

Critical Social Work Education and Practice: An Investigation among Educators and practitioners in the Kurdistan Region

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Abstract:

This research aimed to investigate the extent to which critical perspective is applied in both social work education and practices in the Kurdistan region. Two primary questions guided this inquiry: firstly, to what extent is critical perspective applied in social work education? secondly, how do social work practitioners perceive their roles as change agents within their employing institutions? The study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining surveys and qualitative interviews as well as focus group discussions to gather comprehensive insights from 112 social work educators, students, and practitioners. The findings revealed that due to the stubborn rules and habits, changing how social work programs work in the region is quite difficult. The results also indicated that despite efforts to diversify teaching and evaluation methods, traditional techniques are still applied, which are not supportive to develop critical thinking skills among students. Additionally, social work practitioners think critically, but they don't always act on those thoughts as their institution's rules and habits make it hard for them to do so. The results show the need to revisit institutional policies and procedures to guarantee supportive institutional environments that empower social work educators and practitioners to not just think critically, but also put their critical thoughts into action. Future research should also delve deeper into the underlying factors contributing to the persistence of traditional teaching and evaluation methods within social work programs.

Key words: Critical thinking, social work, Kurdistan region, critical practice

Introduction:

The field of social work, is multifaceted approaches to addressing societal challenges, play a crucial role in promoting social justice and equity worldwide (International Federation of Social Workers, 2024; Payne, 2014). In the Kurdistan region (Iraq-KRI), which has a long history of war and political instability, as well as experiencing significant sociopolitical changes (Leezenberg, M., 2017), the importance of social work, particularly critical social work education and practice, becomes even more essential. The fact that social work as independent profession is still quite new in the Kurdistan region, having been established for approximately 15 years.

Emerging from years of conflict and recently financial crises, the region is now grappling with complicated issues including violence against women (Gill, et al., 2012; Hardi, C., 2013; Kanie, M, 2015; Begikhani & Gill 2016; Hardi, C., 2020), inequality and injustice (Kanie, M, 2018), youth anger, unemployment and migration (Palani, K, 2021a; Palani, K, 2021b), human rights violations (see Human Rights Watch, 2023 and UNAMI, 2021), demanding a strong social work response based on critical viewpoints.

However, despite the growing recognition of the importance of critical social work approaches globally (Leotti, S. M, 2022), the integration of such perspectives into social work education and practice in the Kurdistan region has not been exclusively investigated. In spite of being limited in number, the current literature on social work education and practice in the region tends to focus on providing a general overview of the establishment and evolution of the social work profession in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, along with the teaching methods utilized in social work education (Liedgren, P, 2015; Ghaderi, et al., 2021; Seed Foundation, 2021), with very little discussion on critical perspectives. Hence, this study aims to address this gap by exploring the state of critical social work education and practice in the Kurdistan region of Iraq. More precisely, by examining the intersection of critical perspective in social work education and practice within the specific context of Kurdistan region, this research is intended to answer the following questions;

- To what extent is critical thinking applied in social work education?
- How do social work practitioners perceive their roles as change agents within their employing institutions?

Literature review:**Theoretical framework:**

Critical theory suggests that societal structures and cultural assumptions created by dominant groups are the main causes of social issues, rather than individual psychological factors. It aims to liberate clients from these constraints by using interventions that recognize the social origins of their problems, rather than blaming them. Starting in the late 1990s, critical practice brought back radical ideas from the 1970s influenced by Marxism. It added ideas from feminism, anti-discrimination, empowerment, postmodernism, and social construction to be more complete. Critical practice does not follow conservative, liberal, neoliberal, or social democratic political views in social work. Instead, it looks at the big reasons behind social problems and works to fix inequality and oppression (Payne, 2014).

Scholars make distinction between three different approaches and focuses in social work: therapeutic, social order, and transformation (Payne, 2006). While these models exist, scholars pointed to the contradiction nature of the role of social workers. Social workers can help challenge unequal societies and empower oppressed people to improve their lives. They use knowledge and power from the government to assist in this effort. Although they serve the interests of the elite (if they only apply therapeutic model) and may inadvertently harm the working class, their work also raises awareness about oppression and inequality among working people (Corrigan and Leonard, 1978).

Relatedly, scholars such as Herz & Johansson (2011) suggested a discursive-narrative approach to social work. This implies a meta-theoretical perspective and ongoing self-critical evaluations. There is need for a continuous and critical discussion about methods, psychology, and levels of analysis. In order to avoid treating social problems as exclusively psychological phenomena, methods need to be adjusted to a social-psychological model of the relation between different levels of analysis and practices. Social workers often work with individuals, which can lead us to focus too much on psychological solutions. We believe it's important to always think about how social factors affect our decisions and the people we work with. Even though we're dealing with real people, social influences are always at play. These critical scholars differentiated between a therapeutic and a critical perspective on society as followings;

- **Individual vs. Society:** Therapeutic views focus on a person's thoughts, feelings, and growth, not looking at their social surroundings. Societal views see people as part of society and culture.
- **Context Awareness:** Therapeutic views often ignore social factors like class and gender, focusing only on personal experiences. Societal views think social contexts are important for understanding people.
- **Essentialism vs. Constructionism:** Therapeutic views believe people have fixed qualities. Critical views think people's identities are shaped by society and social influences.

Critical Social Work Education:

There is an ongoing debate about whether universities should just teach knowledge or help students learn how to think critically, and address societal issues through democratic discussions (Lim, 2011). Critical thinkers such as Freire (1970), argued that universities have the potential to be sites of social critique and activism, challenging existing power dynamics and advocating for social justice and equity.

While social workers need critical thinking to navigate the complexities of their field, critical thinking has become a major goal of every social work curriculum in other countries (Mathias, 2015). By enrolling in specialized courses, some think that students can improve their critical thinking skills, ultimately improving their effectiveness in their profession (Plath et al., 1999). Despite the fact that there is no investigation to exclusively look at the courses offered in social work departments in the Kurdistan region, taking a close look at the courses and their contents (See Ghaderi et al 2021), shows that most of the courses are well appropriate for critical perspective application and development of student's critical thinking skills.

How these courses are taught in social work departments has not been well investigated in the region. However, there are a few academic efforts as well as institutional assessment, which partially addressed it. In 2015, Liedgren for example, conducted a study examining the experiences of Swedish instructors who taught social work courses during the inception of the social work department at Salahaddin University in the region. This research delves into the pedagogical dimensions of the program, with particular emphasis on the employed teaching methodologies and approaches. The study revealed that instructors employed a variety of techniques to address teaching scenarios, categorizing them into three primary styles: guiding, therapeutic, and Socratic

(critical perspective). Notably, the study did not include Kurdish instructors who formed part of the teaching faculty, some of whom still continue to teach within the department.

Relatedly, Seed foundation (2021) conducted an assessment and partially highlighted the classroom learning environment, with focus on teaching style and overall classroom experience. The findings are mixed, educators reported that their teaching styles are active, interactive, and facilitative (indication for developing critical thinking skills). However, the students mentioned that the courses are mostly lecture-styles and not interactive enough. Other research about social work-related profession (namely sociology) also showed that traditional teaching methods (lecture-styles) are common in sociology departments at the universities in the region. Teaching and research in Kurdish universities lack focus on Kurdish society and culture (localization's absence). (Khedir & Salih, 2020).

Importantly, Ghaderi et al (2021) collection of research is a localization of knowledge production effort, which mainly focuses on social work in the Kurdistan region, offering both Kurdish and English versions of the compilation. Although this collection aims to localize social work within the region and provide resources in the local language (as a text book for students), the scholars have not consistently used Kurdish terms for concepts such as 'social workers' and 'clients,' as they addressed in the introduction of the book. Furthermore, upon closer examination of the chapters, it becomes evident that a certain number of the subjects are predominantly theoretical and lack contextualization. It appears that scholars, respectfully, relied heavily on their personal observations (without providing clarifications on their personal observation procedures). This could be the reason why they called it semi-academy in the introduction.

In brief, universities have the potential to address societal issues and nurture critical thinking skills, but this role is not guaranteed in Kurdistan due to very limited efforts to update (modernization) and adapt (localization) university courses, teaching methods as well as knowledge production initiatives.

Critical Social Work Practice:

Jones (2013) illustrates a good critical practitioner as someone who can investigate events to understand what happened, how it happened, and why? He considers different approaches and chooses the most suitable one. And what could have happened if they had chosen differently? This helps practitioners develop critical thinking skills and prepares them for future actions.

Relatedly, Pease, Allan, & Briskman (2020) argue that critical social work faces challenges due to differing viewpoints within the field, particularly regarding concepts like "social justice" and "empowerment." While once widely agreed upon, these terms now evoke varied interpretations. Critical social work emphasizes fair and transparent relationships between workers and those they assist, aiming to address injustices and expand options for marginalized individuals. Social workers advocate for others and seek to influence decision-makers.

Critical thinking is essential for social workers. Their job involves analyzing, interpreting, assessing, communicating, evaluating, and intervening using various sources of information while respecting the dignity and diversity of the people they serve (Deal & Pittman, 2009). Social workers often help individuals and families with evident social needs. However, critical theory emphasizes collective action, sometimes overlooking clients' immediate personal needs. This creates a tension between addressing individual and familial needs while also pursuing collective social justice (Scourfield, 2002).

Critical practitioners must grasp how powerful individuals' views and actions are shaped and how this affects those with less power. This helps them identify important power dynamics and use them to help service users. They also need to understand their own authority and that of their organizations. Understanding agency culture, including knowing whom to trust, when to offer support, finding creative solutions, interpreting policies, and dealing with practical challenges, helps critical practitioners apply their expertise effectively. Moreover, having political skills on a broader scale is crucial for making a significant impact on change (Jones, S, 2013).

Based on my best information, there is no specific research to explore critical social work practice in the context of the Kurdistan region. However, the assessment conducted by Seed foundation (2021) revealed that social work practitioners do not have sufficient critical thinking skills while practicing the profession with clients.

Methodology

The current study employed a mixed methods approach to gather comprehensive insights into the perspectives and experiences of social work educators, students, and practitioners in the Kurdistan region of Iraq.

The research sample comprised social work educators, students, and practitioners from the Kurdistan region of Iraq. Participants were recruited from the social work departments of Salahaddin University and Sulaymaniyah University, as well as practitioners who had graduated

from these departments. Specifically, the sample included: 20 social work students who engaged in three distinct focus group discussions-FGD; 6 educators who participated in a focus group discussion; 9 social work educators and practitioners who took part in semi-structured interviews; and 77 social work practitioners who completed an online survey.

Social work students in their third and fourth years were invited to voluntarily participate in the focus group discussions. Each session comprised 6-8 students. Furthermore, a separate focus group session was arranged for social work educators. The discussions, facilitated by the researcher, centered on themes related to critical social work education and critical pedagogy.

A survey was administered to social work practitioners in the Kurdistan region. The survey consisted of structured questions designed to gather quantitative data on various aspects of social work practice to see if critical perspective is employed. Researchers previously created instruments to assess critical thinking abilities (Gibbs et al., 1995), which educational institutions and instructors can use to track the development of critical thinking skills. Hence, this research utilized components of those measures to design the questionnaire.

Qualitative data from the focus group discussions and interviews were analyzed thematically. Themes were identified to capture the key findings and perspectives shared by participants. Quantitative data from the survey were analyzed using descriptive statistics to summarize the responses and identify trends among social work practitioners. Then, the qualitative and quantitative findings were triangulated to provide a comprehensive understanding of critical social work education and practice in the Kurdistan region. Themes identified from the qualitative analysis were compared with quantitative data to corroborate and enrich the findings.

Research limitations:

The practitioners included in the sample are from diverse sectors, each with its own unique roles and perspectives on critical matters. As a result, the findings may not be generally applicable to all sectors. The position of the researcher as a social work educator in the social work department at Salahaddin University may have also influenced how this research was conducted, especially in the phase of data collection, among participants from the same university, respectfully.

Findings and discussions:

Departments Assimilated but have Potential for Transformation:

The findings indicate that the social work departments in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) are closely intertwined with the broader education system. Developments/decline within the education and higher education sectors significantly impact the social work departments and their programs. However, institutional bureaucracy and entrenched routines limit the departments' freedom and support for making remarkable changes to program structures and assessment methods. Educators predominantly rely on exams as the primary means of assessing students' capacity and skill development, despite efforts to prioritize alternative assessment techniques. While there are initiatives to introduce other assessment methods, their effectiveness remains limited. Educators have highlighted the "Bologna system" as a novel approach aimed at diversifying teaching and assessment strategies. However, there is a consensus that this system requires further preparation before implementation. Moreover, educators have expressed concerns about the broader educational landscape, citing a lack of support to change from banking to problem posing education. Educators provided various examples illustrating how university-level policies and procedures impose restrictions on critical thinking skills within departments and among educators. Educators stated things like;

- “Sometimes, we as lecturers do not have any other choice except practicing banking education system...”(A male SW educator with 12 years teaching experiences)
- “...We don’t have much time and space to do group activities...” (A female SW educator with 12 years teaching experiences)
- “... we may all know that our grading system can sometimes disadvantage critical students...” (A male SW educator with 10 years teaching experiences in social work)

They emphasized that the issue extends beyond solely relying on exams to evaluate students' abilities. It also involves limitations on the types of questions instructors can ask and the provision of ideal answers for those questions. Furthermore, the supervision of research projects was highlighted as another area of concern regarding the imbalance of power dynamics between students and educators. Students recounted instances where certain supervisors imposed their own ideas without considering the concerns of the students or their classmates. This was evident in both the selection of research project topics and the manner in which the research was conducted.

These findings are consistent with the results of previous assessment conducted by Seed foundation(2021), which highlighted the departments structure and bureaucratic procedures as well as how participatory process in decision making can be strengthened.

Role model critical educators:

Despite the widespread influence of the banking system in education, there are still inspiring educators who profoundly influence students' thinking. Many participants noted the presence of charismatic educators in both departments who actively encourage and practice critical perspective. These educators critique the banking system for preventing creative ideas but remain optimistic about positive change. Students and practitioners fondly remember these educators and appreciate their impact, often expressing sentiments like;

- "There are educators who helped me see the world differently." (A 4th stage female student, from a FGD)
- "She inspired me and I always wish to be like her..." (A 3rd stage female student, from a FGD)
- "I am grateful for what he did for us, after years, I still remember his comments..." (A male SW practitioner, from semi-structured interview)

Through focus group discussions (mainly with students) and interviews with educators, it became evident that critical educators are typically those who actively engage with the community initiatives and have undergone critical thinking courses. The perspective gained from experiences plays a significant role in critical social work education, impacting both students and educators effectively. Educators possessing these characteristics smoothly articulated the significance of critical thinking, its components, and methods for its development.

Despite the presence of a quality assurance system intended to monitor educators' performance, educator's values still govern their practice more than anything else. Despite being seen as detrimental to the education system, this situation has provided an opportunity for critical educators to emerge. The impact of the critical educators were illustrated in different examples students narrated.

- "...It affected us in a way that made us to be very sensitive and expect a lot from others..." (A 4th stage female student, from a FGD)
- "... When I think back about my life during high schools and before, I understand how oppressed we were..." (A 4th stage female student, from a FGD)

The Majority's Passivity and the Minority's Critical Perspective:

Regardless of the fact that educators have their insights on critical thinking and its elements, they are still struggling why critical perspective is absent among students. The educators made a link between the absence of critical thinking with the reality. In other words, educators mainly attributed the passiveness of students to the wider system like political system, education system, the students themselves without pointing to their responsibilities as an active actor in this process. They stated things like;

- "...critical thinking is not reflected in education system..." ...” (A female SW educator with 10 years teaching experiences, from a semi-structured interview)
- "...part of the problem is students themselves that they are not interested..."...” (A female SW educator with 12 years teaching experiences, from a FGD)
- "...students now a day do not read and they don't have information, that is why they are not critical..." ...” (A female SW educator with 11 years teaching experiences, from a FGD)
- "...once they are getting to university, they are already gone and we cannot effectively educate them to be critical..." (A female SW educator with 12 years teaching experiences, from a FGD)
- "I can see that students in general do not have potentiality to develop critical thinking." (A female SW educator with 7 years teaching experiences, from a FGD)

Regardless of these expressions, educators very rarely criticized themselves for being a reason for this. Educators intentionally or unintentionally didn't touch upon their responsibilities to be part of the issue of the passiveness of students. However, they have enough freedom to design their courses (Seed Foundation, 2021). Regardless of what mentioned above, there are still a minority group of students who are critical and were able to clearly criticize the entire society, education system, educators, and to some extent themselves as students. This narrative was observed in all FGDs and students in stage three and four stated things like;

- "... we are not educated in or society to say 'No'..."
- "... our teachers mainly ignore our personal perspective not only in class discussions, but also what we write in exams..."
- "...we as students are responsible, it is not only teachers and the system..."

Being open-minded is a fundamental aspect of critical thinking; however, some students in the departments exhibited behaviors indicating a lack of openness. A few students showed a lack of support for individual freedoms and failed to respect opposing perspectives of their classmates. This issue has been highlighted in the assessment conducted by Seed Foundation (2021). While this poses a challenge for educators, it also presents an opportunity from a critical perspective. Interestingly, concerns were also raised about educators not being open-minded. Several participants, particularly practitioners who had graduated from social work departments, mentioned instances where social work educators were intolerant of ideas contrary to their own. Even years after graduation, these practitioners recalled how educators treated them and their classmates. For example, practitioners recounted stories of students being removed from class for expressing dissenting views, facing repercussions for disagreeing with educators in class, or failing exams after criticizing a particular lecturer or course. Respectfully, educators themselves admitted for practicing banking system as well

- “I tried so much to motivate students, unfortunately, it didn’t work and they stopped me, now I am practicing the traditional model of teaching as I used the new models for 5 or 6 years.” .”
(A female SW educator with 7 years teaching experiences, from a FGD)

It is really questionable that If resistance is an element of critical thinking, how educators can be affected that much to change their teaching styles!!!

Critical mind, but limitedly reflected in action:

The survey findings indicate that social work practitioners adopt a critical perspective rather than a therapeutic one when analyzing society, problems, and the position of clients. The majority of respondents (76.6%) attribute problems to institutional and structural conditions, such as laws, values, and rules. Moreover, a significant proportion (81.9%) believe that changing the political, social, economic, and cultural reality is crucial for solving these issues. Additionally, 65% of respondents view clients as victims of the societal norms and regulations that influence their thoughts and behaviors. These findings are consistent with insights from interviews with social work practitioners, who highlighted various observations:

- “the political system in KRI does not support critical thinking,...” (A male SW practitioner with 3 years experiences, from a semi-structured interview)
- “our education system reflects the political system...” (A female SW practitioner with 5 years experiences, from a semi-structured interview)

- “ We do not teach our kids in our families to be critical...” ...” (A female SW practitioner with 6 years teaching experiences, from a semi-structured interview)
- “ ...we are educated to think in the way that whatever teachers, politicians, parents say is true...” ...” (A male SW practitioner with 3 years experiences, from a semi-structured interview)
- “ kids grow up without having freedoms in families, schools, even among friends...” (A male SW practitioner with 5 years experiences, from a semi-structured interview)

These statements collectively show social work practitioners' deep understanding of the societal factors influencing clients' personalities and problems. Practitioners recognize that clients' issues are intricately connected to broader cultural and societal contexts. At the institutional level, a significant majority of practitioners (%89.6) expressed their critical perspective believing that “change is necessary” and indicating their willingness (either always willing or to some extent) to participate in initiatives aimed at changing the reality of their institutions (change of the policies, procedures, and institutional staff). Among the reasons cited for this willingness included “it is my responsibility as a social worker to participate in any initiative for change,” which represented (%23.4) of the sample. the belief that “there is always room for improvement” (28.6%), “optimism about the potential positive outcomes of change” (11.7%), “disagreement with the status quo” representing (2.6%) of the respondents, and “a combination of these reasons” (31.2%). Only a small fraction of the sample (2.6%) expressed no willingness to participate in such initiatives. Despite holding a critical mindset, this perspective does not consistently translate into tangible actions. Put simply, although practitioners may have the capacity for critical thinking, this does not always manifest in their behavior. Specifically, 22.1% of practitioners admitted to never participating in initiatives aimed at changing the reality of their institutions, while 9.1% reported participating in such initiatives only once. To gain a better understanding of their awareness and critical responses, practitioners were also questioned about whether they had ever felt their rights were violated by the management staff of their institution, and if so, whether they had chosen to ignore it. A majority, 76.6% of the respondents, reported experiencing violations of their rights by institution management staff, with approximately half of them, around %49.4, admitting to ignoring these violations and not confronting the perpetrators.

Although practitioners are conscious of their rights and recognize when they're violated, they tend to be passive in defending and asserting these rights. This aligns with what practitioners shared during qualitative interviews. They recounted various instances where they encountered challenges while serving clients and felt compelled to remain silent. For instance, a social work practitioner from a private school shared her experience:"

"I once had a student's case at my school where I was helping to resolve an issue. While working on it like any other case, the student's parents threatened me. Despite it being my duty as a social worker to handle such cases, the parents ended up suing me. Although the school's management knew my rights were violated, they told me to stay silent and not take action against the parents."

Similar stories were shared by other practitioners as they stated things like;

- "...If I spoke out, I would lose my job..."
- "...if I say anything, school staff would hate me..."
- "...I didn't react to it, because I would pay a price for it as my friends..."

These examples illustrate that social work practitioners often fail to assert their rights, which contradicts the principles of a critical perspective framework. In essence, if we view these practitioners as oppressed, it becomes their responsibility not only to liberate themselves but also to help liberate their oppressors (Freire, 1970).

It's important to note that practitioners are often constrained by the policies and regulations of their institutions, preventing them from fully adhering to social work principles. A significant portion of practitioners (33%) indicated that their institutions do not support them when they express criticism. Additionally, about half of the participants (49%) reported facing interference from others, while 48% stated that they lack complete freedom to work according to their preferences. At the client interaction level, practitioners predominantly adopt a therapeutic approach. When asked how they typically assist clients with their issues, the majority (52%) indicated providing psychological support. Moreover, when questioned about whether they would sacrifice themselves for their clients, a considerable portion (31%) responded negatively. Regarding self-reflection on missed opportunities to aid their clients, a significant number of practitioners (39%) admitted to never blaming themselves for such situations. These findings suggest that while social work practitioners possess a critical perspective, critical actions are somewhat lacking.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, the research findings offer valuable insights into the state of social work departments in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI) and their integration with the broader education system. While the departments demonstrate potential for transformation, they face challenges stemming from institutional bureaucracy and entrenched educational norms. Despite efforts to diversify assessment methods, reliance on exams persists, hindering students' holistic skill development. Critical educators play a pivotal role in challenging traditional teaching practices and inspiring students to adopt a critical perspective. However, systemic barriers within the education system limit their influence.

Moreover, the research highlights a discrepancy between educators' insights on critical thinking and students' passivity towards it. While educators attribute this to systemic issues, they often overlook their role in fostering critical thinking among students. Despite institutional constraints, social work practitioners exhibit a critical perspective towards societal issues, yet this mindset does not consistently translate into tangible actions. Barriers such as institutional policies and limited freedoms hinder their ability to advocate for change effectively.

Hence, it can be recommended that revisiting institutional policies and reviewing procedures are assignments should be accomplished by decision makers in higher education to decentralize decision making process and ensure that there is a supportive environment for social work education and practice in KRI. This should enable educators in social work departments accordingly to prioritize initiatives to diversify assessment methods and support critical educators in challenging traditional teaching practices. Additionally, efforts should be made to empower social work practitioners to assert their rights and advocate for change within their institutions. This should include establishing a particular asocial for social worker in KRI to ensure there is an institutional support for empowerment and advocacy. Moreover, knowledge-production efforts in future should narrow down its focus into critical perspective development at different stages (pre and during university courses) as well as into critical perspective application in different sectors of social work practice.

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