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CRITICAL THEORY AND CRITICAL REFLECTION IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION IN KAZAKHSTAN

According to global ethical principles of social work, social workers are called upon to challenge stigmatization, discrimination, oppression and violation of human rights in all forms. Considering Kazakhstan's unique cultural context, Social Work faces challenges related to the need to integrate Global professional standards and local socio-cultural norms. In this regard, critical theory and critical reflection are becoming the most important components of social worker training. This research aims to analyze the integration of critical theories and the development of critical reflection in educational programs on social work in Kazakhstan, with an emphasis on emerging ethical contradictions and strategies used by teachers. The study involved 14 teachers (n = 14) from seven universities in Kazakhstan. The methods of in-depth interviews and reflective thematic analysis were used. Analysis of qualitative data has shown that critical theories are applied fragmentally and often intuitively, while feminist theory is the most recognizable. According to the teachers, the discussion of stigmatization, discrimination and gender inequality is actively supported, while the topics of power and hierarchy are perceived by them as politicized and irrelevant for social work. In addition, the concepts of critical thinking and critical reflection are confused. The authors emphasize the need for institutional support and improving the competence of social work teachers for the systematic implementation of critical education, contributing to the formation of social sensitivity and professional self-awareness of future social workers. The conducted research contributes to the development of the theoretical and methodological base of critically oriented social work education in Kazakhstan. The practical significance of the results lies in the possibility of their use in the development of curricula, teacher training and the formation of educational policy in the field of social work in Kazakhstan and other countries with a similar cultural context.

Keywords: critical reflection, critical theory, social work education, professional ethics, social justice, cultural values.

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Қазақстандағы әлеуметтік жұмыс біліміндегі сыни теория және сыни рефлексия

Әлеуметтік жұмыстың жаһандық этикалық принциптеріне сәйкес, әлеуметтік қызметкерлер стигматизацияға, кемсітушілікке, қысымға және адам құқықтарының бұзылуына барлық нысандарда қарсы тұруға шақырылады. Қазақстанның бірегей мәдени контекстінде әлеуметтік жұмыс әлемдік кәсіби стандарттар мен жергілікті әлеуметтік-мәдени нормаларды интеграциялау қажеттілігіне байланысты қиындықтарға тап болады. Осыған байланысты сыни теория мен сыни рефлексия әлеуметтік қызметкерді дайындаудың маңызды компоненттеріне айналады. Осы зерттеудің мақсаты сыни теориялардың интеграциясын талдауға және мұғалімдер қолданатын этикалық қайшылықтар мен стратегияларға баса назар аудара отырып, Қазақстандағы әлеуметтік жұмыс бойынша білім беру бағдарламаларында сыни рефлексияны дамыту. Зерттеуге Қазақстанның жеті университетінен 14 оқытушы (n = 14) қатысты. Тереңдетілген сұхбаттасу және рефлексиялық тақырыптық талдау әдістері қолданылды. Сапалы деректерді талдау сыни теориялардың фрагменттік және жиі интуитивті түрде қолданылатынын көрсетті, ал феминистік теория ең танымал болып табылады. Мұғалімдердің пікірінше, стигматизация, кемсітушілік және гендерлік теңсіздік мәселелерін талқылауға белсенді қолдау көрсетіледі, ал билік пен иерархия тақырыптарын олар саясаттандырылған және әлеуметтік жұмыс үшін маңызды емес деп қабылдайды. Сонымен қатар, сыни тұрғыдан ойлау және сыни рефлексия ұғымдары

болашақ әлеуметтік қызметкерлердің әлеуметтік сезімталдығы мен кәсіби өзін-өзі тануын қалыптастыруға ықпал ете отырып, сыни білім беруді жүйелі түрде жүзеге асыру үшін әлеуметтік жұмыс мұғалімдерінің институционалдық қолдауы мен құзыреттілігін арттыру қажеттілігін атап көрсетеді. Жүргізілген зерттеу Қазақстандағы әлеуметтік жұмыс бойынша сыни бағдарланған білім берудің теориялық және әдістемелік базасын дамытуға үлес қосады. Алынған нәтижелердің практикалық маңыздылығы оларды оқу жоспарларын әзірлеу, оқытушыларды даярлау және мәдени контексті ұқсас Қазақстанда және басқа елдерде әлеуметтік жұмыс саласында білім беру саясатын қалыптастыру кезінде пайдалану мүмкіндігінде жатыр.

Алынған нәтижелердің практикалық маңыздылығы оқу жоспарларын әзірлеуде, мұғалімдерді даярлауда, Қазақстанда және мәдени контекстке ұқсас басқа елдерде әлеуметтік жұмыс саласындағы білім беру саясатын қалыптастыруда қолдану мүмкіндігі болып табылады.

Түйін сөздер: сыни рефлексия, сыни теория, әлеуметтік жұмыс білімі, кәсіби этика, әлеуметтік әділеттілік, мәдени құндылықтар.

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Критическая теория и критическая рефлексия в образовании социальной работы в Казахстане

В соответствии с глобальными этическими принципами социальной работы, социальные работники призваны бороться со стигматизацией, дискриминацией, угнетением и нарушением прав человека во всех формах. В условиях уникального культурного контекста Казахстана социальная работа сталкивается с проблемами, связанными с необходимостью интеграции глобальных профессиональных стандартов и местных социокультурных норм. В связи с этим критическая теория и критическая рефлексия становятся важнейшими компонентами подготовки социального работника. Целью настоящего исследования является анализ интеграции критических теорий и развитии критической рефлексии в образовательных программах по социальной работе в Казахстане, с акцентом на возникающие этические противоречия и стратегии, используемые преподавателями. В исследовании приняли участие 14 преподавателей (n = 14) из семи университетов Казахстана. Были использованы методы глубинных интервью и рефлексивного тематического анализа. Анализ качественных данных показал, что критические теории применяются фрагментарно и часто интуитивно, в то время как феминистская теория является наиболее узнаваемой. По словам преподавателей, обсуждение стигматизации, дискриминации и гендерного неравенства активно поддерживается, в то время как темы власти и иерархии воспринимаются ими как политизированные и не имеющие отношения к социальной работе. Кроме того, понятия критического мышления и критической рефлексии путаются. Авторы подчеркивают необходимость институциональной поддержки и повышения компетентности преподавателей социальной работы для систематического внедрения критического образования, способствующего формированию социальной чувствительности и профессионального самосознания будущих социальных работников. Проведенное исследование вносит вклад в развитие теоретической и методической базы критически ориентированного образования по социальной работе в Казахстане. Практическая значимость полученных результатов заключается в возможности их использования при разработке учебных планов, подготовке преподавателей и формировании образовательной политики в области социальной работы в Казахстане и других странах со схожим культурным контекстом.

Ключевые слова: критическая рефлексия, критическая теория, образование в области социальной работы, профессиональная этика, социальная справедливость, культурные ценности.

Introduction

Understanding social work as a socially constructed field suggests that its content and forms depend on cultural values, social norms, and the historical context of a particular society. This means that social work practices are not universal but must adapt to the local context in order to respond more effectively to the needs of the community (Gray, 2013).

In Kazakhstan, the development of social work takes place in a specific cultural context characterized by collectivist attitudes, re-traditionalization and reviving Islamic influence, previously suppressed during the Soviet period (Kudaibergenova, 2018; Malik, 2019). The country's historical heri-

tage, including its nomadic lifestyle, has shaped moral guidelines based on interdependence, respect for authority, and social hierarchy – values that continue to influence social interactions today (Altayev, 2021; Kabakova, 2013).

However, while ensuring the preservation of identity and continuity, certain cultural norms can contribute to stigmatization, social exclusion, and increased inequality. Such manifestations hinder the realization of the key values of social work – social justice, equality and inclusion. This creates a situation in which social workers and teachers find themselves caught between cultural expectations and global professional norms (Mustafina, 2024). In this context, critical reflection is needed as a way to identify and analyze patterns of oppression, discrimination, and power imbalance present both in client situations and in one's own professional attitudes (Fook, 2013).

Kazakhstan's professional regulation of social work emphasizes the importance of preserving and respecting cultural and historical traditions, reflected in the Norms of Professional Ethics of Social Workers (Order of the Minister of Labor and Social Protection, 2022). International professional standards, including the Global Definition of Social Work (IASSW & IFSW, 2014) and the Global Statement of Ethical Principles (IFSW, 2018), simultaneously emphasize the need to confront cultural practices that promote oppression, stigmatization, or exclusion. Consequently, social workers should be able to critically reflect on both individual situations and the broader cultural and structural context in which they work (Walker, 2021).

Literature review

It is particularly important for social workers to be familiar with critical theories and able to apply them in their practice. Critical theories originating in the Frankfurt School are a set of theoretical approaches aimed at identifying, analyzing and transforming social structures that reproduce inequality, oppression and injustice. They are united by a focus on social criticism, a rejection of the neutrality of knowledge and a desire for the emancipation of marginalized groups. Unlike traditional (positivist) theories, critical theories view knowledge as ideologically and contextually conditioned. (Brookfield, 2005).

These foundations underpin critical reflection in social work, which serves as an essential element of professional awareness and practice. Unlike general reflection, critical reflection involves understanding experiences not only on a personal level, but also in the context of structural, cultural, and political influences. It aims to identify hidden assumptions, ideologies, and power relationships that shape both professional behavior and the social reality of clients (Fook & Askeland, 2007; Fook & Gardner, 2013). Thus, critical reflection serves not only as a means of professional development, but also as an instrument of social transformation – it promotes awareness of one's own position in the hierarchies of power, reveals the internal contradictions of professional practice and allows working with inequality, discrimination and social injustice in deeper forms.

In international practice, social work actively integrates critical reflection as a key element of professional training. In countries with developed academic traditions, such as the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada, and the Scandinavian countries, critical reflection is incorporated into educational standards, professional codes, and practical models (Walker, 2021; Reid, 2024). For example, in Australia it is considered a necessary condition for professional integrity (AASW, 2020, 2023), and in the UK its systematic application contributes to the formation of sustainable, meaningful and socially just practices (Fook & Askeland, 2007).

Meanwhile, in Kazakhstan, critical reflection– both as a theoretical concept and a practical tool– continues to occupy a marginal position in academic and professional discourse. Despite the gradual development of social work as an academic discipline, elements of critical theories and critical reflection are practically not integrated into the training and daily activities of specialists. The lack of research aimed at understanding these approaches in the context of Kazakhstan's socio-cultural specifics makes it difficult to develop a local model of social work that is sensitive to issues of power and justice.

The aim of this study was to examine the perception of critical theory (CT) and critical reflection (CR) by social work teachers in Kazakhstan as significant and applicable components of professional training, with an emphasis on identifying the potential and limitations of their integration into the content of educational programs (EP).

Materials and methods

The study was guided by three research questions: (1) How are critical theories integrated into social work education programs in Kazakhstan? (2) What contradictions do students encounter between

the professional ethical principles of social work and the sociocultural norms of Kazakhstan, and how are these issues addressed in the educational process? (3) What strategies are employed in educational programs to foster critical reflection among students, grounded in the principles of critical theory?

The study was conducted as part of the dissertation research of the first author (educational program "8D11401 – Social Work", Department of Sociology and Social Work of Al-Farabi Kazakh National University) under the scientific supervision of the second and third authors from February to May 2025.

Participants and Sampling

A purposive sampling was used to select the participants. The study involved 14 teachers from seven universities in Kazakhstan, teaching courses related to social work. The main criterion for inclusion was the experience of teaching in higher education. Among the participants were both specialists with Bachelor's and Master's degrees in Social Work (BSW, MSW), as well as representatives of related fields such as sociology, pedagogy and archival studies. Teaching experience ranged from 1 to 24 years, which made it possible to cover the views of specialists at different stages of the professional path. Both Russian and Kazakh-speaking teachers were represented, which ensured the linguistic and regional diversity of the sample. The table below summarizes participants' characteristics (Table 1).

This qualitative study used Braun and Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis (Byrne, 2022) to explore educators' perspectives on the integration of critical theory in social work education in Kazakhstan.

Table 1 – Participant characteristics

Participant	University & City	Qualifications	Work experience (years)	Language of instruction
P1	L.N. Gumilyov ENU, Astana	BSW, MSW	3	Kazakh
P2	L.N. Gumilyov ENU, Astana	BSW, MSW	5	Russian
P3	Narxoz University, Almaty	MSW	2	Russian
P4	Narxoz University, Almaty	BSW, MSW	2	Kazakh
P5	Narxoz University, Almaty	Pedagogy	19	Kazakh
P6	Buketov University, Karaganda	BSW, MSW	24	Russian
P7	Buketov University, Karaganda	BSW, MSW	4	Kazakh
P8	Buketov University, Karaganda	BSW, MSW	18	Russian
P9	Kazpotrebsoyuz University, Karaganda	BSW, MSW	3	Russian
P10	Auezov University, Shymkent	Sociology	2	Kazakh
P11	Esil University, Astana	BSW, MSW	3	Kazakh, Russian
P12	Toraighyrov University, Pavlodar	BSW, MSW	6	Russian
P13	Al-Farabi KazNU, Almaty	Archival Studies	1	Russian
P14	Kazakh Women's Pedagogical University, Almaty	Sociology	7	Kazakh

Data Collection

To collect qualitative data, in-depth interviews (n = 14) were conducted based on interview guide that included 12 open-ended questions. The interviews focused on teachers' understanding of critical theory, how it is taught and integrated into training courses, as well as the presence of contradictions between professional ethics and socio-cultural characteristics that arise during the learning process. In addition, the methods to foster students' critical reflection were discussed. Examples of questions: What critical theories do you apply in your teaching practice and how? Are there any contradictions between professional ethical principles and sociocultural norms of Kazakhstan in the learning process? How do you discuss such cases with students? How do you help students understand how their personal views and stereotypes can influence their work in the social sphere? How are the contents and methods aimed at developing critical theory and

critical reflection implemented in your educational program?

The interview guide was prepared in both Kazakh and Russian; each interview was conducted in the language preferred by the participant.

Data analysis

Audio recordings of in-depth interviews were transcribed verbatim. Transcripts were prepared in the original language of the interview (Kazakh or Russian) to preserve semantic and cultural nuances. The translation into English was carried out at the stage of analytical writing, as needed. The data analysis was carried out using Braun and Clark's reflexive thematic analysis (Byrne, 2022), which is a flexible approach to identifying, describing, and interpreting semantic themes across a qualitative dataset.

Results and discussion

Thematic analysis of the data revealed four key themes: inconsistent application of critical theories; ambiguity of values tension; opportunities and limitations for developing critical reflection; critical reflection in curriculum design (Figure 1).
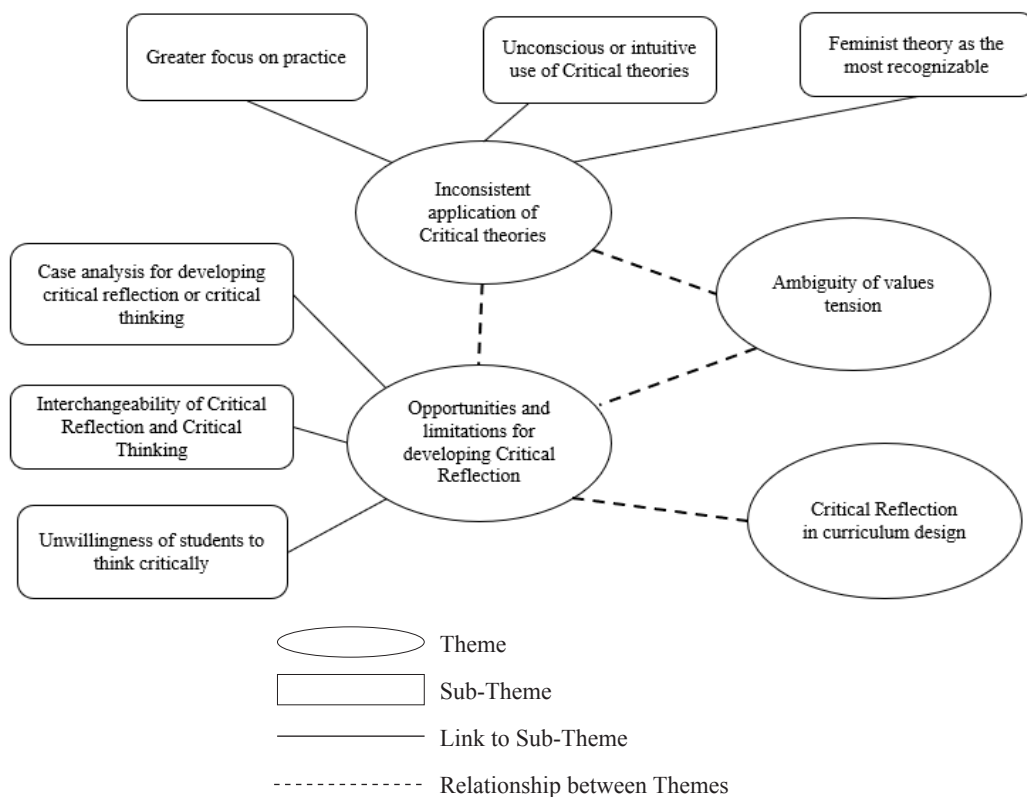

Fgure 1 – Results of reflexive thematic analysis

Inconsistent application of critical theories

This theme includes three sub-themes: (1) a greater focus on practice; (2) the unconscious or intuitive use of CT; and (3) Feminist Theory as the most recognizable. When asked which theories are included in the course content, the interview participants noted the applied nature of social work. An interdisciplinary approach prevailed in the choice of theories (sociology, psychology, pedagogy, philosophy), which was associated with the lack of own theories in social work and a focus on practice-oriented learning in response to student requests. Some teachers included separate theoretical approaches.

"Students generally have a greater request for practice, they are more interested in the practical part, of course, I associate this with theory, but mostly it's about practice" (P1)

"There are a lot of theories. We are social workers, we don't have our own theory. We use: psychological, sociological, pedagogical theories" (P2)

"I would say it's better to talk about approaches, since social work is an applied science" (P14)

The second sub-theme is interpreted as "Unconscious or intuitive use of CT." Expecting that the level of teachers' familiarity with critical theories may vary, we have provided a brief description of these approaches in the context of social work. A variety of answers were received to the question of whether Critical Theories are applied in teaching practice. Some teachers have not heard about the existence of CT and do not apply them, others noted that issues of stigmatization and discrimination are discussed, but without a theoretical basis, that is, teachers intuitively and unconsciously apply them.

"This is the first time I'm hearing from you that there are critical theories in social work" (P10)

"I'm not familiar with these critical theories; I actually became quite interested in them. Perhaps we don't explicitly apply a particular theory, but these are the values of social work that we work with" (P3)

"These theories are necessarily discussed in [the participant lists many disciplines]" (P14)

"I don't purposefully apply critical theories, but sometimes it happens" (P7)

During the thematic analysis, critical topics discussed in the classroom were identified. The most common topics that social work teachers focus on are stigma and discrimination. Teachers note the importance and great interest among students in discussing these topics.

"Precisely, stigma, certain stereotypes, and discrimination are what we discussed" (P7)

"We mostly discuss stigmatization and discrimination" (P11)

"They (students) are always ready to discuss topics of discrimination and stigmatization" (P13)

During the interview, some teachers noted that gender inequality issues are always relevant for students in a gender-mixed study group. An interesting observation is that almost all teachers consider the topics of power to be irrelevant and inapplicable to social work. According to them, power and the imbalance of power are political and sociological topics.

"Probably, power imbalances and such issues are more relevant to sociologists. But power imbalance, I think, is more of a political category" (P3)

"Ultimately, power and the institution of power, in my view, relate to sociology more" (P8)

There is a wide range of critical theory approaches that have emerged as a result of reflective analysis and theoretical support for the emancipatory aspirations of various social and political movements, including feminist theory, critical racial theory, theory of structural oppression, as well as postcolonial and decolonization theories. After listing and explaining all the theories, the participants noted the use of Feminist Theory. It is the most familiar and relevant to teachers, so the third subtheme sounds like "Feminist theory as the most recognizable."

"Feminist theory or, in general, sexism is discussed. For example, nowadays, whether it's about boys or girls, we are discussing sexism" (P4)

"Feminism is trending now" (P5)

"Within the discipline of Social work with women, feminist theory is being considered" (P9)

Ambiguity of values tension

When asked whether there are contradictions between professional ethical principles and socio-cultural features of the Kazakh context in the learning process, teachers' opinions were divided: some confirmed the existence of such contradictions, others did not note them. The former point out the presence of ethical dilemmas that social workers regularly face in their professional activities.

"Well, of course there are, in this case we are talking about ethical dilemmas. Social workers often face ethical dilemmas" (P2)

"In classes on Ethics , we consider ethical dilemmas, where we discuss their (students') actions in a particular situation" (P5)

In the process of discussing ethical dilemmas, disagreements and differences of opinion often arise among students. Some teachers emphasize that there is no single correct solution in such situations, emphasizing the need for an individual approach to each specific case, considering its context. On the other hand, in the process of resolving dilemmas, there is a focus on the priority of professional ethics, which is considered as a key principle in decision-making in difficult situations.

"My students know the ten professional ethical principles of social work by heart. I always ask them (students) to rely on them (ethical principles)" (P5)

"We teach them (students) to overcome such contradictions and, especially in working with clients, to rely on professional ethics" (P4)

Opportunities and limitations for developing Critical Reflection

During the thematic analysis, various interactive teaching methods were identified, but the most popular for the development of critical reflection or critical thinking are **Cases**.

"Students reflect critically in my classes. This is probably a discussion of some cases" (P9)

"We discuss situational tasks or cases involving women's issues" (P12)

When answering the question about ways to promote the formation of critical reflection among students, many teachers, even at the stage of explaining the term, preferred to refer to a more familiar concept – critical thinking, which is reflected in the sub-theme "Interchangeability of Critical Reflection and Critical Thinking" and highlights the existing conceptual confusion between the two concepts.

"Critical thinking is about considering the strengths and weaknesses" (P1)

"It also develops students' critical thinking" (P2)

"I didn't focus on my students' critical thinking" (P10)

Some teachers actively support the process of forming a CR, giving students the opportunity to analyze the impact of their beliefs on their professional activities. In turn, the lack of sufficient training for students in the field of reflection often causes them difficulties in solving complex ethical and professional dilemmas. There is "Unwillingness of students to think critically" noted by social work teachers.

"I explain to the students that we should assess situations in this way, address issues accordingly, and avoid stereotypical thinking" (P4)

"At times, social workers counsel in an unprofessional manner, simply echoing societal messages like, 'You'll be shamed tomorrow'" (P11)

"Well, I'm (SW teacher) probably not in favor of supporting these LGBT people either. I'm probably a proponent of these traditional views and methods" (P6)

When discussing critical topics, participants note the students' lack of discomfort and resistance. Modern students are very active and savvy. However, there are cultural differences between Russian and Kazakh groups, while the former are more open in expressing their thoughts, the latter have a certain tightness. Teachers point to the impact of cultural traditions in Kazakh society, which form the norms of hierarchical relations, according to which the opinion of elders is perceived as authoritative and not subject to dispute.

Thus, despite the efforts of individual teachers and educational institutions, in general, the development of critical reflection among students, social workers and teachers remains limited.

Critical Reflection in curriculum design

During the interviews, all respondents noted that social work educational programs are updated annually in accordance with the requirements of the Ministry of Education. Relevant topics are included through discussions with colleagues and institutional leadership.

"Our educational program is updated every year. We receive suggestions from the administration or employers, we take into account the opinions of experts, and we adjust it based on the recommendations from our Ministry of Education." (P12)

However, critical theories and critical reflection of students are not considered when updating the study content. Teachers are aware of the importance of promoting CT and the formation of students' CR and talk about the need to create common standards for implementation.

"Specifically, critical theories were not considered. It probably even needs to be considered within the framework of one or several topics" (P6)

"Critical reflection should always be present– that is, critical rethinking or reflection" (P13)

"It is also important to provide teachers with methods or frameworks to explain to students what critical theories are and how these theories either support or hinder our practice. Creating a unified framework would be effective" (P4)

The interview participants also noted the need to design special courses, or modules and topics within existing disciplines to discuss cultural practices.

"A special course with real-world practices to explain what contradictions may arise" (P7)

"The module should be developed within the educational program, and 2-3 disciplines should be included in this module" (P8)

The study results highlight the multi-layered and contradictory nature of teaching critical theories and the development of critical reflection in social work educational programs in Kazakhstan. One of the key findings was critical theories are applied in a fragmented way without stable methodological support. This is due both to the lack of an established tradition of teaching these approaches in social work and to the dominance of a practice-oriented model of professional training that meets short-term needs of students and employers (Fook & Askeland, 2007).

The fact that teachers often use elements of critical approaches on an intuitive level, without linking them to specific theories, shows a lack of theoretical training in this area. The predominance of feminist theory as the most recognizable one illustrates the limited understanding of critical approaches and in-

dicates that the assimilation of individual ideas took place mainly at the applied level, without sufficient reliance on a theoretical basis. This is especially true in conditions where both teachers and students are within the same cultural norms, which makes it difficult to develop a critical view of social processes.

Discussing critical topics such as stigma, discrimination, and gender inequality demonstrates students' potential sensitivity to such issues. However, the rejection of topics related to power and the imbalance of power, because of their "politicality", indicates a partial understanding of the nature of social injustice. This is a challenge for social work, which involves not only helping an individual client, but also striving for social transformation.

Tensions between the professional ethical principles and the socio-cultural norms of Kazakh society are observed not only among students, but also among teachers. This contradiction highlights the influence of cultural traditions such as religiosity, collectivism, and an emphasis on public opinion (Mustafina, 2024; Kudaibergenova, 2018; Malik, 2019). In such conditions, the lack of a stable practice of critical reflection leads to the reproduction of unjust social practices, where decisions are made not on the basis of professional ethical standards, but under the pressure of social expectations (Fook & Askeland, 2007).

In addition, the confusion of the concepts of "critical thinking" and "critical reflection" indicates a conceptual ambiguity that prevents their purposeful formation in the educational process. Despite the use of case studies and situational tasks, the development of students' ability to critically self-assess their own values, beliefs and its impact on professional actions remains at a low level.

It is important to note that students' sensitivity to critical topics may vary depending on their cultural background, which highlights the need for a culturally sensitive approach in the educational process. Thus, Kazakh-speaking groups tend to show great restraint and respect for hierarchy (Altayev & Imanbayeva, 2021; Kabakova & Maulsharif, 2013), which may make it difficult for alternative points of view to be freely expressed. This, in turn, requires the teacher to pay special attention to creating a safe and respectful atmosphere in which students can confidently express their opinions and develop critical reflection.

Finally, educators' recognition of the need to incorporate critical theories and critical reflection into educational programs–while no practical steps are being taken in this direction–points to structural barriers within the higher education system. Among them are the insufficient professionalization of social work, the presence of gaps in the professional training of teaching staff and limited autonomy in the curricula design. Previous studies have shown that critical education cannot be systematically implemented without institutional support and clear standards (Brookfield, 2009; Garrett, 2024).

Thus, the results of the study emphasize the need to rethink the educational paradigm in social work in Kazakhstan. This includes the integration of critical theories as a basis for understanding social injustice, the development of critical reflection as a professional skill, as well as systematic teacher training. Only in this case is it possible to form social work as a discipline capable not only of adapting to existing conditions, but also of transforming them.

Conclusion

The development of critical reflection and the integration of critical theories into social work educational programs requires not only methodological training of teachers, but also institutional support. The conducted research shows that teachers frequently incorporate elements of critical approach intuitively, however, the lack of a systematic theoretical foundation and limited autonomy in the formation of training courses make it difficult to fully implement critical education. Cultural characteristics such as respect for hierarchy and restraint in expressing opinions also influence students' perception of critical topics. This requires the teacher to take a culturally sensitive approach aimed at creating a safe space for dialogue. The findings highlight the need for further development of teaching competencies, systematic studies, and institutionalization of critical approaches, which can be a significant step in strengthening social justice and professionalizing social work in Kazakhstan.

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