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Enlighten me: teaching social justice in further and higher education by reclaiming philosophically liberal values – a social work education case study

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ABSTRACT

This article suggests that traditional, liberal values that comprise the broad value consensus of most western democracies may be at risk of erosion, especially in further and higher education settings. The factors that may be contributing to their devaluation include: the downgrading of belief in unique individualism and common humanity in favour of reified group identity, the erosion of the importance of 'liberal science' or a liberal definition of what constitutes knowledge, the supplanting of economic social justice concerns with identity matters, and the erosion of free speech. These developments are related to the promotion of a certain type of postmodern social justice critical theory, typified by critical race theory (CRT), and this article will explore their impact on education.

Tenets of CRT, as espoused by mainstream writers, will be summarised and contrasted with liberal values to illustrate the concerns raised. In the example of social work education, the case is made that postmodern critical social work can be co-opted by 'progressive neoliberalism' and the punitive approach to 'undeserving' groups that this entails. Awareness of this concerning development is very important in the education of future professionals in any of the human services. The article concludes that liberal principles should be robustly reclaimed within social work and further and higher education more broadly.

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Introduction

This article makes a case for professional and human services education to be underpinned by traditional, universal liberal values in its pursuit of social justice informed practice, using social work education as a case study. Liberal values have their genesis in the Enlightenment – that period of intense philosophical and scientific advance over the course of 18th C that marks the beginning of the modern period in history (Pinker 2018). The article also suggests that liberal thinking in social work (and other disciplines where the focus is often on 'marginalised groups') is currently under threat by the increasing adoption of critical social justice theory, rooted in postmodern philosophy. Cox et al. (2020), for example, in a scoping review of social work curricula in 6 western, democratic countries found that critical postmodernism dominated the literature.

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First of all, what is meant by 'social justice'? Visser et al. (2010, 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'. Fraser's (2003, p.36) 'parity of participation' augments this: 'justice requires social arrangements that permit all (adult) members of society to interact with one another as peers'.

In terms of social work, the International Federation of Social Work (IFSW, 2014) outlines social workers' duties in terms of social justice as: challenging discrimination; respecting diversity; working towards the equitable distribution of resources and wealth; and challenging unjust policies and practices. Students must also demonstrate certain social justice values to qualify in social work by 'challeng(ing) the impact of disadvantage and discrimination on people and their families and communities' (Social Work England 2020, n.p.) or 'respond(ing) to ... structural inequality' (Scottish Government 2003, 43). Other disciplines and higher education establishments also espouse a commitment to social justice.

The theme running through the above definitions and duties is that an understanding of social justice must include how structural barriers affect people, but how do we consider this in the classroom?

Liberalism

Pinker (2018) defines liberal enlightenment values as including: individualism (the uniqueness of every person), universal humanism (that which connects us as human beings), legal equality and equality of opportunity, science, objectivity and reason. Of course, it has taken centuries of activism and struggle against slavery, patriarchy, theocracy, fascism, etc., to honour the universalism of those ideals and to insist that their application should be to everyone, not just powerful white men. This endeavour is still on-going and the liberal principles of the Enlightenment are still imperfectly applied (Pluckrose and Lindsay 2020).

Another fundamental aspect to liberalism is what Rauch calls 'liberal science' (Rauch 1993, 61). Rauch's analysis explores how liberal democracies decide what counts as *knowledge*; what is taught in schools, colleges and universities and accepted as 'truth'. 'Liberal science' is underpinned by the principle that 'the checking of each by each through public criticism is the only legitimate way to decide who is right' (Rauch 1993, 6). This requires freedom to enter into dialogue and contestation, and, in fact, Rauch says that 'liberal science' *depends* on people being criticised. Through 'liberal science', theories are either debunked or upheld (for the time-being) and knowledge is advanced.

The progress that liberal principles have made possible in western democracies is impressive, including astounding improvements in health, life-expectancy, sustenance, human rights, literacy and happiness (Pinker 2018) and the basic ideas are still recognised as fair and correct by most people. Why then, might there be a need to 'reclaim' them? The next section will begin to explore that question.

A need to reclaim liberal values?

Unique individualism and common humanity

The concept of social justice and what it means has in recent years become a site of febrile debate and argument. An example of this debate was witnessed in the Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests that exploded in the USA and UK recently. The unifying ideology of BLM is clearly based on critical race theory (CRT) as can be seen in calls to 'eradicate white supremacy and build local power to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities by the state' (BLM, no date). The BLM protests have expedited the mainstreaming of CRT including, for example, the acceleration of the roll out of

unconscious bias training (Equality and Diversity UK 2019). Although the roots of such developments can be found in a CRT ideology what that actually means may not be well understood given that up until recently CRT was an esoteric preoccupation of a few academic disciplines

CRT is an example of a particular type of critical social justice theory characterised by its epistemological roots in postmodern thinking and its aim of emancipating and liberating humans from oppression. Underpinning postmodern critical social justice is the idea that traditional, liberal values are inadequate due to their incrementalism and universality:

Unlike traditional civil rights discourse, which stresses incrementalism and step-by-step progress, critical race theory questions the very foundations of the liberal order, including equality theory, legal reasoning, Enlightenment rationalism, and neutral principles of constitutional law (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017, 3).

Instead, critical social justice theory analyses society in terms of intersections of power and the oppression of 'marginalised' groups such as women, people of colour, homosexual people, etc. (Pluckrose and Lindsay 2020). Universalist or liberal ideas are found wanting in this construct of the world because the particular plight of each group is downgraded in favour of struggles for universal equal opportunity or parity of participation (Fraser 2003). Also, because identity group members are positioned in the same way in terms of power, they have their own, exclusive access to knowledge in terms of 'lived experience'. Fukuyama (2018, 111) states that 'identity, which had formerly been a matter for individuals, now became the property of groups that were seen as having their own cultures shaped by their own lived experiences'. Fraser (2000, np) calls this process 'reification of group identity' and is concerned that:

stressing the need to elaborate and display an authentic, self-affirming and self-generated collective identity, it [group identity] puts moral pressure on individual members to conform to a given group culture.

Fraser and Fukuyama, although coming from politically diverse ideological positions, are concerned that unique individualism has been subsumed within a reified collective group identity. Furthermore, these reified group identities mean that any out-group members cannot understand in-group experience and, thus, subjective accounts of 'lived experience' become the evidence base for contested issues. This special in-group knowledge and attendant claims for 'special treatment' (Fukuyama 2018) means that the views of, for example Martin Luther King, who demanded equal treatment with white people and a downgrading of the importance of racial categorisation, became outdated: it is very unfashionable to be 'colour-blind' in contemporary academia.

A critical social justice approach to social justice is therefore contradictory to the liberal values of unique individualism and universal humanism. The assumption is that people are identified by group membership and other groups cannot understand their experiences, thus rendering common ground and understanding difficult.

'Liberal science' and knowledge

An interesting issue in this discussion is: what is a university for? In the classical liberal tradition, a university is about exploring and advancing towards 'truth', using evidence, reason and science (Pinker 2018) and can include subjective accounts and 'lived' experience knowledge, especially in relation to the human professions such as social work (Cooper and Spencer-Dawe 2006). Central to a university education is the idea of 'liberal science' (Rauch 1993) as discussed earlier. Knowledge does not *qualify* as such until it has been well and truly agreed upon and no one holding special privilege decides what qualifies as knowledge. In the 'liberal science' tradition, attempts should be made to debunk theories and ideas in the classroom, through debate and questioning (Mill, 1859 [2011]; Rauch 1993). However, it is in this area that another threat to liberal values can be seen. For example, Bailey (2017) considers a concept she calls 'privilege-preserving epistemic pushback' when, on hearing accounts of racist or sexist experiences or theory, students might counter the discussion with conflicting evidence. This could be considered excellent 'liberal science' in pursuit of truth, but

Bailey is quite clear that these 'interruptions' are, instead, 'obstacles to knowing' (p18) and that their political motivations (undermining the learning at hand) should be exposed. The objective in the critical social justice classroom is to regard 'the claims that students make in response to social justice issues *not as propositions to be assessed for their truth value*, but as expressions of power that function to re-inscribe and perpetuate social inequalities' (p. 8 emphasis added). Here, we have the unabashed claim that university teaching is to promote an ideology based on a specific version of critical social justice theory and not to seek or contest the 'truth'. In critical social justice thinking, the truth of the theory is already certain, and any expression of dissent is an expression of dominance. DiAngelo (2018), the author of *White Fragility*, gives an example of her white friend saying that she did not want to move to a 'high crime area'. DiAngelo states that this is racist, because the friend is using racially coded language to obscure her true meaning that she does not want to move to a black neighbourhood. The important point, however, is that DiAngelo states that racism is present 'regardless of whether the neighbourhood is actually more or less dangerous' (p45). So, the truth of the friend's claim is unimportant – she is simply being racist.

A second point is liberalism's reliance on empirical and objective knowledge. The central idea in Kendi's (2019, 117) *How to be an Anti-racist* is that any policy that creates or perpetuates disparity in racial group outcomes is racist. He states: 'Either racist policies or Black inferiority explains why White people are wealthier, healthier and more powerful than Black people today'. However, this equates disparity with discrimination, and it might be that there are other, more innocent reasons for the difference in outcome such as age or geography (Norrie 2020). Liberal science would insist on a robust empirical investigation into disparities before any conclusions could be reached. This will be discussed more fully later.

A focus on identity to the exclusion of economic inequalities

A further consequence of critical social justice theory and the contemporary focus on identity or recognition is, as Fraser (2000) points out, that people either overlook economic injustices or believe that cultural recognition will automatically also right economic wrongs. This analysis is underpinned by her two-dimensional construct of injustice – maldistribution and misrecognition. In 2003, she re-emphasises this concern:

the rise of "identity politics" . . . ha(s) conspired to decenter, *if not to extinguish*, claims for egalitarian redistribution (2003, p.8, emphasis added).

There has also been some specific debate about the primacy of recognition or diversity matters specifically within social work, with Webb (2009, 309) stating that 'ethical predilection based on recognition of the Other in terms of diversity and "the right to difference" should be simply abandoned'. Webb's argument is that class is displaced as the focus for understanding injustice, and that identity groupings are divisive. Instead, social work should be 'indifferent to difference' (ibid). McLaughlin (2012, 36) suggests that social injustice as viewed through an anti-discriminatory practice lens, is viewed as an issue of 'cultural injustice' with, logically, cultural recognition as the remedy. Once again the domination of recognition over redistribution is apparent and means that social work can find itself understanding injustice as a matter of identity because those value positions sit comfortably under social work's requirement of 'valuing difference'. Garrett (2010, 1526) adds:

Indeed, the way in which recognition has been articulated within the discourse of social work . . . suggests that it is entirely aligned with the ethics of the profession . . . Moreover, social work's interest in questions of 'diversity' and 'difference' might also be interpreted in terms of recognition ethics.

It appears, therefore, that the social justice efforts defined in the introduction and concerning equal access to resources have been supplanted by calls for identity/status respect. Fraser (2017, np), states that a truly progressive political movement:

must highlight the *shared roots of class and status injustices in financialized capitalism*. It must link the harms suffered by women, immigrants, people of color, and LGBTQ persons to those experienced by working-class strata now drawn to rightwing populism.

Fraser is suggesting that by exposing the effects of neoliberal economics, white populists and minorities could find common cause – a clear implementation of the liberal principle of universalism. The application of group-based critical social justice would be absolutely deleterious to that endeavour. As Fraser (2000, np) says: ‘this sort of identity politics scarcely fosters social interaction across differences: on the contrary, it encourages separatism and group enclaves’.

Proponents of group-based critical social justice ultimately aim for ending disparities in outcome between identity groups. However, this aim can be achieved within an overall unchanged economic hierarchy which would see the 1% at the top still retaining 90% of all the wealth, which would be acceptable as long as within that 1%, people of colour, women, LGBTQ+ people, and disabled people were represented in their population ratios (Reed 2013). Fraser (2017, n.p.) calls this ‘progressive neoliberalism’ and states:

ideals of “diversity,” women’s “empowerment,” and LGBTQ rights; post-racialism, multiculturalism, and environmentalism. These ideals were . . . inherently *class specific*: geared to ensuring that “deserving” individuals from “underrepresented groups” could attain positions and play on a par with the straight white men of *their own class* . . . its principal beneficiaries could only be those already in possession of the requisite social, cultural, and economic capital. Everyone else would be stuck in the basement.

Understanding the above arguments from Fraser and Reed helps to explain why, as unfettered neoliberalism has caused food banks and homelessness to flourish, the ‘working poor’ to emerge and grow, and precarious employment to cause misery and insecurity, the cultural left has focused on disparity in outcomes between groups that are taken as evidence of racism or sexism. In this understanding of social justice, the economic neoliberal hierarchy remains unchallenged.

Erosion of free speech

Turning once again to ‘liberal science’, it might be suggested that the core tenet of open inquiry and free debate is under threat. A study of 1000 students in UK universities found that the majority favoured minority groups’ protection from offence as more important than free speech, with women being especially censorious when emotional safety was in question (Hillman 2016). A 2019 study of 505 undergraduate students looking at views on academic freedom in the UK found that, in general a minimum of only 30% of students would choose a free-speech position on, for example, inviting controversial speakers to come to campus. A minimum of 20% would choose no-platforming in the interests of the emotional safety of minority groups and there was a significant malleable ‘undecided’ group’. Students became 14% more pro-censorship or pro-free speech when they had been primed with a narrative about the need for emotional safety or in support of free speech, respectively (Simpson and Kaufman 2019). Once again, there was a marked gender difference (ibid), a finding that should be especially concerning to social work educators as the majority of students are women – a gender balance that also affects social care, nursing, teaching, community education etc.

The position taken by the students is congruent with Honneth (2003, 173) who suggests that disrespect and humiliation (misrecognition) ‘cannot fail to have damaging consequences for the individual’s identity-formation’. That is, offensive words and opinions cause actual harm. Fraser (2003, 32) objects to this claim for ‘moral entitlement to self esteem’ and the suggestion that ‘harm’ is caused by its absence, insisting instead that ‘everyone has an equal right to pursue self-esteem under fair conditions of equal opportunity’. Fraser, then, is suggesting that misrecognition is not evidenced by subjective and unempirical concepts such as ‘offence’ and ‘harm’ but is, instead, revealed in demonstrable patterns of exclusion from participating as a peer in social and civic life enshrined in law, policy, procedures and actual practice.

A further development that adds to the erosion of free speech is the idea that certain groups have more right than others to talk about certain subjects, due to their 'lived experience' as mentioned earlier. Delgado and Stefancic (2017, 11) state that 'minority status ... brings with it a presumed competence to speak about race and racism'. And Mills (1997) theorised that, as white people are unaware of their privilege, black people are the ones who should speak about their oppression based on their unique experience. Although listening to people's lived experience is crucial in the human services, so is it crucial that every person should be allowed to form and voice opinions and thoughts about racism or any subject (Rauch 1993).

Critical social justice theory's adoption of the concept of 'microaggressions' creates further barriers to free expression. A report by Universities UK into racial harassment states that microaggressions are 'subtle, less "overt" forms of racism' (UUK, 2020, 6) and 'if an incident is perceived as racist by the victim, then it should be treated as such, irrespective of the intention of the harasser' (ibid, p12). Criticisms of microaggressions are significant, including the idea that they are based on the least charitable interpretation of what the speaker is saying, and that there is no defence whatsoever – the interpreter of the 'microaggression' can never be wrong. This means that the concept is unfalsifiable (Campbell and Manning 2018). The UK report draws heavily on an article by Rollock (2012, 519) who gives an example of a microaggression as a listener saying 'You are so articulate/well-spoken' to a person of colour. This is a microaggression because it really means, 'It is unusual for someone of your race to be so intelligent/educated/well-read'. Although this would seem to be a clear example of the least charitable (and perhaps *wrong*) interpretation of the person's statement, that does not matter, because if the listener thinks it is a microaggression then it simply and factually is. If the report's recommendations are adopted, how can universities possibly encourage free thinking and debate when the approach is one that: assumes racism is present; assumes white people are inherently racist; tells students that some people have less right to talk about certain topics due to the colour of their skin; and tells students that they may be racist in everything they say regardless of how they feel or what they intend (DiAngelo 2018; Universities UK 2020). Can a happy, safe and free-thinking classroom even be imagined under those conditions?

This section has outlined how liberal values may be at risk from various developments precipitated by the advancement of critical postmodern social justice theory. The next section will contrast the main tenets of CRT, as the most well known of this field of postmodern social justice scholarship/activism, with universal liberal principles.

Critical race theory vs. liberalism

Critical legal studies emerged in the USA to counter the idea that the law could ever be truly neutral. CRT then formed as a response to critical legal studies' focus on economics, and suggested that race was the more crucial axis of oppression (Cole 2009). This augurs the economics/maldistribution vs race/misrecognition debate (Fraser 2003) discussed earlier.

The central premise of CRT challenges the traditional, liberal definition of racism centred on prejudicial or antagonistic behaviour towards person(s) based on their membership of a racial group. In CRT, this definition is replaced by the understanding of racism as a phenomenon that is hardwired into society. So, racism is the normal state of affairs in society, not an aberration (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017). White people, both consciously and unconsciously perpetuate the system of white supremacy, as it benefits them to do so, either materially or psychically (ibid). Eddo-Lodge (2017, 56), writing about the UK, states that racism is 'in the very core of how the state is set up. It's not external, it's in the system' and Mills (1997) sees white supremacy as a political system in itself, predicated on the economic exploitation of black people who were demarcated as sub-human during the thinking of the Enlightenment. DiAngelo (2018) describes 'white fragility' as 'the *sociology of dominance*: an outcome of white people's socialisation into white supremacy and a means to protect, maintain and reproduce white supremacy' (ibid, p113). 'White fragility' is demonstrated by white people reacting

with argument, anger, silence, walking away or any other expression of disagreement on hearing, and disputing, the above theory. The only way to *not* demonstrate 'white fragility'; is to agree with the theory. It is, therefore (again) unfalsifiable.

This central premise of CRT, that white supremacy/racism is hard-wired into society, relies on a substantial body of evidence that demonstrates disparity in outcomes between different racial groups. A myriad of reviews, reports and research studies have over the years produced results that appear to support the central premise of CRT that racism is indeed an intrinsic part of society. So, for example, Eddo-Lodge (2017) talking about racism in the UK draws on a study showing that black boys are 3 times as likely as white boys to be excluded from primary school. However, Norrie (2020) analysed the Timpon review that investigated these disparities in 2018 and found that, indeed, black Caribbean children were 3 times more likely to be expelled than white children. However, black African, Pakistani, Bangladeshi and Indian children were excluded extremely rarely. Can a racist system therefore be easily defined as *the* causal factor? Perhaps, something more complex is going on.

So, the evidence base for the central tenet of CRT should perhaps be questioned. There are examples of poor research where confounding variables are not controlled for and causation is inferred from correlation (Norrie 2020). Groups vary in all kinds of ways. For example, the median age of the white population is 41, whilst of the Asian and black population it is 30. Might that be a factor in why senior positions are more likely to be held by white people? (ibid). Or must the cause only be racism, as Kendi would contend?

Ninety-three per cent of the public in the UK disagreed with the statement 'you have to be white to be British' (Ipsos Mori 2020). Also, The Office of National Statistics evidenced that, in terms of the earnings of the under 30s, 'White British' are 5th from the bottom – less than 'Bangladeshi', 'Black Caribbean', 'Black African', 'Indian', 'Arab', 'White Irish', and 'Chinese' (ONS, 2020). This suggests positive progress in terms of public opinion towards race issues, and generational improvements in earnings and social standing. It is also a facet of contemporary UK life that poor, white boys are doing the worst of all demographics in terms of education, with data showing that the least likely group to go on to higher education are poor white boys, less than any black or Asian group (Gov.uk 2020). Only 17% of white British pupils eligible for free school meals achieve a strong pass in English and maths whilst students categorised as Bangladeshi, Black African and Indian are more than twice as likely to do so (Gov. uk, 2019).

Perhaps, given the empirical evidence above, the central premise of CRT that white supremacy is hardwired into the system and is the ordinary state of affairs should at least be questioned. The liberal position on this is that bigoted attitudes do exist and need to be tackled, but that these are in fact more aberrational than ordinary. Holding racist or sexist views is denounced in liberal societies, and the gradual liberalisation of people's views is testament to this positive direction. The conclusion to this debate must surely be that any certainty around the issue is misplaced and we must research discrimination where there is evidence it exists, rather than making mono-causal assumptions of discrimination from disparity in outcome.

Another tenet of CRT is its rejection of individualism and universalism/objectivity, exemplified in its critique of 'colour blindness'. DiAngelo's description of this is white people 'pretending not to see race' (p41). This appears to be a strangely literal interpretation of colour blindness because it would be silly to think it is about pretending to not actually see the colour of someone's skin. What it does mean, however, is that the subject of the exchange does not put social significance into the colour of the person they are interacting with. Kendi (2019) points to the fact that racial groups are socially constructed (rather than biologically) but states that we must realise the racial groups are used to categorise people and, thus, we cannot pretend, in a post-racial way that these groups are completely insignificant. This is, of course, true, but does not mean we should then assume that the members of those groups share essential features. Nor should we approach people with an *a priori* assumption of oppression or group experience because this again raises the problem of 'reified'

group identity (Fraser 2000). Rather, the liberal person would approach each person as a unique individual – one who might foreground their race (or gender or sexual orientation or disability) but who might not. Delgado and Stefancic (2017, 27) state

Many liberals believe in color blindness and neutral principles of constitutional law. They believe in equality, especially equal treatment for all persons, regardless of their different histories or current situations (p. 27).

For CRT, the above liberal aspiration is unworkable *because* of the first premise of CRT that racism is ordinary and omnipresent. If the first premise is true, then a system of equality would not work, so the logic there is clear. However, as has been discussed that central premise itself may be in some doubt.

Social work education – a case study

Radical or critical social work education?

The question was posed in the introduction about how to help students fulfil their social justice commitments by understanding structural barriers to human flourishing. It might, therefore, be worth contrasting radical and critical approaches to social work with their roots in Marxism and postmodern ideologies, respectively (Pease 2013). Ferguson and Lavalette (1999) point out that criticism was levelled at the radical social work school for reducing everything to class, down-playing group-based oppression based on gender or race. This echoes the critical theorists' criticism that group-based oppressions are also not fully accounted for within liberalism. Ferguson (2008) acknowledges this and notes that in the 1980s critical social welfare movements which were often service user led, made a very positive contribution to social work including recognising the oppression of a whole range of marginalised groups and the further departure from pathological thinking about service users.

Ferguson (2008), however, also raises objections to critical postmodern thinking. The first has already been considered in this article – the paradigm shift away from struggles based on class and material hardship to one based on identity and recognition. Whilst the former facilitated broad-based collective action, the latter led to fragmentation. Alliances become difficult and narrow pressure group politics, based on identity, become the norm. Also, the consideration of class or material hardship as simply another oppression factor equivalent to others means that the plight of 'the working class poor whose members are the biggest users of social work services' is trivialised (ibid, p107).

Cole (2009) states that people of all races have been negatively impacted by neoliberal globalisation which has led to the outsourcing of jobs to other countries, the undermining of unions and the cutting of welfare and public housing. He states that ideas of 'white supremacy' direct attention away from these developments. Manduca (2018, 183) adds that:

one underappreciated driver of the racial income gap has been the shape of the income distribution itself. Over the past 40 years, there has been a dramatic increase in the share of economic resources going to the very wealthy combined with income stagnation for everyone else. This shift has disproportionately harmed African Americans, who remain overrepresented in the less affluent portions of the income distribution.

It may be, therefore, that there are good arguments for understanding neoliberalism as the primary source of inequality due to the (mal)distribution of wealth upwards. This would be a compelling reason for teaching radical social work in the social work classroom. Furthermore, radical social work cannot be co-opted into the service of neoliberal hegemony because, as Cole (2009, 256) states:

social class ... albeit massively racialized (and gendered) is the system upon which the maintenance of capitalism depends.

In the UK, 8 out of the 10 groups of pupils of all ethnicities who are making the least progress are on free school meals (the 2 exceptions are gypsy/Roma/traveller groups) (Norrie 2020, 94). Should we strive for ethnic group parity in the poor outcomes of these groups, or should we tackle the cross-cutting, universal problem – poverty?

This section has argued that a focus on class and material poverty is an effective way to understand social injustice. As mentioned, poor white boys are faring worst out of all groups in terms of education (Gov 2019, 2020), but *all* poor children are struggling and poor people make up the vast majority of social work service users (Ferguson 2008). So, the liberal principle of universality can be put to work in the service of radical social work in promoting the interests of that broad class of people who are suffering under neoliberal economics.

The current generation of students

The impact of neoliberal ideology has been widely recognised in the academic literature as eroding social work values, especially those that recognise structural factors as contributing to public problems (Ferguson 2008). One of the consequences of this can be a blaming and punitive form of social work practice as service users are held solely responsible for their difficulties (Rogowski 2015). A recent concern in relation to this is expressed by Grasso et al. (2017) who undertook an analysis of the British Social Attitudes Survey data from 1985 to 2012 and found that the ‘millennial’ generation appeared to have internalised this responsibilisation narrative and, as a consequence, to have more right wing authoritarian attitudes than any previous generational grouping since 1930. The authors attribute this to the ‘millennial’ generation coming of age under governments where the neoliberal ‘common sense’ ideology of individual responsibility for success or failure and free market economics were uncontested. Fenton (2019) found that the themes from Grasso et al’s (2017) study were replicated in a study of 122 under-23 year old new university students. In essence, attitudes appear to reflect Levitas’s (2005, p14) conception of the: ‘dual character of the new right’, where ‘state contribution in terms of providing welfare and universal care for people is reduced, whilst at the same time the law and order arm of the state is strengthened’. Juxtaposed with hardened attitudes to poverty and unemployment, younger people’s attitudes towards questions/issues of diversity are more tolerant than those of previous generations (NatCen 2017). In summary, the value position of students might be understood to be socially liberal, supporting freedom, choice and equality for ‘deserving’ groups; but also authoritarian and right-wing socio-politically and economically when ‘undeserving’ groups such as unemployed people are considered.

Cooley et al. (2019), across 2 studies totalling 1,189 participants of mixed age and ethnicity, found that teaching ‘white privilege’ made the situation described above even worse, because it significantly *increased* ‘blaming’ narratives towards poor white people.

After reading about White privilege, social liberals reported less sympathy for, and more punishment/blame, toward a poor White ... person ... [these findings] were distinct to social liberalism (ibid. p.2222).

As was demonstrated earlier, the new generation of students may well have a strong tendency to social liberalism, alongside right wing attitudes to economics in relation to perceived ‘undeserving’ groups. Cooley et al’s studies clearly show that for a group with those particular frames of reference already in place teaching concepts from critical postmodern social justice such as ‘white privilege’ increases blaming attitudes to poor, white (undeserving?) people. The authors speculate that future research might show similar effects in relation to other recognition features such as gender, where ‘Learning about privilege associated with being a man ... might lead social liberals to express significantly less sympathy for a poor man’ (ibid, p. 2227).

So, it is incumbent on social work educators, and others dealing with human services/professional education, to help students resist blaming and punitive practices towards those services users who might be perceived as ‘undeserving’ (Fenton 2019) and to further help students resist a ‘progressive neoliberal’ (Fraser 2017) understanding of equality in society. The impact of economic and policy

choices of neoliberal governments need to be understood. However, what appears to be happening instead, at least in the social work classroom, is that critical social justice theory increasingly takes centre stage and that ‘poverty and inequality (are) ... terms that (are) backgrounded’ (Cox et al. 2020, 35).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper suggests that postmodern social justice’s critique of liberal values depends very much on the first premise of the theory being true – that structural oppression in society based on identity features is ordinary, hardwired into society and kept alive by oppressor groups, consciously or unconsciously. Arguably, that premise is insufficiently evidenced to qualify as *knowledge* and should therefore remain as a contested theory. Given that the critique of liberalism rests on the validity of that premise, this paper suggests that liberal principles should be robustly reclaimed. They have not yet been ‘debunked’.

In terms of liberal principles in the social work and other human professions’ classrooms, this would mean teaching students to:

- Appreciate the uniqueness of every individual they work with, with no assumptions about which group identity features they might feel are important or not.
- Find human-to-human connection that transcends any group identity differences. This idea was central to the thinking of the Scottish Enlightenment. Both Hume and Smith agreed that:

Our capacity for sympathy makes us also fundamentally interested in the greater good of society, and in the happiness of others (Hearn 2016, 217-218).

- Adhere consistently to the principles of liberal science and reason. Helping students understand robust empirical and statistical data alongside accounts of lived experience. Encouraging open debate and *critical thinking* about the issues.
- Finally, put those liberal principles to work for an understanding of economic injustice that often creates misery for the people that our students will go on to work with, in many different capacities. This would mean teaching students basic economics to help them understand how neoliberal policy choices create maldistribution upwards (Fraser 2003). This maldistribution and a narrative about ‘undeserving’ groups have conspired to create poverty, inequality and hardship amongst the poorest of *all* identity groups. This is crucially important when teaching students who are very possibly primed for a narrow, progressively neoliberal understanding of social justice based on identity features.

A belief in human-to-human connection and the universalism of our humanity should be at the heart of teaching students about social justice. Explicitly reclaiming liberal values is one way to hold fast to that principle.

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