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Promoting activism through critical social work education: the impact of global capitalism and neoliberalism on social work and social work education

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The impacts of global capitalism and neoliberalism on higher education can reduce the social work curriculum to competency-based skills acquisition rather than critically reflective, transformative learning. This encourages the promotion of establishment social work approaches aimed at accepting the status quo, rather than critical forms of social work that critique the dominant social structures and power relations that cause broad social divisions. The marginalisation of critical approaches reshapes social work towards conservative, market-led demands, yet an explicitly critical social work curriculum is pivotal to the claim of social work as an emancipatory project. This article presents original research that discusses the impact of an Australia critical social work programme on students' development as agents of change. The findings suggest that developing a curriculum based on critical social science, and using critical pedagogical processes, assists students/graduates to work effectively for social justice and promotes their participation in collective social action.

key words critical social work • activism • social work education • neoliberalism

Introduction

The impacts of global capitalism and neoliberalism on social work and social work education are now well documented (see, eg, Ferguson and Lavalette, 2006; Wehbi and Turcotte, 2007; Rogowski, 2010; Madhu, 2011; Wallace and Pease, 2011; Gardner, 2014). This article presents critical social work education as one form of resistance to global capitalism and neoliberalism, specifically discussing the impact of an Australian critical social work programme on students' learning and development as activists. Through exploring students' experiences of their social work education, the research suggests that using a critical theory informed curriculum may contribute to a transformative learning that fuels a desire to engage in social action as a means of working towards emancipatory social change. This is a significant finding for those interested in furthering a critical social work agenda.

Referring to social work in the current context, Ife (2014: viii) suggests that we are in 'troubled times':

characterised by runaway growth regardless of social and environmental cost, neoliberal economics, global capitalism ‘on steroids’, managerialism pervading social work organisations, increasing inequality, individualism, consumerism, greed, intolerance of difference, and a blatantly unsustainable social, economic and political order supported by powerful media and corporate interests.

Given the local and global challenges presented by this context, critical social work is more important and necessary than ever as it aims to critique and challenge the dominant social forces and power relations that cause broad social divisions along the lines of class, gender, ethnicity and other dimensions of difference (see, eg, Allan et al, 2009; Mullaly, 2010; Lavalette, 2011; Fook, 2012). However, instead of strengthening critical social work, such conditions give rise to conservative or ‘establishment’ forms of social work that accept inequalities as inevitable and assist people to adapt to the status quo (Morley et al, 2014).

Within neoliberal contexts, higher education, which plays a leadership role in the development of social work and social workers, is now treated as a commodity that can be privately owned (Marginson and Considine, 2011). This represents a profound misunderstanding of the nature of knowledge, marginalising the role of education in facilitating the development of citizens that are capable of critical thought – an essential precursor for any democratic society (Giroux, 2011, 2014; Hil, 2012). In the UK, universities have been under attack for allowing ‘too much theory, [and] too much sociology’ in social work education (Narey, 2014: 30, cited in Garrett, 2015: 5). Similarly, in Australia, the federal government has made its own attacks on critical thinking, and specifically on activism. On 21 September 2015, the then Minister for Counter-Terrorism, Michael Keenan, provided state education ministers with ‘Radicalisation awareness kits’ for distribution to schools in order to help students identify and counteract the early warning signs of critical thinking and/or activist tendencies in young people. The 32-page booklet includes fictitious case studies that describe how everyday young people can become corrupted by social action. One case study in particular, on ‘violent extremism’, describes how a young woman, ‘Karen’, moved out of home to attend university, where she became involved with the ‘alternative music scene, student politics and left-wing activism’. After attending her first environmental protest, and feeling proud of doing the “‘right thing” for society’, ‘Karen’ dropped out of university and became ‘totally cut off from her family’. Ultimately, her downward spiral (due to her participation in activism) resulted in her ‘sabotaging machinery’ and ‘being arrested’ on numerous occasions for ‘trespass, damaging property, assault and obstructing police’ (Australian Government, 2015). Within the booklet, activism is described in the same conservative, moralistic overtones that are often used to typify the ‘dangers’ of illegal drugs in prohibition campaigns.

A more subtle undermining of sociologically informed critical content in social work education can be seen in the Australian Education and Accreditation Standards (ASWEAS) (AASW, 2012). While these national standards required for social work education in Australia certainly make reference to the importance of ‘critical analysis’ (AASW, 2012: 7) and ‘critical reflection’ (AASW, 2012: 9), the privileging of more conservative approaches to practice becomes more evident in an analysis of a detailed mandated curriculum. ‘Mental health problems and interventions’, for example,

are positioned as ‘essential knowledge’, while ‘[a]n understanding of age, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status and geographical location of mental health problems’ are reduced to the status of ‘desirable’ (AASW, 2012: 5–6, Guideline 1.1). Arguably, without a strong foundation in the structural factors that are implicated in causing social problems, and in a range of critical practice methods that aim to work towards structural changes, social work education may be reduced to a set of competencies and prescribed content areas aimed at producing proficient, neoliberal practitioners, rather than developing critically analytical and reflective ones.

Savage cutbacks to the tertiary sector and the changing nature of academic work are also having significant impacts on the quality of social work education in Australia (Hil, 2012). The higher education sector has seen profound changes, including a consistent reduction in the amount of public funding available to universities since the mid-1980s (Marginson and Considine, 2011). This has resulted in a shift from focusing on learning, teaching and research, to the pursuit of grant money and other income revenue-raising activities, including increasing international student enrolments, whose fees now substantially subsidise higher education in many universities (Australia Institute, 2015). International education is now the third-largest export industry (AUS\$18 billion) after coal and iron ore, and Australia is the third-largest education exporter in the world after the US and the UK (ICEF, 2015). Paralleling this, higher education in Australia has become the third most casualised sector (after retail and hospitality) (Rhea, 2014). Approximately 60% of the Australian academic workforce is now made up of 67,000 sessional staff (Hil, 2012). Marginson and Considine (2011: 3), who examined 17 case studies of Australian universities, found that a managerial ‘revolution is well under way’, characterised by new structures of governance that elevate the executive power of administrative managers well above disciplinary expertise and academic scholarship. These conditions seriously threaten academic freedom and the development of an innovative curriculum. As Hil (2012: 14–15) states: ‘the rigid and formulaic approach to university teaching with its links to economic and vocational imperatives, and despite all the latest expert teaching theories and technological wizardry, is in many cases delivering a narrow and low-grade education’. Olsen et al (2004: 270–1) describe similar concerns: ‘Neoliberalism has reconstructed teachers as managed professionals.... For the managed professional, who is little more than a skilled technician, performativity replaces the critical reflection and professional judgement of the autonomous professional.’

With this context as a backdrop, the current federal government has proposed deregulation and further, massive funding cuts to public universities. This legislation has been defeated twice in the Senate. Newly appointed Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull (who replaced former Prime Minister Tony Abbott in a dramatic party leadership spill in September 2015) has presently shelved these higher education ‘reforms’ until 2017. However, Senator Birmingham, the new Minister for Education, has vowed to continue to prepare related legislation that might be more palatable for the Senate, despite all the evidence regarding how adverse deregulation would be for accessibility and quality (Kniest, 2014). This would continue to take higher education in Australia down the corporate path, whereby Australian academics will be spending even more of their time ‘peddling their institutions’ educational wares and maintaining market share’ (Hil, 2012: 10). As higher education is generally re-crafted to be uncritically reactive to industry and the demands of the market (Webhi and Turcotte, 2007; Giroux, 2011, 2014; Marginson and Considine, 2011),

the ideological underpinnings of social work education also begin to become more conservative (Morley et al, 2014). Instead of educating for emancipatory change, conservative approaches to pedagogy and the curriculum collude with neoliberal discourses to train practitioners to assess, treat and manage apparently dysfunctional others, while accepting existing inequalities in the system and making concessions to oppressive conditions, rather than exposing the social problems and injustices these create and seeking to change them (Morley et al, 2014). This type of education is a seamless match for neoliberalism as it creates practitioners who conform to dominant discourses (even when they are corrupt and unjust) (Macfarlane, forthcoming). These practitioners are appealing for industry managers as they are easier to manipulate, control and manage. Social work can therefore be easily co-opted into uncritical acceptance of neoliberal discourses that support and entrench inequality (Mullaly, 2007). This has led numerous authors to lament that social work seems to be 'in crisis' (Longhofer and Floersch, 2012), has abandoned its mission (see, eg, Specht and Courtney, 1994; Powell, 2001; McNicholl, 2013) or, at best, is at a 'crossroads' (Lavalette, 2011).

In addition, technicising social work education at the expense of critical social theory creates a vicious cycle within the profession. Given that management structures within higher education institutions are increasingly requiring academic programmes to be industry-responsive, the establishment practitioners produced by this conservative education, who then (after graduation) come to form industry, reinforce the same conservative approach to education in which they were schooled. Ultimately, this cycle deprofessionalises social work and fosters its transition to mainstream conservatism (Whebi and Turcotte, 2007). Parton (1994) suggests that such deprofessionalisation has been aided by a lack of critical theoretical rigour in social work education. This shift away from critical social science to valorising technicist approaches to learning that assume practice to be theoryless (Thompson, 2000; Garrett, 2013) are affirmed by the current political context because they do not question dominant power relations or the privileges held by the elite (Mullaly, 2010). Some have argued that this loss of criticality in mainstream social work directly correlates with the profession's loss of status and autonomy, resulting in it being 'less acknowledged as an academic discipline among academics, and less accepted as a profession among the established professions' (Madhu, 2011). Within the context of neoliberalism, an explicitly critical social work curriculum is pivotal to the claim of social work as an emancipatory project. As De Maria (1992) noted more than two decades ago, unless students are immersed in critical theory and practices before graduation, there is little chance of them sustaining it in a managerial context thereafter.

While most social workers would agree in principle with the sentiments of critical social work, many mainstream practices, when critically analysed, reflect more of a commitment to being aligned with the systems that create injustice, rather than supporting the people who are disenfranchised by them. Despite intentions to contribute to emancipatory aims, we all have the potential to fall into establishment practices at times, particularly when most social workers, both practitioners and academics alike, practise within institutional contexts that do not support the values and goals of critical social work (see, eg, Healy, 2000; Baines, 2011).

However, a social work that claims to be emancipatory cannot, with integrity, only focus on individual change in the form of risk assessments and behaviour modification therapies. As social work academics, we belong to a wider social work community

and have a clear responsibility to challenge the erosion of the basic social justice values (Webhi and Turcotte, 2007), and the encroachment of neoliberal discourses, which privilege individual responsibility and reform over social analysis, critique and change (see, eg, Gray and Webb, 2013).

Critical social work bolsters these commitments and counteracts the effects of dominant discourses that exclude, marginalise and blame socially disadvantaged groups (see Allan et al, 2009; Mullaly, 2010; Lavalette, 2011; Fook, 2012; Morley et al, 2014). At University of the Sunshine Coast (USC), we have tried to develop a critical social work programme. The programme is politically progressive and grounded in critical, anti-racist and pro-feminist theoretical approaches. Every course in the programme uses a critical social science lens to cover the curriculum required by the ASWEAS (AASW, 2012). It has strong input from critical social work and sociological academic staff, who teach dedicated, required courses on critical social theory, community development and social action, anti-racism, social policy, and critical reflection. The programme aims to facilitate practitioners who are agents of change, rather than enforcers of oppressive social systems.

The remainder of this article presents original research that discusses the impact of this critical social work education on students' learning and development as agents of change. Through exploring students' narratives about their experiences with social work education, this research suggests that developing a curriculum based on critical social science (see, eg, Allan et al, 2009; Mullaly, 2010; Gray and Webb, 2013; Morley et al, 2014), and using critical pedagogical processes, including critical reflection (see, eg, Fook, 2012), may assist social work students and graduates to resist co-option into the dominant social forces that lead social work into conservative and reactionary practices, and to re-imagine their agency to develop more emancipatory practices, including initiating and participating in social action.

The research

Ethical approval¹ was gained to undertake a small, empirical, qualitative study with final-year students and recent graduates of bachelor of social work and/or master's (qualifying) programmes at USC who identified as representatives of the Social Work Action and Advocacy Network for Students (SWAANS). An invitation to participate was issued to eligible students and graduates in order to investigate the impact of a critical social work programme on their learning and development as activists. SWAANS is an activist group at USC that is completely student initiated and led. SWAANS is an active group, having engaged in over 30 social action events in the past three years.

The research aimed to explore possible links between the development of this activist student group and the critical pedagogy and curriculum that informs the approach to social work education at USC. Essentially, the research sought to understand students'/ graduates' experiences of studying a critical social work programme, its impact on their learning and whether this influenced their participation in activism. Forty students and graduates who publicly identify as key active members of SWAANS were invited to participate in a semi-structured interview of approximately one hour's duration. Participants were also given the option to provide written responses through Survey Monkey to the following questions, which also loosely informed the interview:

- What is the impact of a critical social work programme on your development as a social worker?
- How does a critical social work education equip you to respond to dominant social forces?
- Has critical social work education influenced your involvement in social movements and activism outside your formal education (eg participation in SWAANS)? Please give examples.

These three key questions, which formed the basis of the study, were provided to potential participants before making a decision about participation.

A member of SWAANS who was undertaking a field education placement within the social work programme at USC was appointed as a research assistant to undertake the interviews and receive survey responses. The interviewer therefore held 'insider' status with the participants (White, 2001: 106). This also meant that participants' identities and responses remained confidential, being known only to the SWAANS member who conducted the interviews in order to minimise any possible pressure students may have felt to participate. Participation in the research was voluntary, which was stressed to participants in a plain-language statement issued to them by the principal researcher. There were no external incentives to participate. There were 26 responses in total; 18 responses by survey and eight students and/or graduates who volunteered to participate in a semi-structured interview.

Data from the interviews were transcribed by another research assistant and de-identified. The survey responses were received and collated by the SWAANS member who undertook the interviews. All identifying data were removed to protect the identity of participants.

The data were then subjected to a thematic analysis, using an interpretive, critical social theory lens. Thematic analysis can be defined as 'qualitative data that explores the presence of themes – those that are predetermined [i.e. by the research questions] and those that emerge – within the data' (Willis, 2013: 323). Critical social theories are 'concerned with possibilities for liberatory, social transformation' (Healy, 2001: 13). Such an interpretive framework is 'both a way of theorizing and ... the product of that theorizing' (Swandt, 2015: 51). It aims to question taken-for-granted assumptions and assists in providing categories for how we think about social phenomena that are attentive to power, difference, dominant discourses and so on (Swandt, 2015).

Key themes

In interpreting the data, I looked for multiple expressions of key themes to emerge from students'/graduates' narratives. I organised quotes from the various interviews and survey responses into themed categories when the different narratives seemed to be making repeated reference to similar phenomena (Willis, 2013). In what follows, these key themes are presented.

A broader understanding of social work

Many students commented on how their ideas about social work had changed since commencing their studies. Often, this reflected a broadening of their understanding of social work from the notion of individual help to much more socially and

politically engaged understandings of social work that explicitly refer to activism. As one participant stated: “I got into social work to help people; help the individual. I now think more about ways to incorporate activism and social movements as part of my practice.”

Another participant also discussed how her/his idea of social work changed after being exposed to critical social work: “I thought [social work] was about individually helping people until I had a critical education; then I realised individuals were impacted by structures which kind of allowed for activism to become an important part of my practice.”

Education as transformation

Nearly all participants (except for two) talked about their experiences of their social work education as being transformative. For most students, this was positive; however, some also talked about the challenges associated with this change for them. For example, this female participant discusses the impact of the complexities of becoming aware of and challenging patriarchy as both positive and difficult:

“before doing the course, I may not have questioned it or challenged it and therefore been silenced and oppressed within certain situations.... [T]o challenge and resist sites of patriarchy within your own life as a woman can be challenging for family and friends around you and can put strain on those relationships.”

Another participant also talked about the potentially overwhelming feelings that can emerge from understanding a structural analysis. As s/he states: “I remember coming into this semester and when I went to my first round of lectures, they were all clearly depressing. Neoliberalism.... It is all very negative.”

Other participants talked more positively about this transformation and described a process of becoming ‘politicised’. Most talked about the benefits that their education had created for them, with a particular emphasis on developing a political identity as part of their professional roles as social workers who are agents of change. As this participant explains:

“[I]t’s changed my perspective on pretty much everything. I had a good shift in the way I think about the world.... [B]efore I had no interest in politics whatsoever; just thought it was stupid or didn’t affect me.... Now I’ve learnt that the personal is political and I can connect things back into the space. I think about everything through a range of new lenses that this education has offered me.”

Several other students/graduates also commented on transformational learning being an empowering experience for them. As one person stated:

“I saw it [oppression] in a very personal way. I didn’t understand the reasons why oppression existed for me. Having a critical framework ... I was able to fight against injustice in ways that I had not known before or didn’t understand. That was really empowering.”

Another participant similarly commented:

“A lot of the course material sort of invites you to have an analysis of yourself and your position in society. So, it’s been really awesome for me to be able to create my own sense of what is called – a political identity.”

Related to this, some students/graduates particularly noted how their personal connections with the transformative learning had impacted the ways they practise. For example, this student/graduate discussed being able to reject the dominant discourses that constructed his/her identity in negative terms, and being able to translate that learning into practise:

“I had a personal transformation with my understanding that my position has been co-constructed by society.... The same process that I have gone through internally is what I envisage and mirror in the work I do with people.... That is what was powerful to me – to actually experience that first hand – see the benefit of seeing the theories and how they play out at a personal level. I think that could be very helpful to other people.”

Critical practice principles

Nearly all the participants spoke about the key principles for critical practice that resonated with them. For some participants, a critical social work education had led them to problematise aspects of social work that are often taken for granted. The notion of social worker as expert, for example, was criticised by participants on several occasions. As this respondent stated: “[I]t’s very important that the stuff about the social work expert be deconstructed so we don’t just come in and say we want to help people.... Seeing ourselves as more powerful or whatever. Sometimes that is what happens.” Other students/graduates affirmed this and extended the critique of social worker as expert to articulate a more critically reflective form of expertise:

“It’s important to avoid taking on that role as an expert and doing stuff for them, rather than with them. So, I think critical social work has given me the ability to do that and question my motives when I am working with people.”

Another student commented that critical reflection “helps me rethink things. So, instead of just being a robot ... I always think critically about why we do things and [ask] who is it going to benefit?” Some participants’ narratives logically extended this critically reflective stance to valuing the expertise of the people with whom they work. As the following quote attests: “Doing social work critically means I see the client or community as the expert on their own lived experiences.”

Some participants expressed that a critical social work education had led them to question other aspects of social work practice, including organisational norms, as this example demonstrates: “It [my education] has meant that I question the norm. I question the norm in my practice and I question the norm within organisations.” Another student/graduate stated that critical reflection enabled “creativ[ity] in the way I deal with situations of uncertainty. So, for example, it may be about questioning

a particular procedure or practice and it may be about questioning the criteria as to how people can access things.”

Paralleling this, some participants talked more explicitly about questioning their own practice. As one student/graduate stated: “With critical awareness, you can be more proactive around critiquing your own practice and your own interactions and dialogues through critical reflection with the people you are working with, whether they are clients or staff or organisational staff.” Others discussed using critical reflection to enhance congruence between their espoused theory and their actual practice, for example:

“I look deeper into what I think my practice is, compared to how it actually is. For instance, I align myself with certain values: anti-oppressive or anti-racist or anti-colonial theory. But I know that what I think I am doing might actually not always align with the reality of my practice. So, I think critical reflection allows me to align my use of theory with my actual practice.”

This student/graduate also commented on using critical reflection to align his use of theory with practice:

“I think, to say as a white male, I don’t have racist inclinations is naive. Not that I consciously do racist things or that I am sexist or whatever, but it is definitely part of my upbringing in a racist and sexist world.... So, critical reflection allows me to see if or when certain aspects of racism or patriarchy start creeping into my practice.... It kind of allows me to bring my practice into line with my espoused anti-oppressive position, which has got to be more beneficial for the people I work alongside.”

In addition to practice principles, some graduates provided informative accounts of what these critical principles looked like in their practice in the particular situations and contexts in which they work. One graduate, for example, who works as a child safety officer, spoke about how a critical analysis has informed her/his work:

“So, for example ... it’s clear that there is over-representation of Indigenous people involved in the child safety system.... So, I suppose, without a critical analysis, you would just think that there’s lots of Indigenous parents out there who don’t care for their children properly. Whereas, a critical/structural analysis would show you Indigenous people are the most vulnerable populations in this country. They are the most disadvantaged. So, you don’t need brain science to understand why they are over-represented in child safety.... [I]t [critical theory] shows you the actual issues – the level of disadvantage.... And how the current way those issues are being dealt with is actually creating more disadvantage.”

Another graduate talked about his/her role in community mental health, indicating how a critical approach had made a difference to his/her practice:

“I don’t feel I am just another cog in the system.... Essentially, I am able to be an agent of change. You need to be able to participate in a way that you

still do the job, but working underneath all that, you operate differently.... Now, when I do an assessment, I am thinking: what is the client talking about? What dominant discourses are operating and what structures are oppressing them? How can I work with this person to make change?"

Another graduate similarly discussed her/his role in mental health, particularly with regard to employing a structural analysis to challenge individualistic and medicalised constructions of service users' experiences:

"There have been instances where I have gone into a government organisation, where the focus is on individual responsibility ... especially in organisations orientated to a biomedical model.... So, a critical approach enables me to articulate the broader structural factors ... to a nurse or a psychiatrist.... Looking at wider impacts ... in terms of social structures, limited resources, definitely gave them a different perspective from blaming the individual."

Privileging a critical analysis

Central to the identification of critical practice principles was the theory underpinning these. Participants were also able to articulate how a critical framework influences the ways in which they conceptualise social problems. As this participant explains:

"The biggest impact on me as a practitioner is understanding that the complex issues people face aren't just their fault. It is much more complicated ... understanding how disadvantage is created within society, how it is maintained, but also structural analysis gives you a way to engage with people to challenge to resist some of the reasons why they come into services."

Another participant makes similar links between the personal and political: "Critical theory allows me to see the wider social structures that are impacting on the individual.... It allows me to look at social structures that inhibit people in everyday life."

While privileging a structural analysis was a key theme identified in most participants' narratives, some participants were also explicit about the influence of a post-structuralist perspective on their learning. This student, for example, talks about the importance of a structural analysis and also the need to recognise multiple interlocking oppressions: "Having a structural analysis really opened my eyes to other intersectionalities that impact on people: like race, gender and ethnicity, law, which was a big one, power and patriarchy."

In the following quote, the participant refers to using the tempering effects of critical reflection to mitigate the potential dangers of modernist critical approaches to set up oppressive practices in the name of being emancipatory. As he/she explains:

"Critical reflection has been good for me, otherwise I would have been out there challenging everybody about being racist or sexist or you know; not necessarily in a respectful way I suppose. Just challenging everyone who makes judgement on people, and thinking I was high and mighty."

Similarly, another student/graduate referred implicitly to some of the potentially unintentionally disempowering elements of modernist critical frameworks, and discussed critical reflection as a tool to promote hope and agency:

“At first, my learning made me feel really nihilistic about everything and fatalistic about all these things. After learning all about this structural stuff, I felt good about the fact I know about it but also I felt totally disempowered about these huge forces out of my control and what is the point?... I am just trying to integrate postmodern theory.... The process of critical reflection has given me that glimmer of hope I was looking for, I suppose.... What I really wanted to learn the whole time was what can I do about it, and that’s what I’ve got from critical reflection.”

Resisting dominant social forces

Several participants indicated that learning about neoliberalism had been useful in preparing them to respond to contemporary practice contexts. For example, one student/graduate stated:

“If you want to respond effectively to something like neoliberalism, you need at first to understand what it is.... I remember posting on the SWAANS page a message that said: ‘The system isn’t broken. It was built this way...’ It [education] changes your whole perspective on everything ... because you realise why things are the way they are and how they can be different.”

Another student/graduate discussed strategies to resist neoliberalism:

“I think if you view neoliberalism as a dominant force, like an overpowering force, which you don’t have any power to influence, then you will become disillusioned and become very disheartened. If you view power not just as a commodity, but also a fluid thing ... there are always ways of working in and around it.... [W]e need to recognise that and think critically about how we use that power so it can be beneficial.... So looking within the system and finding ways of navigating it for the better of the people you’re working alongside.”

Interestingly, most participants referred implicitly to their capacities to internally reject neoliberal discourses. As this example attests:

“If I hadn’t had the knowledge or education around what neoliberalism is, how it operates, then I would have no idea how to effectively respond to it.... So I think it’s powerful that I have an awareness of what it is, the way it operates in society. And with that kind of foundation, you can start to think of creative ways of getting around it; trying to find spaces where you can resist it.”

This student/graduate similarly comments:

“Critical social work education has given me the skills to challenge neoliberal constructs; to resist by advocating for change, at structural and systemic levels, instead of just looking at individuals for the answer.... I think that critical social work education has taught me that it is almost my responsibility to challenge these things.”

Critical social work education and activism

Finally, the research sought to unearth whether there are links between the development of the SWAANS activist group and the critical pedagogy and curriculum that informs the approach to education at USC. Participants’ accounts overwhelmingly confirm that their engagement with critical education has been an important catalyst for their involvement in SWAANS and other forms of activism. As one student/graduate stated:

“Critical social work education has given me a political lens and insight into how collective action can change situations.... [W]hen you look at things like policy and dominant discourses within our society, it is often overwhelming and you can feel almost hopeless.... I think this course has taught me how that, collectively, change is possible.”

Another participant affirmed:

“As soon as I started to engage with this learning and the links between personal and political, I started to become an activist.... I realised the significance of people coming together, collectivising over social issues, so I started to go to protests.... I definitely became more politically engaged as a direct result of this education.”

This student/graduate similarly commented: “I now see activism as a fundamental part of social work practice. I see it as my responsibility. I didn’t think that before my degree.”

One participant talked more about critical education affirming her/his involvement in activist practices, rather than initiating it:

“I think it has influenced me to some degree, but I have always been active in political movements. It is not something new to me.... What the social work programme did, though, was give me the ability to articulate my arguments more and reinforce why activism is important.”

In addition to activism, SWAANS members also talked about the benefits and importance of connecting with like-minded others. As one student/graduate commented: “SWAANS has opened up new opportunities, new friendships and new connections; networks where I have alliances with people who have the same hope and advocacy goals that I do in regard to social justice.” Another student/graduate similarly attested to the power benefits of collective action:

“SWAANS has given people a collective voice, whereas as individuals, we may not have had a voice that could be heard.... It has given us hope that, together as a group of people, we can change things.... We travelled to Brisbane to attend a protest against Tony Abbott’s austerity-style budget. We have also been to rallies against the forcible closure Aboriginal communities. I personally attended a conference run by a refugee collective in regards to how human services workers need to be able to work more effectively, collaboratively and creatively with asylum seekers and refugees and how currently our country is failing that population.... [L]ots of opportunities have come out of a group of people working collaboratively.”

Another graduate similarly affirmed the benefits of staying involved with SWAANS beyond his/her studies:

“Studying critical social work has made me want to participate in SWAANS and in activism because I can see that there’s power in numbers; strength in numbers.... The new students now have links with graduates and that connection can continue.”

Importantly, one account indicates that critical social work education had not just facilitated the development of SWAANS, but also informed the operations of that group at times, with attention being drawn to power relations and processes. As one participant explains:

“There was one time when we thought about doing an event to promote equity amongst international students.... We had already thought of how we could achieve this and even thought for a second that we could skip the consultation with students and go straight to stakeholders. But another student was saying: ‘We need to slow it down; consult properly. It will be more effective....’ Now I understand that I would have imposed an agenda and that true grass-roots activism requires attention to process, rather than just focusing on outcomes.”

Discussion

A key aim of this study was to understand the impact of a critical social work programme on students’ learning and development as activists. In summary, the findings suggest that using a critical theory-informed curriculum and critically reflective pedagogical processes contributes to a form of transformative learning in students that inspires participation in collective social action. Key themes to emerge from participants’ narratives in this research suggest that this transformation involves a number of aspects, including developing a broader understanding of social work (from the notion of individual help to much more politicised understandings, including social activism). This parallels Preston et al’s (2014: 57) contention that a broader understanding of social work is essential to ‘maintaining a commitment to preparing and supporting critical activist practitioners’.

Students/graduates also referred to transformative education as involving a sense of becoming politicised. As noted elsewhere, being able to link personal experience to

the political realm was essential to this (see, eg, Fook, 1993; Mullaly, 2007). As hoped and expected, participants talked about a shift in thinking away from victim-blaming approaches to privileging a structural analysis of social problems, which is noted as a key component of radical social work (Fook, 1993). For some participants, this had led them to critically question their role as helpers and experts, and to problematise taken-for-granted assumptions. All participants identified a range of critical principles that informed their practice and a number of them provided excellent examples from their current work of the difference that critical theory had made to their practice.

Some students were more explicit about the influence of a post-structuralist perspective on their learning, and most referred to the benefits of using critical reflection to improve practice. This took the form of moving beyond a structural analysis to further recognise multiple interlocking oppressions, overcoming some of the unintentionally potentially disempowering elements of modernist critical frameworks, and discussing critical reflection as a tool to promote hope and agency. This supports previous studies in this area which suggest that critical reflection can be a useful tool in supporting practitioners to do emancipatory practice (Fook, 2004; Pockett and Giles, 2008; Morley, 2014).

Approximately two thirds of the participants indicated that learning about dominant social forces, such as neoliberalism, had been useful in preparing them for practice, and, interestingly, most participants referred implicitly to their internal capacities to reject neoliberal discourses. These findings support Ferguson and Lavalette's (2006: 312) contention that 'resistance' to dominant social forces 'lies in the possibility ... of developing a new, more robust paradigm for critical social work practice'.

Limitations of the study

As the chief investigator of this research, I should acknowledge that I also lead the discipline of social work at USC and have done so for the past eight years. I have had a key role in the development of the critical orientation of the programmes and the curriculum and therefore have a vested interest in the findings of this research. Objectivist researchers would see this as a limitation of the study given my apparent biased positioning (Sarantakos, 2005; Arnd-Caddigan and Pozutto, 2006). However, others would regard my knowledge of and connection with the programmes as potentially having an enriching influence on the research (White, 2001; Loftus et al, 2011). That being said, the SWAANS activist group, which has been the focus of this study, emerged quite independently from my contributions to the programmes, and as students' social action visibly increased on and off campus, I became curious about their motivations. I was impressed by their initiative and achievements and hoped to learn something about what might support them to continue their activist work.

One of the ways in which this potential limitation was addressed was to appoint research assistants, who were part of the SWAANS group, to undertake and transcribe the interviews and collect and collate the survey responses in order to provide me with some distance from this aspect of the project. This also satisfied the ethics committee, who were concerned that students/graduates may feel pressured to participate if their identities were known to me given the power relations inherent in my dual role as researcher/programme coordinator. Anonymity was prioritised for this reason, and this extended to the decision not to include the collection of demographic information. While this could be considered another limitation of the

study as clearly one's biographical lens, based on social location, influences everything, including choices to study social work and engage in collective social action, the decision to protect students' confidential right to engage in the research or not took precedence. For example, consistent with enrolment patterns in many social work programmes (Zastrow, 2009), we have far fewer men studying social work at USC than women. Hence, asking a question about gender may have revealed the identity of the respondent. Including information about participants' ethnicity, for example, may also have potentially invalidated participants' right to remain anonymous. As such, this information was not specifically elicited, although was disclosed by some participants.

Another limitation of the study was that not all students and graduates were invited to participate in the study, only those students in the final year of the bachelor and master's qualifying programmes and recent graduates who were prominent and public representatives of SWAANS. This was because I was interested in whether the curriculum had influenced their decision to participate in activism, and so asking students who were close to completing their studies, or graduates who have recently completed their degree, seemed appropriate for this aim. This targeted approach to privileging students' perceptions about how/whether their social work education had influenced their motivations for engaging in activism could also be criticised as a limitation of the research given that their potentially wider motivations for activism (which may well be external) were not specifically part of the enquiry. The interviews, however, were semi-structured and did not exclude this kind of information from emerging. Indeed, one participant talked about activism not being new or the result of the programme, which was presented in the findings. Certainly, an equally interesting study would be to ask USC students/graduates who do not participate in activism about the reasons for their decision not to be involved. Further research could also include a larger sample of participants; the students/graduates in this study represent just over 10% of the total SWAANS cohort but no claims are made about the sample being representative of the entire student population.

Conclusion

Historically, education has provided a catalyst for social change based on the assumption that it can create the conditions for a more fair and democratic world (Amsler, 2011). Educating for critical social work 'aims to enable graduates to understand, critique and transform the profession of social work and the unjust nature of society, through their capacity to analyse power and social relationships as both personal and political' (Macfarlane, forthcoming). The research suggests that social work students and graduates benefit from a solid foundation in critical social theory and a thorough understanding of its relationship to practice in order to be appropriately prepared to work within the sort of uncertain, complex and rapidly changing environments that characterise contemporary practice contexts. This will facilitate the development of graduates who: can respond to burgeoning social inequality and environmental destruction that will be disguised as progress; have a social and politicised understanding of human suffering that will be constructed as risk; understand and will critique and contest the colonisation of social work by neoliberal, managerial, patriarchal, heterosexist, racist and medicalised discourses that will be framed as diversity and inclusivity; and understand that the scientisation

and medicalisation of social work is not the pathway to professional autonomy or distinction.

Social workers need to think carefully and critically about these issues and formulate responses to ideological attacks on our discipline. With the dominance of managerial practices such as the emphasis on outcomes, paperwork, auditing, quality assurance and preoccupation with the assessment and management of risk (Mahdu, 2011; Wallace and Pease, 2011), social workers are unlikely to become radicalised by their experiences in the field. In fact, experienced practitioners have reported anger and demoralisation at the gap between the work that they thought they would be doing in line with the reasons that originally motivated them to come into social work, and the daily realities of their practice, in which their relationships with individuals, groups and communities are increasingly defined by economic imperatives (Jones, 2005). Without a critical analysis, social work is at risk of becoming little more than a functionary of the state to protect the most powerful and privileged groups and is therefore in danger of becoming something quite different from the social justice and emancipatory-oriented profession that it can be (Kessl, 2009). The findings from this research suggest that a critically informed approach to social work education can prepare students/graduates to work effectively for social justice despite the neoliberal human service context. Students'/graduates' narratives indicate that critical social work education can counteract some of the most pernicious impacts of dominant social forces. They exhibited a range of strategies, including: a critique of and commitment to challenge structural inequalities; the use of critical reflection to promote a sense of agency for change; and participation in practices of resistance, such as collective social action.

The types of responses that social work educators develop will largely determine the sort of social work that will be carried forward into the future. The challenges posed by global social forces may unite us collectively in (re-)visioning our practice (Ferguson and Lavalette, 2006). While being a critical social work practitioner may well be demanding as it often requires the practitioner to challenge entrenched institutional and political arrangements that benefit powerful groups (see, eg, Mullaly, 2010), educating for critical social work is vital if we are to remain an ethical and emancipatory project.

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¹ University USC (de-identified for peer review) Human Ethics Committee Approval A13488.

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