

ANZSWWER Symposium  
September 2017  
*Challenging Dominant Discourses*

Organisational Power and Authority: A Social  
Justice Response to the Coercive Power of the  
State

Mike Webster, University of Auckland

[m.webster@auckland.ac.nz](mailto:m.webster@auckland.ac.nz)

## Human rights, social justice and social change

*Social work leadership strives to ensure access to needed information, services, and resources; equality of opportunity; and meaningful participation in decision making for all people in organisations and the wider community; to act as an agent of human rights and social change for marginalised and vulnerable client groups in society.*

(NASW, 1996, as cited in Stewart, 2013, p. 165).

# The Literature: Eileen Gambrill, Roger Smith and Michael Preston-Shoot

Eileen Gambrill (2001) presented a stark critique of the profession in her article *Social Work: An Authority-Based Profession*. She addresses tensions between the profession's commitment to empowerment and

“ ... *hiding coercion* in the name of helping [and] negative reactions to criticism which reflect an *authoritarian base* ..”  
(Gambrill, 2001, p.167)



Professor Eileen  
Gambrill  
UC Berkeley

Source:

<http://socialwelfare.berkeley.edu/faculty/eileen-gambrill>

# The Literature: Eileen Gambrill, Roger Smith and Michael Preston-Shoot

Roger Smith (2008) analyses the relationship between social work and power. He argues that “Their [social workers’] expertise provides legitimacy for interventions *on behalf of the state*, which may serve the purpose of *exerting or maintaining social control over deviant elements* [of society.]”  
(Smith, 2008, p.107)



Professor Roger Smith  
Durham University

Source:  
<https://www.dur.ac.uk/sass/staff/profile/?id=10543>

# The Literature: Eileen Gambrill, Roger Smith and Michael Preston-Shoot

Smith suggests that the welfare professions are *'elitist'* in that their specialised education and pathways to employment result in *'ideological claims to authoritative roles and status.'* This inherent power, privilege and freedom may lead to a self-interested *'maintenance of the system which supports them.'* (Smith, 2008, p.107)



Professor Roger Smith  
Durham University

## The Literature: Eileen Gambrill, Roger Smith and Michael Preston-Shoot

*“On administrative evil-doing within social work policy and services: Law, ethics and practice”*

(Preston-Shoot, 2011)

*“Case law provides evidence of unlawful removal of children from parents, flawed decisions on assessment and service provision that badly lets down children and families, and illegality in failing to balance resource considerations alongside assessment of people’s needs.” (p.187)*



Professor  
Michael  
Preston-Shoot  
University of  
Bedfordshire

Source:

<https://www.beds.ac.uk/howtoapply/departments/healthsciences/michael-preston-shoot>

## The Ethics of Leadership

*“The ethics of leadership in our profession are never more needful than in the potentially frightening levels of power that accrue to social workers by virtue of legislation, expertise and the temptation to self-serving preservation of undoubted privilege.”*

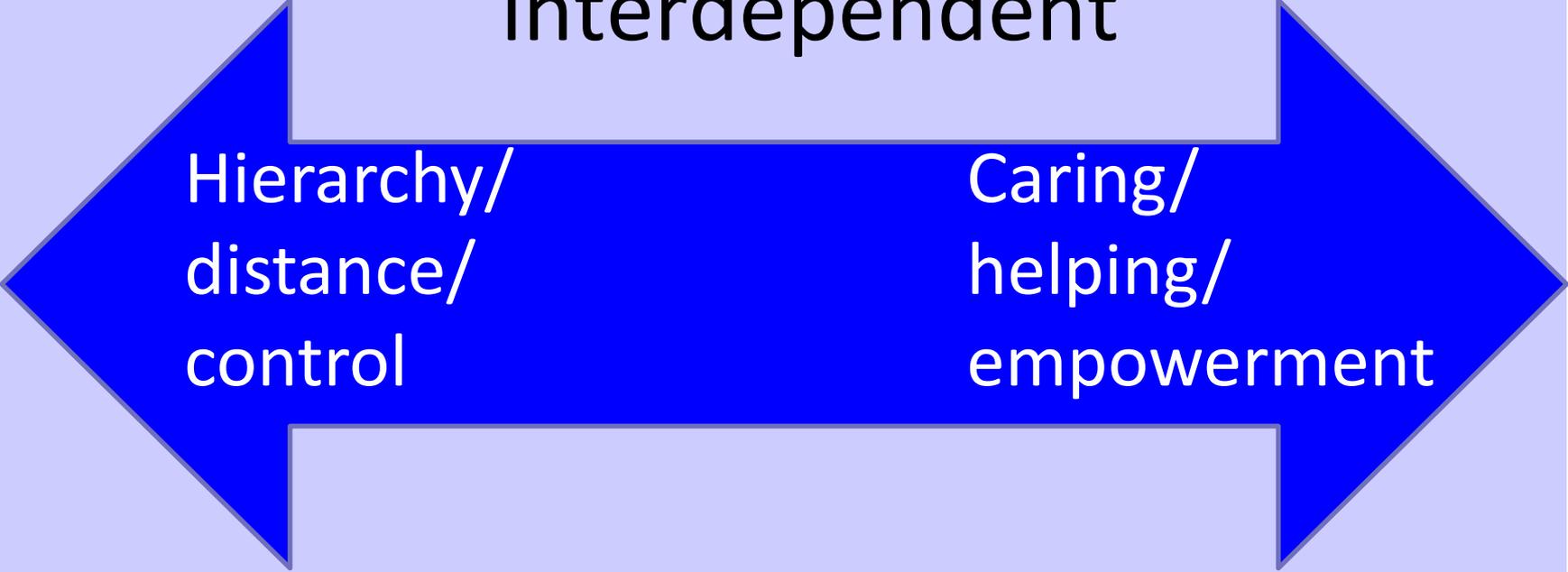
(Webster, 2017, p.81)

## Managing polarities (Johnson, 1992)

“The genius of the AND”

(Collins & Porras, 2005)

2 or more right answers that are  
interdependent



Hierarchy/  
distance/  
control

Caring/  
helping/  
empowerment

## Managing polarities (Johnson, 1992)

- Few themes test the commitment to empowering, ethical and socially just leadership more than the use of power and authority.
- Coming to terms with exercising positional and other power is an ongoing issue for social work leaders.
- Managing the polarity between empowerment and control at opposite ends of a continuum is to develop a situational ethical response to social work's coercive agent of the state conundrum.

## Managing polarities (Johnson, 1992)

- How did participants address this perennially thorny issue—including the management of risk?
- Two spheres are under consideration:
  - Social work practice in the field
  - Leadership in the organisation
- I will argue that *ethical, empowering and authentic leadership* which expresses a commitment to *organisational social justice* is achievable.

“Between the 1950s and 1980s more than 100,000 children were taken from their families and put into state institutions. Many suffered abuse and neglect while in state care.”

*“We were so astounded, dumbfounded you might say. The degree of physical violence, just how harsh it was.”*

Judge Carolyn Henwood

Source:

[www.radionz.co.nz/stories/201825742/justice-delayed-justice-denied](http://www.radionz.co.nz/stories/201825742/justice-delayed-justice-denied)



Judge Carolyn Henwood

Source: <http://www.radionz.co.nz/news/national/319324/judge-%27lost-faith%27-in-govt%27s-handling-of-state-care-child-abuse>

Findings: How Social Work Leaders Exercised Power and Authority (Source: Webster, 2017, pp.190-194)

*“The cold hard face of social work ... [we] are the ones who go into the house, ask the hard questions, get the information to determine whether that child or those children are safe with those parents or in that family. We work under an Act that enables us to do that .”* (‘Natasha’)

## Findings: How Social Work Leaders Exercised Power and Authority

That “*cold hard face*” is not solely determined by legislation.

Natasha’s reality derives from New Public Management’s (NPM)

“*measurements and accountability.*”

She adds:

“*Hierarchy within a very structured environment is good; it is needed.*”

## Findings: How Social Work Leaders Exercised Power and Authority

How might we interpret that statement?

- 1. Relief:* policy exists subject to checks by senior management. I am part of that hierarchy which in itself is morally good and necessary; OR
- 2. It is not my responsibility to weigh the ethical dilemmas associated with children in care.*

## Findings: How Social Work Leaders Exercised Power and Authority

The dilemma is accentuated:

*“Frontline social workers have so many things to complete within timeframes.”* (‘Natasha’)

Deadlines may be externally generated eg. Court sitting dates; or created by internal management reporting requirements.

## Findings: How Social Work Leaders Exercised Power and Authority

Encounters with hard facts are the reality check in Natasha's exercise of leadership:

“There are always children coming through our doors. We work with the family [but] can't identify any safe person so *have no choice but to bring these kids into care.*”

## Findings: How Social Work Leaders Exercised Power and Authority

Natasha:

*“Sometimes you don’t want to sit in front of a computer all day long checking your team’s work. Because that is what a supervisor does.”*

The use of power and authority may be reduced to mechanically scanning computer files.

## Findings: How Social Work Leaders Exercised Power and Authority

Natasha would prefer to  
*“congratulate the people who  
constantly do good work and are  
getting good feedback.”*

Affirmation, empowerment, and recognition are presented in that comment as social work’s default values, giving rise to trust.

## Findings: How Social Work Leaders Exercised Power and Authority

Natasha prefers this environment:  
“The site manager [and] my supervisor know me. They know how I work [and] *they trust me*. I don’t feel someone is watching me. I can just focus on what I need to get done. *I think people thrive under that rather than being policed all the time.*”

## Findings: How Social Work Leaders Exercised Power and Authority

*“Being able to [lead] without needing to enforce authority is really important. You come from an organisation [with] statutory power. You walk into [a] home and you can hold that power very lightly. You don’t feel you have to wield it.”*  
(‘Judith’)

## Findings: How Social Work Leaders Exercised Power and Authority

“When I most feel I need to assert my authority are probably those moments when I most need to *step back and reflect and think*. What is playing out here? Am I just feeling my leadership and my decision making is being challenged? I [ask] myself: ‘*What is driving this behaviour?*’ ”

(Judith)

## Findings: How Social Work Leaders Exercised Power and Authority

Judith's nuanced treatment of power and authority is an example of insight and professional wisdom. It applies ethical, empowering and authentic leadership. Reflective practice as a hallmark of professionalism is true of any field; but it applies particularly to social work.

## Findings: How one Social Work Leader Managed Risk

'Alan' explores the leader as both an encourager and a risk taker by way of a *“really good leadership model.”* That model is that of a leader who *“can recognise and show real confidence in their staff”* while acknowledging what he describes as *“knife edge stuff”* in relation to risk.

## Findings: How one Social Work Leader Managed Risk

He contrasts managers *“who would play it by the book, get all the [KPIs] ticked off [to] look good on paper”*

against a set of questions:

*“Have they really helped their clients?”*

*“Have they looked at the possibilities that might make some worthwhile change for them?”*

## Findings: How one Social Work Leader Managed Risk

*“Have they in fact done anything other than put rubber stamps on everything and so rather than [being] leaders they just tick things?”*



## Findings: How one Social Work Leader Managed Risk

*“A leader is a person prepared to take calculated risks based on good judgment because the good leader has sound judgment, sound networking and other skills [and is] aware of the issues. They don’t go in blind.” (Alan)*

## Findings: How one Social Work Leader Managed Risk

Alan's organisational leadership philosophy is one of *two-way accountability* to his staff members and to his own manager.

This is to “hold power lightly” (Judith) and is an example of one of the values underpinning social work leadership in the findings:

*Spirituality/authenticity/servant leadership*

## Spirituality/authenticity/ servant leadership

*“The connections between authenticity, spirituality, wisdom and servant leadership: the values of transparency and accountability to followers, employers and clients which give meaning, purpose and inspiration to other parties and from which a leader learns.”*

(Webster, 2017, p.124)

## Findings: How one Social Work Leader Managed Risk

Alan illustrates his leadership model in relation to “a social worker [who] was basically dead in [the] water [and who] nobody could manage.”

## Findings: How one Social Work Leader Managed Risk

Alan employed empathy: “This guy is not unlike me. He is not necessarily burnt out but he is bored, he has been manipulated, he has been kicked here and there and basically had lost the ability to give a damn and extend himself.”

*But, “I knew he had it in him.”*

## Findings: How one Social Work Leader Managed Risk

Alan “backed him and backed his [the worker’s] decision.” There *was* a risk.

“I was thinking, ‘You had better get it right, or my backside is on the line here.’ But the beauty about it was that when he actually saw that people did start to believe in him, did give him the chance to be creative, he blossomed. Every one of the three original social workers I had in my team all became supervisors in their own right.” (Webster, 2017, p.194)

# References

- Collins, J. C., & Porras, J. I. (2005). *Built to last: Successful habits of visionary companies*. London, England: Random House.
- Gambrill, E. (2001). Social work: An authority-based profession. *Research on Social Work Practice, 11*(2), 166-175. doi:10.1177/104973150101100203
- Johnson, B. (1992). *Polarity management : identifying and managing unsolvable problems*. Amherst, Mass: HRD Press.
- Preston-Shoot, M. (2011). On administrative evil-doing within social work policy and services: Law, ethics and practice. *European Journal of Social Work, 14*(2), 177-194. doi: 10.1080/13691450903471229
- Smith, R. (2008). *Social work and power*. Basingstoke, England: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Stewart, C. (2013). Resolving social work value conflict: Social justice as the primary organizing value for social work. *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought, 32*(2), 160-176. doi:10.1080/15426432.2013.779184
- Webster, M. (2017). *Social work leadership for Aotearoa New Zealand*. (Doctor of Philosophy), University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand.