Are social workers part of the new Precariat?

Social Work Labour Conditions of Mental Health Social Workers Working in the Non for Profit Sector in Greece.

Precarity/Insecurity and Lessons for Social Work Education - Work in progress -

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Social and political disaster

Rising inequalities in Greece and worldwide (5 wealthiest people own more than half the world’s population).

Democratic deficit (Decision making powers have been transferred from the people to transnational decision making bodies, such as IMF, ECB which serve the interests of the financial /corporate elite-New European Economic Governance).
Austerity/ social spending cuts

- “Socio-economic conditions have deteriorated almost worldwide as a result of the financial crisis (UN, 2014).

- This has been framed as a crisis of public finances in order to legitimize social spending cuts (Levitas. 2012, Pentaraki, 2013).

- Socio-economic inequalities have been rising as global wealth has been concentrated in the hands of 1% of the population (Dorling, 2014) within a background of neoliberal globalization (Harvey, 2005).

- This growing level of socio-economic inequalities further leads to the intensification of social problems (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009).
This has been reflected in the rising levels of poverty in European Union (EU) where in 2012, one in four Europeans lived on less than 60% of median national income and since the start of the crisis, 6.7 million people have been added to this number (European Union, 2014:19) cited in Pentaraki”
“HPD has been a consequence of class-based policies implemented by successive Greek governments. These policies include, one of the lowest corporate taxation rates in the EU (OECD (2010), one of the highest military spending levels worldwide (SIPRI, 2010), and the implementation of a high bank bailout (for a detailed discussion about the factors that led to the HPDC see Pentaraki, 2013). This class based induced HPD has lead successive Greek governments since 2010 to agree to loans from the TROICA (European Commission (EC), European Central Bank (ECB) and International Monetary Fund (IMF)) to service it. These loans came attached with numerous conditionalities, part of a structural adjustment program (SAP) aiming to restructure society along neoliberal lines (Karamesini, 2015, Pentaraki, 2013). One of the predominant features of these conditionalities has been social spending cuts (cited in Pentaraki).”
Human Rights Crisis

• “Through the implementation of the social spending cuts socio-economic conditions in Greece have deteriorated rapidly, with the country falling 7 places in the UN’s Human Development Index Ranking (UN 2011 & 2014).

• These deteriorating conditions (see Bohoslavsky, 2015, Karemesini, 2015, Koukiadaki, & Lefteris 2012) have led the UN Independent Expert advisor to state that a humanitarian and human rights crisis in the field of economic and social rights exists in Greece (Bohoslavsky, 2015). Furthermore, leading legal scholars (Salomon, 2015) have argued that imposed austerity has led to the denial of social rights and enormous social harm cited in Pentaraki”.
Research study

- Small qualitative study part of a larger study exploring the effects of austerity to social workers.

- 9 face to face in depth interviews conducted September to December 2012. The interviews lasted from 30 minutes to 90 minutes. The average length of the interview was 55 minutes. Even from the 2nd interview data saturation was achieved.

- Participants age ranged from 27 years to 32 years. The average age was 30 years. 7 white females born in Greece and 2 white males born in Greece. The majority had an undergraduate social work degree (n=7), 2 had a masters degree. 5 of the participants are on psychotherapeutic training.
Research study

• Participants years of experience as mental health social workers ranged from 3 to 6. The average years of experience was 5 years.

• The length of employment at the present employer ranged from 1 year to 6 years. With average length 4 years.

• The length of being unpaid during the time of interview ranged from 3 months to 8 months. The average length was 4 months.

• 1 participant lived with parents, 2 lived with partner, 1 lived with roommate, 5 lived by theirselves.
Research study

- Participants’ total years of experience as social workers ranged from 4 to 7. The average years of experience was 5.5 years.

- Participants worked in 4 different cities. 8 in Athens, 1 in North Greece, 2 of the above also worked in islands of Cyclades.

- The type of units the participants worked where Mental Health Mobile Units, Residential Care and Day Centres for Mental Health Users with severe psychiatric disorders.

- 2 of the participants are active members of SKLE.
Insecurity for one self and insecurity about the service users

- ...I have experienced a great sense of abuse... when you have not been paid for seven months, trying to care of the mentally ill people, it's too difficult... This is too abusive and having to simultaneously manage all your own anxieties and all your own practical and operational needs, it is very, very abusive..... [At the other hand]...

- ...there were too many times when we could not feed the patients, so simple, we could not pay the electricity in the residential home and there was a danger to remain without electricity, we could not pay the drugstore and the pharmacist was threatening to leave us without medicines, we were under eviction, and the police come to present to us the eviction note etc.

- 31 mental health social worker working in a residential facility
Shared Austerity Reality

It “refers to the socio-economic context of austerity that is shared both by social workers and service users, albeit to different degrees. Traditionally, the concept of the shared reality has been utilised to encompass the experiences of welfare professionals working in situations where both they and service users are exposed to the adverse effects of a natural disaster, war or terrorist attack. In my previous research, the concept of shared reality is expanded through the introduction of the context of austerity. Shared austerity reality reflects the deterioration of socio-economic conditions and the rising inequalities under neoliberal capitalism. (Pentaraki, 2016). Existential and material precarity.
Definitions of Precarity

- According to Standing (2011:7) “the precariat is a class in the making”. It encompasses people across the world who live and work in precarious insecure jobs, which are often short term, low and intermittently pay, without access to stable occupational identities or careers, stable social protection and other protective labour regulation. These precariously working people have no protection by trade unions either.

- Is that a new tendency though? Hardly, as precarity is not a new phenomenon. Precarity is a global challenge (Kalleberg, 2011; Lee & Kofman, 2012) under neoliberal capitalism. Precarity is embedded in capitalism and expanding to the middle class (in the Weberian sense).
Precarity and other middle class occupational professions in other western countries


- This is not a new working class but new phase of the working class in western countries under the conditions of neoliberal capitalism.

- The undermining of the welfare state. Rising of inequalities world wide.
Precarity

- Precarity is a concept used to describe living with the unforeseeable (Lorey, 2014:1) due to job insecurity, intermittent and or low income, and existential precariousness (existential insecurity because of low incomes, welfare cuts, high cost of living, etc.) In the western world the condition of precarity predominantly affected migrants, women, and the youth in poverty but now it affects the whole of society. University education/ white collar jobs are not a protective factor any more. As our research with sw has demonstrated.
Understanding of common shared background of precarity

- Precarity is a global phenomenon which cuts across national boundaries, employed and unemployed status etc.

- If we fail to understand that “then we understand neither the politics nor the economy of the present” (Lorey, 2006).
Precarity and resistance

• Trade unions first to understand and mobilize against the common background of precarity.

• European Marches against unemployment, precarity and social exclusion- 1997 Amsterdam- demonstrating against the EU summit / Maastricht Treaty
Social workers in Greece mobilizing
Understanding of common shared background of precarity

- Will this understanding lead to:
  - alliances or divisions?
  - resistance or accommodation to the neoliberal order?
  - challenging precarity out of a sense of entitlement for middle class security (Thorkelson, 2016) or will it lead to challenging precarity in order to seek socio-economic justice for all?
Continuum of social workers responses to the common conditions of insecurity

- From collective responses to individualized responses
- Community organizing, strikes etc

Furthering ones educational qualifications hoping to maintain a middle class status this reasonates
- “A relation of cruel optimism” (Berland, 2011:170) “cruel optimism is the condition of maintaining an attachement to a problematic object in advance of its loss” (Berland, 2006:21).
- “How one lives becomes a biographical solution to sytemic contradictions” (Beck, 1992:137).
Transforming the social work curriculum

• The argument accords with that of Garrett (2015; 2017) in highlighting the importance of enhancing the critical theoretical resources available to social work in order to address the negative impact of neoliberalism.

• One of these resources is the understanding that precarity influences both social workers and service users in different degrees though.

• This insecurity is world wide but is distributed according to ones gender, class, race, ethnicity, ability, sexual orientation and country in which one lives.

• This insecurity is part of neoliberal capitalism that needs to be challenged.
Transforming the social work curriculum

- In order to offer analytical tools for understanding the shared precarity between social workers and service users.

- This can be achieved by including modules on neoliberal globalization in order to demonstrate how the socio-economic context influences not only the effectiveness of social work practice, but also the insecurity both service users and social workers experience (Pentaraki, 2013, Reisch, 2013) and thus, it should be a site of intervention.
Transforming the social work curriculum

• 2) that celebrates and discusses the need for both micro and macro acts of resistance emanating from the social justice value base of the social work profession (Pentaraki, in progress);

• 3) educates how the welfare state was won out of the struggles of the labour and other progressive movements (Reisch & Staller, 2011; Reisch, Andrews, 2002);

• 4) prepares future social workers for the difficulties they will encounter as they practice in an austerity context (Pentaraki, 2016);

• 5) gives them the means, such as through modules and practice opportunities, for community organizing and practice and for materializing values of social and economic justice, so they can fight austerity and precarity.
Publications

- Pentaraki M. (2013) “If we do not cut social spending, we will end up like Greece”: Challenging consent to austerity through social work action’, Critical Social Policy, 33(4), pp. 700-11.


- Part of the presentation draws from the above publications.