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# Challenges for Social Work Education in a Changing Europe

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**Abstract.** There can be little doubt that neoliberalism has replaced social democracy as the political consensus across Europe and globally. This has led to levels of inequality and relative poverty unprecedented since the post-war social democratic consensus. It has also led to a common sense, neoliberal narrative essential in garnering support for policies that weaken workers' rights, deregulate corporations and businesses, and cut budgets for welfare and public services. Essentially, the narrative is that people should be completely self-sufficient and that to depend on welfare or the state in any way is a sign of poor character, laziness and of membership of the 'underclass.' It is a 'moralising self-sufficiency' narrative (Marston, 2013). Much of social work activity is concentrated in areas of unemployment, poverty and deprivation and what will happen to our values of respect, compassion and care if social workers unquestioningly internalise the above narrative? Maybe a form of authoritarian social work that treats people as 'less than human' (Smithson and Gibson, 2016)? Grasso et al (2018) undertook a study using British Attitudes Study data and found that the generation known as 'Millennials' were more right-wing authoritarian than all previous generations. What might happen if that trajectory continues? The authoritarian attitudes of our current generation of post-Millennial students, labelled as iGen by Twenge (2018), were studied in one Scottish university and the results will be shared in my talk today. What might the implications be for social work education and are we up to the challenge?
**Keywords:** Social work students; neoliberalism; self-sufficiency; 'undeserving'; socio-political attitudes

## [es] Desafíos para la educación del Trabajo Social en una Europa que cambia

**Resumen.** Indudablemente, en Europa y a escala mundial, el neoliberalismo ha sustituido a la socialdemocracia como consenso político. Esto ha llevado a niveles de desigualdad y pobreza relativa sin precedentes en el consenso democrático. También ha llevado a un sentido común, una narrativa neoliberal esencial para obtener apoyo a las políticas que debilitan los derechos de los trabajadores, desregulan las corporaciones y las empresas, y recortan los presupuestos para el bienestar y los servicios públicos. Esencialmente, la narrativa es que las personas deben ser totalmente autosuficientes y que su bienestar dependa del Estado es señal de ser pobre, indolente y pertenecer a una "subclase". Es una narrativa de "autosuficiencia moralizante" (Marston, 2013). Gran parte de la actividad de Trabajo Social se centra en áreas de desempleo, pobreza y privaciones; ¿qué sucederá con nuestros valores de respeto, compasión y cuidado si los trabajadores sociales incuestionablemente interiorizan esta narrativa? Tal vez dé lugar a una forma de trabajo social autoritario que trata a las personas como si fueran algo "menos que humanas" (Smithson y Gibson, 2016)? Grasso et al.(2018) emprendieron una investigación, utilizando los datos del Estudio de Actitudes Británicas y encontraron que los miembros de la generación, conocida como Millennials, eran más autoritarios y de derecha que todas las generaciones anteriores. ¿Qué sucederá si esa trayectoria continúa? Las actitudes autoritarias de nuestra generación actual de estudiantes post-Millennial, etiquetados como iGen por Twenge (2018), se estudiaron en una universidad escocesa y los resultados los comparto en este artículo. ¿Cuáles podrían ser las implicaciones para la educación en Trabajo Social de este desafío?
**Palabras clave:** Estudiantes de Trabajo Social; neoliberalismo; autosuficiencia; "inmerecido"; actitud sociopolítica.

**Summary**: Introduction. 1. Deserving vs undeserving clients. 2. iGen students' socio-political attitudes. 3. Research study. 4. Discussion. 5. Conclusion. 6. References.

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## Introduction

I am writing as a social work academic from the University of Dundee in Scotland. Dundee is a city of about 150,000 (compared to Madrid which has population of 3,174 million) and there are only about 5.5 million people in the whole of Scotland. Although Dundee is relatively small, it has a new Victoria and Albert Museum of Design, of which it is very proud and that is great for the economy of the city.

There is another side to Dundee, however, with "28% of the city's children growing up in poverty," (The Courier, 2018, n.p.). Dundee is also the drug death capital of Europe (The Guardian, 2019) and was the murder capital of Scotland in 2013 (The Courier, 2013), so there is also much to be concerned about.

In my previous pre-academic working life, I was a social worker with people who had committed crime. In Scotland, work with that client group is undertaken by the social work department, in contrast to many other places; for example England and Wales have their own probation service (where a social work qualification is not required), sections of which have, quite disastrously, been sold off to the private sector (The Guardian, 2019b). One of the uniquely Scottish features, then, is that work with this group, like all other groups of social work service users, is underpinned by the Social Work (Scotland) Act (1968) which has the duty to promote social welfare at its heart. This is absolutely in keeping with social work values, and a radical idea of social work at that, encompassed in the belief that improving someone's material circumstances will help them thrive and flourish, including desisting from crime.

I think that my enduring passion for ideas about getting to the humanity of the person behind the deeds they might have done, and my belief in that radical idea of social work that is woven into our legislation, comes from this early grounding in Criminal Justice Social Work, as it was then known in Scotland. The contrast between the stereotypes of people who were 'offenders', 'junkies' 'sex offenders' 'chavs' ('Gadgies' in Dundee), the 'underclass' really, and the people that I came to actually *know* through my work was stark. People simply did not fit the stereotype. They weren't all 'good' (who is?) but they *all* had good things about them; they had dreams, loves, aspirations and desires, just like the rest of us. It was a privilege to work with many of them. I didn't like all of them of course, again, who does like everyone, and all of them didn't like me. *But,* it opened my eyes to the humanity of people who had done sometimes really bad things, and made me realise that social work *had* to be about getting to know the 'inner worlds' of people in order to see that shared humanity. It also helped me understand that there are always extremely complex reasons for people's behaviour. It is rarely simple.

## 1. Deserving vs undeserving clients

So, still thinking about people who have committed crime and the other involuntary clients that social work works with who might be in child protection, substance misuse services, services for homeless people etc. There is something here about the *deserving vs the undeserving* social work client, and our knowledge that social work is unique in that it undertakes to discover shared humanity no matter what the person has done or how they might have ended up in the circumstances they are in or how 'undeserving' they might be. As Bauman says:

> The members of the 'underclass', the poverty-stricken people, single mothers, school-dropouts, drug addicts, and criminals on parole stand shoulder to shoulder... What unites them and justifies piling them together is that all of them, for whatever reason, are a 'burden on society.' (Bauman, 2000, p.8)

And, according to Bauman, because these groups are a "burden on society", when seen through an economic lens which of course is the lens of neoliberalism, then they become 'undeserving' because everything is valued in terms of economic use. Why should we care about them? Quite frankly, we would be much better off without them. It doesn't make any sense to care in a neoliberal world. However, Bauman also says that social work should indeed care, and that the morality of caring for another is enough of a justification. It is ethical to care and social work is defined by its 'ethical impulse,' again because of shared humanity. Bauman (2000) traces this back to Judeo-Christian roots as follows:

> When God asked Cain where Abel was, Cain replied, angrily, with another question:

'Am I my brother's keeper?' The greatest ethical philosopher of our century, Emmanuel Levinas, commented: from that angry Cain's question all immorality began. Of course I am my brother's keeper; and I am and remain a moral person as long as I do not ask for a special reason to be one. Whether I admit it or not, I am my brother's keeper because my brother's wellbeing depends on what I do or refrain from doing. And I am a moral person because I recognize that dependence and accept the responsibility that follows.

The moment I question that dependence and demand—like Cain did—to be given reasons why I should care, I renounce my responsibility and am no more a moral self. My brother's dependence is what makes me an ethical being. Dependence and ethics stand together and together they fall (p.5).

Bauman goes onto say that this idea of care weaned our common understanding of humanity and civilised being. It's not news. It's not new. Also, in social work it's not a controversial idea really. Hyslop (2016, p.33) investigated the idea that social work ought to treat service users with care and compassion regardless of whether they deserve it, and found "a stubborn commitment to the ideal of shared humanity" amongst the experienced social workers he studied.

In the International Federation of Social Work's statement of ethical principles (IFSW, 2012), and our national codes of ethics (for example, British Association of Social Work, 2104), we see ideas of respect for persons, care and compassion which are not contingent on somebody *deserving* them. Also, these values implicitly recognise the absolute complexity of why people behave in the ways they do. Simplistic notions of blame or of good and evil are usually just far too glib.

## 2. iGen students' socio-political attitudes

So, why am I making such a big deal of this, if we are all agree 'yes, social work is about that' and we all know it and take it for granted? 'Undeserving' narratives are long gone. Well, I suppose that my worry is that as neoliberalism becomes the absolute unquestioned common sense ideology of our times, and the 'underclass' are not, as Bauman pointed out, deserving of our care in a neoliberal framework, then maybe the undeserving narrative might be resurrecting itself with our newer generations of social work students. Quite a bit of work has been done looking at whether students are becoming more 'neoliberal' in their thinking, and there is some evidence around. So, for example, Gilligan (2007) found that the age-group of social work applicants termed 'Thatcher's Children' were significantly more likely to attribute the roots of social problems to individual, rather than structural, causes. Sheedy (2013, p. 6) noted that many social work students, who become the newer workers of tomorrow, have little knowledge of politics or "more worryingly, no interest in politics". Woodward and MacKay (2013) found students struggling to apply social justice values, beyond individual level interactions and Fenton (2014) found younger social workers significantly less troubled by neoliberal influences in CJSW than older colleagues.

So, there *is* some evidence of the internalisation of neoliberalism and that individual responsibilisation or 'blame' narrative. It is a difficult challenge, however, to ask students to recognise that there is such a thing as a politically driven narrative and even to recognise neoliberalism as an ideology. As Monbiot (2016) says:

So pervasive has neoliberalism become that we seldom even recognise it as an ideology. We appear to accept the proposition that this utopian, millenarian faith describes a neutral force; a kind of biological law, like Darwin's theory of evolution. But the philosophy arose as a conscious attempt to reshape human life and shift the locus of power. Neoliberalism sees competition as the defining characteristic of human relations (n.p.).

So, because we 'seldom even recognise it as an ideology' students need critical thinking ability and skills to recognise it, understand it and critique it. Do we have that? Well, unfortunately, Sheppard and Charles (2017) found that critical thinking skill was not predictive of the classification of degree attained by graduating social work students. Sheppard et al (2018) found that critical thinking and assertiveness were poorer in cohorts of graduate social workers than in a UK normative sample, although compassion and altruism scores were better, and Fenton (2018) found that critical thinking assignment results correlated with

age with younger students doing significantly more poorly. So, as well as an internalisation of the neoliberal narrative, we maybe also lack the kinds of critical thinkers who will be able to deconstruct it. Not a hopeful situation.

Moving on, Grasso, Farrall, Gray, Hay and Jennings (2017), analysed data from the British Attitudes Survey, looking at what the authors called 'Right Wing Authoritarian' attitudes in different generational cohorts. They hypothesised that in the first phase of Conservative government, from 1979, there was *normative* neoliberalism that is, there was ideological debate and disagreement on a deep level about the new monetarist direction. Then however, the UK moved into a *normalised* neoliberal phase, when even political opponents had internalised the "rules of the [market] game" (Grasso et al., 2017, p. 18). In effect, the authors wanted to explore whether the generations who came of age under Tony Blair were more right wing than those who came of age earlier, when neoliberal ideology was more contested. So, they studied nine questions, some about views on welfare benefits, redistribution (economically right or left wing), others about views on unemployed people and self-sufficiency and some on punishment and authority. What the authors found was that 'millennials' or the "Blair's babies" of the article title (coming of age under Blair and Brown's government, 1997 to 2010) were significantly more right-wing authoritarian than *any other previous generation*. Also, the kind of questions asked *did* concern people who might be thought of as 'undeserving' in Bauman's terms: poor people, unemployed people and those who had committed crime. So, my worries about the resurrection of the 'undeserving' narrative seem to have some validity here so far.

Given the findings above and the previous concerns from the literature, I wondered whether the new generation of students, the generation after Millennials, might be following a similar trajectory even though it would be in direct contradiction to the 'ethical impulse' and basic values of social work. So, I wanted to look at this group, named iGeneration and defined as being born after 1995 by American researcher Jean Twenge (2018). Twenge's work was carried out in America, drawing on data covering 11 million iGen young people, and has strong resonance with the UK picture. Some relevant features of iGen are as follows:

- iGen has spent all of their adolescence in the era of the iphone;
- They have significantly poorer critical thinking skills (significantly lower Scholastic Aptitude Test scores and significantly fewer books being read) than previous generations. This resonates with the literature outlined above, for example Sheppard et al (2018), Fenton (2018).
- They delay the markers of maturity significantly longer, meaning that iGen go on dates, work, have sex, drink alcohol, go out without their parents later than previous generations at the same age. They are, however, *willingly* in the protection of their parents and there also seems to be evidence of feelings of vulnerability and poor mental health. Luckianoff and Haidt (2018) suggest that iGen are a generation encouraged to see harm in minor incidents, quick to take offence and very alert to the offence of others. They suggest that this makes for a frightened generation and this might be something that contributes to the lack of assertiveness found by Sheppard et al (2018). Other authors are currently writing about how to encourage students to speak in class (for example, Oliver et al, 2017) and I certainly see more difficulty with this than in previous years.
- In terms of socio-political attitudes, iGen are as economically right wing and as individualistic as the Reagan era, are more tolerant of diversity than previous generations, but are more censorious of free speech and believe that people need to be protected at all costs. Twenge illustrates their socio-political individualistic and economically right wing beliefs with the following quotes from iGen members:
  - "The welfare system allows people to be lazy and supported by the government" (Twenge, 2018, p. 265).
  - "We are free to be whoever we want" (p. 264).

In essence, there are quite clearly two main strands to their political orientation:

1. Firstly, there's that individualistic belief in personal responsibility – internalisation of the neoliberal narrative, echoing the literature mentioned earlier.
2. Secondly, iGen are significantly more tolerant of diversity and the right to choose

own personal lives, and this is backed up by British Attitudinal Survey data (NatCen, 2017). This is very much a positive for social work, where respect and promotion of diversity are core principles. However, the extension of these values into the restriction of free speech, the heightened sensitivity to 'offence' and the concomitant need for protection may be less so.

## 3. Research study

In the current research study, I wanted to look at the first strand of iGen's socio-political at-titudes as explored by Grasso et al (2017) in regard to the millennial generation. I wanted to explore individualistic, self-sufficiency, economic and punitive attitudes and so I surveyed all of our new first year students in the school – social work, primary education and community education and took out anyone over 23 – leaving an iGen sample of 122 students. I asked them the same questions as Grasso et al and subdivided the scale into 3 sub-scales: Attitudes to unemployed people; attitudes to inequality and redistribution and social authoritarian attitudes (Fenton, 2019a). Here are the findings:

| Scale | iGen Primary Education Mean | iGen Social Work Mean | iGen Community Education Mean | Entire iGen Group Mean | Entire Older Colleagues Mean |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Attitudes to Inequality and Redistribution (Neutral = 9) | 10.84 | 11.0 | 12.07 | 11.01 | 12.36 |
| Attitudes to Unemployed People (Neutral = 9) | 8.04 | 8.69 | 10.07 | 8.41 | 8.77 |
| Authoritarian Social Attitudes (Neutral = 9) | 7.21 | 7.56 | 7.78 | 7.34 | 8.23 |
| Total RWA Scale (Neutral = 9) | 26.02 | 27.26 | 29.92 | 26.72 | 29.36 |

(Fenton, 2019a).

First of all, there were no significant differences between social work and the other disciplines. However, there were significant differences between primary education and community education on Attitudes to Unemployed People (a sub scale comprising 3 of the questions) and on the overall Right Wing Authoritarian scale. Community education is explicitly about the impact of ecological and structural forces on people (from the Standards Council for Community Education) (CLD, 2017), but so is social work. And yet there were no differences in attitudes between social work and their primary education colleagues.

So, to generational differences. When I compared the iGen group with the older student group, I found the following:

There were significant differences between the Inequality and redistribution sub-scale and on the scores for the overall scale. In terms of inequality and redistribution, iGen results were more redistributive than not, but only marginally so and, crucially, significantly less so than their older colleagues. In terms of the overall scale, iGen were roughly neutral but again, significantly more right wing/authoritarian than their older colleagues.

Finally, and this is maybe the most concerning finding, in relation to attitudes to unemployed people, and authoritarian social attitudes (like punishment for crime) iGen were more authoritarian then neutral or liberal. However, so were the older students – many of whom were millennials and so Grasso et al (2017) would say this is not a surprise either.
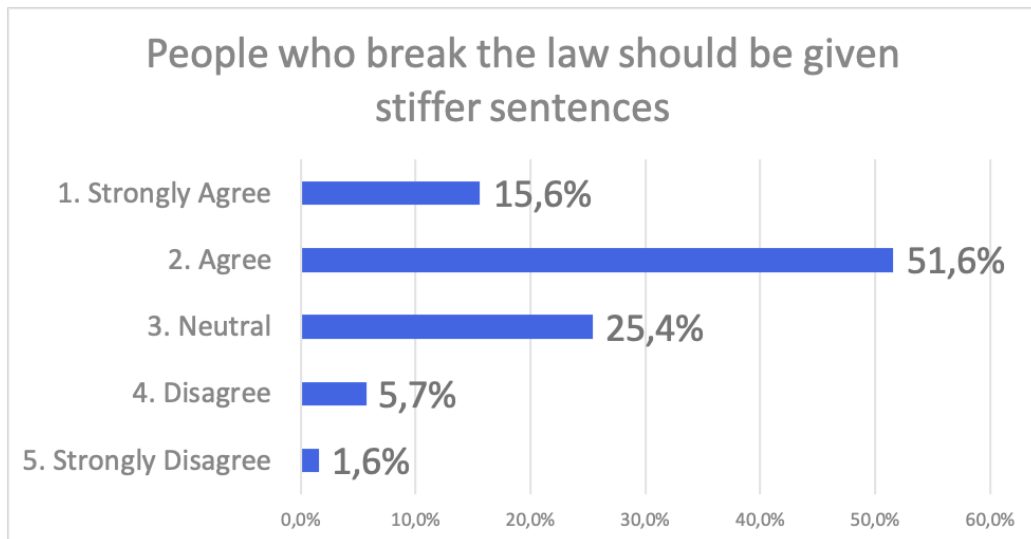
In summary then, when iGen were neutral or slightly liberal (that is, in economic redistribution and RWA overall) they were still significantly less so than their older peers. And this in a country where benefits have been hugely cut, where homelessness has gone through the roof (increased 169% since 2010 according to the Guardian, 2018a), where there has been an explosion in use of foodbanks (JRF, 2016) and

where welfare sanctions are leading to absolute misery for people and not to employment (The Guardian, 2018b).

When iGen were markedly more authoritarian (that is, in attitudes to unemployed people and punishment for crime) so were their older peers, a finding that would not surprise Grasso et al (2017).

No matter how you look at this pattern it suggests a worrying trajectory of increasingly authoritarian and punitive attitudes.

It is worth maybe now looking at a sample question to see how the iGen cohort answered, before we go on to see what to make of it all. Just as an illustration, let's see how much students agreed with a statement about a potentially 'undeserving' group - those who had broken the law. The statement was: people who break the law should be given stiffer sentences.



People who break the law should be given stiffer sentences

| | |
|---|---|
| 1. Strongly Agree | 15,6% |
| 2. Agree | 51,6% |
| 3. Neutral | 25,4% |
| 4. Disagree | 5,7% |
| 5. Strongly Disagree | 1,6% |

So only about 9 students of the 122 in the group disagreed with giving tougher sentences – a pretty punitive response overall!

Ok, so what to make of all of this? As well as the 'undeserving' groups of people who become thought of as a hopeless 'underclass' through a neoliberal lens, the parallel neoliberal narrative is that of self-sufficiency. There was huge support for the statements 'people should learn to stand on their own two feet' and 'unemployed people could easily find a job.' Marston (2013) calls this a 'moralising self-sufficiency' discourse and states that beginning social workers are likely to be influenced by this dominant discourse of self-sufficiency, and the muted political agency that it gives rise to. Well, yes, this is indeed what we are saying. In essence, if everything is simply about the effort you put in, and society is a benign meritocracy, then people really do just have to pull their socks up. It makes so much coherent sense! This narrative also informs the desire for stiffer sentences – If we understand that people simply choose to commit crime, as individual actors, and we take no cognisance

of the strain and grimness brought about by poverty and inequality, or indeed the actual complexity that leads to behaviour, then, again, harsher punishments make sense. Also, redistribution of wealth, including more generous benefits and progressive taxation, will be eschewed – why should I pay my taxes to prop up people who simply do not work or try as hard as I do? They simply do not deserve it!

Levitas (2005, p.14) calls this the "dual character of the new right", when state contribution in terms of welfare and universal services is reduced, whilst at the same time the law and order arm of the state is strengthened. The students' views perfectly echoed that. We can sum this attitude up by reference to Margaret Thatcher changing hearts and minds with a new neoliberal paradigm and way of thinking, observed in her famous quote in *The Catholic Herald*:

Nowadays there really is no primary poverty left in this country … In western countries we are left with the problems which aren't poverty. All right, there may be poverty because they

don't know how to budget, don't know how to spend their earnings, but now you are left with really hard fundamental character- personality defect (Catholic Herald, 1978, n.p.).

## 4. Discussion

So, where to now? Well thinking more broadly about a changing Europe, Stepney (2019) states that the impact of neoliberalism on social work internationally has been profound. Effects on social workers include the fading of humanitarian values and a reduced commitment to equality and social justice. Stepney asserts that to operate in this context, social workers internationally need to critically understand it rather than be "moulded into passive compliance with it" and to "move away from an exclusively individualistic approach that de-politicises clients' problems" (Stepney, 2019, p.56). That individualistic approach very well characterises the approach of our incoming generation of social work students.

Lorenz (2017) also explains that neoliberalism has had a profound effect across Europe and said the following about the post-world war 2 consensus and commitment to welfare in all Western European countries:

> These hopeful developments almost came to a halt by the turn of the Millenium...war and its devastating consequences had become a distant memory and economic achievement rather than socio-political measures could be ideologically portrayed as the foundation and guarantor of well-being; and with the 'defeat of communism' the need for maintaining public social protection as a competitive measure had disappeared. These two factors gave rise to the almost universal attraction that the ideology of neoliberalism exerted on politics all over Europe. If welfare was now being presented as an optional, if not negative factor in national politics, this meant it had to be restricted to the most urgent – and the most *deserving* cases (p. 5).

Lorenz goes onto ask how we can actually then *do* something about this rather than just commiserating about the harsh, neoliberal conditions under which social work is being practised, or indeed becoming a controlling function of neoliberalism itself? He wonders whether developing a 'European orientation' towards social work practice that would allow

cultural, political and legal differences, but would help maintain social work's professional autonomy and service-user orientation. It would focus on individual identity formation as well as social solidarity. In other words, do we need a European, radical vision?

Lorenz thinks we do need that. I think that we, in the UK anyway, need all the help we can get, that's for sure! Reading about social work in England, for example, we can see the results of those 'underclass' or 'undeserving' narratives playing out in research such as:

- Smithson and Gibson (2017, p.572): families in child protection system treated as "less than human."
- Gupta (2015, p. 138): "individualising risk and blaming families for their poverty."
- Nicolas (2015, n.p.): "Why pretend social work is about social justice' It's not."
- Rogowski (2015, p.105): "an authoritarian desire to responsibilise parents regardless of their economic and social circumstances".
- Featherstone et al (2012): a family might be in more need of the price of a loaf of bread or help with transport than a dreaded "parenting skills class".
- Goldhill (2017, p.288): "By showing her disapproval of Bimla's behaviour the previous week and ensuring she checks the current state of her alcohol intake, Steph is carrying out a tick-box exercise; she neither listens to Bimla's concerns nor engages with Bimla's feelings".

In summary, all of the above are examples of a very 'blaming' approach and exemplify what Trotter et al (2017, p. 400) say is "associated with poor client engagement, and negatively correlated with achieving therapeutic goals." In the above examples, there is no place for relationship based practice or care or compassion. There is an absolute individual level focus and a managerial approach – where is the help? Care? The promotion of social welfare? Where are social work values?

Lorenz's point that we need to see both the individual and the social solidarity or otherwise around them is particularly pertinent. The UK, according to the Eurobarometer, was found to be the most individualistic country in the whole of Europe when asked a question about whether people wanted a future based on individualism or social solidarity (The In-

dependent, 2017). Thus, a European model of social work would help the UK in resisting this unrelenting pull towards neoliberal, individualistic thinking. Once again, we need that help, because, as Storr (2017) suggests:

> Individualism makes us a blameful people. For us, blame is … a thing that exists, that belongs to someone. When we decide that it's ours, or somebody else's, we act in ignorance of the impossibly complex nature of why anybody behaves as they do. Of the addicts, the homeless, the violent, the obese, of those whose circumstances lead them into the utter darkness of prison, we're quick to condemn and slow to forgive (p. 330).

So, you can see my worries.

1. The literature raises concerns about the younger generation of social workers – particularly in terms of critical thinking and assertiveness.
2. My own research suggests punitive and authoritarian attitudes to 'undeserving' groups of people.
3. The quite profound and increasing internalisation of the neoliberal, individualism narrative;
4. The resurrection more generally of 'undeserving' and simplified 'blame' discourses; and
5. The wider UK socio-political context and individualistic political direction.

The radical idea of European social work, where we unflinchingly require students to think critically about material circumstances, where we draw back from a punitive/coercive or even therapeutic lens through which to view clients and where we insist on an understanding of socio-political context, might be a way forward. Spolander, Engelbrecht and Sansfacon (2015) in *The European Journal of Social Work* make a persuasive case for social workers having a proper understanding of macro-economics because, without that understanding, we cannot actually fulfil our social work roles. I agree with that 100%. I have students in my classes who have absolutely no idea whatsoever about taxation, about how the public sector is funded (or underfunded), so trying to connect those hard economic and policy facts to ethical issues of caring for others whom they view as 'undeserving' is very dif-

ficult. If that understanding is missing, however, neoliberal common-sense behavioural and other individualistic understandings of social problems can easily and simply step in and fill the gap.

I now want to give an example of all of this from my teaching and now from my new book *Social Work for Lazy Radicals* (Fenton, 2019b). Consider this case study:

- Kyle is 18 years old and has been charged with Breach of the Peace for the third time.
- Kyle's schooling did not go well. He truanted and caused trouble, seemingly not interested in applying himself at all. He then engaged with a project worker for some time after being excluded from school, and made some improvement, but then began to spend time with an older peer group and drank alcohol regularly. He then disengaged from the project.
- Kyle had been living with his dad and his dad's girlfriend, who now have a baby. He used to stay some of the time with his grandmother to whom he was close, and when she died, his drinking escalated. His dad could not cope with his high level of drinking and resultant aggressive and disruptive behaviour and had to ask him to leave the house. He occasionally returns for a night or two, but is mainly sofa-surfing with friends and sleeping rough.
- Even if Kyle's behaviour did improve, he says he does not want to return to the family home. There is very little space now. His dad has not worked since being made redundant five years ago from his job as a welder when the factory closed down, and the family survive on benefits. They are poor and struggle to make ends meet.

The aim of this assignment is to identify and explore the wider political and societal issues which are impacting on Kyle (and, where appropriate, his family).

You can see my desperate attempt to get students to focus on the wider socio-political issues? I want them to talk about poverty and inequality, austerity, benefit cuts, lack of secure and well-enough paid jobs, lack of social housing and how that situation has come about etc. The whole module has been about that. However, a good number of students *do* respond in a way that is exactly congruent with the neoliberal self-sufficiency narrative: 'Kyle

should have stuck in at school', 'he just needs to get a job' (even though the kind of job he will get will be insecure and poorly paid – he'll still be poor – a fact usually ignored or not understood or believed by students), 'he should be clearly warned about prison for his offending', 'and really told to pull his socks up' etc etc. And/or they agree with Louise Casey's 'troublesome families' analysis (Casey, 2012): 'it's just his terrible family',' if only they had *prioritised education',* they talk glibly about the 'cycle of deprivation' etc. Even if this is thinly disguised, it is *there. The 'blame' is entirely on Kyle and his family. And is so difficult to shift.* I am not trying to undermine agency for the individuals involved, and the students are required to recognise that too, but I want them to see what Kyle and his family are up against.

Also, and just as worrying as the blame and self-sufficiency narrative, is an increasingly therapeutic one: 'Kyle needs alcohol counselling because he has an alcohol problem', 'he needs bereavement counselling', 'he needs anger management classes', 'he needs family mediation', 'he has been rejected because of the new baby – he needs counselling for that, 'he may well have ADHD to some other condition' and 'he may need counselling for past trauma...! On the topic of increasing therapeutic responses to problems, Furedi (2004) notes that in a search of UK newspapers, there were no references to 'self-esteem' in 1980, 3 references in 1986, 103 in 1990 and, by 2000 (around the time of iGen's birth, note!), a "staggering 3,328 references to self esteem" (Furedi, 2004, p. 3). Similar patterns were found for "trauma", "stress", "syndrome" and "counselling" (ibid.). So, even if students are too kind to completely support a punitive neoliberal response, they will stick with the individual-level, but approach Kyle as if there is something *wrong* with him. He therefore needs therapy.

So, all in all, I am trying very hard to get the core idea of radical social work over to students – *that Kyle is an ordinary young man (who doesn't have something wrong with him morally or mentally!) doing what lots of young men do for reasons we can understand and some we can't yet, who needs better conditions to allow him to thrive. He needs housing; he needs less poverty; he needs social connection; he needs gainful, secure and well enough paid employment.* I want the students to start

from that premise – but that takes critical understanding of the socio-political context and recognition of the neoliberal hegemony so that they can deconstruct it.

Unfortunately, I am failing in my quest. I think we need a concerted effort (Europe wide?) to fashion an approach to social work education based on teaching politics, economics and explicitly radical ideas of social work. We also need to *resist* both pathological and therapeutic approaches based on a belief in clients' psychological deficiencies, and punitive and coercive ones based on a belief in clients' moral deficiencies.

## 5. Conclusion

So, thinking about our new generation of social work students, we can draw, from all of the evidence, the following:

• We may well have a new generation of social workers who have profoundly internalised the neoliberal, individualistic narrative – positive for diversity but very negative for 'undeserving' groups. Students are more tolerant of diversity than previous generations (cautionary note: can extend into restriction of free speech, vulnerability and 'offence' taking), but we also need to note that attention to diversity and recognition can supplant attention to economic inequality, which might well be happening with our students. Remember Twenge found very right wing economic attitudes alongside this increased tolerance of diversity? Fukuyama (2018 p. 178) in his new book *Identity* also points out that it is "easier to talk about respect and dignity than to come up with costly plans that would concretely reduce inequality". So, I would suggest that this is a key part of the neoliberal narrative internalised by the students. Their concerns are often about respecting diversity, using the correct, inoffensive language, cultural competence, individual identity issues really, at the expense of understanding poverty and inequality. Yes, the personal is political, but the political is not only personal. As Mark Lilla (2017) says, politics should engage the self, but is not all about the self.

Remember that Sheppard et al found that the social work granduands were more

altruistic and compassionate than a UK normative sample? But again, a cautionary note: the compassion may be conditional – only if the individual is 'deserving'?

• We may also have a new generation of social workers who may lack skills in critical thinking and assertiveness. Poor critical thinking skill does not bode well for sophisticated understanding of neoliberal hegemony and makes simplistic causal explanations of problems, very attractive. Simple 'blame' explanations are easy as are understandings of respect for diversity and language use – these groups are 'deserving' and it's easy to learn the rules of engagement. Mclaughlin (2008) gives a great example of this in his description of social workers interviewing an asylum seeker and

> Demonstrating their anti-oppressive credentials by admonishing the asylum seeker for his sexist language whilst at the same time refusing them services or taking their children from them, because they are not considered 'one of us'.

Might lack of assertiveness be down to passivity and fear? How can we hope to produce social workers who have the moral courage to advocate and stand alongside a client, even presuming the social worker does understand the social context that is so difficult for the client and does understand the right thing to do?

So, what should we do (and these are my suggestions only):

• Require critical thinking skills to be tested at admission and focus on it during programmes and assessment, being quite ruthless here AND
• Resurrect radical social work – focussing unashamedly on politics (including deconstructing the neoliberal hegemony), policy and resultant poverty, inequality and hardship. Educating about diversity but not allowing that to supplant attention to economics.

Finally, and to conclude, the neoliberal narrative is loud and clear from our students. If we just go with that flow, then thinking about actual people as, in Bauman's words, a 'burden on society' is increasingly likely and the very essence of social work's ethical impulse and the need for human-to-human connection is under threat.

Surely we, together, need to do something about that?

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