The Social Professions in the Republic of Ireland: Theory, Challenge and Opportunity

Catherine Forde

University College Cork, Cork, Ireland

Since the 1970s a number of distinct social professions have emerged in Ireland. These professions are social work, youth work, community development, social care and family support work. While social work is an established profession, the other four occupations are at varying stages in the trajectory of professionalization. These occupations are emerging as distinct professions, despite having common origins and a common value base. A significant Irish literature has developed on each of these occupations but to date the relationship between them has not been subjected to substantial analysis or critique. Furthermore, the reasons for their divergence into discrete professions have not been interrogated.

This paper begins by deconstructing selected explanations of professionalization. While a number of explanations exist, this paper will focus solely on two of the most significant. The first is Larson’s (1977) thesis of the professional ‘project’, whereby the impetus for professionalization comes from the occupation. The second and preferred explanation is a post-structuralist one and derives from the work of Michel Foucault, and specifically his ideas about governmentality. For Foucault the state is a complex entity made up of ‘a diverse range of agencies, apparatuses and practices producing varied mechanisms of control and varied forms of knowledge’ (Finlayson and Martin, 2006: 167). According to this conception, professionalization is a symbiotic process, whereby the impetus to professionalise comes from both occupation and state and a relationship between both parties is developed and maintained. Thus, both state and profession combine in the identification and response to social issues and concomitantly in ‘the production and delivery of welfare’ (Lorenz, 2006, p. 176).

Focusing on the emerging professions of youth work, community development and family support work, the paper proceeds to identify and engage in a tentative exploration of four questions: (i) How have these social professions evolved within the contemporary Irish state? (ii) Who benefits from their professionalization – the profession itself, the state or volunteers and service users? (iii) Given that these occupations are not fully established as professions, what are the implications for them of economic recession and the consequent curtailment or total removal of state support? In Ireland, significant cutbacks to state-funded youth and community work activity have already been implemented and rationalisation of many core activities is under consideration. These developments bring challenges that more established professions do not face.

The paper concludes by tentatively considering if a different way of organising and delivering the work of these professions can be envisaged.


