The Neoliberal Colonisation of Social Work Education: A Critical Analysis and Practices for Resistance

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ABSTRACT

Neoliberalism reduces everything, including social work practice and education, to commodities, subjecting them to market calculations that maximise exploitation and profit. Whilst the impacts of neoliberalism on social work practice are now well documented, this paper seeks to contribute to an emerging dialogue about the impacts of neoliberalism on social work education. Social work education holds direct implications for social work as a discipline and the type of professional practice that is carried out in the field. The paper examines the implications of the neoliberal university for social work curriculum, pedagogy, research and academic educators, particularly with reference to the Australian context. In this paper we expand existing critiques about the impacts of neoliberalism on social work education, and draw on our own and other educators' experiences to highlight the scope for agency and resistance.

INTRODUCTION

Neoliberalism, the discourse that provides justification for global capitalism, reduces everything to commodities, subjecting them to market calculations that maximise exploitation and profit. Neoliberalism (sometimes referred to as "economic rationalism") is responsible for creating massive societal power imbalances between rich and poor, and leads governments to prioritise capital accumulation over social concerns (Holscher & Sewpaul, 2006). This results in funding cuts to human service organisations where practitioners are expected to do more with less (Holscher & Sewpaul, 2006). Within neoliberal contexts, social work practitioners and educators may find our analysis at odds with neoliberal orthodoxy that valorises individual responsibility. This individualisation denies structural causes of social problems, resulting in scapegoating members of marginalised groups for difficulties arising from complex and divided social, economic and political contexts.

It has been two decades since Lena Dominelli first wrote about how rapid contextual changes were undermining anti-oppressive practice and de-professionalising social work (Dominelli, 1996). Whilst Dominelli did not explicitly refer to neoliberalism, she did name the rise of conservative approaches to social work (such as task-centred practice, systems theory and case management practices) as implicated in supporting corporate, managerialist agendas. As she explains: "Case management techniques have facilitated the penetration of market forces into a hitherto sacrosanct professional area—the 'client-worker relationship,' through the implementation of the purchaser-provider split in service organization and delivery" (Dominelli, 1996, p.156).

In the context of social work practice, Dominelli further clarifies that "the case management vision of social work practice … facilitate[s] the psychologizing and pathologizing of 'clients' by presenting their problems as the product of their personal inadequacy rather than as political issues which need resolving" (1996, p. 159). Such narrow analyses serve a range of functions for neoliberalism including: 1) reshaping social work as more "*politically acceptable*" to government and industry employers (Dominelli, 1996, p. 163, emphasis in original); and 2) reducing social work to a set of technical, decontextualised skills that can be undertaken by less qualified workers, thereby deskilling social work and ensuring social workers have fewer safeguards against exploitation in the workforce.

In sum, a key impact of neoliberalism has been to produce a version of social work practice that fails to adequately take account of structural forces. Depoliticised, conservative approaches to social work are encouraged by neoliberalism because of their proclivity to accept existing inequalities in the system (Morley, Macfarlane, & Ablett, 2014). Similarly, establishment forces that serve neoliberal goals have also infiltrated social work education. The impacts of neoliberalism on social work practice are now well documented (see for example, Ferguson & Lavalette, 2006; Gardner, 2014; Madhu, 2011; Rogowski, 2010; Wallace & Pease, 2011; Wehbi & Turcotte, 2007), and there is a considerable body of research evidence detailing the impact of neoliberalism on higher education generally (see for example, Berg, Huijbens, & Larsen, 2016; ; Fraser & Taylor, 2016; Giroux, 2014, 2015; Hil, 2012, 2015; Marginson & Considine, 2000; O'Sullivan, 2016; Williams, 2016). This paper seeks to continue an emerging dialogue about the impacts of neoliberalism specifically on social work education (see for example, Fenton, 2014; Garrett, 2010; Hanesworth, 2017; Lucal, 2014; Preston &

Aslett, 2014; Wagner & Yee, 2011; Wallace & Pease, 2011; Webhi, 2009; Wehbi & Turcotte, 2007; Zuchowski, Hudson, Bartlett, & Diamandi, 2014). Social work education holds direct implications for the discipline and type of practice that is carried out in the field. Therefore, documenting both the impacts and responses to the neoliberal colonisation of social work education is important both for expanding critique, and for promoting practices of resistance. In particular, we examine the impact and responses in relation to social work curriculum, pedagogy, research and social work educators' roles within the Australian higher education system.

Impact of neoliberalism on social work curriculum
One of the most destructive impacts of neoliberalism on social work curricula is the shift away from critical social analysis to prioritise depoliticised curricula based on the learning and teaching of technical skills addressing individual problems (understood mainly as psychological pathologies), rather than challenging social disadvantage or oppression (Hanesworth, 2017, p. 43). In social work education, competency-based approaches to learning reduce education to training in the micro-skills of assessment and case-management, and seek to give employers and government (rather than social work academics and practitioners) control over curricula. The consequences of this include a curriculum that is not driven by commitments to social justice or responsivity to the needs of the people with whom we work, but by market demands which seek to accumulate profit. As Dominelli states (1996, p. 172), "transferred to social work education, [competency-based approaches] ha[ve] caused a funda-mental shift in power from social work professionals to those holding the purse strings under arrangements espoused by 'contract government.'"

Given that neoliberal agendas are antithetical to the espoused emancipatory values and goals of social work, the maintenance of a social analysis (including critical theory and political-economy) in our curricula should be paramount. One of the most dangerous elements of neoliberalism is the automatic privileging of personal responsibility over larger social forces in the diagnosis of, and response to, human problems. The deliberate collapse of the public into the private is accompanied by a discourse in which "non-productive" or "othered" individuals are classified as deviant, deficient, lazy or in need of coercion, remediation and control. For example, in relation to preparing social work students to work in mental health, a critical analysis of the impact of social, economic, political and gendered structures, for example, should not be eschewed in favour of biomedical models that position social workers as second-rate psychologists in a quest for professional status (Morley & Macfarlane, 2010).

The critical educationalist, Henry Giroux (2014, p. 2) argues neoliberalism is "…almost pathological in its disdain for community, social responsibility, public values and the public good …[thriving] on a kind of social amnesia that erases critical thought, historical analysis and any understanding of broader systemic relations." This is precisely what we must protect in social work curricula. Giroux (2014, p. 2) further elaborates that neoliberalism is intent on "eliminating those public spheres where people learn to translate private troubles into public issues," highlighting the fundamental importance of retaining and enhancing our curricula along critical lines, if we wish to equip social work graduates to challenge a status quo that reproduces profound inequalities and injustices.

The neoliberal impact on curricula noted by Singh and Cowden (2016, p. 84) has been driven by the "introduction of a consumerist model of education … heavily promoted by government and some educationalists and encouraged by the use of metrics" and league tables. A key measure for assessing academics' performance and inducing curricular conformity to the status quo is the "customer-based" model of teaching evaluation. Within the neoliberal university, "fee paying students are increasingly treated like consumers of higher education who must be satisfied, flattered and appeased" (Williams, 2016, p. 57). In this construction, students are paradoxically ascribed disproportionate expertise in assessing courses and teaching via evaluations (Singh & Cowden, 2016) and yet simultaneously infantilised by a discourse of making the classroom "safe" from discomforting knowledge (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2015). Implicit here is the common denominator that students should not be challenged. As Hil (2012, p. 123) explains: "reducing the risk of students failing or dropping out is a top priority for most universities, particularly since much of their revenue depends on healthy retention rates." The marketised higher education system means that academics must spend significant time ensuring that "student-shoppers who are the financial bedrock" of the tertiary system are content (Hil, 2012, p. 123; see also Hanesworth, 2017). Within this context, the pressure for academics to "self-censor… is strong" (Williams, 2016, p. 57), and this is especially problematic for social work education that seeks to be transformative, requiring educators to challenge racism, sexism, homophobia, ageism, ableism and other manifestations of oppression created by dominant power relations and structures.

Yet, developing social work curricula to reflect a range of alternative discourses, standpoints, relationships and policy directions that embrace social change and social justice would seem imperative at this point in our history. Neoliberalism narrows and masks options for a consideration of power and its role in the production of legitimised knowledge. Embracing its implications—more or less consciously—leads to a de-politicisation of the classroom and a movement away from the role of the educator as provocateur in a shared learning journey exploring what it might mean to be emancipatory in intent and action. However, a critical social work curriculum can play an important role in contesting such cultural trends that are an anathema to social justice values (Macfarlane, 2016).

The Impact of Neoliberalism on Social Work Pedagogy

Pedagogy, according to Giroux (2010, n.p.) "is never innocent" of values or politics but seeks to shape the formation of students. A key way that neoliberalism has impacted pedagogy is through the rise of a managerial administrative culture which has profoundly reduced the ability of academics to maintain and further develop sound, critical teaching practices. This operates to rob academic staff of valuable time to dedicate to thoughtful, quality teaching. Managerial practices within Australian universities ensure an endless stream of administrative tasks, audits and reviews that colonise teaching practices, monopolise time available for teaching preparation and undermine opportunities for thinking and reflection. In Hil's words, this situation "chok[es] the very life out of" academic staff (Hil, 2012, p. 105). Yet reflection and critical thinking are core to sound pedagogical practice in the teaching and learning of social work (AASW Practice Standards, 2012). How do we teach these vital components of social work practice effectively if we do not have time to engage in them ourselves? Some academics have argued that the role of technology has propelled the intensification of *administrivia* in academic roles, subverting both teaching and research to the margins (Hil, 2012, p. 106).

A lack of academic autonomy and discretion is also a defining feature of this neoliberal assault on pedagogy in which technicised teaching and formulaic, competency-based learning are rigidly governed by narrow, reified learning objectives that appear to be "antithetical to intellectual practice" (Hil, 2012, p. 108). These processes of standardisation involve an attempt by learning and teaching administrative "experts," many of whom have negligible classroom teaching experience, to implement a linear "pre-determined approach to learning … directly linked to 'learning objectives' … [that]… act as a kind of pedagogical straitjacket" (Hil, 2012, p. 114). The tyrannical influence of learning objectives has been referred to by some academics as the "death of teaching"; burdensome administration reducing creativity and spontaneity, controlling pedagogic practices, and excluding and/or invisibilising everything that does not conform to a template (Hil, 2014, p. 114).

Such interference results in a levelling of curriculum; in pedagogic terms, a "one-size-fits-all approach" (Hil, 2012, p. 118), in which academics must only teach "safe" knowledge that reinforces the status quo and affirms the central messages of neoliberalism—the idea that "society should construct and produce self-enterprising individuals solely interested in enhancing their human capital" (Fraser & Taylor, 2016, p. 5,). For social work, which claims a foundational commitment to social justice and human rights, reinforcing inequalities via an "education" that simply reproduces the existing order, is contradictory and a failure of integrity.

As Giroux (2011, p. 9) explains, "Neoliberal ideology emphasizes winning at all costs, even if it means a ruthless competitiveness, an almost rabid individualism, and a notion of agency largely constructed within a market-driven rationality and economic growth." Within this context of "the broader economic script," the value of learning, knowledge and skills is judged according to "what corporations need to increase their profits" (Giroux, 2011, p. 9). When knowledge is conflated with skills, and skills are treated as "a component of 'human capital' to be invested in by individuals and governments in order to secure financial return, they also become seen as commodities with an appropriate exchange value" (Williams, 2016, p. 61).

In pedagogic approaches corrupted by neoliberalism, "students are educated primarily to acquire market-orientated skills in order to compete favourably in the global economy. This type of pedagogy celebrates rote learning, memorisation, and high-stakes testing" (Giroux, 2011, p. 9), whilst producing passive learners and practitioners, the foot soldiers for neoliberal regimes. Neoliberal ideology is presented as truth so as not to upset the status quo, while the conditions for dissent are eroded (Giroux, 2011). As Fraser and Taylor (2016, p. 5) explain, "the aim, it seems, is to produce docile students without critical thinking abilities, who are fully enrolled in ideological notions of individuality and personal success, irrespective of and largely blind to any social costs this entails." Social work education is therefore diverted away from the promotion of universal knowledge for public good "towards inculcation of particular [neoliberal] beliefs on one hand, or employment-related skills of the other" (Williams, 2016, p. 71).

Another potential implication is more teaching in block mode to satisfy "flexible delivery" requirements (Hil, 2012, p. 105), increasing use of technology to substitute face-to-face teaching, and pedagogies designed to not confront or disturb existing knowledge. Within this paradigm:

… knowledge is reduced simply to data and easily internet-accessible facts. In an "information age", the idea of reading books … or even attending lectures, can appear outdated when all that is known on a topic can be accessed at the push of a button. (Williams, 2016, p. 61)

Academics are increasingly directed to develop online teaching technologies which begin to drive, rather than support, pedagogic processes. Collectively, these changes have significant potential to reduce the quality of social work education along critical lines. Whilst the espoused goal of greater online learning and teaching sits comfortably with social work (to increase access to education for students who cannot attend university) it is more likely that increased use of online technologies is driven by economic objectives: enabling Australian universities to increase growth by further exploiting global markets for international students (Hil, 2012). The subordination of pedagogic goals to market forces is so commonplace it hardly warrants disguising. Earlier this year, *Universities Australia* (the higher education CEO organisation) publicly lauded the fact that, at $21.8 billion (in 2016), education was now Australia's third largest export industry after coal and iron ore, and therefore "a beacon for international students" (Universities Australia, 2017).

In addition, Ford (2015) in his prophetic treatise in *Rise of the Robots* also warns that academics who thoughtlessly pursue online technology to replace face-to-face teaching may find themselves participating in their own redundancy, as computers replace the need for human labour. We know, for example, that the technological revolution has already had a significant impact on reducing jobs, with unemployment in Australia now 340 per cent higher than it was in the early 1970s (Mitchell, 2015, n.p.). A critical analysis implores us to ask: What is the technology for? Whose interests is it serving? What are the social and political implications of using such technologies in social work education and practice? Education, health and welfare have been resistant to full digitisation but Ford (2015) suggests this is just a matter of time, and is ultimately governed by political, not technical, choices.

The Impact of Neoliberalism on Social Work Research

In relation to research, neoliberalism has perverted the fundamental nature of knowledge. Academic knowledge is no longer treated as intrinsically valuable in its own right, but as a commodity that should be "leveraged" for profit (Fraser & Taylor, 2016, p. 12). Others refer to this process as transforming knowledge from something that formerly held "use value" to now instead holding "exchange value" (Berg et al., 2016, p. 4). Metrics are the dominant way that universities seek to measure this exchange value and, within neoliberal contexts where universities pursue economic rather than educational outcomes (see for example, Fraser & Taylor, 2016; Heath & Burdon, 2013), such "metric measures" operate as "market proxies" to (de)value knowledge (Holmwood, 2013, n.p.).

Whilst several authors point to universities' increased fixation on journal- or article-level metrics, they also highlight the limitations of such metrics to meaningfully measure quality (see for example, Fraser & Taylor, 2016; Gruber, 2014; Holmwood, 2013). In summary, articles with negligible impact may be published in high impact journals or journals with a high ranking, whereas articles with a high impact may be published in journals with a low impact factor. Citation counts are unreliable and can be easily manipulated, and metrics that seek to measure an individual's academic impact (such as the *h*-index)

privilege established academics who have had more opportunity than early career researchers to accumulate citations over time (Gruber, 2014). Indeed, we agree with Colquhoun and Plested (2013, cited in Gruber, 2014, p. 174): if you really want to know about the quality of an article, "you have to read it."

Despite the emptiness of metric systems, however, they have been incredibly consequential in directing research. Some authors have argued the focus on metrics shifts researchers' attention away from the broad questions concerning how to generate useful knowledge to combat social problems, to a focus on the measurement of one's own academic impact (Gruber, 2014). One of the potential consequences of this is to influence research towards well-established areas in which there are sufficient academic colleagues to ensure further citation, potentially discouraging research into new areas (Gruber, 2014; Williams, 2016).

The imperative to publish in an increasingly narrow selection of "appropriate" journals holds related implications for the kinds of work that academics engage in and is implicated in determining the kinds of knowledge that are valued and privileged, or excluded, silenced/discredited (Fraser & Taylor, 2016; SIGJ2 Writing Collective, 2012, p. 1056). Holmwood (2013, n.p.) spells out the repercussions of this for determining whose voices are considered powerful and legitimate, and whose are not:

Where … discursive knowledge is aligned with the understandings of elite publics, no particular problem of credibility arises. However, where a discipline has an aspiration to engage with less powerfully placed publics, then a different issue of credibility arises, precisely that of our credibility because we represent a challenge to the certainties of neo-liberal orthodoxies and are witnesses to the consequences of the widening social inequalities with which they are associated.

Academic and intellectual freedom is profoundly threatened by this imposed "culture of conformity" (Williams, 2016, p. 55) that "incentivizes self-censorship and conservativism" (Williams, 2016, p. 57). Such processes implicate neoliberalism in silencing dissent (Fraser & Taylor, 2016, p. 2) to bring academic research "into line with the expectations of funding councils, journal editorial boards, colleagues and students." As such, research that affirms the status quo is rewarded and overshadows the production of critical knowledge that may contribute to social change (Williams, 2016, p. 55). As Fraser and Taylor (2016, p. 12) argue, "the commercialization of knowledge development produced through these processes has significant consequences for the nature of research undertaken, the approaches used, representation of findings and conclusions drawn" (Fraser & Taylor, 2016, p. 12).

In terms of publication, "feminist scholarship, race/ethnically orientated work, qualitative work, or work that interrogates systems of inequality from a structural perspective" do not feature prominently in most highly ranked journals (Gonzales & Núñez, 2014, p. 11). This exacerbates "the problem of ongoing bias towards Western European issues, needs, experiences and authorship" (Fraser & Taylor, 2016, p. 12). At the same time, more "conservative and mainstream" research outputs tend to be privileged in the higher-ranking journals and citations (Fraser & Taylor, 2016, p. 12). Indeed, as a discipline and a profession, social work is highly disadvantaged by metrics such as journal rankings. For example, the highest ranking journal in social work, *The British Journal of Social Work*, has

an impact factor of just 1.16, compared with publications in science journals such as *Nature* or *Lancet* that have impact factors of 38 and 45 respectively.

These systematic processes that disadvantage social work research are perhaps even more evident in competitive funding processes where funding bodies often nominate preferences for particular research areas that align with current government policy (Williams, 2016). The politics of knowledge production are also implicated here as particular (objectivist, evidence-based, scientific) paradigms and (quantitative) methodologies are privileged over others. Gondalez and Nunez (2014, p. 7), for example, highlight a "notable connection between neoliberalism and the privileging of a scientific epistemology." As such, the biophysical sciences tend to be favoured in national competitive research grants schemes and also attract greater funding from industry, while colleagues in the arts, social sciences and humanities have considerably fewer opportunities to access research funding (Hil, 2012). This structural disadvantage means that social work academics and our intellectual contributions are significantly less competitive than many colleagues in other disciplines, particularly if we seek to do research that furthers a social justice agenda or challenges neoliberal orthodoxy.

Impact of Neoliberalism on Social Work Academics

The impact of neoliberalism on the university as a workplace has been well documented (see for example, Berg et al., 2016; Fraser & Taylor, 2016; Hil, 2012; O'Sullivan, 2016; Williams, 2016). Workplace cultures in higher education are renowned for promoting self-censorship (Williams, 2016), conformity, silence (Fraser & Taylor, 2016; Williams, 2016) and competition (Berg et al., 2016; Hil, 2012). In addition, Berg et al. (2016, p. 4) describe some of the other important consequences of the neoliberal university including: the transformation of academic labour into human capital; monitoring and accounting systems to manage academic performance and ensure "control of control" for those who fund teaching and research; and fostering short termism (in grants, writing, publishing and job security). Extending this last point, a number of authors refer to conditions that create an academic precariat. Andrews, et al. (2016, p. 1) show how the national percentage of contingent (contract and casual) academic staff rose from 40% in 1989 to just over 56% in 2013, with a corresponding decrease in full-time, ongoing academic positions. This insecure work weakens the capacity of academic staff to counter the neo-liberalising thrust of modern academia. Williams (2016, pp.56–57) speaks to the consequences of this, as many academics "no longer have the employment security of tenure but instead serve lengthy periods working as a temporary or hour paid members of staff before gaining the prize of an 'open-ended' contact…'" which, she states, "incentivizes obedience and discourages people from saying or doing anything controversial for fear they will lose their job" (Williams, 2016, pp. 56–57). This has been characterised as a shift from "ontological security" towards "existential anxiety" (Neilson, 2015, p. 184). Hil (2012, pp.72–74) similarly discusses anxiety, stress, overwork and excessive alcohol consumption in academics, which are linked to neoliberal reforms in higher education. Others too, note the adverse impact on academics' mental health (Fraser & Taylor, 2016; Berg et al., 2016). Fraser and Taylor (2016, p. 16), for example, state that "depression is widespread in academic life and attribute some of the reason for this to the neoliberalisation of the university and its escalating benchmarks [that] academic[s] are expected to meet."

Many academics report profound dissatisfaction with their jobs (Gonzales & Núñez, 2014). As one academic in Hil's study comments, "the lack of room and movement for academics really saddens me. There is little respect for us as professionals. Having to confront this sort of bureaucratic culture is so dispiriting. I feel totally disillusioned. My spirit has gone" (cited in Hil, 2012, p. 115).

As academics in the discipline of social work, which is committed to social justice, human rights, challenging oppression, and so on, actively contesting and resisting systems that undermine the professional autonomy, discretion, respect and mental health of our colleagues would seem of fundamental importance to our roles within universities.

Critical Pedagogical Approaches as a Response to Neoliberalism
Having painted a somewhat bleak picture of the impacts of neoliberalism on social work education, we now turn our attention to what social work educators *can* do and *are doing* to respond to the challenges. Given that social work is a practice-based academic discipline with a strong commitment to critical analysis and practices of social change, social work academics may be among the best equipped to formulate meaningful responses for resistance, by advancing perspectives that challenges neoliberalism across our own curriculum development, pedagogic, research and collegial practices.

If the "single most important feature of neoliberal govern[ance] is that it systematically dismantles the will to critique," then a crucial role of critical social work educators is to "speak into existence" alternative subjectivities, relationships and discourses (Davies & Bansel, 2010, p. 5). This endeavour incorporates, firstly, resisting neoliberalism's "anesthetisation of the mind" (Van Gorder, 2007, p. 9) and "culture of conformity" (Williams, 2016, p. 55), and secondly, engaging in a renewed emphasis on social change, issues of power and the wider purpose of social work as a social justice endeavour (McArthur, 2010). We acknowledge that this is sometimes an uncomfortable task: if universities have drifted towards becoming "intellectual dead zones" (Giroux, 2015, pp. 122–123), our plight is indeed formidable. However, if any discipline can inspire academic colleagues into challenging the oppressive nature of dominant discourses, it should be, and arguably still is, social work due to its explicit ethical basis (Hanesworth, 2017, p. 52).

Practices of critical pedagogy come naturally to social work education as we engage in critical reflection, emphasising the importance of disrupting taken-for-granted values, beliefs and assumptions, and encouraging students to see themselves and others as culturally and socially located within intersections of privilege and oppression. We can create supported learning spaces in which we invite students to acknowledge their own—and the profession's—location and agenda (Liebowitz, Bozalek, Rohleder, Carolissen, & Swartz, 2010). Assuming responsibility for educating students to comprehend how privileged social identities uphold oppression, leads at times to challenging classroom discussions, but also to important discoveries (Nicotera & Kang, 2009), often as a result of engaging in "courageous conversations" around difference (Singleton & Hayes, 2013, p. 24).

This is a journey we share as educators, learning how to embrace the "tension between comfort and discomfort … [drawing] students into a position of critical engagement

with the material in front of them" (Ejsing, 2007, p. 237). By using the "here and now" of teachable moments we can work purposively with the disjunctures that arise when wading into and exploring challenging territory, such as that of privilege and oppression (Rasmussen & Mishna, 2003). In some ways, this mirrors social work practice itself, in which the critical exploration of challenging territory at micro, meso and macro levels is a core concern. Our pedagogical approach can model our intentions as anti-oppressive practitioners: acknowledging power imbalances while consciously joining with students as co-investigators and lifelong learners (Campbell, 2002).

Critical Curriculum to Resist Neoliberal Colonisation of Social Work Education

A social work curriculum should, by its very nature, be critically informed. We work with students—whether in relation to policy, theory for direct work with clients or when engaging in research—to consider the implications of power implicit in various methods and approaches to practice. The neoliberal mantra of objectification, self-responsibilisation and individual deficit is in direct opposition to social work's emphasis on the structural, the discursive and the social. Part of our role as social work educators involves working with students to "unlearn domination" and extend our circles of compassion (Curry-Stevens, 2007, p. 40). We can challenge the objectifying nature of neoliberalism by nurturing "educated hope" as a potentially "subversive" practice (Giroux, 2012), in which we consider the sort of world we want to live in and leave to future generations.

It is increasingly important that social work curricula explicitly resist complicity with individualistic explanations of social problems that ignore structural causes of inequalities. This critical consideration can extend across all aspects of curricula, where we endeavour to challenge paternalistic constructions of the "other" that are rife in neoliberal discourses, and discourage students from seeing other people as a "project" to be fixed (Van Gorder, 2007, p. 16). This also includes challenging the binary oppositional thinking present in public discourses and in our own social work praxis (for example, "welfare recipients" versus "tax-payers") that further promote oppression.

Selecting critically informed texts is another area in which we can refine our critical edge in social work education, drawing on an ever-expanding repository (see for example, Allan, Briskman, & Pease, 2009; Fook, 2016; Fraser & Taylor, 2016; Gray, Coates, Bird, & Hetherington, 2013; Morley et al., 2014; Pease, Goldingay, Hosken, & Nipperess, 2016), as well as journals such as *Radical and Critical Social Work* and online critical social work communities. Further to this, our critical stance should include widening students' (and our own) perspectives around what constitutes "legitimate knowledge" and who is allowed to produce it, by drawing on a range of knowledge sources outside of those produced by white, western writers and thinkers. An over-reliance on epistemologies that arise exclusively out of the history of dominant groups, in other words "epistemological racism," creates a skewed construction of both reality and how knowledge is created (Scheurich & Young, 1997, p. 8). Indigenous writers worldwide are creating an invaluable resource for social work educators to share with students in our ongoing learning journey (see for example Bennett, Bessarab, Gilbert, & Green, 2012).

Diverse sources of knowledge can also be incorporated into the curricula via stories of lived experience from clients and service users. At a deeper level, students can be encouraged

to critique the binary, oppositional constructions that deny that students and workers are often service users themselves; that the label of "service user" or "client" obscures that we are all bundles of intersecting identities and social locations. As educators, critical perspectives can best enable us to encourage students to consider theories and concepts in light of their own social location, experience and biography, and to share these perspectives with others for mutual learning.

Discussion around social policy, and the service delivery it engenders, provides the ideal opportunity to challenge the positioning of neoliberal ideological claims to objective truth (Williams, 2016) by foregrounding and modelling critical discourse analysis across the curriculum. This is also a way of critically resisting the reduction of social work teaching and learning to competency-based skills (Dominelli, 1996). By promoting anti-oppressive social work ethics and values as a constant underpinning of theory and practice, we create a lens through which to problematise practices that can otherwise be seen as neutral. If critical social work, because of its structural analysis of society and commitment to challenging inequitable power relations and structures (Pease et al., 2016) will best prepare social work practitioners to respond to neoliberal contexts in ethical ways (Morley & Macfarlane, 2014), we also need to clearly outline, in each unit of study, what we mean by a "critical approach" and maintain and highlight that focus throughout the unit. Critical social work educators can also engage with students in generating possibilities for resistance to neoliberalism in everyday practice—working creatively within complex, diverse and uncertain contexts (Fook, 2016).

An important element in critical social work education is to work through, with students, some of the challenges to enacting critical practice in current contexts, often around perceived gaps between our desire to contribute to progressive social change and what we can actually do in practice (Fook, 2016; Healy, 2000; Rossiter, 2005). Teaching skills in critical reflection is crucial in deconstructing and reconstructing ways in which students may variously limit and extend their potential for critical practice.

Reclaiming Social Work Education Through Critical Reflection and Activism
Critical reflection arguably provides a practical mechanism by which to connect the emancipatory aims of critical theory with social work education and practice. This holds relevance both for our own practices as academics, and in our teaching, which has implications for students/graduates. Critical reflection enables us to question how we construct problems and our view of capacities to respond to them (Fook, 2016). For example: how might we participate in dominant discourses that contribute to a sense of powerlessness or fatalism? Critical reflection can be used to reconstruct a sense of hope and agency for change (see for example, Fook, 2016; Morley, 2014).

Critical reflection also asks us to explore the discretionary spaces academics still have available for autonomous and emancipatory practices. As the SIGJ2 writing collective (2012, p. 1057) explain: "remember it is not simply a question of whether or not we have academic freedom but how we use what we do have." If all social work academics continued to publish in journals in which we believe our work has most impact for our discipline and our intended audiences (including local, activist, community-based, and practitioner journals, open access journals,

and other forms of dissemination including social media), this might mitigate against the push to publish in a narrow range of journals which limits our scope to make meaningful contributions to social justice and social change through research. We can also seek to connect our scholarship with social activism (SIGJ2 Writing Collective, 2012) by developing critical approaches to teaching and research, and promoting critical approaches to social problems through research: "imagin[ing] new ways of creating and sharing knowledge that [do] not reinforce the neoliberal institutions in which we are embedded" (SIGJ2 Writing Collective, 2012, p. 1058). Senior academics can similarly foster awareness of the dangers and limitations of narrow measures of metrics and rankings in academia (Gruber, 2014). The notion of "slow scholarship" (Mountz et al., 2015) which draws on a "feminist politics of resistance through collective [action] in the neoliberal university," provides another antidote to the pressure to "publish or perish," or the more recent "commercialise or crumble," mentality promoted by the Australian Prime Minister (Rea, 2016, p. 13).

Social work academics can promote egalitarian politics, collegiality and engage in collective endeavours over competition (SIGJ2 Writing Collective, 2012, p. 1056). If the purpose of education is to foster democracy (Giroux, 2011), academics can defend this by collectively advocating for university managements to value community engagement and social action as much as publication, or producing successful grant applications (SIGJ2 Writing Collective, 2012, p. 1057). Additionally, the collective spaces that are still available within universities (school and faculty staff meetings, for example) can be optimised to encourage critical debate about ideas, challenge the managerial hegemony, and re-introduce democratic measures that have been lost in managerial meeting processes, such as agenda setting by meeting participants, and moving resolutions from the floor of meetings.

In spaces where the dominant discourses cannot be refused, critical reflection can be drawn upon to develop practices that subvert the dominant meaning and turn it upon itself. For example, if neoliberal management within universities imposes unreasonable directives, we can question the evidence base for these decisions and/or highlight gaps between their actions and the espoused strategic goals of the university. Dominant discourses also promote opportunities to advance a critical agenda if their meaning is reclaimed. For example, the dominance of risk-management discourses can provide fruitful ground to highlight ways in which poor managerial decisions to cut resources, increase class sizes, raise academic workloads unreasonably, and so on, might constitute "high risk" strategies for the university.

Finally, it is timely to remind ourselves that social activism is a core part of social work practice. Being a social worker within the context of a university setting can mean that our main practices as academics (education and research) can become somewhat removed and disconnected from direct service roles in the field. Being an active member of your union provides a legitimate practice role for social work academics, enabling us to promote community development and social action to promote cultural change within our universities, organising to build collective, collegial responses to disturbing managerial trends, and counselling and advocacy with colleagues who need our support. For example, in Australia, the National Tertiary Education Union recently led a very powerful and successful campaign to block Federal government proposals to deregulate the higher education system, which would exacerbate many of the consequences caused by neoliberalism that have been discussed in this paper.

CONCLUSION

Overall, this paper has outlined the impacts of neoliberalism on social work education, particularly as it affects curriculum, pedagogy, research and social work educators. Given that social work education directly influences future generations of social work graduates, social work academics hold significant responsibility for the kind of social work profession that will develop into the future. Whether graduates complete their studies in social work having developed a critical analysis of society and a mandate to redress social injustice, or whether they fit comfortably within neoliberal imperatives and operate as functionaries of the neoliberal project, has much to do with how their education prepares them for professional practice.

Neoliberalism is having profound, deep and wide-ranging impacts on social work education: moving curricula away from critical frameworks and towards individual theories and skills/competencies acquisition; limiting the scope and nature of research that pursues a critical and/or social change agenda and making quality teaching more difficult through the imposition of endless administrative control of, and interference in, our curriculum. These changes also have significant adverse consequences for social work educators' workloads, morale, job satisfaction, mental health, and collegial relationships.

Despite this, we have argued that, because of our values, skills and knowledge base, social work academics are well placed to formulate meaningful strategies for resistance, bolstered by advancing a critical perspective that challenges neoliberalism across our own curriculum development, pedagogic, research and collegial practices. We have presented practices from our own and other educators' experiences to highlight social work academics' scope for agency in contesting the neoliberal colonisation of social work education.

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