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Macfarlane, Selma and Morley, Christine 2011, What are the possibilities and responsibilities for social work to further a social justice and human rights agenda in a neo-liberal context?, in AASW 2011 : The role of social work in social justice and human rights : Proceedings of the AASW Queensland & North Queensland conference, Australian Association of Social Workers, Melbourne, Vic., pp. 1-16.

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How Can Social Work Further A Social Justice and Human Rights Agenda In A Neo-liberal Context?

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The Neo-Liberal Context of Social Work Practice

- managerial practices of cost containment
- efficacy and standardisation
- an over emphasis on risk
- an under focus on need and rights;
- a quest for objectivity and certainty.
- Culture of auditing
- increased emphasis on procedures, routines, surveillance and compliance with operational standards.

(Madhu, 2011; Marginson, 2006; Fook & Gardner, 2007).

- While neoliberalism severely limits our freedoms to ensure our work is directed towards economic interest and state control (Marginson, 2006).

Neo-Liberalism Reduces Social Work To:

- An 'evidence based social work enterprise,' &
 - The 'professional project'
- (Meager & Parton, 2004:p.10-11),
- Neoliberal represents an ideological attack on critical social work.
 - Critical reflection is needed to understand and resist neoliberalism.

Social Work as Managerial Practice

- “M]anagement tools and techniques and administrative practice” and aspirations for professional status “define social work” (Madhu, 2011 p.6).
- “social work does not have core theoretical knowledge base, and that there is a hole at the centre of the enterprise” (Parton, 1994, p.30).
- Social work is “less acknowledged as an academic discipline among academics, and less accepted as a profession among the established professions” (Madhu, 2011, p.6-7 citing Shanin, 1998 and Toren, 1972)
- Social work is captured by the ‘tactics of governmentality’ (Foucault, 1979 cited in Madhu, 2011. p. 9).
- “[T]he absorption of social work practice into the managerial schema is a win-win situation” for the dominant interests (Madhu, 2011, p. 10).

- Social work is destined to remain a profession with no autonomy unless it can find ways to resist “the heteronomy of governmentality and managerialism”
- The influence of critical perspectives in the Western social work education has ironically declined (Dominelli, 1997).
- Healy and Meagher (2004, p.97) argue that “a poorly trained and inadequately supported human services labour force is not well placed to enact social work as a thoughtful, analytic and creative activity... and, moreover, a de-professionalised and de-skilled workforce is not in a good position to defend the interest of service users especially when these interests deviate from prevailing organisational and policy dictates.”

- Discourses 'are dependent on continual maintenance, creation and recreation through social practices... and, as processes, discourses... are open to modification' (Pozzuto, Angel & Dezendorf 2005: 31)
- The development of our capacity as social workers to reflect critically and 'to actively frame problems or issues in a way that points out the road to transformative change... can deconstruct the discourse which shape not only the professional domain but the way in which the worker makes sense of that domain and their place within it' (McArdle & Mansfield 2007, p.496).

Social Work's Ethical Commitment to Challenging and Resisting Oppressive Discourses

- Social work is “the core human rights profession . . .
- “social work practice . . . is in a unique and potentially powerful position to help make the vision of human rights a reality” (Ife, 2001,p.203).
- Critical reflection “open[s] conceptual space regarding one’s position within competing or dominant discourses” (Rossiter,2005, n.p).
- Ethical practice involves ‘unsettling’ our practice (Rossiter, 2011)

Critical Reflection (Fook & Gardner, 2007)

- Identifies & challenges implicit values, beliefs and assumptions that support dominant power relations
- Draws on: reflective practice (Argyris and Schon; Schon, 1983; 1987); discourse analysis and deconstruction (D'Cruz & Jones, 2004) & reflexivity (Taylor & White, 2000) to enhance the critical postmodernist underpinnings (Allan et al, 2009).

The Research

- Aimed to understand the depth and breadth of student learning from participation in 'Critical Social Work Practice course' which involves:
 - students deconstructing and reconstructing a critical incident (Fook & Gardner, 2007).
- Focus group 1) concerned students' perceptions of the learning
- Focus group 2) aimed to elicit how students may have used critical reflection during their second placement.
- Data analysis was thematic, using critical discourse analysis.
- A critical and social constructivist research paradigm was used to inform the broad approach to this exploratory inquiry.
- The findings from this research provide empirical evidence to support many of the claims that have been made about critical reflection in the literature.

Main Themes

- Increased understanding of the purpose and vision of critical social work
- strong sense of professional identity linked to emancipatory values
- Willingness to challenge social injustices- both internally and externally
- Increased awareness of use of power in practice
- Increased capacity to deal with uncertainty, complexity, contradiction
- Increased self awareness and accountability to critical and ethical practice
- Protection from burnout, and
- Increased sense of personal agency to create social change

- *It has been transformational – totally changed the way we think about practice and expanded our understanding... We understand the nature of hidden privilege... We're more comfortable sitting with uncertainty. We can communicate more competently and could even challenge others' thinking in a respectful way".*
- *"The ability to critically reflect is now embedded so strongly into our thinking that it is a skill we will have for life... We can challenge dominant discourses that damage the lives of vulnerable people. Our understanding of power relationships makes us mindful of not perpetuating people's experiences of oppression in our working relationships with them."*

- *'In that situation, it [critical reflection] helped me to really listen to the client and listen to the differences in their response [from mine] rather than interpreting their experience through mine or privileging my experience.'*
- *'I don't have to agree but I can respect difference.'*
- *'I used the deconstructive process to look at what part of the conflict could I own.... So, how was I adding to it? What was I responsible for? And in taking that ownership, then seeing what I could do about it because ultimately I recognized that this was my own construction of perceived conflict... '*

- Critical reflection *“can make a tricky situation workable.”*
- *“[I]f you are so fixed in modernist thinking, and you’re fixed in your way of doing things or way of thinking, then when you use postmodernism and the reconstructive processes you’re actually giving yourself new and alternate ways to think about things”*
- *“I have been able not only to assist clients, but also to challenge unhelpful dominant discourses within my own organisation... I have been able to help create change within the court process when assisting women who have experienced domestic violence.”*
- *“This teaching has influenced the way I interact with clients as a children’s sexual assault counsellor. It has enabled me to recognise the political, economic and social systems that influence individuals’ lives, and recognise the power relations that exist in all relationships. . . thus enabling me to support, empower and raise the awareness of my clients and their families.”*

Findings

- Critical reflection facilitates praxis, challenges thinking and practices that may be complicit with dominant power relations, constructs alternatives to work towards emancipatory outcomes.
- Critical reflection in social work positions learning and teaching as a form of social activism

Critical Reflection Challenges Neoliberalism

- As Mezirow (1990 p .360) states, “fostering critically self-reflective learning means a deliberate effort to foster resistance to... technicist assumptions, to thoughtlessness, to conformity, to impermeable meaning perspectives, to fear of change, to ethnocentric and class bias, and to egocentric values.”
- Critical reflection provides strategies to promote resistance to dominant neoliberal trends in social work which threaten ethical practice and ensures students develop a strong sense of professional identity as agents of progressive social change.

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