

# Rising wealth and income inequality: A radical social work critique and response

Christine Morley<sup>1</sup> and Philip Ablett<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Queensland University of Technology, Australia

<sup>2</sup> University of the Sunshine Coast, Australia

## ABSTRACT

**INTRODUCTION:** Wealth and income inequality is increasing in most societies, including Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand, with detrimental social impacts. However, despite professional marginality, the renewal of radical social work critiques with their emphasis on structural issues highlight, the need for alternative practice responses.

**METHOD:** We employed a critical and synthetic review of the literature to examine major trends in wealth and income inequality (both globally, and in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand) and the social work responses to increasing economic inequality.

**CONCLUSIONS:** Resurgent wealth and income inequality has reached new crisis points in both countries but individualising analyses and programmes render most social work responses complicit with neoliberal governance. These responses do little to reduce inequality. Alternatives promoting economic equality can be found in radical social work approaches.

**IMPLICATIONS:** At a minimum, effective radical responses to economic inequality must advocate critical social analyses in social work education and practice, including fostering practitioners' capacity for critical reflection, policy practice and political activism.

**KEYWORDS:** inequality; radical social work

Rising wealth and income inequality is an increasing global concern and, given its broad social impacts, a core priority for social work. Radical social work, with its commitment to redressing structural disadvantage, can lead social work in this endeavour through its capacity to analyse the social, economic and political contexts that produce wealth and income inequality, and formulate socially just responses.

The article begins by outlining the key tenets of radical social work, briefly noting some comparisons between Australian and Aotearoa New Zealand contexts that have created the conditions for a resurgence of radical social work. The international context of wealth and income inequality is then discussed and compared with the current situations in both countries. This article discusses why the

renaissance of radical social work is vital to informing broader social and community sector responses to wealth and income inequality, particularly through offering: 1) a critical analysis of society that links privately experienced problems with social structures; 2) a radical social work curriculum; 3) a form of critical self-reflection that is cognisant of the impact of social structures and also of practitioner agency to respond to social problems; 4) a capacity to influence social policy for socially just outcomes; and 5) collective and activist practices for social change.

## Radical social work in contemporary contexts

Radical social work aims to combat oppression and proactively work with socially marginalised individuals, groups

AOTEAROA  
NEW ZEALAND SOCIAL  
WORK 29(2), 6–18.

**CORRESPONDENCE TO:**  
Christine Morley  
c3.morley@qut.edu.au

and communities to promote a more equitable, democratic and ecologically sustainable world. Writing in the early 1990s, Fook (1993, p. 7) asserts radical social work involves: explicitly making the links between people's personally lived experiences and oppressive structures that shape those experiences; a commitment to challenge the social control functions of social work practice; a critique of social, economic and political arrangements that cause inequality; the goals of emancipation for the people with whom we work; and social progressive change (as opposed to personal adaptation to an unjust status quo). More recent writings suggest a revitalised, contemporary form of radical social work includes a rejection of managerial and marketised practices; a reaffirmation of social justice values in social work; a renewed commitment to social action and collective practices for progressive social change; and an understanding of the imperative for radical practice to be directly informed by critical social theories (Ferguson, 2016).

While some proponents of radical social work suggest that it almost "disappeared" in the 1980s (Ferguson, 2016), a number of commentators are discussing the contemporary revival of radical and critical perspectives in social work, acknowledging the importance and relevance of them now, more than ever before (see for example, Ferguson, 2016; Gray & Webb, 2013; Morley, 2016a; Morley & Ablett, 2016; Morley et al., 2014). Mainstream social work which, in some quarters, has arguably been co-opted by neoliberal, managerial and medicalised therapeutic discourses (see for example, Ferguson & Lavalette, 2006; Gardner, 2014; Madhu, 2011; Rogowski, 2010; Wallace & Pease, 2011; Wehbi & Turcotte, 2007), has paid little attention to the escalating social problems of wealth and income inequality. O'Brien (2013) has warned that, by prioritising professionalisation, registration and managerial practice, social work risks compromising its central historical concerns with poverty and social justice. Neoliberalism and related managerialist

practices have shifted the ideological underpinnings of mainstream social work to become more conservative (Fenton, 2014; Garrett, 2010; Wallace & Pease, 2011). Thus, official statements that claim social work is committed to promoting "social change . . . and the empowerment and liberation of people" (AASW, 2010, p. 7) and "challenging systems and policies that maintain inequity and inequality" (ANZASW, 2014, p. 5), are often reduced to rhetoric, when much of social work practice reflects an individualised, and increasingly psychologised understanding of social problems that reproduce inequality (Mullaly, 2007). This disparity between espoused goals and practice has led a number of social work scholars to question whether social work is "in crisis," at a "crossroads" (Lavalette, 2011), in a "state of flux" (Dominelli, 1996, p. 153), or has abandoned its mission (see for example, McNicholl, 2013; Powell, 2001; Specht & Courtney, 1994).

Social work in both Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand is similar in this regard. Whilst there are parallels and variances between these countries in relation to cultural, economic and social experiences, both share a violent history of colonialisation of indigenous populations, and similar models of social security that developed in the late 19th century, including a "wage earner's welfare state" (Castles, 1985). Since the 1980s, both countries have similarly experienced aggressive neoliberal reforms that have largely dismantled their welfare states. Neoliberal restructuring has eschewed social (structural) analyses in favour of discourses valorising individual responsibility. Hence the problem of unemployment and poverty has been reconstructed as "a problem of the unemployed" (Marston et al., 2014, as cited in Mays, Marston, & Tomlinson, 2016a, p. 3). The impacts of economic privatisation and social deregulation on people, systems and the environment have caused widespread inequality and related social problems in Australia, New Zealand and other liberal-capitalist societies. These problems, in addition to the marketisation

of the human services sector and associated managerial practices are among the primary reasons identified for reinvigorating key social movements and collective resistance, including contemporary radicalism in social work (Ferguson, 2016; Ife, 2014).

Radical social work aims to be responsive to people's expressed needs, but also to challenge and change the social conditions that create social disadvantage and exclusion (Baines, 2011). Given its commitment to reversing structural disadvantage, radical social work has a leadership role to play, not only in analysing the social and economic conditions that create wealth and income inequality, but also in formulating strategies that address poverty and other forms of social disadvantage, using a range of practices that link structural analyses of citizens' personally lived experiences with the goals of social transformation.

### **An overview of wealth and income inequality**

At this point in our history, global capitalism has generated more wealth and prosperity than ever before, with our world economy now being worth more than US\$250 trillion (Credit Suisse, 2015). However, the benefits associated with rising global wealth are not distributed equitably. In fact, the divisions between rich and poor worldwide are "reaching new extremes" (Oxfam, 2016, p. 2). Those officially defined as the poorest citizens in the world try to survive on US\$1.90 per day or less, and the total population living on this amount (roughly 800 million people) is about the same as 200 years ago (Roser, 2015). Meanwhile, the richest eight individuals in the world own and control more capital than the poorest 3.6 billion people (Oxfam, 2017), while the bottom 80% of the population access just 6% of the world's economy (Oxfam, 2016). These profound socioeconomic inequalities have skyrocketed in the last decade, with the wealthiest 10% of the global population acquiring more than half of all income growth, and the richest 1% of the population

obtaining 22% of these rises (Ostry, Berg, & Tsangarides, 2014). In addition, the richest 1% have increased their income by 60% over the past 20 years, with the global financial crisis (GFC) further enabling their monopolisation of wealth (Oxfam, 2013, p. 2). Whilst international comparisons suggest wealth inequalities in Australia and New Zealand are not quite as extreme as some other contemporary capitalist societies, the rates of socioeconomic inequality are rising more quickly in these countries than analogous Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries (Douglas, Friel, Denniss, Denniss, & Morzwetz, 2014).

Indisputable evidence of growing wealth and income inequality in both countries requires urgent action from social workers on both sides of the Tasman Sea. Recent data show that, in Australia, the richest 1% own the same wealth as the poorest 60% (Oxfam Australia, 2014, p. 2). National research demonstrates that "the income share of the top 1% has doubled, and the wealth share of the top 0.0001% (the richest one-millionth) has quintupled" in recent decades (Douglas et al., 2014, p. 8). The richest seven individuals in Australia now control more economic resources than the poorest 20% of the population (1.73 million households) (Richardson & Denniss, 2014). Many people in this bottom 20% rely on the "Newstart" allowance to live, which provides a level of income support that is 20% below the poverty line (Denniss & Baker, 2012). Consequently, approximately one in every six children in Australia now lives in poverty (Douglas et al., 2014).

In Aotearoa New Zealand, the wealthiest 10% of the population now own and control about 60% of household wealth, while the poorest 40% hold just 3% of the nation's total wealth (Statistics New Zealand, 2016). Similar to the situation in Australia, research also demonstrates that economic inequality in Aotearoa New Zealand has grown rapidly since the early 1980s (OECD, 2011), with the

evidence suggesting that new, additional wealth is accruing to the already wealthy (Johnson, 2015). Social researcher, Max Rashbrooke (2013) highlights that income inequality also increased in this period to a greater extent than in any other developed economy. Rashbrooke (2013, p. 37) further explains how “the top 10 per cent of New Zealand[ers] ... have seen their incomes increase by over 75 per cent between 1986 and 2013”. Race relations and ethnicity, demonstrably amplify this inequality:

In 2003/04, European/Pakeha made up 33% of the over 15s population yet held 93% of the reported wealth. By comparison Maori made up 10% of the same population yet owned 4% of the wealth. Even worse off are Pacific people, who made up nearly 5% of the over 15s population but owned just 1.3% of the reported wealth. (Johnson, 2015, p. 2)

Social research clearly demonstrates the correlations between wealth inequality and a broad range of social problems (see for example, Habibis & Walter, 2015). The impacts of growing wealth and income inequality include: intergenerational poverty; rising crime rates; increasing suicide rates; higher rates of morbidity and mortality; increased incidence and prevalence of violence; and increased mental health problems (Abramovitz, 2012; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010). In addition, there are also direct links between human-induced climate change, and the disproportionate exploitation of non-renewable natural resources that global capitalism drives (Noble, 2016). Climate change also reinforces the gap between the rich and the impoverished, as the most socioeconomically disadvantaged people in the world are the most affected by the consequences of climate change (Noble, 2016). In highlighting the sense of social division caused by economic inequality, Rashbrooke (Inequality.org.nz, 2013, n.p.) tellingly suggests it causes people to “lose their sense of what life is like for people in the other half”.

Whilst mainstream social work has been slow to respond to these issues (Morley & Ablett, 2016; Noble, 2016), ironically, multi-lateral financial institutions (that have been bastions of neoliberal policy) such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, and World Economic Forum (WEF), are leading the appeals to address rising wealth and income inequality. The gap between rich and poor has become so lopsided that it can now slow economic growth and radically decrease political and economic stability (Douglas et al., 2014; Piketty, 2014; Stiglitz, 2014;). According to OECD statistics (2012), Aotearoa New Zealand has a similar Gini score for income inequality (after tax transfers) as Australia, sitting around 0.33 (OECD, 2012), above the OECD average. The IMF demonstrates that a 5% increase in inequality (measured by the Gini Coefficient) causes a corresponding 0.5% reduction in growth annually (Ostry et al., 2014). Recent OECD data similarly indicate that increased economic inequality over the past 25 years has reduced economic growth by 0.35% per annum, a cumulative loss of 8.5% in economic growth (Cingano, 2014). Hence, extreme wealth inequality also poses serious consequences for the wealthy.

### The social context

In 20th century western societies, inequalities in wealth and income were managed by the economic and social policies of diverse welfare-state regimes (Habibis & Walter, 2015). These policies were designed to reduce poverty and institute some redistributive measures to avoid contributing to social conflict. The period from the 1920s to the late 1970s has been referred to as the “Great Compression” (Douglas et. al., 2014, p. 38) whereby wealth and income inequalities were reduced in most western nations. During this time both Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand were more egalitarian than most countries (Perry, 2013). Since the early 1980s, however, in the wake of various crises and globalisation, there has been a retreat from social provision on the part of nation-states in favour of neoliberal

market solutions. Today, economic policies in the OECD vary widely in their regulation or liberalisation of market forces and social policy approaches are likewise varied in their targeting of disadvantage (Carson & Kerr, 2014).

In Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand, the reduction of economic inequality was achieved, historically, through a combination of labour market regulation and direct social provision. The former was based on a unique system of compulsory industrial arbitration and wage determination (from 1894 in New Zealand; 1904 in Australia) with unions securing a living wage for most male workers by the 1920s (Vranken, 2005, p. 28). The latter involved government welfare measures (funded by progressive taxation transfers), in which Aotearoa New Zealand arguably had a more comprehensive system than Australia. Equity-promoting measures included state education, public health outlay, pensions, anti-racial and anti-gender discrimination legislation, national disability insurance, family services and allowances, and paid parental leave (Carson & Kerr, 2014). However, the past 30 years of economic restructuring has seen a considerable diminution in both industrial regulation and public provision in Australasia, whereas executive salaries and corporate profits continue to rise. This slide into inequality has been justified by liberal (now *neoliberal*) economic doctrine, particularly among political conservatives, imposing market-driven, private provision for social problems. Insofar as it considers inequality at all, this approach deploys “Kuznet’s curve” (Kuznet, 1955) arguing that long-term economic growth alone will decrease inequality without recourse to redistributive policies.

In liberal-capitalist societies, governments, along with public–private partnerships and non-government organisations (NGOs), are largely responsible for framing social policies. Many social workers practising within this (government and non-government) workforce, within a range of

human service organisations that aim to deliver equity-enhancing programmes and projects are, by extension, responsible for implementing social policies through case management and other practices. Many do not determine the policies but neither are they without agency in the policy process.

### Social work responses

Despite a long-standing espoused commitment from social workers to social justice, poverty and economic inequality have received relatively little attention in recent times, compared with other fields of practice. This is evident in curriculum standards for social work education in which, for example, poverty and wealth inequality are not mentioned in the Australian Education and Accreditation Standards (AASW, 2012). The Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers fares slightly better with three explicit references to poverty within the practice standards (ANZASW, 2014). Similarly, there is a relatively small amount of contemporary social work research that directly addresses wealth inequality or its impacts (see for example, Beddoe & Keddell, 2016; Goldberg, 2012; Krumer-Nevo, 2015; Hosken, 2016; Marston & McDonald, 2008; Mays et al., 2016b; Morley & Ablett, 2016; O’Brien, 2011; Parrott, 2014; Rashbrooke, 2013). The dominance of neoliberal policies and discourses that prioritise economic over social imperatives and emphasise individual responsibility, has also resulted in practice interventions that reinforce rather than address existing social and economic exclusion. This largely operates through administrative and case management practices that focus on individualised understandings of poverty, instead of the structural factors implicated in producing inequality (Krumer-Nevo, 2015; Marston & McDonald, 2008; Mullaly, 2010). Therefore, mainstream social work practice responses significantly depart from a radical analysis. These responses range from providing budgeting advice, or developing people’s resilience to cope with, and adapt to,

injustices (such as being excluded from the paid workforce), to blaming people for their exclusion (Agllias, Howard, Schubert, & Gray, 2016; Parrott, 2014).

This individualisation is consistent with mainstream social work approaches historically, which have functioned to ignore structural determinants of wealth inequality and instead draw on depoliticised understandings of poverty (Becker, 1997, as cited in Parrott, 2014); in effect, operating to “discipline and punish” (Foucault, 1977) the impoverished. In practice, this has meant that social workers have often demonstrated “attitudes that could be considered ambivalent, confused, and at the extreme, hostile to service users living in poverty” (Wainwright, 2005, as cited in Parrott, 2014, p. 5; see also Agllias et al., 2016, p. 7). Others too, have argued that the helping professions have failed “to develop practice based on awareness of poverty” (Krumer-Nevo et al., 2015, p. 225). Whilst there is some evidence to suggest that social workers, such as those employed in Australian Centrelink services, may not be as judgmental and punitive towards the unemployed as case managers generally, there is evidence of widespread, forceful and stigmatising practices that are incongruent with promoting the autonomy and self-efficacy of job seekers (Marston & McDonald, 2008).

These factors, combined with the gap identified between research evidence, and policy and practice (Bacchi, 2009) mean that some social work practitioners may have internalised the neoliberal policy framework around unemployment, or may not be fully cognisant with growing evidence about wealth and income inequality; in particular, the social, political and economic factors that cause this inequality (Parrott, 2014). O’Brien (2011), for example, found that only a sixth of the Aotearoa New Zealand social workers he surveyed saw income inequality as a central issue for social justice. The way the welfare sector is organised exacerbates this conceptual gap. The provision of social services is not set up to reflect an

understanding that social workers practising in this sector are working with individuals and communities who are excluded and marginalised by global capitalism—their positioning being the result of systems that enable an elite few to exploit unearned privileges and monopolise resources. Instead, practitioners engaged in responding to wealth and income inequality largely practise in the fields of income support, unemployment, emergency housing and homelessness, job network and activation schemes, emergency food provision, mental health, substance abuse, and domestic and family violence. These services often focus on the consequences, rather than the causes of inequality, and the organisation of them in this way enables the separation of personally lived experiences from the political realm (Mullaly, 2010).

Within neoliberal contexts, social work services become more conservative, and are often privatised, resulting in many areas of practice emerging as industries to be mined for profit. Unemployment, for example, has seen a proliferation of private providers seeking profit for offering job-seeker activation schemes (Mitchell, 2015). Within these services, social work practice may lose its radical potential, to instead become a form of neoliberalised practice, in which the goals are to police welfare recipients, protect the scarce resources of organisations, and recast human suffering as a case to be assessed and managed (Krumer-Nevo, 2015; Marston & McDonald, 2008). This is part of a broader pattern that positions social work as a profession that aims to fit and adapt to neoliberal contexts (Wallace & Pease, 2011). This conservatism also promotes a form of professionalism that conforms to, rather than challenges, existing inequalities in the system (Morley et al., 2014) and is counterproductive to espoused policy aims of improving the motivation and self-efficacy of the unemployed (Marston & McDonald, 2008). Despite this, social work may still have an important role to play both in responding to the consequences of wealth and income inequality critically, and in leading initiatives

that focus on a more equitable redistribution of social resources. Radical approaches can provide leadership for mainstream social work and a much needed alternative.

### **The need for radical social work**

Radical social work, which locates individuals within broader societal contexts, offers a much more politically and ethically informed understanding of poverty and wealth inequality that fundamentally re-frames dominant neoliberal understandings of this issue. If social work is to promote change for social justice and human rights in the current neoliberal context, then social workers need to embrace five core measures as a minimum baseline for practice: 1) a critical analysis of society that links private problems with unequal social structures; 2) a radical/critical social work curriculum; 3) a capacity for critical self reflection by practitioners upon their socially constructed and constructing positionality that highlights potential agency; 4) a capacity to engage and influence social policy; and 5) activist practices for social change (see for example, Ferguson, 2016).

### **A radical analysis**

A critical analysis of society is at the heart of a radical approaches to practice. Inspired by the legacy of Karl Marx, a radical analysis elucidates the ways that global capitalism creates and perpetuates wealth and income inequality through enabling powerful individuals and groups (classes) to control social and economic systems for their advantage, to the detriment of others (the working class and unemployed) (Parrott, 2014, p. 33). Hence, the privileges of the wealthy elite are emphasised, along with their capacity to monopolise resources through measures such as austerity policies. As Clarke and Newman (cited in Baines & McBride, 2014, p.3) explain, "Neoliberal politicians have sold 'austerity' to the public as a virtuous necessity in the face of government deficits". These austerity measures burden the poorest citizens who

are least able to make the adjustments imposed on them whilst redistributing more wealth to the rich (Sayer, 2016). Consistent with the neoliberal agenda, industrial relations reforms concentrate power in the hands of employers, creating a workforce stripped of rights and fair conditions, including declining incomes and increased casualised labour, while undermining trade unions (Luewchik, Vrankulj, & Lafleche 2014, p. 107). Standing (2011, p. 1) refers to this emerging group of unemployed and insecure workers as a "global 'precariat', consisting of many millions around the world without an anchor of stability". Standing (2011, p. 11) suggests that, in addition to low income, and/or precarious work, the precariat experience a "lack of community support in times of need, lack of assured enterprise or state benefits, and lack of private benefits to supplement money earnings".

A radical analysis has direct implications for social work practice with the precariat (Hosken, 2016; Mullaly, 2010). Raising consciousness about the socio-economic and political determinants of wealth and inequality is a key element of this practice (Mullaly, 2010). As Parrott (2014, p. 33) suggests, "being able to explain a service user's position as not being a consequence of deficient cultural attitudes or as a result of individual failure requires an understanding of the structural reasons for poverty". Such awareness-raising conversations may operate to counteract the self-blame that people excluded from the labour market often feel, as neoliberal discourses and public narratives demonise them for failing to acquire jobs that do not exist.

Radical social work practitioners who work with the unemployed in individual casework, case management or counselling roles, for example, would reject victim-blaming discourses to instead find ways to highlight structural factors as part of their dialogue with the people they work with (see Krumer-Nevo, 2015). This may involve conversations that expose how

high population growth, combined with technology replacing human labour with machines (Ford, 2016), results in a shrinking labour market and unemployment, which is now 340% higher now than it was in the early 1970s (Mitchell, 2015). This stands in stark contrast to conversations that focus only on individualised factors, including for example, a person's motivation for job seeking, employability within the market, interview skills and resume presentation. A radical analysis demonstrates how unemployment is a politically and economically orchestrated social phenomenon (Baines & McBride, 2014), not an inherent deficiency in those impacted by it, thus necessitating compassion, individual and public advocacy, social policy reform, collective practices, social action, and critical reflection. All of this begins with the education of social workers.

### **A radical social work curriculum**

As our rapidly changing, market-driven society becomes more inequitable and divided, radical and transformative approaches to social work education have increased relevance. However, such approaches are often marginalised in social work education in favour of competency-based and technique-driven approaches that are presented as neutral (i.e., free from politics and theory). All approaches to education, however, entail theoretical assumptions and have political implications. Whether students develop a critical analysis of oppression and seek to challenge this, or whether they see themselves as functionaries of social systems that manage others, has much to do with their education. As Holscher and Sewpaul (2006, p. 268) explain: "all too often the dominant ideologies . . . are so entrenched that it is difficult to think outside of certain prescriptive ideological frameworks". Education is therefore a key site for facilitating alternative paradigms that enable students to develop counter-hegemonic practices of resistance and agency, and strategies to practise for social change. A radical curriculum emphasises

the forgoing social work practices that are discussed in this article, on the basis of radical analysis. Whilst this article is specifically addressing the neglected areas of poverty and socio-economic disadvantage associated with wealth and income inequality, a radical analysis is needed in both social work education and practice across all contemporary social issues, including for example, gender inequality, environmental issues and the oppression of people who are marginalised on the basis of cultural or religious identity, mentally unwell people, and those who live with a disability.

### **Critical reflection**

Tseris (2008, p. 45) warns "[s]ocial workers are not immune to the influences of society, so they need to be constantly assessing and questioning their own views and practices, to ensure that they are not in fact, replicating the very things they so vehemently oppose". Critical reflection is an important part of radical/structural social work to assist social workers to reject conservative thinking and practices; safeguard against critical practices that are well intentioned, yet potentially oppressive; and "enhance the possibilities for critical [and radical] practice in organisational contexts that are restrictive by empowering practitioners to connect with a sense of agency to create change" (Morley, 2016b, p. 25). Fook's (2016) model of critical reflection offers a useful framework for connecting social work practice with a radical analysis of inequality. It involves critical evaluation of one's own social positioning (the impact of geographic, historical, ethnic, gendered, and socio-economic status) and the ways in which personal biography shapes one's worldview, critical analysis of socio-political contexts and reflection on professional practice to ultimately reconstruct possibilities for action (Fook, 2016).

Morley et al. (2014) provide an empirical example from practice that demonstrates how critical reflection is an important part



of radical/structural social work to assist social workers to unmask conservative thinking and re-frame practices. This also safeguards against critical practices that are well intentioned, yet potentially oppressive; and “enhance the possibilities for critical [and radical] practice in organisational contexts that are restrictive by empowering practitioners to connect with a sense of agency to create change” (Morley, 2016b, p. 25). In this example, the practitioner was working in an agency that provides material assistance to people experiencing poverty, and expressed moralistic and blaming attitudes towards a man who had come to the service to request a food parcel. Part of the practitioner’s frustration was that she felt she could not help him because the agency in which she worked had strict policies about limiting people’s access to needed resources. Rather than recognising this situation as a human rights’ violation, activating an advocacy response, she took on a policing role, shaming him for attempting to gain “more than his fair share”. Critical reflection on her practice assisted this practitioner to deconstruct the neoliberal origins of her assumptions, and acknowledge a gap between her practice and her espoused commitments to social justice. Awareness of this incongruence between theory and practice, and of how hegemonic discourses had distorted her worldview created an additudinal shift in the worker that challenged her initial beliefs that the man was undeserving of support. She also recognised her capacity to bend agency policy about restricting access was within her own discretionary decision-making power as a professional. Elsewhere, this model of critical reflection has been shown to reliably produce demonstrable changes in the thinking and actions of practitioners in ways that elucidate the broader social and political implications of our work (see for example, Morley, 2014).

### Social policy

A radical analysis highlights that access to affordable housing, food, education and healthcare are all basic human rights. Radical and critical social work theories demonstrate

that poverty is the result of social, political and economic systems that have failed, rather than the fault of the people who are impoverished (Hosken, 2016). Instead of reinforcing the current system of inequalities and power divisions, a radical perspective suggests governments should promote social change for human betterment and social justice. A socially just society is one in which all members share the same basic rights, protections, benefits and obligations, not one in which we blame the impoverished for their exclusion from the paid labour market (Morley et al., 2014).

Historically, social policy has proven to be a powerful vehicle for arresting social inequality (Leigh, 2013). Whilst powerful elites and dominant interest groups influence social policy, a radical approach promotes alternative social policy initiatives that can be effective in enacting and reviewing equity-promoting practice measures (Douglas et al., 2014, Krumer-Nevo, 2015). A more ethical and equitable division of resources will not happen without redistribution through significant social policy and taxation reform (Scott, 2014).

Radical social work has a vital role to play in contesting social policy with a comprehensive analysis of the complex political and economic causes, and social consequences, of wealth and income inequality. A radical view also highlights that Australia’s gross domestic product (GDP) in 2014, for example, was A\$1.56 trillion (World Bank, 2014), and that a mere A\$8 billion (or less than 0.5% of the GDP) was spent on the Newstart allowance. In fact, Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand are amongst the lowest in their expenditure on unemployment benefits in the OECD, some of whose members spend above 3% of GDP on unemployment relief (Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS), 2014; Denniss & Baker, 2012).

Clearly, a radical social work serious about combatting inequality must pursue alternative policies beyond the neoliberal

malaise. One promising initiative is a basic income guarantee: that is, “an unconditional grant that is paid by the government to all permanent residents at regular intervals” (Mays et al., 2016a, p. 3). Social work and human service researchers promote this alternative through the Basic Income Guarantee Australia (BIGA) research site at the Queensland University of Technology (School of Public Health and Social Work, 2013). A parallel movement in Aotearoa New Zealand is the Universal Basic Income New Zealand (UBINZ) website and network established in 1992 whose ideas have influenced current debates about tax credits (School of Public Health and Social Work, 2013). Consistent with the goals of radical social work, this would mean replacing many existing complex, conditional, arbitrary, and often punitive transfer schemes that rely on government paternalism, with a system of universal payments that promote a material safety net and freedom for all citizens from precarious survival (Mays et al., 2016a; Standing, 2011). This is an affordable option in wealthy countries (Mays et al., 2016a).

### Collective and activist practices

Whilst social workers generally concur that activism for social justice is a core part of social work (Greenslade, McAuliffe, & Chenoweth, 2015; O'Brien, 2011), confronting wealth and income inequality through social action has not been a prominent practice in recent times (Reisch & Andrews, 2001; O'Brien, 2010). However, contesting neoliberal policy through a range of practices including individual and public advocacy, collective organising, community development and social activism around anti-poverty campaigns, and the development of alternative economic structures such as LETS (Local Energy Transfer System) schemes (Ife, 2016) for example, should be core practice for all social workers. Greenslade et al. (2015) also discuss activist practices in welfare organisations that resist and contest dominant power relations, despite the conservatism of many such institutions. Whilst they refer

to many of these activist practices as covert, we argue that engaging in debating policy, union activism, advocacy for service users, lobbying and joining social movements after hours, should be among the regular social work practices that challenge social injustice (Greenslade et al., 2015). This can involve creatively interpreting the rules, non-compliance, broadening professional boundaries and possibly civil disobedience (when attempting to meet a higher ethical code). Consistent with a radical perspective that focuses foremost on social justice, Greenslade et al. (2015) suggest that the profession needs to accept such practices as inevitable if social work is to maintain integrity within neoliberal contexts. Gray and Webb (2013, p. 213) similarly suggest that “counter-acts of resistance and oppositional tactics against the totality of neoliberal domination” are indicative of a rising “New Left” in social work.

### Concluding thoughts: Radical practice as essential for social work

Wealth and income inequality are profoundly out of balance in liberal-capitalist countries, with the disparities becoming more pronounced in recent decades. The social and political redress of this global issue is an urgent priority for any social work that claims to be emancipatory on both sides of the Tasman and beyond (AASW, 2010; ANZASW, 2014; IFSW, 2014). This is attested to by the recent declaration of the President of the International Federation of Social Workers, Gary Bailey, at a world conference in Melbourne in 2014, urging social workers to “become more political” in tackling inequality (Horton, 2014). Social work is strategically positioned to address the socio-economic disadvantages associated with wealth and income inequality, yet the hegemony of global neoliberalism often renders social work impotent in achieving its espoused commitments to social justice and human rights. While much social work practice with the precarious population affected by wealth and income

inequality is undertaken in the context of assessing eligibility for emergency housing, provision of food and other basic essential resources, and schemes that aim to motivate “the unemployed” to seek jobs, radical social work has long pointed to a range of alternative practices aimed at more equitable wealth redistribution and progressive socio-economic reform. This includes implementing a radical/critical analysis to form the basis of all social work curricula; employing this analysis of society to connect the personal consequences of wealth and income inequality with social structures that create it in direct practice; critical self-reflection that is cognisant of the impact of social structures and also of practitioner agency to respond to social problems and inequalities, advocating for progressive social policy initiatives such as a basic income; activism to eliminate poverty; and covert practices of resistance affirming citizens’ basic human rights.

### References

- Abramovitz, M. (2012). Theorising the neoliberal welfare state for social work. In M. Gray, J. Midgley, & S.A. Webb (Eds.), *The Sage handbook of social work* (pp. 33–50). London, UK: Sage.
- Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW). (2010). *Code of ethics*. Canberra, ACT: Author.
- Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW). (2012). *Australian social work education and accreditation standards*. Canberra, ACT: Author.
- Australian Council of Social Service (ACOSS). (2014). *Submission to review of Australia’s welfare system*. Retrieved from [http://www.acoss.org.au/images/uploads/ACOSS\\_welfare\\_review\\_submission\\_2014-FINAL.pdf](http://www.acoss.org.au/images/uploads/ACOSS_welfare_review_submission_2014-FINAL.pdf)
- Australia Institute. (2015). *Loopholes not leaners costing the budget billions*. [Media release]. Retrieved from <http://www.tai.org.au/content/loopholes-not-leaners-costing-budget-billions>
- Agllias, K., Howard, A., Schubert, L., & Gray, M. (2016). Australian workers’ narratives about emergency relief and employment service clients: Complex issues, simple solutions. *Australian Social Work*, 69(3), 297–310.
- Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers (ANZASW). (2014). *ANZASW social work practice standards*. Retrieved from <http://anzasw.nz/wp-content/uploads/Practice-Standard-Publication-Full-Nov-14.pdf>
- Bacchi, C. (2009). *Analysing policy: What’s the problem presented to be?* Frenchs Forest, NSW: Pearson.
- Baines, D. (2011). *Doing anti-oppressive practice social justice social work* (2nd ed.), Winnipeg, Manitoba: Fernwood Publishing.
- Baines, D., & McBride, S. (2014). Introduction: Context and fight-back. In D. Baines & S. McBride (Eds.), *Orchestrating austerity: Impacts & resistance*, (pp. 1–8). Black Point, Nova Scotia: Fernwood Publishing.
- Beddoe, L., & Keddell, E. (2016). Informed outrage: Tackling shame and stigma in poverty education in social work. *Ethics and Social Welfare*, 10(2), 149–162.
- Carson, E., & Kerr, L. (2014). *Australian social policy and the human services*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Castles, F. (1985). *The working class and welfare*, Sydney, NSW: Allen and Unwin.
- Cingano, F. (2014). *Trends in income inequality and its impact on economic growth*. OECD SEM Working Paper No. 163. Retrieved from <http://www.oecd.org/els/workingpapers>
- Credit Suisse. (2015). *Global wealth report*. Retrieved from <https://publications.credit-suisse.com/tasks/render/file/?fileID=F2425415-DCA7-80B8-EAD989AF9341D47E>
- Denniss, R., & Baker, D. (2012). Are unemployment benefits adequate in Australia? The Australia Institute, Policy Brief No. 39, April. Retrieved from [http://www.tai.org.au/sites/default/files/PB%2039%20Are%20unemployment%20benefits%20adequate%20in%20Australia\\_4.pdf](http://www.tai.org.au/sites/default/files/PB%2039%20Are%20unemployment%20benefits%20adequate%20in%20Australia_4.pdf)
- Dominelli, L. (1996). Deprofessionalizing social work: Anti-oppressive practice, competencies and postmodernism. *British Journal of Social Work*, 26, 153–175.
- Douglas, B., Friel, S., Denniss, R., & Morzwet, D. (2014, January). *Advance Australia Fair? What to do about growing inequality in Australia*. Report on a roundtable held at Parliament House, Canberra. Retrieved from <http://www.australia21.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Final-InequalityinAustraliaRepor-2.pdf>
- Fenton, J. (2014). Can social work education meet the neoliberal challenge head on? *Critical and Radical Social Work*, 2(3), 321–335.
- Ferguson, I. (2016). The new social work radicalism: Results and prospects. 35(4), 93–98.
- Ferguson, I., & Lavalette, M. (2006). Globalization and global justice: Towards a social work of resistance. *International Social Work*, 49, 309–318.
- Fook, J. (1993). *Radical casework: A theory of practice*. Sydney, NSW: Allen and Unwin.
- Fook, J. (2016). *Social work: A critical approach to practice* (3rd ed.). London, UK: Sage.
- Ford, M. (2016). *The rise of the robots: Technology and the threat of mass unemployment*. London, UK: Oneworld Publications.
- Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline & punish: The birth of the prison*. New York, NY: Random House.
- Gardner, F. (2014). *Being critically reflective*. Houndmills, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Garrett, P. M. (2010). Examining the “conservative revolution”: Neoliberalism and social work education. *Social Work Education*, 29(4), 340–355.
- Goldberg, G. (2012). Economic inequality and economic crisis: A challenge for social workers. *Social Work*, 57(3), 211–224.
- Gray, M., & Webb, S. (2013). *The new politics of social work*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

- Greenslade, L., McAuliffe, D., & Chenowith, L. (2015). Social workers' experiences of covert workplace activism. *Australian Social Work, 68*(4), 422–437.
- Habibis, D., & Walter, M. (2015). *Social inequality in Australia: Discourses, realities and futures*. South Melbourne, VIC: Oxford University Press.
- Horton, C. (2014, July 9). Social workers "should be more political in tackling inequality". *The Guardian*, Social Care Network. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/social-care-network/2014/jul/09/social-workers-more-political-inequality>
- Hosken, N. (2016). Social work, class and the structural violence of poverty. In B. Pease, S. Goldingay, Hosken, N., & S. Nipperess (Eds.). *Doing critical social work: Transformative practices for social justice*. Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin.
- Ife, J. (2014). Foreword. In C. Morley, S. Macfarlane, & P. Ablett, *Engaging with social work: A critical introduction* (pp. vii–ix). South Melbourne, VIC: Cambridge.
- Ife, J. (2016). *Community development in an uncertain world: Vision, analysis and practice*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Inequality.org.nz. (2013). Understand inequality. *Inequality: A New Zealand conversation*. A joint project by Max Rashbrooke and the New Zealand Council for Christian Social Services. Retrieved from <http://www.inequality.org.nz/understand/>
- International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW). (2000). *Global definition of social work*. Retrieved from <http://ifsw.org/get-involved/global-definition-of-social-work/>
- Johnson, A. (2015, February 11). *Recent wealth and income trends in New Zealand*. Paper presented to the University of Otago, School of Medicine, Wellington. Retrieved from <http://www.salvationarmy.org.nz/sites/default/files/uploads/20150211SPPUspeechAlanJohnso nRecent%20wealth%20and%20income%20trends%20in%20NZ.pdf>
- Krumer-Nevo, M. (2015). Poverty aware social work: A paradigm for social work practice with people in poverty, *British Journal of Social Work, 46*(6), 1793–1808.
- Lavalette, M. (Ed.). (2011). *Radical social work today: Social work at the crossroads*. Bristol, UK: Policy Press.
- Leigh, A. (2013). *Battlers and billionaires: The story of inequality in Australia*. Melbourne, VIC: Redback.
- Luewchik, W., Vrankulj, S., & Laffleche, M. (2014). Bridging the gap. In D. Baines & S. McBride (Eds.). *Orchestrating austerity: Impacts & resistance*, Black Point, Nova Scotia: Fernwood Publishing.
- Madhu, P. (2011). *Praxis intervention: Towards a new critical social work practice*. [e-book] SSRN eLibrary. Retrieved from <http://ssrn.com/paper=1765143>
- Marston, G., & McDonald, C. (2008). Feeling motivated yet? Long-term unemployed people's perspectives on the implementation on workfare Australia. *The Australian Journal of Social Issues, 43*(2), 255–269.
- Mays, J., Marston, G., & Tomlinson, J. (2016a). Neoliberal frontiers and economic insecurity: Is basic income a solution? In J. Mays, G. Marston, & J. Tomlinson (Eds.), *Basic income in Australian and New Zealand: Perspectives from the neoliberal frontier* (pp. 1–25). London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Mays, J., Marston, G., & Tomlinson, J. (2016b). *Basic income in Australian and New Zealand: Perspectives from the neoliberal frontier*. London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- McNicholl, A. (2013). We're in trouble when social workers who love the job feel forced to quit. *Mad world: New and views on mental health and other stuff*. Retrieved from <http://www.communitycare.co.uk/blogs/mental-health/2013/09/were-in-trouble-when-social-workers-who-love-the-job-feel-forced-to-quit/>.
- Mitchell, W. (2015, February 24). Punishment dished out to unemployed is on par with our treatment of refugees. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from [http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/feb/24/punishment-dished-out-to-unemployed-is-on-par-with-our-treatment-of-refugees?CMP=soc\\_568](http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/feb/24/punishment-dished-out-to-unemployed-is-on-par-with-our-treatment-of-refugees?CMP=soc_568)
- Morley, C. (2014). *Practising critical reflection to develop emancipatory change: Challenging the legal response to sexual assault*. Surrey, UK: Ashgate.
- Morley, C. (2016a). Promoting activism through critical social work education: The impact of global capitalism and neoliberalism on social work and social work education. *Critical and Radical Social Work, 4*(1), 39–57.
- Morley, C. (2016b). Critical reflection and critical social work. *Doing critical social work*. Crows Nest, NSW: Allen & Unwin.
- Morley, C., & Ablett, P. (2016). A critical social work response to wealth and income inequality. *Social Alternatives, 35*(4), 20–26.
- Morley, C., Macfarlane, S., & Ablett, P. (2014). *Engaging with social work: A critical introduction*. South Melbourne, VIC: Cambridge.
- Mullaly, B. (2007). *The new structural social work* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Toronto, Ontario: Oxford University Press.
- Mullaly, B. (2010). *Challenging oppression and confronting privilege* (2nd ed.). Toronto, Ontario: Oxford University Press.
- Noble, C. (2016). Green social work: The next frontier for action. *Social Alternatives, 35*(4), 14–19.
- O'Brien, M. (2010). Social justice: Alive and well (partly) in social work practice? *International Social Work, 54*(2), 174–190.
- O'Brien, M. (2011). Equality and fairness: linking social justice and social work practice. *Journal of Social Work, 11*(2), 143–158.
- O'Brien, M. (2013). Social work registration and professionalism: Social justice and poverty—Fellow travellers or discarded passengers? *Aotearoa New Zealand Social Work, 25*(3), 50–59.
- Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). (2001). *The DAC guidelines poverty reduction*. Development Assistance Committee. Paris, France: OECD Publications, Retrieved from <https://www.oecd.org/dac/povertyreduction/2672735.pdf>
- Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). (2011). *Divided we stand: Why inequality keeps rising*. Paris, France: OECD Publications. Retrieved from [http://www.keepeek.com/Digital-Asset-Management/oecd/social-issues-migration-health/the-causes-of-growing-inequalities-in-oecd-countries\\_9789264119536-en#\\_WEiMKJ969Y](http://www.keepeek.com/Digital-Asset-Management/oecd/social-issues-migration-health/the-causes-of-growing-inequalities-in-oecd-countries_9789264119536-en#_WEiMKJ969Y)
- Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). (2012). *Income distribution and poverty*:

- By country – inequality. Retrieved from <https://www.stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?QueryID=66597>
- Ostry J., Berg, A., & Tsangarides C. (2014, February 14). *Redistribution, inequality, and growth*. IMF [International Monetary Fund] Staff Discussion Note. Retrieved from <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/sdn/2014/sdn1402.pdf>
- Oxfam. (2013). *The cost of inequality: How wealth and income extremes hurt us all*. [Oxfam media briefing]. Retrieved from <https://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/cost-of-inequality-oxfam-mb180113.pdf>
- Oxfam. (2016). An economy for the 1%: How privilege and power in the economy drive extreme inequality and how this can be stopped. [Oxfam briefing paper]. Retrieved from [https://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/file\\_attachments/bp210-economy-one-percent-tax-havens-180116-en\\_0.pdf](https://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/file_attachments/bp210-economy-one-percent-tax-havens-180116-en_0.pdf)
- Oxfam. (2017). An economy for the 99%: It's time to build a human economy that benefits everyone, not just the privileged few. [Oxfam briefing paper]. Retrieved from [https://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/file\\_attachments/bp-economy-for-99-percent-160117-en.pdf](https://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/file_attachments/bp-economy-for-99-percent-160117-en.pdf)
- Oxfam Australia. (2014). *Still the lucky country? The growing gap between rich and poor is a gaping hole in the G20 agenda*. Retrieved from [https://www.oxfam.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/2014-66-g20-report\\_fa\\_web-2.pdf](https://www.oxfam.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/2014-66-g20-report_fa_web-2.pdf)
- Parrott, L. (2014). *Social work and poverty: A critical approach*. Bristol, UK: Policy Press.
- Piketty, T. (2014). *Capital in the twenty-first century*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Perry, B. (2013). What do we know about income inequality in NZ? Extracts from the *2013 Household Incomes Report*, 16 July. Retrieved from [http://igps.victoria.ac.nz/events/Inequity%20Forum/InequalitySummary\\_Bryan\\_Perry\\_2013HIR.pdf](http://igps.victoria.ac.nz/events/Inequity%20Forum/InequalitySummary_Bryan_Perry_2013HIR.pdf)
- Powell, F. W. (2001). *The politics of social work*. London, UK: Sage.
- Rashbrooke, M. (2013). *Inequality: A New Zealand crisis*. Wellington, NZ: Bridget Williams Books.
- Reisch, M., & Andrews, J. (2001). *The road not taken: A history of radical social work in the United States*. New York, NY: Brunner Routledge.
- Richardson, D., & Denniss R. (2014). *Income and wealth inequality in Australia*. Policy Brief No 64, Australia Institute, Canberra. Retrieved from [http://www.tai.org.au/system/files\\_force/PB+64+Income+and+wealth+inequality+FINAL.pdf](http://www.tai.org.au/system/files_force/PB+64+Income+and+wealth+inequality+FINAL.pdf)
- Richardson, D., Denniss, D., & Grudnoff, M. (2014). *Auditing the auditors: The people's commission of audit*. The Australia Institute Policy Brief 61. Retrieved from <http://www.tai.org.au/sites/default/files/PB%2061%20Auditing%20the%20auditors.pdf>
- Rogowski, S. (2010). *Social work: The rise and fall of a profession?* Bristol, UK: The Policy Press.
- Roser, M. (2015). World poverty. Retrieved from <https://ourworldindata.org/world-poverty/>
- Sayer, A. (2016). *Why we can't afford the rich*. Bristol, UK: Policy Press.
- School of Public Health and Social Work. (2013). *Basic Income Guarantee Australia*. Faculty of Health, Queensland University of Technology. Retrieved from <http://www.basicincome.qut.edu.au>
- Scott, A. (2014). *Northern lights: The positive policy example of Sweden, Finland, Denmark and Norway*. Clayton, VIC: Monash University Publishing.
- Stiglitz, J. E. (2012). *The price of inequality*. New York, NY: Norton.
- Specht, H., & Courtney, M. (1994). *Unfaithful angels: How social work has abandoned its mission*. New York, NY: Free Press.
- Standing, G. (2011). *The precariat: The new dangerous class*. London, NY: Bloomsbury.
- Statistics New Zealand (Tatauranga Aotearoa). (2016, June 28). Household net worth statistics: Year ended June 2015. [Media release]. Retrieved from [http://www.stats.govt.nz/browse\\_for\\_stats/people\\_and\\_communities/Households/HouseholdNetWorthStatistics\\_MRYeJun15.aspx](http://www.stats.govt.nz/browse_for_stats/people_and_communities/Households/HouseholdNetWorthStatistics_MRYeJun15.aspx)
- Tseris, E. (2008). Examining these words we use: "Participation", "empowerment", and the child protection role. In R. Pockett & R. Giles (Eds.), *Critical reflection: Generating theory from practice* (pp. 30–44). Sydney, NSW: Darlington Press.
- United Nations. (2000, September 18). *United Nations millennium declaration*. [Resolution adopted by the General Assembly, Fifty-fifth session]. Retrieved from [http://www.un.org/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/55/2](http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/55/2)
- Vranken, M. (2005). Labour law reform in Australia and New Zealand: Once united, henceforth divided? *Revue Juridique Polynésienne/New Zealand Association of Comparative Law Yearbook*, 11, 25–41.
- Wallace, J., & Pease, B. (2011). Neoliberalism & Australian social work: Accommodation or resistance? *Journal of Social Work*, 11, 132–142.
- Wehbi, S., & Turcotte, P. (2007). Social work education: Neoliberalism's willing victim? *Critical Social Work*, 8(1), 1–9.
- Wilkinson, R., & Pickett, K. (2010). *The spirit level: Why equality is better for everyone*. London, UK: Penguin.
- World Bank. (2014). *Gross domestic product 2014*—World DataBank. Retrieved from <http://databank.worldbank.org/data/download/GDP.pdf>