the case elsewhere (though that lies beyond the remit of this article) but a contradiction exists here. How can a worker be simultaneously alienated but still enjoy their work? This situation is where abductive inference is useful. Instead of rejecting the theory in its pure logical from it can be adapted, perhaps not for the theory as a whole, but definitely for this historical example of alienation. The compassionate self being such a deep part of the participants' identity does not immediately succumb to the travails and pressures of the workplace. Glimpses of its realisation can be found in social work practice. Borrowing a phrase from Marxist economics, the moments when the compassionate self is realised act as a countervailing tendency to the general tendency of alienation. They act as a form of compensation or, as Lordon (2014) would suggest, a moment of affect when capitalist labour returns an emotional as well as financial reward for willing servitude.

Those moments though are not constant and their compensatory presence, at least for the longer serving social workers, diminished over time and the negative experiences became overwhelming. For the longer serving participants, what Nathan called a 'crash point' was reached. That was a critical moment when suddenly alienation was experienced at its sharpest. Here Sheila reflects on her crash point:

*When it came to going to my client after that I just couldn't face it. I broke down in tears and told my colleague I needed to go home. So we returned to the office and I went home. I was then off after that. So that had been my actual breaking point.*

The crash point had considerable consequences for participants. Some were required to take leave of absences due to illness that they attributed to the negative impact that work had on their lives. Usually, taking sick leave followed what Whilst for others, and typically the longer served participants, a cynicism and weariness was evident. The contradiction between what they expected, what their labour would involve, and the daily realities of social work proving difficult to resolve. Two older social workers Bob and Sheila talked of planning to retire earlier than anticipated. While for Nathan and for Richard, they had made the decision to reduce the centrality of work to his sense of self and focus on other aspects of his life instead. As Richard noted:

> *… you've got to refocus on what's more important: a job, in the end, is just a job.*

Their decision must also be understood in context of alienation theory. Choosing to compartmentalise their lives into separate spheres to prevent the travails of work overflowing into domestic life may seem a sensible solution. Taking that action perhaps indicating that they had developed, in that classic trope of neoliberalism, resilience: dispositions and strategies to prevent negative reactions to potentially harmful external events. From the standpoint of alienation theory, whilst their agency may seem a protective move, it speaks of a fragmenting of the lifeworld, where labour is set aside as not being capable of providing the affirmation of self. Life, for Marx, should be lived as a totality where all experiences enrich existence and allow for the flourishing of talents and creativity. What Nathan and Richard were expressing here is human nature alienation. They had become estranged from what had compelled them into social work in the first place.

***Discussion and concluding remarks.***

Analysing the working experiences of social workers from the vantage point of alienation theory introduces (1) new insights into the causes of the disillusionment and poor wellbeing experienced by social workers and (2) suggests new solutions to those problems. Developing Lavalette's and Ferguson's (ibid) argument further we can clearly see that the causes of disillusionment and poor wellbeing are not to be found in the failings and deficiencies of individual social workers. The causes are rather to be found in the objective relations and circumstances in which they work. Those relations are defined by the political objectives of

governments pursuing a variety of neoliberal ideological projects. In the moment of work those relations lead to the loss of control experienced by the social worker. They are not free to realise their human nature in the form of the compassionate self. They become estranged from it as their labour is not working with people in need of help, but rather the technocratic and reductive reports that seek to rationalise and discipline the life world of a service user and the labour of a social worker.

To, therefore, offer a solution to the above issue requires travelling beyond discourses and technologies of resilience, a familiar trope of neoliberalism that seeks to reinvent structural maladies as individual responsibility and is often raised as a response to any problem. In resilience discourses the social actor is encouraged to be constantly fluid and malleable, able to meet any challenge. The anthropology of resilience is one where the subject is imagined as possessing no history or, indeed, any form of human nature or emotional self. They are instead imagined as an endlessly flexible rational entity that coldly moves from meeting one challenge to the other (Joseph 2013, Dardot and Laval 2013). What this research indicates that for these social workers adopting neoliberal forms of resilience would entail suppressing core aspects of their identities and what motivated them to become social workers in the first place, a heavy loss.

The solution that logically emerges from what I have been discussing above is for social workers to regain control over their labour process – a point raised by Lavalette and Ferguson (2018). That would entail, for example, social workers being able to collectively decide what level of report writing is necessary, how funds are used, how much time to devote to working directly with service users and which of their repertoire of their skills to use. Given the current highly managerialist context of social work (Tsui & Cheung, 2004) that goal may seem idealistic, but it is worth pointing out that social work has taken different forms over time. A re-engagement with some of the literature and ideas that were common currency in Harris' period of parochial professional period in the 1970s could be instructive. Mayer and Timm's (1970) classic the *Client Speaks* points to a radically different social work from that of today in the United Kingdom. What may be more problematic is how to arrive at that place. When asked what changes they would like to see in social work practice all the participants pointed to bureaucratic or procedural alterations. Nor did they see trade unionism as a vehicle for change. I feel to discuss that point in greater depth requires further research and a separate article.

Overall, what this research achieves is to uncover how alienation operates in the social work labour process, where the compassionate self, the aspect of their human nature that animated the decision to become a social worker, is estranged by the loss of control over the labour process

and over the object of production. Disillusionment and poor wellbeing experienced by social workers ae therefore to be found in the structures and power relations of the workplace, and not in the deficiencies of the individual social worker.

[i] Historical follows the Hegelian usage, which refers to how people actively create their lives in the present and not just in the past.

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