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Looking for elderly people’s needs: teaching critical reflection in Swedish social work education

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ABSTRACT
This paper focuses on how to use critical reflection in social work education in order to encourage students to critically reflect on their standards regarding assessment, opinions and values about aging. Material, both oral and written, from needs assessments of older persons conducted by 106 social work students was analyzed. The result shows that the students initially interpreted needs based on prejudice and assumptions about aging. However, when using Schön’s three steps of reflection in the exercise, together with knowledge of critical social work theories, students became more concerned and reflected more critically on their assessments. This study shows the possibilities of working with pedagogical exercises in order to increase the awareness and critical knowledge of social work students in order to attempt to reduce discrimination. Educating students in critical social work enables them to learn how to comment on and transform the profession of social work and our unjust society, while questioning their own as well as society’s prejudice regarding the needs of elderly persons.

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Introduction

Even though the ethical principles of social work are included in social work education, there is a risk that such principles simply remain ‘good rhetoric’, which is not expressed in education and social work practices, particularly in precarious times when the neoliberal reorganization of the welfare state influences social work practices, as well as the context of social work education. Thus, the development of pedagogical tools to improve students’ abilities for self-reflection and critical knowledge is crucial in critical social work education. The question of whether we are teaching students to think critically and what teaching methods best support an environment that fosters the development and enhancement of these critical skills is of great importance to social work educators.

The focus of this study is to uncover and challenge the power relations on aging among social work students, power relations that frame social work practice in the field of needs assessment in elder care. This is achieved by gaining knowledge of how students, focusing on critical reflection, understand and interpret older persons’ vulnerability and needs, as expressed in three case vignettes. How can we raise issues
in social work education that encourage students to critically reflect on their standards in terms of assessment, opinions, prejudices and values about aging in order to stand up for core principles of social work and to understand the forms and mechanisms of oppression?

**The concept and use of critical thinking in social work education**

In this paper, the term *critical*, as referring to critical social theory, is used in the sense that individuals are affected by and influence the social structures in which they live (Gardner, 2014). The intention of the analysis in critical social theory is to increase understanding of how structures and power relations are internalized in everyday life in order to enable change on an individual level and create a more equitable and just society (Brookfield, 2005). In this process, the capacity to analyze power and social relations as both personal and political is crucial. Such ideas are familiar in social work, as shown by its definition by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW, 2017). Crucial to critical thinking is demonstrating an openness to diverse ideas, sometimes beyond an individual viewpoint, challenging taken-for-granted assumptions, identifying, exploring and imagining alternatives and the complexity of information, issues and problems (Vandsburger, Duncan-Daston, Akerson, & Dillon, 2010). Critical thinking involves the concepts of reasoning and learning how to learn.

Social work students benefit from a foundation in critical social theory and a thorough understanding of its relationship to practice in order to be prepared to work within the uncertain, complex and rapidly changing environment that characterizes contemporary practice contexts. It will help students develop into practitioners who are able to respond to discriminatory structures. Historically, education has provided a catalyst for social change based on the assumption that it can create the conditions for a fairer and more democratic world (Amsler, 2011). Plath, English, Connors, and Beveridge (1999) contend that critical thinking skills can be taught and suggest that providing intensive courses on critical thinking would increase students’ abilities to think critically.

Schön (1987) is one of several theorists in the realm of critical thinking. He theorizes about critical reflective practice and the concept of reflection in action. He stresses the importance of bridging the gap between knowledge and practice with the concept of learning by doing. Schön recommends designing reflective field placements or exercises in which students can learn the nuances of practice and apply them to knowledge from the classroom. This process develops students’ problem-solving and thinking skills via the reflective environment.

**Implementing critical reflection in social work education with the elderly**

The interplay between age and structural power relations based on, for example, gender, class, ethnicity, sexuality and life phase must be considered if inequalities around aging are to be understood (Krekula, Närvänä, & Näsman, 2005). Advanced age that will inevitably lead to vulnerability through a loss of social and bodily abilities (Collins, 1999) is also interpreted in a context of dominant norms reinforced and influenced by perspectives on social problems being explained in an individualistic and ‘naturalistic’ way, and norms around the ‘well-functioning citizen’, interpreted as one that should be autonomous and self-sufficient.
Misconceptions, negative stereotypes and biases toward older adults are reportedly prevalent in research into students of health science (see e.g. Ross, Duigan, Boyle, & Williams, 2014), as well as into social work students (Kane, Lacey, & Green, 2009; Lin, Bryant, & Boldero, 2010). These negative attitudes are often associated with a lack of exposure to older adults and a lack of education about the elderly (Wang & Chonody, 2013). Attitudes, prejudices and expectations about aging shape the ways in which students as future professionals interact with aging individuals (Lovell, 2006) and how care will be provided (Ferrario, Freeman, Nellett, & Scheel, 2007). Elderly lesbian, gay and bisexual people, for example, felt that professional counselling was based on prejudices about sexuality and advanced age (Brotman, Ryan, & Cormier, 2003). Further, when older immigrants apply for help, their ethnicity is highlighted as a primary factor for understanding their needs, and the most interesting source with regard to understanding their needs is their ‘non-Swedishness’ (Forssell & Torres, 2012). The diversity within this group is seldom acknowledged. The social problems of elderly persons are often framed as individual problems related to their aging. Such a simplification of social problems ignores the complexities of human beings as actors at the intersection of different power relations.

Swedish social workers are primarily educated to encounter service users as objects of change that are ‘external’ to them, meaning they are generally not trained to reflect on their own cultural background, their own basic values and social status (Pease, 2006). A perspective of critical reflection in social work education can compensate for these shortcomings by including critical discussions about structural and institutional mechanisms that form part of the intersections of age, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation and gender, among other power relations in society (Laanemets, Mattsson, & Nordling, 2013). This perspective can enable social work students and practitioners to learn the skills necessary to reflect on their own values and assumptions.

To understand how inequalities and power relations are maintained in society and how they affect vulnerable groups (e.g. the aging population) it is of great importance to promote social workers’ awareness of human and social rights. Theoretical perspectives of intersectionality and theories of social justice and critical reflection are therefore crucial elements of social work education.

**Aging in a Swedish social work context**

The aging population imposes great challenges on the welfare state. In Sweden, as in many European countries, marketization has profoundly restructured the provision of eldercare services, notably by introducing competition and choice between public and private providers in the organization of care (Williams & Brennan, 2012). Despite the fact that, compared to most countries, public elder care in Sweden is still generous, public spending on elder care has decreased in recent years (Blomberg & Petersson, 2010).

Public responsibility for elder care in Sweden is stipulated in legislation and in policy documents at a national level, as well as in local municipal guidelines. Even though the principle of ‘family responsibility’ does not exist in Swedish social welfare legislation, in the sense that no person other than a husband/wife married partner has financial and care obligations vis-à-vis one another (Johansson, Sundström, & Hassing, 2003), informal care has increased in recent decades (Brodin, 2018). The general pressure on relatives to provide unpaid care is particularly hard for women
(Ulmanen & Szebehely, 2015), and the retreating welfare state has turned the inter-play between informal and formal responsibility for social care of elderly persons into a necessity.

Over the last three decades, public elder care in Sweden has focused on those who are most ill, a kind of medicalization of elderly persons’ needs, while those persons with defined ‘less important needs’, are no longer covered by public elderly care (Trydegård & Thorslund, 2010). As care managers, social workers encounter contradictory demands and expectations, often related to the gap between needs and available resources in the social service organization of elder care. Difficulties in applying the principle of formal justice have led to criticism of the needs assessments conducted by care managers (Söderberg, Stålhl, & Melin Emilsson, 2014) and studies show that care managers are more loyal to the organization than to the elderly persons under their care (Janlöv, 2006). These changes represent an altered context for social work that challenges social work education and practice in order to benefit the ‘managerial ideology’ and discourses of quality and efficiency, using the criterion of economy.

**Method**

This empirical qualitative study, conducted in 2016, aimed to uncover and challenge the power relations on aging among social work students in the field of needs assessments in elder care. This was achieved by gaining knowledge of how students understood and interpreted older persons’ vulnerability and needs, based on three case vignettes (described below). 106 undergraduate social work students in their second year of a social work course (a total of 3.5 years of study) at a university in Northern Sweden participated in the study. Most participants (85%) were female. The majority were born in Sweden. All of them were attending a social work course on Social problems and social vulnerability. The course had a pronounced critical perspective on social problems and, during one week, particularly focused on the elderly. The study was approved by the Ethical Review Board in Umeå (Dnr 2013-344-310). Data was collected over two weeks via written material as well as via discussions comprising groups of eight students and the teacher (the author of this paper) at a time.

Initially, in their written needs assessments, they were asked to reflect on the following: Describe your experience of older persons in your private life and possibly in a professional context. Try to describe how you regard the vulnerability of older persons according to social problems in a social work professional context. Further on, when conducting their needs assessments, they were asked to identify signs of needs and vulnerability, to reflect on social rights granted to elderly Swedes based on legislation, and on ethical principles in social work. Finally, they were asked to reflect on whether their perceptions in the assessments made any difference to their interpretations of needs regarding gender, ethnicity, class, sexuality, health status, etc. These reflective aspects were expanded upon the group discussions, where the teacher developed the discussions and reflections by adding perspectives linked to critical theories in social work, such as the critical life course perspective and intersectionality.

It is difficult to understand and to identify one’s own values and perceptions from a critical perspective. It requires an understanding of oneself on a deeper level and the ability to identify the hidden power relations that create normative positions and
privileges in society (Brookfield, 2005). Discussions on oppression and power relations are often associated with strong emotions and are therefore difficult to practice and reflect on. This places great demands on the teacher in creating a good and safe environment for the students, an environment in which they do not feel criticized for their opinions. In this study students were not being assessed on the adequacy of their needs assessments but rather their ability to question taken-for-granted assumptions and beliefs, their capacity to be open to new ideas and their ability to use critical theories. This made the students more capable of reflecting on the shortcomings of their assessments with openness and honesty, and without fear of judgment or failure. Special attention was paid to how the teacher related to different scenarios in the student group. For example, students who had difficulty in communicating self reflectively in the group, arrogance between students or ‘weak’ students with a lack of practical or theoretical knowledge, as well as the fact that self-reflection could be difficult and even disrupt the students’ self-development and professional identity in inappropriate conditions (Yip, 2006).

The participants in this study were students in the same department at which the researcher was teaching. This could have positive implications on the study as an in-depth understanding of the research topic and a shared context could benefit the education in general. However, the relationship between the researcher and the students might possibly contribute to uncertainty among the students about what their participation might entail. Thus, the teacher repeatedly emphasized the purpose of the study and how the results of the study would be used. The students’ participation would have no effect on course grades or any implications regarding their future studies at the department.

**Vignettes**

The vignettes used in the study, upon which the students based their needs assessments, were constructed around the following cases (in summary):

*Per*, A 79-year-old single male, who became socially isolated after his partner’s death. He has poor eating habits, does not take care of his personal hygiene and has difficulty ‘getting fit’. He shows several signs of depression. He has received a tremendous amount of help from his daughter during the 6 months that have passed since he lost his partner. The daughter is now referring the needs of her father to the social services.

*Aniita and Bertil*, both 89 years old. Bertil finds that Aniita forgets things, loses her ability to find Swedish words and speaks only in Finnish, a language Bertil does not understand. He expresses concern that he doesn’t know how to help Aniita, especially with regards to personal hygiene. Their social network is severely restricted and their contact with their son is sporadic. In this case example the needs of Aniita are defined by Bertil.

*Elif*, A 76-year-old single female of Turkish origin. Elif suffered a myocardial infarction some weeks ago and has now medically recovered. Elif has no major mobility problems, is weak after the infarction and has to be medicated. In addition, she has a poor appetite and does not attend to her laundry and personal hygiene. Her son visits her every other weekend and she has a close relationship with her LAT partner (Living Apart Together—an intimate relationship in which the partners do not share a common home). Nevertheless, she expresses a need for more social interaction.
By means of the vignettes, the ability to create patterns in processes about the specific aim was acquired (Denscombe, 2009). Several studies in the field of social work have used case vignettes (e.g. Križ & Skivenes, 2013) as this methodology has been found to be an effective way of eliciting an understanding of practitioners’ methods. It offers a less threatening way of exploring sensitive topics and it provides a basis for comparison (Hughes & Huby, 2002).

**The critical reflection approach**

Highlighting what are considered ‘personal’ assumptions and attitudes is necessary if we want to learn how we act as professionals (Fook, 2002; Fook & Askeland, 2007). The critical reflection approach highlighted in this study values multiple perspectives, appreciating different viewpoints and holding contradictory views (Brookfield, 2009). Through literature and lectures during the course, the students were well aware of critical theories in social work and should therefore be able to identify problems relating to oppression, inequality and misuse of power in society. Also, their ability to be aware and critical of the rational bureaucracy inspired by New Public Management in social work was expected to be well developed.

The focus on power relations makes the reflection critical. A starting point in critical theory and critical thinking in this sense comprises the ability to identify, challenge and change established truths and norms in a society that adopts a rhetoric on oppression and inequality as conditions that are ‘normal’, ‘natural’ and inevitable. The aim of this study was to integrate different types of power relations into the analysis and discussions of the vignettes, something that a vast majority of the students were able to see, as evidenced in the results.

The reflective process in this study was carried out in three steps, according to Schön (1987): (i) reflection in action, (ii) reflection on the action, and (iii) reflection for action, meaning the results of the consequences of actions. *Reflection in action* was undertaken by the students when carrying out their written needs assessments. In the group discussions students reflected on their action of their assessments. The teacher carefully oversaw and analyzed alternative courses of action followed by the students in this second step of reflection. In the final step, the *reflection for action*, the teacher participated and was involved as a guide by posing critical questions or statements in the group discussions. By using Schön’s three steps of reflection, the aim was to achieve alternative responses, enhance professional understanding and promote personal insight, to enable students to frame and reframe a problem, search for alternatives and synthesize new ideas and ways of dealing with problems and difficult situations (Schön, 1987).

When analyzing the data material, through content analysis, the focus was on repetitions or dominant themes, as well as similarities and differences in responses to the same phenomenon (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004). In interpreting the data, multiple expressions of key themes were identified. This was guided by the initial background statement and the reflections on the needs assessment exercise, mentioned above, emerged from the students’ written and oral narratives. Quotes were organized from the various responses into themed categories when the different narratives appeared to be repeatedly referring to similar phenomena. In what follows, these key themes are presented in italicized headings throughout the results.
Results

Attitudes towards the elderly—reflection in action

In the study, students were initially asked about personal perspectives towards and experience of elderly people on a personal level, as well as in a context of social work and vulnerability. The analysis of the students’ written work regarding their attitudes and experiences showed a focus on two general settings. The first perspective concerned *no personal experiences and less interest in working with older persons*. Students with this perspective, which comprised a vast majority of the participants, stated that they understand the vulnerability of the elderly but that, nevertheless, they wanted to focus on the vulnerability of other groups. This was because their perception was that needs were more important in groups other than the elderly. This perception was grounded in both stereotypical views and a bias towards older people (see e.g. Ross et al., 2014). As one student tried to explain:

I understand the vulnerability of the elderly. But as discussions about money and the welfare state are going on you start thinking about priorities and responsibilities… They are also facing a loss of ability and influence in society… the future is, like, ‘behind them’ This is terrible, but I think you can take advantage of this… I also have problems relating to older people. They don’t awaken the same empathy in me as children. I mean, you can’t relate to aging like everyone relates to childhood, right? The vulnerability of the elderly is something that many people never witness before they themselves start getting older. (Erica)

This could be linked to the fact that public social services consider certain needs of older persons to be non-legitimate or, alternatively, needs for which public responsibility has been significantly reduced (Blomberg et al., 2010). This de-legitimization of certain needs, in turn, affects the students’ views of social problems and how best to solve them. How a context of vulnerability is understood on a personal level affects how a person acts as a professional (Fook et al., 2007; Brookfield, 2005). However, a person’s ability to understand and be aware of the life situations of others might also be to do with self-identification, some kind of acquired understanding through recognition. The problems of others are then made more understandable and even become legitimized. This reveals major challenges when it comes to older persons in need of help from social services. If life experiences regarding advanced age are limited among social workers and students, it becomes more difficult on an individual level to relate to the problems and trials encountered by older persons in their everyday lives.

The second approach was based on students *having an interest in the group based on personal and emotional experiences with a greater interest in working with older persons*. This perception was, in general, grounded on a basis of personal experiences in family life and on professional experiences working in elder care. Anna expressed it like this:

I have worked in elder care when I was younger, and when I grew up I had many older relatives in my inner circle. I have always felt a sense of security being around older people. As I see it, what sets us apart are experiences and physical factors, but thoughts and feelings are often the same. Although I do understand that it can be hard to relate to older people, I mean, none of us has ‘been there’ really! Before I started my education in social work, I thought that issues that limited the lives of the elderly solely
was connected to private finances and health issues, but now I can understand, when putting my personal experience on aging together with theoretical knowledge, that it is more complexed than that.

Overall, these students had a more open-minded and self-reflective approach in their needs assessments. How the students interpreted the needs of aging individuals was then shaped by their attitudes to and expectations of aging (Lovell, 2006) and affected the quality of the needs assessments (Ferrario et al., 2007). As shown in research (Wang et al., 2013), when students are exposed to older persons in their studies both theoretically and in fieldwork practice, it impacts their interest in working in the field.

**Dominant interpretations of aging and needs—reflection on action**

**Intimate relations and sexual orientation**

The result of this study shows that intimate relations of older persons are interpreted in different stereotyped ways. Intimate relations are primarily hidden from view in the matter of being in a relationship based on love and intimacy, ‘despite’ advanced age, and, in this way, made less important. When discussing the case of Anita and Bertil, students lack the capacity to predict the consequences of being a caregiver for the one you love. Johanna puts it this way:

Anita needs someone to take care of her properly and professionally. Bertil says he doesn’t know how to but I think Bertil should be able to learn... On the other hand, I think it would be best if Anita moved out and got the help she needs. Bertil could visit her every other day and have his own apartment where he could start dealing with his own issues. That would be the best solution for both of them!

Categorizations of elderly people, regardless of gender and ethnicity, stem from a heteronormative understanding. Expressed in most of the students’ assessments was the assumption that all of the older persons in the vignettes were heterosexual, or had previously been living in a heterosexual relationship. Sara puts it like this:

Per’s partner had passed away and I understand she (sic!) was doing the housework when she (sic!) was alive. Unfortunately, many heterosexual men rely on their partner and usually the woman has a busy social network.

In order to understand people’s current living conditions, knowledge of their life experiences is required from a societal perspective. Part of these life experiences is sexuality. As mentioned previously, Brotman et al. (2003) show how older lesbian, gay and bisexual persons’ prior experiences of healthcare and social service professionals have impacted them today, and the fear of facing negative attitudes in retirement homes. The results from my study shows tha being unopen to the fact that not all individuals live according to normative dominant discourses results in the individual and their needs not being visible in the needs assessment.

**Invisible mental health**

A typical assessment in the students’ written quotes is of Per’s physical capacity. The students associate needs in advanced age with physical problems or shortcomings, and the mental health of older people does not appear to be an issue. This is largely based on the normative idea of how vulnerabilities, problems and needs of the elderly are interpreted and defined in current Swedish social work, with a focus on the most physically ill—a kind
of medicalization of elderlies needs (Trydegård & Thorslund, 2010), but it is also about how we, as individuals and professionals, interpret problems from categorizations that are often based on prejudices concerning advanced age (Forssell et al., 2012). The quote from Carin illustrates a representative assessment made by the students regarding Per.

He is physically healthy and there is no real obstacle to him doing these things by himself. He needs to take walks and maybe this will encourage him to do more of these kinds of activities. Per is not entitled to assistance in the form of support from the social services as he is completely fit and also capable of learning.

The findings in my study shows that the individuals in the vignettes and their problems are consistently considered from the perspective of the image of people of advanced age being unproductive and non-autonomous in society and thereby ‘less important’. A question posed by the teacher, who changed the age of Per, making him a 40-year-old male—made a huge difference in how students understood and reasoned about Per’s problems. When Per was made younger, the focus of the discussions ended up on his productive ability linked to both the labor market and his possible responsibility for his family and children; his mental health problems where then visualized.

Even though this is the dominant picture, assessments were made by students in which suggestions about improving Per’s mental well-being are made, although they were based on more basic changes in his everyday life, such as physical activity or more social interaction. The students generally overlooked providing information about therapeutic aid, referral to a health clinic or possible treatment for depression.

**Gendered responsibilities**

In all the vignettes, students make a clear connection between gender and the older person’s own ability to take care of him or herself. Gender is also important in the students’ assessment of the role of relatives in elder care. The family’s possible expected support has been assessed based on gender, despite the fact that there are no ‘family obligations’ in Sweden between children and their elderly parents. In the case of Elif, her son’s ability to assist her was hardly not discussed at all, whereas the students frequently discussed the possibility of Per’s daughter continuing to help him.

In the majority of the students’ assessments, men’s vulnerabilities are related to their physical disabilities and generally smaller supporting social network. Women, despite their physical problems, are more often described as being capable of taking care of themselves and others (Brodin, 2018). In Aniita and Bertil’s case, more students argued about Bertil’s lack of ability to manage a home compared to Elif’s limited physical ability to do so. This is in line with statistics and research (e.g. Ulmanen et al., 2015) on gender differences in public elderly care in which older women receive less help from the public elderly care than men, as well as from a partner. Students describe male vulnerability as follows:

Bertil feels very insecure as he has never taken care of anyone like he is doing now. He is 89...should we really expect him to do this now? Maybe he doesn’t want to, either! Still, he is quite healthy but his life experiences as an older man should be considered... Well, now I see how I treated Elif... a woman with heart problems, I really thought she could manage on her own. (Iris)
In this context, it is obvious that the students have problems linking the impact of structural factors, e.g. gender inequality, to individual circumstances as they would rather see the needs of elderly persons as something that is part of life and that requires voluntary solutions.

**The dominance of ethnicity**

The results from my study shows that when ethnicity other than Swedish was visible in the vignettes (by name and reference to ethnic origin) the focus of the assessments became explicitly concerned about language. As in the vignette of Aniita and Bertil, many students discussed in great depth Aniita’s need to speak her language of origin due to the loss of her communication skills, rather than discussing her needs in general terms based on the expressed needs in the vignette (Forssell et al., 2012).

When reviewing the vignette of Elif, some students spent time discussing how immigrants in general would like to handle their aging parents’ need for help on the basis of cultural norms. Although this discussion highlighted much of the students’ own experiences and feelings, they lost their focus regarding Elif’s expressed needs. In the context of aging and ethnicity, social work education might have focused a great deal on theories about aging as a stage of ‘going back to one’s origins’, which may also have affected students’ interpretations of the needs of elderly migrants.

**Group discussions and reflections—reflection for action**

The results show that the students lack knowledge of othering categorizations, their implications for care and the intersection of categories in their written assessments of the vignettes. However, such problems are addressed and critically reflected on in the group discussions, regarded as the last step of reflection—reflection for action. The students reflected on their interpretations as the teacher encouraged them to use critical social work knowledge by adding, for example, aspects of critical life course perspective and intersectionality. These theoretical perspectives were used to render the life situations and needs of the elderly persons in the vignettes more visible and understandable, as students critically compared, ‘questioned’ and elaborated their assessments in the group discussions. Questions, as follows, were stated by the teacher to generate reflections; How, for instance, would we understand Per differently according to a critical life course perspective based on sexual orientation? How could our interpretations and biases impact the elderly person’s life? By using critical perspectives, how can we make the shortcomings in our assessments understandable in order to visualize how to interpret needs in a more non-normative and anti-discriminatory way? Talking openly in the group discussions about why interpretations of needs were strongly associated with assumptions and prejudices according to gender, ethnicity, sexuality and physical health, enabled most of the students to express an awareness of the importance of reflecting on their actions as it has an affect on the outcomes of their assessments as well as on their future actions as social workers. In this way the reflections in the final group discussions showed a cognitive change regarding the decisions the students made in the first two steps of their reflections. As the students reflected on their ‘shortcomings’ in this final step, it becomes clear how critical reflection as an educational tool could be used to increase awareness of the importance of reflecting on
one’s professional work. This could also act as a guide for future actions in the students’ social work with aging people. As Ara, put it:

I definitely think that the assessments I made can be influenced by my own attitudes and prejudices. Through my assumption of sexual orientation with Per, for example, I made interpretations based on prejudices and perhaps missed important parts of his life that might affect him today as an old man. And would I have made a different assessment if it had been Anita who took care of her husband Bertil instead of the other way around? I like to think it makes no difference. But I can see it now, there are certain assumptions about gender that I would most likely consider. In addition, I didn’t see that Per had such severe mental health problems as I might have seen if he was a 40-year-old male with responsibility at work or as a father. Why is this? I thought I treated everybody equally and that I had an open mind about people’s needs, no matter what!

And Iris explained it like this:

I never thought this of myself but I am trapped in the norms of gender. I would never have thought this if you had told me I was!

Although the students had problems in reflecting on the normative beliefs that influenced their assessments in the initial steps, most of them managed to do so in the final group discussions, reflection for action, in which they were able to rethink their decisions through the guidance of their co-students and the teacher in the group discussions.

Discussion

The overall aim of this study was to uncover and challenge power relations on aging among social work students by examining how social work education can use critical reflection for the purpose of encouraging students to identify their underlying opinions and prejudices about aging. Drawing on Schön’s perspectives on critical self-reflection, social work students’ interpretations of expressed needs, in three vignettes of older persons, were studied.

The findings show, during the first steps of the exercise, that the students reflected on interpreted needs in their assessments based on prejudices and taken-for-granted assumptions concerning elderly persons. This resulted in most of the students interpreting expressed needs and obvious living conditions in an unreflective way. Stereotyped conditions regarding advanced age dominated the needs assessments, which were about giving attention to physical health problems at the expense of mental health problems. Further, the needs and capacities of women and men were interpreted based on the image of women being more capable than men of performing or managing care situations. When ethnicity was obvious in the vignettes, the students focused heavily on the language of origin and cultural aspects of caring for the older person that overshadowed the obvious expressed needs. Sexuality, other than normative heterosexuality, was generally ignored. Notwithstanding, when participating in the final group discussions of the exercise, implementing knowledge regarding critical theoretical perspectives, alternative interpretations of their assessments were made and a more holistic analysis on a deeper level was developed. In these group discussions, the teacher encouraged the students to look at multiple truths and realities regarding an elderly person’s needs, beyond what was
expected based on normative beliefs, socio-political rhetoric and definitions of the so-called legitimate needs of the elderly in a Swedish socio-political context. By critically examining the constructions of their assessments, students understood why, for example, one particular version was more privileged than another and how their own assumptions, values and judgments had impacted and influenced their interpretations and perceptions of the elderly person’s needs (Fook, 2002). The critical reflective process exposed students to the weaknesses and limitations of their assessments, which made them understand how to improve their assessments in future practice. In other words, Reflection for action was made obvious and possible.

The most instructive experience that resulted from participating in this study was that the students were being made aware that they were more prejudiced than they imagined, as several students put it. With insight into how their assumptions negatively affected them and their assumed clients, they made a commitment to make critical reflections a part of their future practices.

This study shows the potential of working with pedagogical exercises in social work education in order to increase students’ awareness of how our abilities and knowledge can help us and the people we encounter in social work to reduce oppression. Working with a critical self-reflection approach in social work education is more important than ever in an age when social work is influenced by neoliberal managerial solutions to social problems. Critical methodological tools could counteract the reproduction of oppressive structures, discrimination and categorizations and act as a protection of the basic ethical values associated with social work.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Sofie Ghazanfareeon Karlsson is PhD., Senior Lecturer at the Department of Psychology & Social Work, Mid-Sweden University. Her research focuses on new forms of family relations among older people in Sweden. Her research also includes social care of the elderly with a focus on gender relations; aging and migration as well as issues of using critical self-reflection in social work education.

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