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Title: Social work education in a time of national crisis in Greece: educating the workforce to combat inequalities / Η εκπαίδευση στην κοινωνική εργασία την εποχή της κρίσης στην Ελλάδα: εκπαιδεύοντας το ανθρώπινο δυναμικό να καταπολεμήσει τις ανισότητες.

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Abstract

Since 2010, Greece has experienced an unprecedented economic and humanitarian crisis, which continues to have tremendous social impact. Austerity measures and policy cuts have included a dis-investment in social work and social care and more recently the abolition of one of the four national Social Work Departments providing qualifying social work education. In this context, this study addresses the following question: how does pre-qualifying social work education in Greece influence students' ability to manage value tensions in relation to anti-oppressive practice? Using a case study methodology, the research was based in one Social Work Department (subsequently abolished). Data were collected through semi-structured interviews from social work students at the beginning and the end of their professional education (n=32) and once from academic staff/placement supervisors (n=10). Data were analysed drawing on grounded theory techniques. In this paper only one particular dataset is considered in detail: the attitudes and experiences of final year students. The main findings indicate students' narrow understandings and individualistic approaches towards oppression, reflecting an urgent need to redefine social work education and practice in Greece according to current social justice concerns. Specifically, social work education needs to give greater weight to a structural perspective on the dynamics of oppression.

Although focussed on Greece, the paper offers a critical debate of contemporary relevance for social work education in many European nation states.

Η Ελληνική κοινωνία βιώνει από το 2010 μια άνευ προηγουμένου οικονομική και ανθρωπιστική κρίση με τρομαχτικές κοινωνικές επιπτώσεις. Τα μέτρα λιτότητας και οι περικοπές σε κρατικές πολιτικές, συμπεριέλαβαν την από-επένδυση από την κοινωνική πρόνοια και την κοινωνική εργασία, με πιο πρόσφατη την κατάργηση ενός από τα τέσσερα Τμήματα Κοινωνικής Εργασίας στην Ελλάδα. Υπό αυτές τις συνθήκες, το ερώτημα της συγκεκριμένης μελέτης είναι: Ποιος είναι ο ρόλος της εκπαίδευσης στην κοινωνική εργασία στην Ελλάδα, αναφορικά με την ικανότητα των φοιτητών να διαχειριστούν συγκρούσεις αξιών σχετικά με την αντι-καταπιεστική προσέγγιση; Χρησιμοποιώντας τη μέθοδο της μελέτη περίπτωσης, η έρευνα βασίστηκε σε ένα Τμήμα Κοινωνικής Εργασίας (στη συνέχεια καταργήθηκε). Τα δεδομένα συλλέχθηκαν μέσω ημι-δομημένων συνεντεύξεων από τους φοιτητές κοινωνικής εργασίας στην αρχή και το τέλος της εκπαίδευσής τους (n = 32) και το ακαδημαϊκό προσωπικό/επόπτες πλαισίων πρακτικής άσκησης (n = 10). Τα δεδομένα αναλύθηκαν με τη χρήση τεχνικών της θεμελιωμένης θεωρίας. Σε αυτό το άρθρο μόνο ένα μέρος των αποτελεσμάτων από τις συνεντεύξεις θα συζητηθεί: οι συμπεριφορές και οι εμπειρίες των τελειόφοιτων φοιτητών. Τα αποτελέσματα, αποκάλυψαν απλοϊκές αντιλήψεις και στερεοτυπικές πεποιθήσεις των τελειόφοιτων ως προς την καταπίεση, αναδεικνύοντας την ανάγκη για επαναπροσδιορισμό της εκπαίδευσης και άσκησης της κοινωνικής εργασίας στην Ελλάδα, ανάλογα με τις σύγχρονες κοινωνικές ανάγκες και μια πιο δομική προσέγγιση ως προς την καταπίεση. Το παρόν άρθρο, παρόλο που πραγματεύεται την Ελληνική πραγματικότητα, αποτελεί το έναυσμα για κριτικό αναστοχασμό για την εκπαίδευση της κοινωνικής εργασίας, που εν δυνάμει αφορά όλα τα κράτη μέλη της Ευρώπης.

Keywords: anti-oppressive practice, social work education, Greece/αντι-καταπιεστική προσέγγιση, εκπαίδευση στην κοινωνική εργασία, Ελλάδα

Introduction

This article concerns the education of social work students in anti-oppressive practice and examines how one university department in Greece, prepares social workers to understand, internalise and enact anti-oppressive practice. In a context of the deconstruction of social cohesion and rising inequalities (Poulopoulos, 2014), there is an urgent need for social work practice and education to more strongly reflect the emancipatory values of the profession. In what follows, we briefly examine the current socio-economic situation and social work's response to oppression in Greece before discussing the education of social workers in one higher education institution in the light of anti-oppressive concepts. A case study design was adopted using semi-structured interviews with a sample of first year students (n=16), final year students (n=14) and academic staff members/placement supervisors (n=10). The implications of the findings are discussed in terms of the current context of economic hardship and welfare crisis.

Greece in times of oppression and anti-oppressive practice

Since 2010, Greece has been experiencing an unprecedented economic and humanitarian crisis. The results of the continuous austerity measures as determined by the political parties in governance and Troika[1], are thousands of redundancies, policy cuts in social care and the violation of basic rights (minimum wage salary, maternity/sick leave, protection of redundancy or union participation) (Matsaganis, 2012). Papadopoulos and Roumpakis (2012) signalled this reality as 'the end of the world' as most Greeks knew it.

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[1] The tripartite committee led by the European Commission, the European Central Bank (ECB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) that organised the financial rescue of Greece.

According to Eurostat (2012, 2014) results, poverty[2] has risen from 19,7% in 2008 to 23,1 % in 2011 (INE-GSEE, 2013) and unemployment rates have risen from 26.3% to 28% within a year (November 2012-November 2013). Moreover, the rising number of suicides, 22% (2009-2011) (Kentikelenis et al., 2011) and deaths resulting from no access to basic public goods such as health services (there are numerous patients without insurance unable to pay for their treatment) demonstrate the hard reality that thousands of households experience.

Whilst one might expect that under these conditions the state would need to invest more in social care, dramatic cuts (over 40% between 2009 and 2013) in public social welfare services (among other publicly provided services and sectors, i.e. hospitals, schools, universities) have resulted in a 'progressively enfeebled welfare state' (Asimopoulos, 2012; Petmesidou, 2013:613). According to the annual report by the Professional Association of Social Workers in Greece (SKLE, 2014), an excessive lack of funding and staff in social services (ratio of social workers to service users may even reach 1/50,000 in some municipalities) has resulted in the sudden termination of community projects, fragmentation of social services as well as the waste of human resources.

In 2013, the Ministry of Education announced the so called 'Athena' plan[3] which included the abolition of one of the four national social work departments in Greece. Following the announcement of the 'Athena' plan, numerous occupations and protests took place for several weeks by millions of students across the country, demanding its withdrawal. Reflecting on the social work students' occupation in Patras, Teloni (2013) and Ioakimidis et al. (2014:295) noted that eventually 'they were violently attacked by thugs who allegedly attempted to suppress the protest'.

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[2] (income less than 60% of the available average income)
[3] A governmental plan that introduced closing down or merging of numerous University and Technological Educational Institutes Departments in Greece.

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Within these conditions where austerity and policy cuts have resulted in pauperisation and deconstruction of the welfare state, oppression and inequalities are rising. Amnesty International has pointed out the violation of human rights in Greece numerous times in their reviews: Greece ranks first in Europe for police brutality and racist crimes (Michael-Matsas, 2013; SKLE, 2014). Also, the spectacular rise of the neo-Nazi party Golden Dawn (represented in the parliament and European Commission in the elections of May 2014) is a clear sign of the deconstruction of social cohesion in countries facing financial crisis like Greece (i-Red, 2012).

Yet, numerous solidarity and social movements have developed across the country as a response to austerity and oppression that are participating in solidarity activities and social action. Commenting on this mobilisation, Ioakimidis et al. (2013) as well as Teloni and Mantanika (2015), have described new forms of grassroots social welfare and political action in Greece. For example, the Social Medical Centres expose the consequences of policy cuts in health care, develop alternative ways of intervention and engage in community action. In addition, grassroots groups at the local level such as the Resident Assemblies in neighbourhoods and citizens' mobilisation in Skouries (Halkidiki, Nothern Greece) against the privatisation and destruction of their natural resources by private mining companies, reflect a broader anti-austerity and anti-oppressive movement in the years of crisis. What though is social work's response in this context?

Researchers and scholars have commented that social work in Greece has been traditionally carried out in a 'culture of silence', due to poor, even oppressive working conditions that include the deconstruction of welfare, the low status of social work and the historical evolution of social work as a conservative and neutral profession based on individualistic approaches to social problems (Ioakimidis, 2008; Papadaki, 2005; Teloni and

Mantanika, 2015). However, a gradual radicalisation and politicisation of social work seems to be occurring in Greece (Ioakimidis and Teloni, 2013). For example, the social workers' first instance of collective civil disobedience was witnessed in 2011, sparked by the government's direction to social workers to participate in decisions that would potentially see an individual's electricity supply disconnected, if he/she was unable to pay new head tax (an addition to the existing electricity bill). In addition, social workers' involvement in community action and social movements' activities (for example the actions of the Greek branch of Social Work Action Network) are clear signs of the profession starting to take an anti-oppressive stance on a collective basis. However, these are very new initiatives and do not reflect a general critical approach by social workers or social work academic departments, as explained below.

Pentaraki (2015), in her research on the response of the Greek Professional Association of Social Workers (SKLE) in austerity, observed its failure to adopt a structural approach that would have required exposing and challenging oppressive policies. In a context of a market-driven agenda and fragmentation of social services, Pentaraki (2013) and Ioakimidis and Teloni (2013) argue that social work cannot respond by using individualistic approaches to oppression that fail to critically examine the maintenance of inequalities without participating in their reproduction. Recently there has been an announcement of the official participation of two social workers as nominees of Golden Dawn in the elections of May 2014. Whilst such an involvement is considered incompatible with the profession, SKLE is not a regulatory body which has powers to intervene, e.g. there is no official register

of social workers from which these candidates could be struck off, nor any system of accountability and challenge to suitability to be called a social worker[4].

On the education front, social work education in Greece (following the abolition of one Department) is provided by two Social Work Departments of the Technological Educational Institutes (TEIs) and the Social Administration Department at the University of Thrace. Research on social work education in Greece has revealed individualistic and uncritical approaches within the curriculum (Papadaki and Papadaki, 2008; Teloni, 2011; Teloni and Mantanika, 2015) as well as inappropriate academic conditions with limited resources, staff shortages and a 'schism' between permanent educators and teaching fellows (Ioakimidis, 2008). Social work departments have the autonomy to develop their own course content; however, its efficacy to stimulate an anti-oppressive practice is questioned in the light of recent research.

Although multicultural social work modules have been included in the curriculum in recent years, it is argued that in the absence of an anti-oppressive content cultural awareness does not necessarily result in an understanding and explanation of the structural causes of oppression. This is further reflected in research such as Papadaki and Papadaki, (2011) and Papadaki et al. (2012), who linked social work students' attitudes towards the LGBT[5] community and ageism in Crete with their education's limited reference to social divisions and oppression issues. Similar findings for social work education were discussed by Dedotsi and Paraskevopoulou (2014), who observed traditional, male-orientated standards and sexist beliefs about the structure and roles within Greek family among students. Whilst these values

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[4] In order to obtain a social worker's license in Greece, one needs to registrate in the county headquarters of the county where they intend to practice. The only criterion is to hold a degree of social work and have a clear police check. This license could only be retracted permanently by a court's decision following conviction of a felony or plimmelim. For a breach of the profession's code of ethics the disciplinary board of the Ministry could consider a temporary retraction (1 year maximum).

[5] This is an initialism that stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender.

and beliefs are indicative of broader societal attitudes, the failure of social work education to challenge these can result in passivity or even reproduction of oppressive practices, especially in times of oppression and injustice as explained earlier. How may social workers adopt an anti-oppressive practice then?

Anti-oppressive practice (AOP[6]), a critical social work approach (Healy, 2014), has been identified to have major strengths in: a) its 'reconciliation' of social work values – such as social justice - with practice; b) the recognition of interpersonal and statutory work as legitimate sites of anti-oppressive practice; and c) its conceptualisation of oppression and power dynamics related to different and intersectional social divisions, which occur at personal, cultural and structural levels (Banks, 2006; Dalrymple and Burke 2006; Danso, 2009; Dominelli, 2002; Healy, 2014; Sakamoto and Pitner, 2005).

However, major criticisms of AOP suggest that its proponents have turned it into a micro approach focusing on interpersonal behaviours rather than structural inequalities (Cemlyn, 2008; McLaughlin, 2005; Strier and Binyamin, 2010). The latter, has been the main charge by McLaughlin who highlighted that AOP has become institutionalised allowing the state to hide oppressive policies under an equalities agenda. It is also argued that AOP can take the form of a top down approach due to the limited involvement of service users in decision and policy making as well as social work education (Sakamoto and Pinter, 2005; Wilson and Beresford, 2000).

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[6] It needs to be acknowledged that AOP has been defined and debated mostly by British authors. Therefore, it would be irrelevant even oppressive to impose this model on the Greek context. In addition, we do not subscribe on an assumption that AOP is the only way to radicalism and politicisation in Greece. Instead, the intention is to inform a more radical shift in thinking in social work education in Greece based on the emancipatory values that have driven such theories and are also reflected in the social work definition and training guidelines (IFSW and IASSW).

In the light of these debates, it is not surprising that AOP has been characterised as tokenistic, having lost its political edge (Cocker and Hafford – Letchfield, 2014). However, what appears to be a shared consensus among AOP pioneers and sceptics is their call to the ongoing inclusion of theoretical underpinnings in relation to power and oppression such as the theories of Freire (1970, 1993, 1994) or Foucault (1977, 1980, 1982); the incorporation of ground up knowledge and grassroots involvement of service users and social movements; and last but not least, the development of critical reflection and critical consciousness toward the self, practice and the claims of AOP theory (Banks, 2006; Dalrymple and Burke 2006; Danso, 2009; Dominelli, 2002; Dunk-West, 2014; Healy, 2005, 2014; Sakamoto and Pitner, 2005; Wilson and Beresford, 2000).

Despite the importance of these concepts, social workers are not abstract moral agents 'made' to act automatically in an anti-oppressive way. It is well documented in the literature (i.e. Banks, 2006; Clifford and Burke, 2009; Dalrymple and Burke, 2006; Parrott 2009) that the practitioners' personal values may conflict with the profession's (anti-oppressive) values. Freire (1989, in Moch, 2009:94) when questioned at a social work conference, acknowledged the difficulty of this tension 'because we constantly fight and contradict ourselves'. Yet, whilst being involved in value tensions between personal and professional values may be difficult and uncomfortable, the expectation (IFSW&IASSW) is that professional values and ethics will guide practice. How then can such value tensions be resolved? The resolution seems to lie in a critical understanding of the self (personal values and social location) and in a critical reflection on practice via a dialogical process of knowledge/action – critical reflection – knowledge/action (Adams et al., 2009; Clifford and Burke, 2009; Dalrymple and Burke, 2006; Dominelli, 2002; Singh, 2014).

In the light of these, each social worker confronts 'a moment of decision' in which he/she 'picks the side of change which is pointed in the direction of humanisation...or is left in the position of favouring stagnation' (Freire, no date, p.10, cited in Carroll and Minkler, 2000: 26). This is why it is argued that social workers cannot be neutral and apolitical; they are *active* participants, whose decisions have political consequences, especially in times of oppression. Therefore, it is worth asking: What is the influence of students' qualifying education on practicing anti-oppressively? And how does the wider cultural/social/political context of the country where they are educated, influence that professional formation?

Methodology

This study took place in one of the four national social work Departments in Greece (subsequently abolished). The overarching research question of this study was: how does pre-qualifying social work education influence students' ability to manage value tensions in relation to anti-oppressive practice within the context of social work education in Greece? Using a case study design, data were collected via semi-structured interviews of two different groups of students, one at the beginning of their course (n=16) and the other at the end of their studies (n=14) as well as academic staff (n=10) who taught on the programme. The study received ethical approval from the University of Manchester Research Ethics Committee (reference 12343) and the Head of Social Work Department, where the research took place.

Students were approached in class before and after their lectures whilst academic staff and placement supervisors were approached via a group mail sent by a third party, the Committee of Dissertations within the Department. Participants voluntarily contacted the researcher if they wished to take part and the interview was conducted according to an agreed convenient date/time for them. They were fully informed about the research (i) in generalised

discussions broaching the research, (ii) just before the interview commences, (if they subsequently agree to take part), and (iii) on the consent form. They were also afforded the opportunity to provide anonymously written information - if they wished - in relation to any aspects of the interview within sealed envelopes after the interview. Keeping the confidentiality and anonymity of participants was a central concern; therefore any elements which might have revealed their identity were removed (for example, reference to the courses that the staff teaches).

The interviews with students involved questions around their understanding and beliefs about diversity and oppression/discrimination, reflections on the social work role against these, their ability to manage value tensions in relation to anti-oppressive practice and their expectations/comments on their education and anti-oppressive practice. Members of academic staff were asked questions in relation to the content of their teaching/supervision, anti-oppressive training and students' response, as well as students' ability to resolve value tensions related to anti-oppressive practice.

The duration of the interviews was 45-50 minutes and they were digitally audio recorded. The analysis of interviews was based on techniques of repeated sorting, coding and constant comparison informed by a grounded theory approach. Coding, can be understood as 'categorizing segments of data with a short name that simultaneously summarizes and accounts for each piece of data' (Charmaz, 2006). These pieces of text were compared and contrasted with each other constantly while any ideas/possible links were written in memos. This approach is akin to the constant comparison method of data analysis in grounded theory (Chiovitti and Piran, 2003). Through the use of these methods and memos within an iterative process of back and forth, patterns were identified which led to the development of initial codes, then to categories and their links and finally to broader themes and concepts.

In this article, a single qualitative dataset that comprised interviews with final year students from a larger qualitative study will be discussed. It needs to be acknowledged that these results refer to one Department of Social Work in Greece (the research's case), at a specific time of period (spring 2013) and they cannot be generalised for the whole social work education in Greece. However, such research takes place for the first time in Greece and it can initiate further debate and dialogue about social work education not only at a national level but in other countries too, especially the ones which are under financial crisis. Last but not least, we need to note that our intention was not to use this research as a retrospective justification of the abolition of the specific Social Work Department. Instead, our fear is that social work practice and education in Greece is under threat and it is more important than ever to redefine its mission against oppression wherever it comes from. We hope that the findings from this research will initiate such a dialogue in Greece.

Findings

Defining and explaining diversity and oppression

When students were asked about their understandings of diversity and oppression/discrimination, the approach of the vast majority of students could be described as 'narrow' and 'individualistic'; they offered quite simple understandings based on unchallenged deep-rooted stereotypes. For example, some of their answers included: "*diversity is in life choices or in how you seat, speak, drink your coffee, and read*" (student 3) and "*I have people in my mind that have a special nature, some weaknesses, a disability or if originate from another country*" (student 8). It is interesting that issues of social justice and power as well as institutional oppression were not mentioned by the students. Instead, based on limited understandings, the majority focused on dividing individuals one from another into groups with negative connotations.

In response to the question that sought to explore the roots and causes of oppression within Greek society, students offered a variety of accounts which revealed that they held positive and negative beliefs simultaneously. Only two students out of fourteen offered an explanation of the roots of oppression that drew on structural causes including poverty and social policy. In the students' accounts of the root causes of oppression they consistently apportioned blame to minorities, claiming that minorities' own actions were implicated in their oppression. Seven students highlighted the role of current socio-economic conditions in conjunction with the state's social policies. According to them, oppression is rooted in an "*absent*" (student 1) and ineffective welfare state as "*it is limited only in a benefits' policy. It is a smearing, like chocolate onto a cake...*" (student 2). Such economic-led policies along with the financial crisis were thought to increase oppression within Greek society, making minorities the scapegoats for all the society's suffering: "*we place our responsibilities to immigrants that it is their fault what we experience* (the financial crisis)" (student 8) and "*the crisis has made us to marginalise them more*" (student 2). According to four students the above conditions set the foundations of the rise of fascism which sustains and replicates further inequalities: "*extremism has come in light...*" (student 3) and "*we experience political events currently ... that you hear they kill immigrants and they try to present this as a normal thing...*" (student 9).

However, students also discussed society's passive role toward the rise of discrimination. Ten students explained this passivity by providing its cultural origins: an oppressive Greek mentality and a lack of culture/education. More specifically, it was thought that Greeks' 'mentality' appears to be founded on: a tendency for homogeneity (three students) "*society has learnt to live within a norma, a fishbowl and they can't accept diversity as they want to keep their homogeneity as 'the normals'...*" (student 10); lack of empathy and

a blaming approach (three students) "*it is our mentality, for example we say 'look how he looks like', 'look, he has a smell', or 'how it comes to be a friend of yours?'*" (student 12); and last a lack of questioning skills (one student) "*people are influenced from negative things that they listen without trying to critically think*" (student 8). Other explanations for oppression included: lack of culture/education (in Greek: *παιδεία*) (three students), the stigmatisation by media (two students) and the power of stereotypes in rural areas (three students).

Despite the above explanations that focused on the structural origins of oppression, twelve students also fell into a blaming approach toward minorities such as immigrants, mental health patients, lone mothers, Roma, and the LGBT community. They saw oppression as the result of personal failure/fault rather than considering the contribution of the context's unjust and oppressive policies to someone's conditions. Their arguments included beliefs that minorities are passive or even reproduce their exclusion and oppression (five students) "*they are not organised to react against or to create an anti-oppressive climate. For example I haven't seen gypsies changing the notion of 'oh the gypsy will approach me begging and he will try to take my money with cunning'*" (student 6) and "*mental health patients can't control themselves sometimes. In addition, gypsies are inclined to steal...*" (student 2). Other arguments revealed: beliefs that being a minority is a matter of personal choice (one student) "*...homosexuals don't have a real problem, it is their choice...*" (student 7); and even an understanding/justification towards oppressors themselves (one student) "*...when Albanians came in Greece they did bad things; therefore they have been provoking others[7] and it is logical to be treated like that*" (student 1). Within these quotes, deep-rooted stereotypes are observed which are founded on a view of these groups as a whole (they are all the same) and

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[7] In order to give the exact meaning, another phrase is used here. The student actually said "*they have given rights*" (to the oppressors/society) (in Greek: *έχουν δώσει δικαιώματα*).

a failure to acknowledge the variety and diversity within. There is also a tendency to focus on traits as characteristic of a whole group, for example Roma and stealing.

The exception to the above stereotypes and blaming approach were two students who refused to blame minorities for their oppression and remained firmly focussed on structural influences and causes of it. As student 11 explained "*society creates your personality. I don't blame these people* (minorities) *because they live in this society without the necessary goods, and they are not encouraged to deal with this problem* (oppression)". Considering the above quotes, the fact that only two students out of fourteen focused on structural roots of oppression raises questions about their ability to advocate the social rights of oppressed groups in their near future.

Positioning of social work to the oppressive society

It is interesting that seven students provided different points of view in relation to social work's mission against oppression: three students argued for a structural social work, for example "*Social work is both the vision and motivation to fight for a society without oppression and stereotypes*" (student 11); two students suggested a vocational social work "*it is in the nature of social work to be the supporting hand that the other will catch. We will feel as "Mothers Teresa"…giving more than taking*" (student 9); and two students considered social work as an oppressive profession itself: "*in cases where society itself creates 'problems' like drugs, social work can be a tool. In other words, you make the problems and then you offer services to deal with it, fact which hides a lot of traps and oppressive policies*" (student 4). In a continuum of these contradictory views of social work, students also disagreed about what social work can actually do against oppression, offering a key role (six students) but a limited one (eight students) too. In relation to its key role, four students considered collective action as the means for social work to fight oppression "*social workers*

need to leave the office and do more street work; this is how people from community will participate into this collectively..." (student 3) and "*to fight collectively for peoples' rights and against oppression*" (student 11). In addition, three students suggested that social work needs to empower minorities and communities "*making aware communities and minorities about things, being the ombudsman in community conflicts and bringing new strategies for social development*" (student 2).

Instead, eight students described a social work approach limited to: public awareness campaigns only (three students) "*social workers can do a very good awareness campaign in the community*" (student 7) and "*inform neighbourhoods about immigrants even educate them to live together nicely*" (student 13); to individual support (four students) "*social work can't do anything to change society. Maybe to decrease the extent which the person experiences the oppression...*" (student 5) and even to inaction (one student) "*a social worker can't do anything. The community needs to realise first its needs* (in relation to oppression) *and then a social worker can act within it*" (student 10).

In the light of the above understandings and positions, a limited understanding of the roots of oppression is observed whilst social work's role in challenging it was conceptualised largely on an individualistic basis with little reference to structural change and challenge. Considering that these students are graduates, these results are alarming and question the efficacy of their education into these matters.

Reflections on Social Work Education and students' self

When questioned about reference to oppression and diversity within their studies, twelve students replied that there was limited reference: "*there was some information by the individual initiative of some lecturers. It didn't happen to all modules*" (student 3). They also

pointed to an outdated curriculum, which does not reflect current social needs, for example "*some books make reference of Ottoman Greece and the lecturer of a module[8] used this reference as examination syllabus and it was an examination topic too. OK, we could have made a reference to this as a historical note, but you can't focus on Ottoman Greece and everything else that happens now is not even discussed within class*" (student 3). According to students, their education has focused on a technical approach of 'how to work' instead of providing theoretical explanations about the roots of oppression as well as the role of social work in challenging it. In some of their words: "*we learned about each minority, what services are available, what their needs are, etc*" (student 5) and "*lecturers were trying to prepare us in applying the right method of intervention/management of such groups*" (student 9). Social work education's limited reference to critical approaches appears to have contributed to students' individualistic perspectives in their understanding and explanations of oppression and the role of social work against this.

It was observed that students discussed to a great extent the role of their educators revealing that it is about who and how they teach distinguishing the interesting lectures from 'boring' and ineffective ones. Students focused on educators' personal qualities and teaching strategies. For example, "*some lecturers were available to us* (after class) *for further information" (student 6)*; "*to not be judgemental even when we express stereotypes*" (student 9); and "*discussing examples was very important and helpful*" (student 7). However, it appears there is a lack of staff and resources according to seven students, for example "*We don't have permanent lecturers*" (student 4) and "*even our logistical means are limited. For example, we wanted to present our assignment and we did it on paper whilst we could have the opportunity to use power point, etc*" (student 6). Considering the above reflections by the

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[8] Whilst the student named the module, such a reference is avoided as there is a danger of revealing the lecturer's identity.

majority of students, education is under crisis too - having an outdated curriculum, staff and resources' shortages. It appears that an anti-oppressive education is not a priority and it is questionable in what extent these students will be able to challenge oppression both at a personal and institutional level.

Regarding students' response to their education, they all admitted that they did not attend all their lectures – a significant finding in relation to their learning[9]. The majority's (ten students) explanation for this was linked to the educator's teaching approach, for example "*after some years I knew the way the lecturers were teaching us so I was choosing whom to attend. When I felt that I am not going to gain anything I was not attending. You feel it is pointless*" (student 4) and "*I was trying to attend my lectures but there were some boring because of the lecturers. Therefore I either didn't attend them or I did just because I had to; but I didn't learn much. On the other hand, other educators were easy to understand and it was a pleasure to attend their lectures*" (student 1). Further explanations for not attending lectures were: working (two students), the distance between their home and academic premises (one student) and early morning lectures (one student). What is evident here is students' personal commitment and personal judgement about what is important or not and the contribution of these lectures for them. In the light of these views, one may wonder to what extent students are educated without attending their lectures.

Last but not least, thirteen students revealed that whilst their education may have contributed to their self-awareness, they felt unprepared to combat inequalities: "*I have neither the knowledge nor the experience for this*" (student 1); "*I am not ready to face value tensions in relation to diversity and oppression*" (student 3) and "*I can't say if I am ready for sure*" (student 13). It is important to note here that two students admitted that due to their

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[9] In theoretical courses/lectures there is not a minimum attendance requirement for students. Instead, the laboratory courses require full attendance.

unpreparedness, it is easier for their personal judgements and beliefs to override social work values: "*I will follow my judgement. I can't do anything else*" (student 2).

As a summative note, the failure of their education in stimulating the development of a critical self who is an agent of the anti-oppressive and emancipatory values of the profession is observed. Whilst it was reported that a few lecturers took the initiative to focus on these issues, this appears to have been taught without truly comprehending what students are learning or thinking. In addition, students' response to their education is also questionable in the light of their resistance to stereotypes, as discussed above. How might these graduates advocate for social rights and tackle oppression when their anti-oppressive education has been so limited?

Discussion and Conclusions

We have presented the analysis of social work students' views in relation to anti-oppressive practice in the context of one social work education programme in Greece. The discussion has been limited to presentation of findings from interviews specific to final year students to enable depth of exploration of the rich qualitative material. Inevitably, when we choose depth we lose out regarding breadth – here the perspectives of the first year students and staff are absent. Our aim is to present further results in future publications on the completion of the research. Data were collected at a time of national socio-economic crisis (Matsaganis, 2012) and within a highly oppressive context which includes the rise of fascism and inequalities and the daily violation of human rights. It is a context in which both practice and education based on the emancipatory values of the profession should have a significant role to play. However, as these data have revealed, social work education is not necessarily preparing students to offer an alternative or radical stance to the situation that surrounds them.

The failure of education here is that it has not raised students' critical consciousness and understanding of the social structures of power, oppression and the political nature of social work within it. This lack of critical consciousness and critical reflection explains both the inability of students to manage value tensions and the absence of praxis (a key social change role to social work) according to Freire (1993). Therefore, in times of oppression, such an education is seen as limited and insufficient to prepare students who one might reasonably assume would take the side of the oppressed. However, these students' positions need to be seen in the broader educational context too.

In his analysis of the subject and power, Foucault (1982) used the example of an educational institution to illustrate how its structure, strategies/policies, procedures and power relationships are all adjusted to one another and constitute the concept of 'discipline', which in turn constructs an individual's thinking and positions. Students' reflections on their education in this study (characterised by its non-prioritisation of social justice and anti-oppressive content, its highly -individualistic approaches and the lack of staff and resources) along with earlier observations by Ioakimidis (2008), Papadaki and Papadaki (2008), Teloni (2011) and Teloni and Mantanika (2015), reveal that students' unpreparedness and oppressive positions are *produced* within a network of power relations among the Department, the broader (oppressive educational) policies by the state (market-driven policies, 'Athena' plan) and the students' self. It would be wrong to cast the students as entirely the source of the uncritical attitudes revealed in this study. As demonstrated, the students' adopted cultural dominant values not only remain unchallenged but actually are reinforced by the context and structures in which they are learning and developing. They are being educated within an environment where the response to social needs is far from reflective and anti-oppressive and where students are not being exposed to the resources they might need to engage with anti-

oppressive practice because there is no institutional reflections of anti-oppressive praxis. There is a lack of community action, user involvement and engagement with social movements, even at times of crisis.

However, the need for a shift towards an anti-oppressive education and pedagogy inspired by the insights of Freire (1970, 1993) is not limited to the Greek case. Alarming results for education's influence on students' commitment to the emancipatory values of the profession have discussed in research outside Greece too. For example, Weiss et al., (2004) compared empirical data from 223 students in Israel and USA at their first and final year and observed no major impact on students' preferences and willingness to engage in social change. A number of research findings have also highlighted students' unchanged group preferences, questionable understandings and explanations, as well as individualistic or even passive responses to oppression in national contexts like USA (Bundy-Fazioli et al, 2013; Early et al., 2003; Reutebuch, 2006) Nothern Ireland (Wilson and Kelly, 2010), Turkey (Buz et al., 2013) and Britain (Collins and Wilkie, 2010; Evaluation team, 2008; Galvani and Hughes, 2010; Jack and Mosley, 1997; Mackay and Woodward, 2010; Woodward and Mackay, 2012). This lack of critical reflection and anti-oppressive action with regard to the self and others, has been revealed in Wilson and Kelly's (2010:11) findings too, where students felt powerless to counteract oppression and they had been 'in a tenuous position' of accepting oppressive agency and institutional policies. Such findings in times of oppression, where neo-liberal policies dominate in the Western context (Preston and Aslett, 2014; Reisch, 2013; Spolander et al., 2014), and South-East Europe faces extreme debt crises and inequalities rise, reveal a number of implications for social work education.

There is an urgent need to re-define the structure, content and mission of social work education in order to reflect the emancipatory focus of the profession. Building on the works

of Foucault and Freire, social work students can be engaged in critical consciousness and critical reflection not just on themselves as agents of change but with respect to the policies of institutions in which they are situated. In this way, they will be equipped to expose the structural origins of social problems and not blame the oppressed for personal failure (Ferguson, 2012). In the context of Greece today, such an education cannot but reflect and respond to current social needs: including critical approaches to the curriculum like that of anti-oppressive practice, as well as engaging in social action via the collective participation of students and academics against austerity measures and policy cuts, violation of human and social rights, and through social movements and professional associations.

Yet, such content should not impose a dogma towards students (Pugh, 1998). Anti-oppressive education according to Freire (1970, 1993) needs to stimulate our critical understanding of reality. Therefore, students need to learn 'to be constantly unsatisfied with what is being learned, said and known' (Kumashiro, 2000: 43), through an ongoing process of deconstruction and reconstruction of knowledge (Das and Carter – Anand, 2014; de Montigny, 2011; Kumashiro, 2000, 2001).

However, 'action' for Freire or the 'political' task of criticising the working of institutions according to Foucault (Lazaroiu, 2013) involves also a critical and reflective self. Therefore, it is more important than ever for social workers in the making to be aware of their personal beliefs and stereotypes too (Sinclair and Albert, 2008). This commitment to rigorous life-long self-learning (Hughman, 2005; Lay and McGuire, 2009) enables students 'to paint themselves into the picture, rather than casting events as external and out of their control' (Fook, 2002, in Morley, 2008: 416). It is also vital to reflect on our own roles as educators and to take responsibility at a personal and institutional level for ethical issues that arise in the world of higher education (Campbell, 2002). Here, students can learn from educators as

role models through listening and observation (Clifford and Burke, 2005). Without a critical and reflexive stance to the self, policies and institutions, social work will only 'objectify' the student, the 'other', the service user or more broadly – the oppressed.

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