

ARTICLE

Employing critical realism in times of crisis: a study of human rights and social justice in social work training in England and Spain

Empleando el realismo crítico en tiempos de crisis. Un estudio sobre los derechos humanos y la justicia social en la formación en trabajo social en Inglaterra y España

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Abstract

This paper discusses the implications of adopting a critical realist philosophical approach to social research; specifically, through a study on human rights and social justice in social work education in England and Spain. Critical realism, linked to both critical theory and a realist philosophy of social sciences, offers, it is argued, great potential to enhance the depth, rigor and critical values of

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social work research. Nevertheless, critical realism is underdeveloped in this field. Seeking to address this gap, the paper offers an introduction to the core tenets of critical realism and outlines the main methodological and practical implications of its use.

Resumen

Este artículo aborda las implicaciones de adoptar la aproximación filosófica del realismo crítico en la investigación social, concretamente en un estudio sobre los derechos humanos y la justicia social en la formación en trabajo social en Inglaterra y España. El realismo crítico, enfoque vinculado a la teoría crítica y a la filosofía realista de las ciencias sociales, ofrece un gran potencial para dotar de coherencia, profundidad, rigor y valores críticos a la investigación en el trabajo social. No obstante, el realismo crítico carece de desarrollo en este campo. Buscando contribuir a su desarrollo, el artículo ofrece una introducción a sus bases fundamentales y detalla las principales implicaciones metodológicas y prácticas de su uso en el estudio de referencia.

Palabras Clave:
trabajo social;
realismo crítico;
metodología;
derechos
humanos; justicia
social

Introduction

This article aims to provide an introduction to critical realism in social work research and to explain the implications of adopting this philosophical approach to social research in an empirical study of human rights (HR) and social justice (SJ) in social work education in England and Spain. It is argued that critical realism, an approach linked to both critical theory and realist philosophy of the social sciences, offers great potential for endowing social work research with coherence, depth, rigor and critical values. However, critical realism is scarcely developed in this field at the international level and particularly in Spanish-speaking countries. Therefore, it is hoped that the theoretical and practical aspects discussed in the article can contribute to the development of this approach in social work research and be useful for other researchers in different national contexts.

This article offers, first of all, a brief introduction to the reference study and a detailed introduction to the bases and fundamental ideas of critical realism, explaining the reasons for its choice as the philosophical and methodological foundation of this research. The

text then details some of the methodological and practical implications of adopting critical realism in the study, including a discussion of the steps and processes followed. Finally, it presents in a very summarized form some of the results of the research.

The research study

In order to focus this article on the philosophical framework of this study, critical realism, the text will limit itself to introducing as briefly as possible the context, objectives and research methods employed (as indicated, the results will be summarized at the end of the text). However, the full research (Martínez Herrero, 2017) is available in English in the virtual repository of Durham University. The study received approval from the Research Ethics Committee of this university, and was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) of the United Kingdom.

Research Context

As detailed below, framing this study within the philosophical framework of critical realism entailed taking into account and applying the main postulates of the critical paradigm of social research. One of them is that values and ideology cannot be separated from research processes. Therefore, and in contrast to the position of traditional positivist research (in both natural and social sciences), which advocates this separation and the search for objectivity, social research from critical theory consists of a “self-conscious critique” in which social researchers try to understand the ideology and epistemology that guide their research, as well as their own perspectives and subjectivity. As Kincheloe et al. (2017, p.243) point out, in the critical paradigm researchers “go into an investigation with their assumptions on the table, so that no one is confused about the epistemological and political baggage they bring with them.”

In accordance with the above, the following lines point out some data that could help contextualize this study and “put on the table” the author’s perspective and the origin of the motivations that gave rise to the design of this research and that mark several aspects of its development.

Thus, it is important to point out that the author, currently a social work teacher and researcher in England, studied Social Work in Spain and acquired her first professional experiences there as a social worker in municipal social services. This professional practice took place in the period when both the global economic crisis that began in



2008 and the first austerity measures in Spain were beginning to have serious effects on the lives of the most vulnerable population groups, as well as on the resources of public social services (Ioakimidis, Santos Cruz and Martínez Herrero, 2014), which could be observed and experienced first-hand in social services.

Practice in this context would sow in the author's mind a series of doubts and concerns about how she could or should, as a professional, materialize in practice the profession's ethical commitment to social justice and work to ensure the dignity and respect for the rights of users in such an adverse professional context. These concerns contributed to her decision to further her studies in social work at the graduate level in England. These studies brought, in fact, new knowledge and perspectives on human rights and SJ in social work and also represented a very different and complementary educational experience to that received in Spain. All this awakened in the author an interest in comparing research from both educational contexts, and continuing to expand knowledge about human rights and SJ in social work, motivating the development of the research project on which this text is based.

Aims of the study

The overall aims of this study on human rights and social justice in social work education in England and Spain were to: 1) explore how social work's global commitment to promoting and respecting the values of HR and SJ (as embodied in the declarations and agendas of international social work organizations such as the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) or the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW)) materialize in social work training in England and Spain; and 2) contribute to critical thinking about the role of HR and SJ in social work training. The more specific research objectives of the study were:

1. To study how the concepts of HR and SJ were understood with respect to social work in these two countries.
2. To study, from the perspective of critical theory, the ideology and possible governmental interests regarding HR and SJ in social work education in these two countries.
3. To study the mechanisms used to transmit the values and contents of HR and SJ to social work students in these two countries.



4. To develop a series of recommendations to help social work teachers to integrate HR & SJ in their regular teaching.

To achieve these objectives and answer a series of related research questions, we chose to employ critical realism as a philosophical framework, along with the following specific data collection methods:

1. An electronic survey addressed to social work students and teachers, sent to all institutions offering social work training in the two countries (a total of 224 valid surveys were received in response). This survey collected descriptive statistical data and a large number of short qualitative responses to open-ended questions.
2. A limited number of qualitative interviews (7) with social work faculty from one university in each country.

The Critical Approach in Social Research

In the context of the social sciences, the term “critical” is used today to refer to social research that explicitly seeks to address the oppression of human beings and to provide moral and philosophical foundations for social science, as opposed to the traditional positivist stance of the natural sciences, which would demand a quest for objectivity by separating scientific research and such moral foundations (Bohman, 2016; Kincheloe et al., 2017).

Sociology, whose origins date back to the late 19th century, was originally aligned with a positivist philosophy of the social sciences, assuming that this young discipline could adopt the method of the natural sciences to discover the prevailing scientific laws of society. However, positivism and its assumption that social scientists could and should separate observation and measurement of facts from values and theory was challenged by various schools of thought throughout the twentieth century. Critical theorists were part of the early currents of reaction against positivism in the social sciences (Bohman, 2016; Buch-Hansen and Nielsen, 2020).

Critical theory has traditionally been linked in the social sciences to Marxist work and thought originating in the Frankfurt School in the 1920s (Friedeburg, 2011; How, 2017). However, since its first formulations in the first half of the 20th century, critical theory has expanded widely across social science disciplines and interacted with numerous



intellectual traditions and social movements globally. This has led to the development of a variety of perspectives within critical social science, some of which may differ significantly from the strands of Marxist class analysis (Kincheloe et al., 2017). This would be the case, for example, with different feminist, post-colonialist or post-Marxist currents (Sim and Van Loon, 2009).

As we will see below, a fundamental particularity of the critical realism on which this article focuses is that, rather than being an alternative critical current, it consists of a philosophical and methodological perspective “on and for the social sciences” (Buch-Hansen and Nielsen, 2020, p.136) compatible with numerous theoretical perspectives and traditions of critical social science research such as those mentioned in the previous paragraph. The limits of this compatibility would be marked by the basic notions about the nature of social reality of critical realism (such as the existence of an external and stratified social reality) and its fundamental methodological principles of research, detailed in the next section. Thus, as Buch-Hansen and Nielsen (2020, p.141) state, “while Bhaskar was a Marxist, other key figures of critical realism such as Archer, Sayer or Lawson have not been”. Sayer’s position, for example, the authors explain, is post-Marxist and Lawson links critical realism both to the Marxist perspective and to other non-Marxist thinkers such as Veblen or Keynes.

Kincheloe et al. (2017, p.237) argue that, roughly speaking, contemporary critical social researchers are characterized by using their research work as a cultural or social critique and by sharing a series of postulates such as: that human thought is conditioned by the social and historical constitution of power relations; facts cannot be separated from values and ideology; capitalism affects (negatively) social relations; language is key in the construction of the experience of subjectivity; in societies, certain groups are privileged at the cost of the oppression of others; oppression manifests itself in many interrelated ways (on the basis of class, race, gender, sexual orientation, ability, culture, colonialism, religion, etc.).

Thus, critical social science, and especially critical social work, would be committed to social justice and human rights, would recognize the complexity of social problems, and would aim to uncover and confront their root causes, from their roots in the unjust and oppressive social structures prevailing in the neoliberal global order. This commitment is fully consistent with the global definition of social work (IFSW and IASSW, 2014), the ethical codes of the profession worldwide (Banks, 2006; Lundy, 2011), and the reference documents and messages of international social work organizations, including the global standards for social work education (IASSW and IFSW, 2020).



Social work thus understood is both a moral and technical activity, related to the study of social phenomena in order to transform the world and pursue emancipatory projects. To this end, social workers need access to quality knowledge and training, and must also employ the tacit knowledge and ethical reasoning necessary to interpret and manage the open and complex social realities in which they intervene (Pease, 2010).

Critical Realism as the philosophical framework for this research

In this study on human rights and SJ in social work training in England and Spain, we chose to use the more specific philosophical and methodological framework of critical realism, which, being situated within critical theory, was considered to fit particularly well with the moral commitments of social work and, in turn, offered great potential for facilitating the approach to the broad and complex object of study. Employing such a complex and underdeveloped philosophical framework in social work as critical realism was not without its difficulties (which will be discussed below). However, the notions and reasoning processes of critical realism made it possible to develop a broad and holistic, as well as coherent and deep, understanding of the field of research. Critical realism further endowed this research with solid philosophical (epistemological and ontological) foundations for the combination of multiple methods (electronic surveys and qualitative interviews) in this study and, it is argued, fruitfully guided the process of data collection and analysis, enabling answers to the questions posed and the achievement of the stated objectives. The following pages provide an introduction to critical realism.

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Critical realism: Definition and fundamental ideas

The origin of critical realism as a philosophical approach to the social sciences is attributed to the work of Roy Bhaskar in the 1970s. Critical realism, as will be seen below, redefines and links elements of positivism as well as interpretivism and constructivism. However, it is important to note that it would be philosophically and methodologically incompatible with the purest or most radical positions of these perspectives. A fundamental notion of critical realism, shared with positivism, is the assumption that there is an external social reality, independent of the perception of the subjects, which the social scientist seeks to discover by acquiring and accumulating increasing knowledge about this reality (Buch-Hansen and Nielsen, 2020). Discovering



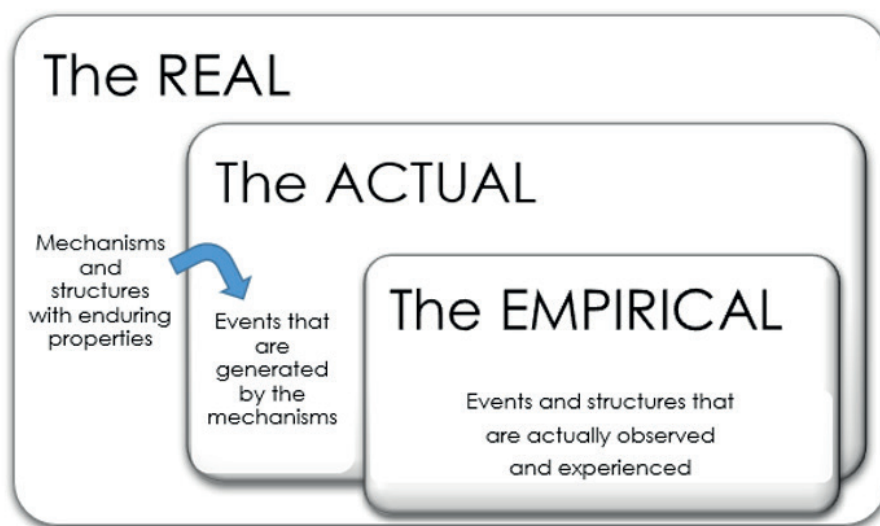
and understanding social reality makes it possible to generate changes in the status quo and pursue goals of social justice (Bhaskar, 1989).

Unlike positivism, however, critical realism rejects the idea that scientific knowledge obtained from the study of social reality directly reflects this reality (Bryman, 2016). Social reality, inaccessible through direct observation, consists of a “network of interacting forces, complex, multi-causal and formed by multiple layers” (Oliver, 2012, p.374) where social phenomena are the result of a series of “generative mechanisms” (Bhaskar, 1989) in interaction, in specific contexts.

The approach proposed by Bhaskar (1975), that social reality is stratified or divided into the three domains of “the real”, “the actual” and “the empirical” is another key foundation of the ontology (or theory of reality) of critical realism, and at the same time one of its most complicated ideas. In essence, the real (deepest) domain consists of enduring mechanisms and the deepest social structures, the actual domain consists of the events that such mechanisms activate or generate, and the empirical (and most superficial) domain consists of events that can be observed or experienced. To visually illustrate the three domains of reality proposed by Bhaskar, the following is a slightly simplified and translated version of a figure made by Mingers (2004, p.94).

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Figura 1: Bhaskar's Domains of Social Reality



Source: Mingers (2004). Translation and adaptation by the author

Craig and Bigby (2015, p.313) use the following example to explain Bhaskar's conceptualisation of the three layers of social reality.:

We can understand the real and actual domains by making inferences from the effects that are experienced. For example, if we were to observe a series of incidents in which single mothers are repeatedly denied access to the private housing [rental] market (empirical level), we might infer that there is some level of prejudice (actual level) operating against them. The “prejudice” is not seen, but inferred, and the proposition of its existence is tentative, since another unobserved factor, such as the fact that they have pets, could have led to their being denied access to housing (actual level).

Thus, the mechanisms and structures of the real domain and many events of the current domain are not observable, but can be inferred from the effects that are. However, in social reality, the relationships between (often unobservable) generative mechanisms -which may include language and subjective interpretations of particular situations (Nightingale and Cromby, 2002)-, are multidirectional and extremely complex. This makes it impossible from the perspective of critical realism for social scientists to pretend to explain and predict social phenomena through logic of linear causality. Therefore, human scientific knowledge of social reality, necessarily mediated by the inescapable “filters of language, individual interpretation and social contexts” (on which constructivist research perspectives focus), is based on provisional and incomplete explanations of it and it is accepted that the gap between the subjects' perspectival knowledge of reality and reality itself will always remain (Oliver, 2012, p.374).

However, it is precisely the complex causality and nonlinearity of social reality that opens the door to the possibility of designing and implementing a multiplicity of alternative interventions with the aim of achieving a desired social change (Robson and McCartan, 2016; Oliver, 2012). Therefore, in critical realism, different interpretations of the same social reality and alternative proposals on the best ways to intervene in it to promote social justice must be evaluated in light of real-world experiences and observations. The best ways to achieve social justice should, for Bhaskar, begin by trying to uncover the mechanisms (including false beliefs and discourses) that sustain exploitation and injustice (Bhaskar, 1986).

Interpretations and explanations about social reality are formulated in critical realism through a form of logical reasoning called retroductive reasoning, which involves making inferences about the underlying causal mechanisms that might be responsible

for the patterns observed in social reality (Bryman, 2016). The process of retrodution combines successive cycles of deduction (from theory to observations) and induction (from observations to theory), whereby it becomes increasingly firmly established which generative mechanisms might be giving rise to the social phenomena of interest (Robson and McCartan, 2016). Retroductive thinking involves asking, in relation to observed phenomena, “how can we explain the pattern of events we find?” (Robson and McCartan, 2016, p.32), or “what must be true for this to be so?” (Oliver, 2012, p.379).

Robson and McCartan (2016) clarify that in realist research, the term “theory” refers to proposals about mechanisms capable of generating observed events. The proposal of generative mechanisms tends to be “significantly speculative during the early cycles of retrodution, becoming more firm as the research progresses” (Robson and McCartan, 2016, p.371). While it has been proposed that retrodution is a research method in itself, the observation of the phenomena it requires can be done through different research methods (surveys, interviews, documentary analysis etc.), which may come from other research approaches or paradigms, such as positivism or constructivism (Oliver, 2012).

Several authors have highlighted that critical realism fits particularly well with research in practice-oriented, value-driven professions in open social systems and complex contexts, such as social work (Anastas 1998, cited in Robson and McCartan, 2016). However, the influence of critical realism, although growing (and as reflected in significant and relatively recent developments such as the launch of the international scientific Journal of Critical Realism in 2002), has so far been very limited in social science research in general and social work in particular (Buch-Hansen and Nielsen, 2020; Kjørstad and May-Britt, 2017; Craig and Bigby, 2015; Oliver, 2012).

Some of the explanations put forward in this regard point to the complicated and excessively theoretical language of many of the reference texts, starting with Bhaskar’s work (Pratt 1995, cited in Oliver, 2012); to the limited development of the methodological implications of putting critical realism into practice compared to the extensive methodological development of other traditional philosophical approaches in the social sciences such as positivism or constructivism (Lipscomb, 2008); or to the lack of examples of research projects in social work in which critical realism is employed (Craig and Bigby, 2015) -hence the interest in sharing this research experience from this approach.



Certainly, designing and carrying out this research project entailed these difficulties. It was not easy to find relevant literature on critical realism, so literature from other disciplines such as nursing (Lipscomb, 2008) or the field of information systems (Mingers, 2004) was used instead, and it was necessary to invest time and effort on the part of the author to reach a good understanding of critical realism, including understanding its main philosophical positions, its origins, and the methodological implications of incorporating this philosophical approach into this project. However, it was considered that the effort to face these difficulties would be worthwhile, considering that critical realism would bring great benefits to the research and taking into account the possibility of contributing with this work to bringing critical realism closer to social work research.

Integrating critical realism into the methodology of this research

More specifically, in order to integrate critical realism into the methodology of this research, a simplified version of the scheme of social research from critical realism formulated by Danermark et al. (2019) was used in the processes of data analysis and interpretation. This scheme is composed of six phases or steps, through which the authors claim it is possible to get from the concrete (phase 1) to the abstract (phases 2-5), finally returning to the concrete (phase 6).

The steps proposed by Danermark et al. (2019) are:

Phase 1: description of the event or situation we want to study.

Phase 2: analytical resolution - or separation of its components, aspects or dimensions.

Phase 3: abduction/theoretical redescription: interpretation and redescription of the components from hypothetical conceptual frameworks and theories about structures and relationships.

Phase 4: retroduction: based on the previous stage, searching for answers to the research questions.

Phase 5: comparison of the different theories and abstractions.

Phase 6: concretization and contextualization.

Danermark et al. (2019) indicate that their model should not be understood as a fixed template, but can be used flexibly. They recognize that the proposed stages may be intertwined and that researchers may have reasons for choosing to focus on some of them.

The simplified outline used in the data analysis and interpretation was as follows:

Stage 1: Description

Stage 2: Analytical resolution

Stage 3: Theoretical redescription (abduction) and retroduction

Stage 4: Concretization and contextualization

Stage 1: Description

Once the data collection through the electronic surveys and qualitative interviews was completed, the first step was to synthesize and describe the data. Specifically, on the one hand, the qualitative data from the electronic surveys and qualitative interviews were thematically coded and summaries of the data, illustrated with tables, were developed. On the other hand, descriptive statistical graphs were used to summarize and describe the quantitative data obtained from the electronic surveys.

Stage 2: Analytical resolution

In this stage, a deeper analysis of the qualitative data obtained in the interviews was carried out through a critical discourse analysis based on Fairclough's (2010) method of interdiscursive analysis, which made it possible to identify in the interviews a series of underlying discourses (shared and persistent ways of representing social realities and collective imaginaries) and social structures reflected or mentioned.

From this point on, the data from the electronic surveys and the interviews began to be used and presented together.

The combined exploration of the survey and interview data (already synthesized in the previous phase) made it possible to identify a series of incipient patterns, in relation to:

1. how the concepts of HR and SJ were understood with respect to social work in England and Spain.
2. the ideology and possible governmental interests regarding the role of HR and SJ in social work training in these two countries.
3. the mechanisms used to transmit the values and contents of HR and SJ to social work students in these two countries.



Based on the data obtained and the theoretical knowledge on the subject of the study developed up to that point of the research, it was possible to identify a series of broad areas of generative mechanisms with potential “explanatory power” (Danermark et al., 2019) on the similarities and differences found in England and Spain in relation to the previous points. Among these, three stood out and were selected for further study:

- The ideology underlying international social work ethical frameworks.
- The neoliberal ideology.
- Culture: a) the culture of the academic social work field; b) broader social cultural differences between England and Spain.

Stage 3: Theoretical redescription (abduction) and retroduction

Theoretical redescription involved interpreting the components or aspects of the object of study that had been identified from “conceptual frameworks and hypothesized theories about structures and relationships” (Danermark et al., 2019, p.129). Retroduction, on the other hand and as explained above, involved seeking explanations for the patterns of events encountered. Danermark et al. (2019) point out that, very often, the theory and concepts employed themselves provide adequate explanations, with theoretical redescription and retroduction being closely related. Therefore, during the interpretation of the research data, explanations from theory were sought first and only when adequate theoretical explanations could not be identified were new explanations of their own put forward, recognizing their provisional and speculative nature and making an effort to transparently indicate the reasoning processes that had led to them.

Stage 4: Concretization and contextualization

The “concretization and contextualization” stage is the final stage in Danermark et al.’s (2019, p.129) model for data analysis and interpretation and consists of “examining how different structures and mechanisms manifest themselves in concrete situations,” studying how they interact with each other “under specific conditions.” Given the more global comparative nature of this research, the processes of contextualization and concretization were present at all stages of the research process, playing a central role.

Notes on research quality criteria

Pease (2010, p.111) states that for social work research to be able to “promote social change and social justice ... (according to the moral imperatives of our profession),” social workers must seriously analyze the epistemological and political assumptions involved in their research practices:

We need to be clear about our own beliefs regarding the phenomena we are investigating and our relationships to them ... [and] think about the implications of our theories of knowledge and our structural and discursive locations on the ethics and politics of how we do research (p.111).

For this, D’Cruz and Jones (2014) assert that we need to be well versed in the criteria for quality in the research paradigm in which we position ourselves and ensure that we are conducting ethically and methodologically sound research.

As explained, this research was characterized by being framed within the epistemology of critical realism and was based on a multimethod strategy for data collection, using research instruments traditionally aligned with positivist (electronic surveys) and constructivist (qualitative interviews) research paradigms. However, the primarily interpretive (or qualitative) nature of the knowledge about human rights and social justice in social work education that this research contributes can be highlighted. Therefore, although the quality criteria of quantitative research (internal and external validity, objectivity, etc.) gained importance and were applied in relation to various aspects of the design and use of electronic surveys, the research quality criteria of qualitative methodology and philosophy were paramount in guiding and justifying the quality of this research.

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There is, however, much debate surrounding the most appropriate quality criteria for qualitative research (Bryman, 2016, p.387). The specific qualitative research quality criteria framework adopted was that proposed by Yardley (2000), focusing on the aspects of 1) context sensitivity, 2) engagement, rigor, transparency, and coherence, and 3) impact and significance. During the development of the study, the necessary steps were taken to ensure quality in relation to each of these aspects.

Research Results

The remaining sections of this article are then devoted to indicating some of the main findings of the research, the result of the joint interpretation of the data obtained in the surveys and interviews. It is important to note that in the original research report the results were presented extensively and systematically in two chapters or parts, following a structure marked by the four phases of the social research model presented above (which simplifies the work of Danermark et al., 2019). Part 1: Descriptive and analytical presentation of the data obtained in the surveys and interviews (stages 1 and 2). Part 2: Interpretation using existing theories and the author's hypotheses (abduction and retroduction respectively, stage 3). This interpretation was characterized by an emphasis on a continuous search for concretization and contextualization (stage 4). In the following sections of this article, for reasons of space and the need for synthesis, the results of all these stages will be integrated into a single discussion, focused on the research objectives. While it is important to keep in mind that this paper offers, necessarily, a very simplified version of the results, having to obviate many details about the contexts and in-depth discussions that would be relevant, it is expected to provide some interesting brushstrokes on the results and conclusions to which this research gave rise (full report of results in Martínez Herrero, 2017).

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How the concepts of HR and SJ are understood in social work training in England and Spain

The first objective of the research was to study how these concepts are understood in social work training in England and Spain. In this regard, several differences were found between the two countries. The descriptive analysis of the data from the surveys and interviews (stages 1 and 2) showed that in England, social work teachers and students tended to understand HR and SJ as distinct concepts and separate areas of knowledge. Teachers in particular had a very legal view of human rights, focusing on civil and political or “first generation” rights, and understood the role of social workers with respect to human rights to be focused on fulfilling their legal responsibilities in this area. They referred to social services' legal responsibilities under the UK Human Rights Act 1998 (Human Rights Act, 1998), which incorporates into UK domestic law the “first generation” human rights established by the European Convention on Human Rights. When interpreting these data (stages 3 and 4), it was striking that the existence of a specific national law on human rights, which nevertheless contemplated only a part of



them (civil and political rights), seemed to have enhanced the development of a limited, legal and individualistic view of the concept of human rights and its implications for social work, criticized by key authors in this field of study of social work such as Ife (2016) or Sewpaul (2016).

Continuing with the descriptive analysis (phases 1 and 2), in Spain, on the other hand, social work teachers and students understood the concepts of HR and SJ in a more interrelated way, either as part of the same continuum or as separate but intrinsically related concepts. For them, human rights included, in addition to the “first generation” civil and political rights, the rest of the individual and collective rights contained in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights of 1948. Educators and students in Spain tended to consider that human rights responsibilities were shared by governments, civil society and the professions, with social work in particular having a major responsibility in line with the mission of the profession as set out in the global definition of social work.

In relation to social justice, a variety of views existed in England, from a limited and individualistic concept whereby promoting social justice would consist of “helping those on the margins of society” (The Centre for Social Justice, CSJ, 2015, p.3) without considering the structural dimensions of social problems, to more radical conceptions focused on tackling the “public causes of private suffering” (in the words of a teacher interviewed in England). However, the participants in Spain expressed understanding and commitment from the profession to the structural, activist and preventive dimensions of social justice development.

Ideology and possible governmental interests regarding human rights and SJ in social work education in England and Spain

The second objective of the research consisted of studying, from the perspective of critical theory, the ideology and possible governmental interests regarding the teaching of human rights and SJ in social work training in England and Spain. This objective takes us fully into the field of theoretical redescription, retrodution, concretization and contextualization of the research results (phases 3 and 4 of the methodological model for research from critical realism employed).

Several issues were identified in relation to contemporary and historical governmental interests in the social work profession in both countries. With respect to Spain, an important aspect to highlight was the deep and complex historical interrelationship



between social work and Catholicism (Méndez-Bonito, 2005). In the case of England, the existence of a historical trajectory in social work, marked by constant attempts by the central government to reform and control the profession, was emphasized (Bamford, 2015).

Regarding the analysis of the ideology(ies) that would be influencing the way of understanding and materializing, in social work training, the commitment to HR and SJ, two ideologies were identified as particularly influential in social work training in both countries: 1) the neoliberal ideology and 2) the ideology underlying international social work ethical frameworks and ethical codes of the profession worldwide (Banks, 2006). This second ideology was referred to in the study as the “ideology of (international) social work ethics”.

In a critical realist analysis, these two ideologies can be considered deep generative mechanisms with the capacity to influence the way human rights and social justice are understood in social work, as well as the teaching practices of social work educators. Another area of generative mechanisms, which was identified as affecting how HR and SJ are understood and realized through teaching practices by mediating the effects of the above two ideologies, was cultural in nature: the prevailing norms, beliefs and values in the social work education systems in the two countries, along with broader national cultural patterns. Thus, the study argues for the idea that neoliberal and social work ethics ideology are contradictory (Higgins, 2015); as one gains acceptance in the profession, the other becomes less influential. The study provides explanations for the fact that neoliberal ideology has had a strong influence on social work training in England and a more moderate influence in Spain, while the influence of international social work ethic ideology has been and remains stronger in Spain than in England.

This research documented the fact that both the related literature (see Martínez Herrero, 2017) and the testimonies of the research participants reflected a great concern about the growing effects of neoliberalism on social work in England and about the increasingly oppressive nature of the profession in this country, whereas in Spain such concerns were reflected to a much lesser extent, and both teachers and students in Spain openly stressed the importance of resisting neoliberalism, seeing the profession as a key agent in the struggle for the advancement of human rights and SJ.

This revealed the importance, with the case of Spain as an example, of opposing the advance of neoliberalism in all areas of social work, through active engagement in the social work profession with an alternative ideology based on human rights and social justice and legitimized by the ethical codes of social work, as advocated during the last decades by the main global social work organizations and authors such as Dominelli, (2007), Ife (2016) or Sewpaul (2016).

Teaching practices and recommendations to transmit the values and contents of HR and SJ to social work students

The last two objectives of the research were: a) to study the mechanisms used to transmit the values and content of HR and SJ to social work students in England and Spain, and b) to develop a series of recommendations to help social work teachers integrate HR & SJ into their regular teaching.

A number of teaching practices were identified that, based on the experiences of the teachers and students participating in the research and the existing literature, would be of particular importance in teaching knowledge and values of HR and SJ to social work students, including in contexts increasingly marked by the challenges imposed by the influence of neoliberal ideology. To go into detail about each of these areas of teaching practice is not possible in this text, but we conclude by highlighting how they revolve around the importance of the following aspects:

1. To facilitate, through appropriate theoretical and legal frameworks, a deep, holistic and politically informed understanding of social problems.
2. To be aware of and teach about the history of the profession.
3. To teach about international social work and promote international collaboration, empathy and solidarity among students from different countries.
4. To include the experiences and perspectives of the users.
5. Support collective action and student activism.
6. Activities oriented to the struggle for social justice and human rights outside the classroom.
7. Teachers to act as role models for these values.
8. Create safe spaces (seminars, group activities, debates, supervision, etc.) for discussion, reflection and support for students.

These recommendations, considered and detailed in the research, would make it possible to address and confront social mechanisms and structures (including oppressive discourses and ideologies) contrary to human rights and social justice in all areas of social work.

Conclusion

Critical realism is a methodological approach to social research that is practically unexplored in social work research. However, there is great potential for synergy between the two perspectives. Critical realism and social work share an explicit commitment to social justice and seek to understand open, changing and complex social realities, the ultimate goal of both being to generate knowledge that enables the development of interventions capable of modifying problematic or oppressive social realities.

Subject to its own criteria of research quality, and not without its own limitations and difficulties (aspects discussed in this text), critical realism offers an alternative methodological approach to positivist research, allowing the study of social realities from a more holistic, flexible and speculative perspective that, as has been argued, is worth exploring in the field of social work.

The potential of critical realism acquires special relevance in the face of situations and research questions that, due to their complexity, do not fit with a methodology based on the exploration of research hypotheses (necessarily reductionist) and on the measurement, control and/or manipulation of variables. This article has offered a practical example of the use of critical realism in a study of a complex nature on human rights and social justice in social work training in Spain and England, together with an introduction to the foundations and methodology of this approach to social research. It is, however, content that is expected to be of interest and of use to social work research in other countries and contexts, particularly those of predominantly Spanish-speaking countries.

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