

# Resisting neoliberalism in social work education: learning, teaching and performing human rights and social justice in England and Spain

## **ABSTRACT**

In an increasingly complex, globalized world, many of the problems confronting social workers are rooted in structural inequalities created or deepened by uncontrolled neoliberal market mechanisms. Yet neoliberal political agendas dominating the global order encourage individualistic models of social work intervention, characterized by managerialism and deprofessionalisation. Critiquing the impact of neoliberalism, those aligned with critical and radical social work traditions have highlighted the use of narrow technicist interventions to disguise the root social causes of people's suffering and contradicting values of human rights (HR) and social justice (SJ) that lie at the heart of social work as a profession. For social work students to locate themselves confidently within HR and SJ frameworks, they must experience HR and SJ as central to their education. This article draws on doctoral research exploring how HR and SJ are operationalized in social work education in England and Spain. A web survey of social work educators and students was complemented by interviews with educators in both countries. Findings revealed key opportunities for learning, teaching and performing HR and SJ in social work education. We discuss each in turn, reflecting briefly on the implications for enhancing the profile of HR and SJ in social work education.

## **INTRODUCTION**

Human rights and social justice are central tenets of social work as an international profession (IFSW and IASSW, 2014). Yet the global spread of neo-liberalism as 'the common sense of most governments [both right and left oriented]' represents an assault on social justice ideals, citizenship rights and universal human rights (Ferguson, 2008, pp. 2-3; Jones, 2004; SWAN, 2019). A neoliberal worldview prioritises instead the interests of free global markets, promoting minimum interference with their mechanisms and the social structures that allow their optimum operation. In the UK, government led reforms of social work embracing neoliberalism have led to the marketisation of service delivery, the growth of new managerialism, and the reshaping of training to encourage technicist models of social work (Dominelli, 2010; Dominelli and Khan, 2000; Dustin, 2007; Ferguson, 2008; Garrett, 2010; Jones, 2004; Rogowski, 2011). These changes have brought sharp reductions in public services, and the narrowing of social work practice to focus on risk management and social control leaving little space for practitioners to

contend with the structural causes of social problems that expose individuals, families, groups and communities as victims of social injustice, their human rights threatened or denied (Martinez-Herrero and Charnley, 2017). Simpson and Murr (2015) offer an in-depth analysis of the dialectical tensions of change in social work education in the UK during several decades of government led attempts to reshape the social work curriculum along neoliberal lines. They highlight the tensions among conflicting understandings of ‘good’ social work and the appropriate social work curriculum, exploring the position of different stakeholders of social work education (the Government, employers and Higher Education Institutions) during the processes of change.

Similar processes are evident, to a greater or lesser extent, worldwide, including in Spain (De-la-Red and Brezmes, 2009). This has led to international calls to reclaim the critical paradigm in social work, reinforcing human rights and social justice as core values, and confronting the effects of neoliberalism on the profession and service users (Finn and Jacobson, 2003; Healy, 2001; IASSW and IFSW, 2004; Ife, 2008; IFSW Europe, 2010; Jones *et al.*, 2004; Velasco-Vázquez, 2012). Social workers have demonstrated a readiness to develop new ways of working and thinking to ‘resist [neoliberal] economic and political pressures’ (Ferguson and Lavalette, 2006, p. 311; Ioakimidis *et al.*, 2013), engaging with activism, building closer relationships with service users and sharing positive experiences of structural social work practice across the world (Beresford and Croft, 2004; Dominelli, 2010; Ferguson and Lavalette, 2006; Lundy, 2011).

Important in re-establishing a strong social justice framework for social work is a focus on historical perspectives. This can help in identifying and understanding recurring events such as crises of capitalism and patterns of social change (Finn and Jacobson, 2003; Ife, 2008; Pagaza *et al.*, 2000) and in highlighting individual and organisational failures of social work that have led to oppressive practices (Ioakimidis, 2015). Confronting the neoliberal discourse also requires strong engagement with human rights perspectives as a route to social justice through the identification and elimination of structural inequalities (Dominelli, 2007; Reichert, 2003). The adoption of a human rights framework draws attention to the profession’s ‘mixed track record’ on human rights and enables social workers to reflect on ‘whether or not they have become complicit in legitimizing inequalities’ (Preston-Shoot and Höjer, 2012, p. 15).

For social work practitioners to locate themselves confidently within frameworks of HR and SJ these concepts must be central to social work education (Dominelli, 2010; Ife, 2008; Méndez Fernández *et al.*, 2006; Sewpaul and Jones, 2005); equipping students with the knowledge and skills to recognize and confront threats to the HR and SJ foundations of social work posed by neoliberalism. There is limited literature discussing experiences of incorporating HR and SJ in social work education (Bransford, 2011; Palumbo and Friedman, 2014; Poole, 2010; Reynaert *et*

*al.*, 2019; Wehbi and Straka, 2010), and a particular lack of attention to strategies and practices relating to the transmission of HR and SJ practices in social work education in both England and Spain.

Informed by critical theory (Houston and Campbell, 2001), and reflecting our own value positions in line with the radical social work tradition (Bailey and Brake, 1975; Lavalette, 2011) the study presented here was designed to develop a systematic understanding of wider opportunities for cross-cultural learning experienced by the lead author in undertaking undergraduate social work training in Spain and postgraduate education in social work and research methods in England. Specific aims of the study were to: i) achieve a comparative, holistic and situated understanding of how HR and SJ are understood and operationalized in social work education in England and Spain, ii) contribute to critical debate and iii) identify strategies for social work education to strengthen commitment to HR and SJ in each country.

## **RESEARCHING HUMAN RIGHTS AND SOCIAL JUSTICE IN ENGLISH AND SPANISH SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION**

A first step was to define human rights and social justice, contested concepts subject to ongoing philosophical debate embracing broad emancipatory understandings, as well as narrow definitions proposed by proponents of oppressive ideologies such as neoliberalism. In 1948, following the end of the second world war, human rights were defined in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) as the inalienable rights of every human, rights and freedoms that allow us to satisfy human fundamental needs, fully develop our qualities and conscience, and which ‘set the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world’ (United Nations, 1949). The UDHR referred to civil and political rights, known as first generation rights and to socioeconomic and cultural rights, known as second generation rights. Subsequent recognition of the limitations of first and second generation rights to respond to changing circumstances across the world led, in the 1980s, to the emergence of a third generation of collective rights focusing on solidarity (Ife, 2012). As indicated in the international definition (IFSW and IASSW, 2014) social work embraces all three generations of human rights.

Broad definitions of social justice incorporate notions of human rights. For example, Visser *et al.*, (2010, p. 364) define social justice as ‘an ideal state of society where individuals and social groups enjoy protection of their basic human rights and receive a just share of the benefits of social cooperation’. By contrast, narrow definitions of social justice are characterized by neoliberal tones for example: ‘social justice, helping those on the margins of our society, benefits everybody...when families on the margins find stability, work and independence from the social breakdown that holds them back, more adults and children have a chance to thrive.

More people become net contributors within society and demands on the public purse reduce. We all gain.’ (CSJ, 2015, p. 3).

As a profession social work has a value base consistent with broad perspectives of human rights (Banks, 2006; Healy, 2005; Reichert, 2003). However, it is only in recent decades that human rights have been explicitly articulated as a focus of global social work in developing models of critical and radical social work practice, and despite claims that human rights offer the strongest possible unifying discourse (Huegler et al., 2012; Ife, 2008; Staub-Bernasconi, 2011), understandings of human rights and their meanings for social work vary across the world (Yip, 2004). A differential understanding of human rights oriented social work has been found between social work educators in England (narrower and legalistic understanding) and Spain (broader and social justice oriented) (Martinez-Herrero and Charnley, 2018).

For the purposes of this research, human rights were operationalized as those rights recognised in the UDHR together with evolving and context specific interpretations of what should be considered as fundamental human needs (Ife, 2008). Social justice was understood as the state of society where human rights are respected and all are entitled to a fair share (Visser *et al.*, 2010) of the available resources and benefits of social cooperation. Based on a synthesis of key elements of definitions encountered in the literature and reflected in the discourses conveyed by international social work organisations, human rights and social justice were treated as intrinsically linked concepts.

## **RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS**

The study was designed to achieve breadth and depth in understanding how social work educators conceptualize and incorporate HR and SJ in their respective systems of social work education, and to understand students’ experiences of learning about HR and SJ as part of their qualifying courses. A web survey of social work educators and final year students was sent to all institutions offering undergraduate social work degrees in each country. The survey was complemented by interviews with social work educators from a single university in each country, selected purposively for their strong overt focus on HR and SJ, increasing the likelihood of gaining insights into the operationalization of these concepts in social work education. Ethical approval was granted by (anonymised University name) Research Ethics Committee.

The survey combined Likert scaled questions with open-ended questions, seeking attitudes and understandings as well as personal commitment to HR and SJ, and experiences of teaching and/or learning about HR and SJ. Twenty-three (27.7%) of 83 HEIs in England, and 13

(33.3%) of 39 Universities in Spain, engaged with the survey. 224 valid survey responses were received from 41 social work educators in England, 35 social work educators in Spain, 56 students in England, and 92 students in Spain. These low response rates, common in online surveys, have traditionally raised questions about reliability, however, recent statistical research (Fosnacht et al., 2017) suggests that low response rates in online surveys do not imply bias.

Seven in-depth interviews with social work educators sought their views on the relationship between HR, SJ and social work, their approaches to teaching about HR and SJ, and experiences of students' engagement with HR and SJ. This approach facilitated engagement with a 'positive critique' (Fairclough, 2010, p. 20) highlighting sources, discourses and strategies of resistance to the spread of neoliberal ideology in social work education. Following transcription and initial thematic analysis to identify an overview of the patterns found in the interviews from each country, deeper analysis of the interviews drew on Fairclough's (2003) methods of critical discourse analysis, with support of Nvivo software.

Descriptive statistics from the survey were generated automatically through the use of Bristol Online Surveys tool, while responses to open-ended survey questions were analysed thematically. All data were interpreted in the light of the literature and current social work debates, within a broader framework of critical realism (anonymized reference).

## **FINDINGS**

Seven key areas of teaching, learning and performing HR and SJ emerging from the survey and interviews are discussed below. Annexed tables 1 and 2 offer complementary detail on educators and students' open responses to survey questions seeking their views on: the best ways of teaching HR and SJ (table 1) and what could improve teaching and learning about HR and SJ in social work education (table 2).

### **1. Teaching theoretical and legal aspects of human rights and social justice**

Lectures were the most common format for teaching about theoretical and legal aspects of HR and SJ in both countries. These tend to involve large classes with limited opportunities for interaction or innovative approaches to learning, though lectures were referred to as one of the most helpful experiences in learning about HR and SJ by social work students in England and considered helpful by a minority of students in Spain. HR and SJ are complex, contested areas of social work knowledge and Dominelli (2010) and Ife (2008) highlight the importance of engaging students with social work models connecting local and global contexts. This requires holistic understandings of the deepest roots of service users' problems, and of international and national frameworks of HR. Survey responses from educators in both countries referred to

diverse approaches to teaching about HR and SJ. Theoretical frameworks included anti-oppressive, radical, and transformational social work as well as culturally sensitive, anti-colonialist and empowerment based models, Marxism, feminism, participatory democracy and the human capabilities framework. In interviews, educators in England explained they mainly taught in lectures and drew on an elaborated critique of neoliberalism, with examples of direct relevance to social work practice. In Spain, educators explained they taught about the history of HR and SJ, with a focus on citizenship perspectives showing an awareness of contemporary anti-capitalist arguments, and anti-austerity social movements. However, students in Spain indicated this approach created challenges in linking abstract theory with social work practice. Students in England did not raise explicit difficulties in relation to theoretical teaching but suggested that more support in linking theory with social work practice in demanding practice contexts, particularly through more practice examples, could improve their learning. The message here is the need in both countries, but particularly in Spain, to create a more effective basis to enable students to understand the links between theory and practice

## **2. Historical and international perspectives.**

References to the importance of teaching about history in social work featured strongly in interviews with educators in Spain while only one educator in England referred to teaching students about the history of social policy and social work, and implied that this was unusual:

*... we do quite a lot of history of Social Policy ... and they probably don't understand why on earth we're starting at 1834 but I want to get them to think about the continuities in policies and how things have changed but not as much as we think perhaps about how the poor are demonised and have always been demonised ... I think they eventually get it but ... when they come in, they think that's a bit strange what we're doing. (Interview 3, England)*

In the English context where social work is heavily influenced by managerialism, and where many social work students experience a sense of oppression and powerlessness in practice contexts, awareness of continuity and change, and of the effects of neoliberal capitalism on the profession, serve as a source of hope for those seeking to resist neoliberalism in social work.

Learning about social work internationally also offers a source of hope, helping students to discover differences and similarities in different countries and to avoid ethnocentric thinking (Rode, 2009). While educators in Spain placed greater importance on teaching about social work in other countries (mostly Latin-American), one interviewed educator in England explained that whilst learning from social work in other countries could improve social work in England, this was seen as a “luxury” for which the curriculum did not allow space. Since the completion of this study, the professional capabilities framework that shapes the English social

work curriculum has been revised and now includes a requirement for ‘recognition of social work as an international profession that supports practice with diverse communities in England’ (BASW, 2018, p. 4) removing any sense that attention to social work as a global profession can be seen as a luxury, and implying that social work educators must support students to explore the ‘local-global synthesis’ in social work education (Rasell et al., 2019, p. 677).

### **3. International collaboration: fostering empathy and cultural awareness locally and globally.**

Lalayants et al. (2015) and Sims et al. (2014) argue that contact and collaborative working between social work students from different countries is a key strategy for advancing social work agendas of HR and SJ. With technological advances, establishing such connections can be easily achieved. Hawkins (2009) argues that knowledge alone is unlikely to lead to action, rather it is empathy that triggers desire to take action on other people’s behalf. Collaborative projects and building networks to foster empathy, including immersion experiences where students live for a short period within disadvantaged communities, and international social work placements, were highlighted by interviewed educators in both Spain and England as opportunities offered by their courses, enabling students to “open their eyes” to different conditions and ways of living. Empathy can also be fostered through the use of visual media such as films and the internet to understand how HR and SJ issues affect real people’s lives (Hawkins, 2009). Survey responses from educators in both England and Spain referred to the use of audio-visual materials, including films and documentaries, to facilitate learning about HR and SJ. However, only a small minority of students acknowledged the value of these approaches. Listening to service users’ stories was considered more effective way of promoting empathy and awareness of HR and SJ issues at a local level reflecting the democratisation of social work knowledge in collaboration with service users and sensitive to local cultures (Beresford and Croft, 2004; Dominelli, 2010). While service user involvement is a common feature of social work training in both countries just over a third of students in Spain asserted they had not been taught by service users. This suggests that service user involvement offers a fertile opportunity for the enhancement of social work education in Spain. However, we urge continuing efforts to ensure that widespread support for service user involvement in social work education from service users, students and educators alike (Robinson and Webber, 2012) is complemented by effective outcomes in the delivery of services that make a real difference in service users’ lives, and that the ‘feel good’ factor associated with service user involvement in social work education does not distract attention from the negative impact of austerity on services at local level.

#### **4. Practice learning**

Survey responses in England indicated that practice learning was the most vital opportunity for students to learn about human rights and social justice. However, some organisational contexts for practice learning were a source of concern for educators in England where social work practice has been so heavily affected by neoliberal ideology that attention to HR and SJ has taken second place to bureaucratic priorities in many social work organisations. In Spain, too, practice learning was considered by educators as a central space for learning about HR and SJ in social work, allowing students to ‘put themselves in the service users’ shoes’ (Interview 4, Spain) to ‘see’ (Interview 1, Spain) and better understand the links between social work, HR and SJ. However, placement experiences were viewed as helpful in this respect only by a small number of students in Spain. This is consistent with the difficulties experienced by students in understanding the links between theory and practice and underlines the importance of reinforcing support for students in connecting theory and practice, and understanding how to model their practice accordingly.

#### **5. Modelling human rights and social justice**

Asked if their social work educators (academic and practice) were good role models for ethical social work practice, more than 90% of students in both countries felt that some or all of their educators were indeed good role models for ethical social work practice, with a higher proportion of students in Spain feeling that all their educators were good role models. Qualitative responses indicated clearly that students were motivated and encouraged by the educators they considered good role models in developing their own ethical social work practice. Among the students who did not find some or any of their educators to be good role models, concerns focussed on failure to listen to students, favouring some students, avoiding being honest about their real views, or trying to impose their own views. Students highlighted a desire for greater openness, honesty, and readiness for discussion among educators to indicate their own ethical practice. As Ife (2008) and Méndez-Fernández *et al.*, (2006) argue, means and ends cannot be separated in social work education or in practice that is respectful of, and committed to, HR and SJ. This reminds us that teaching about the achievement of HR and SJ in social work practice must be supported by educators’ own commitment to HR and SJ, modelled through educational styles, attitudes and practices, and that social work courses must operate in ways that uphold HR and SJ, promoting student choice, offering individualised, empowering support, non-discrimination, and valuing and promoting diversity (Ife, 2008; Sewpaul and Jones, 2005).

A difference between the two countries in modelling HR and SJ related to educators’ views about meaningful interactions with students in spaces within and outside the University.



Educators in Spain tended to see these spaces as complementary and intertwined. Personal commitment to HR and SJ causes beyond formal educational contexts was perceived as an extension of social work professionalism, and a desired goal for social work education. Interviews with educators revealed a commitment to convey to students that “human rights involve them not only as professionals, but also as persons” (Interview 1, Spain) and that “social workers are co-responsible for the communities we form part of, as citizens as well as social workers” (Interview 2, Spain). A third respondent illustrated this point in greater detail:

*When there is something on the news related to the module, with human rights, with social justice, I ask [students] if they watched the news, and whether they talk about this with their university peers when they are outside the classroom, if they talk about this with their families, in their leisure time, or when they are having a drink (Interview 3, Spain)*

By contrast, in England where social work education is tightly controlled by the government and shaped to encourage narrow, bureaucratic models of professionalism (Higgins, 2015), the spaces within and outside the social work courses were perceived as offering different opportunities to model HR and SJ values and partnership work with students and service users, a point illustrated clearly in the following quote:

*I think it is in those kind of spaces [activist groups outside University] in which you can really consider what we mean by social work for social justice. Firstly, what that space does -this is a campaign led by service users in which social workers and social work students and educators are allies of service users and campaign alongside, so this is a kind of embodiment of a different kind of relationship to the classic power relationship between the professional and the service user... (Interview 2, England)*

The development of alliances between students, educators and service users is closely linked to the next finding.

## **6. Collective action**

Survey responses showed that 63% and 90% of social work educators in England and Spain respectively, and around 40% of students in both countries, had experience of activism and collective action, indicating fertile ground for teaching about HR and SJ. However, there was little explicit recognition by students or educators of a role for collective action in learning about HR and SJ with only two educators from England valuing opportunities for educators and students to engage with activism outside University and practice contexts in order to support service users and defend the social work profession. The low visibility of HR and SJ in

contemporary social work practice suggests that efforts to defend social work as a HR and SJ profession against the advancement of increasingly narrow neoliberal models of social work may require collective action by students and educators outside the educational context. This suggests a need to introduce students to models, examples and experiences of collective action and activism equipping them to defend the rights of service users, social work practitioners, and the wider social work profession against oppressive political interests. We recognize, however, that whether, and how far, social work educators should support student political activism remains a contested area. Debate at a recent European social work research conference about the appropriateness of academics' participation in political demonstrations alongside students produced polarised views among academics within and between countries. And in Canada, Palumbo and Friedman (2014) are amongst those who have documented their experiences in supporting social work students to engage with activism, highlighting converging values as well as areas of contradiction and tension. Simpson and Connor (2011) offer valuable guidance for social workers to further their understanding of social policy and engagement in social action as part of their commitment to HR and SJ.

## **7. Teaching spaces for honest discussion and reflection**

A final area of teaching about HR and SJ, where participants' views resonated with the literature (Gibson, 2014; Méndez-Fernández *et al.*, 2006), was the importance of creating spaces where students feel safe to engage in honest discussion and reflection on their views, experiences and emotions, promoting personal development for social work practice that is fully engaged with HR and SJ. The survey of educators in both countries generated references to emotional and/or ideological resistance among some students to engage fully with debates on HR and SJ. However, the survey of students indicated a clear desire for more space for debate and discussion and more interaction between educators and students. Educators in both countries referred to such interaction as providing students and educators alike with access to new worldviews which change their thinking about HR and SJ, with one English educator (Interview 2, England) describing such opportunities as a "transformational aspect of social work education".

Poole (2010, p. 2-3) stresses that social work students need support to become aware of their positioning in society and of the barriers they may experience in engaging with social work as a HR and SJ profession. This support, she argues, is vital in enabling students to hold on 'in a post-welfare world in which social work organisations are run under neoliberal models of management' associated with internalised oppression, fear, lack of belief in the possibility of change, shame, stereotypes and burnout (Wehbi and Straka, 2010). Strategies of support to withstand these pressures include awareness of personal values, power dynamics, and support

networks, together with development in skills of critical reflection and self-care. Discussion around these topics requires educators to build safe environments for emotional engagement, honest discussion and critical self-reflection, (Bransford, 2011). Small group seminars and group work offer obvious spaces for such activities, and can be supported by education in techniques and materials for promoting honest discussion and critical self-reflection.

## CONCLUSION

The findings of this comparative study contribute to developing an understanding of how HR and SJ are conceptualized and operationalized in social work education in Spain and England, and to identifying strategies to strengthen commitment to HR and SJ as the basis of social work practice that can endure the pressures of neoliberalism on the profession. Despite differences between the countries, commonalities underline the importance of: i) facilitating learning of theoretical, legal, historical and comparative perspectives of HR and SJ, ii) supporting students' understanding of the value of international collaboration to facilitate cultural awareness locally and globally, iii) underpinning practice with theory, particularly in challenging practice learning environments where neoliberal values vie with the those of the social work profession, iv) educators modelling human rights and social justice in their pedagogic practices, in demonstrating the value of collective action, and in creating spaces for learning and teaching that allow for open, honest and reflective discussion and debate. These areas of common concern between the two countries help us in seeking clarity on the question: "whose side are we on"? (Becker, 1967) in the struggle to achieve respect for human rights, social justice and solidarity. This remains a question of central relevance as we face the enduring pressures of neoliberalism and new waves of far-right ideology that threaten the human rights of the most vulnerable in these two European countries and across the world.

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