sw&s | Social Work and Society International Online Journal

Social Work for the Middle Classes

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Beyond the financial and emotional hardships involved, a weakened middle class can threaten the fabric of society and its democratic institutions. As Kapsos and Bourmpoula (2013, 1) note, "one of the sharpest divides between developed and developing economies is that in the former, middle class status is the norm, with a reasonable standard of living enjoyed by the bulk of the population." What has been called the "middle class consensus," based on narrowing strong class differences, is the point of departure for social peace, and the consolidation of democracy and investment in human capital (Easterly 2001). In this regard, several studies have highlighted the link between middle class values, economic growth, and the demand for transparent and democratic public and private institutions (Amoranto et al. 2010).

People belonging to the middle class in Spain are often overlooked and remain unexplored in our literature on social work, where research on social service users usually centers on cases of low-income groups suffering from social exclusion. While social service interventions in the years prior to 2007 were targeted at people who suffer social exclusion, more recent interventions are encountering families with a very different profile as a result of the crisis. Specifically, we are referring to middle-class families whose basic everyday needs were satisfied until recently. In this regard, it is very important that social work interventions be based on a thorough assessment of the social and economic challenges facing middle-class people. These professional interventions no longer focus only on those at high risk of exclusion; rather, nearly 80 per cent of the services are provided to families in 'normalized' situations (Spanish Social Service Users Information System [SIUSS] 2012)

This themed issue seeks to link the situation of the middle class to the field of social work because, as suggested above, the profile of excluded people in Spain has changed substantially, to the extent that 3 million people in Spain have moved from the "middle class" to the "lower class" (Pérez, Cucarella & Hernández, 2015).

In order to explore these and other related issues, the Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (UNED), the School of Public Policy at the University of Maryland (UMD), and the Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management (APPAM) held a conference in Segovia, Spain, on 29-30 September 2014. Some 150 academics and professionals from government agencies, think tanks, and NGOs from sixteen countries attended the conference.

A total of 104 papers were presented at four plenary sessions and twenty-eight panel sessions. Topics included the social and economic condition of the middle class in specific countries and the factors shaping these conditions, among them macroeconomic policy, labor market conditions, family structure, work/family issues, demographics (such as aging and disability), immigration and migration, government cash transfer programs, and workforce development efforts (including remedial education programs, such as basic, secondary, post-school and career-related education, as well as higher education). Many of the conference papers can be found at http://www.umdcipe.org/conferences/DecliningMiddleClassesSpain/Papers/.

The conference was conducted in both Spanish and English with nineteen Spanish-language papers presented. In this monograph we have made a selection of the most relevant ones, which have been translated into English to ensure the wider dissemination of knowledge to the academic community. From a social work perspective, these papers reflect some of the most important issues affecting the Spanish middle class.

The first paper of the monograph, written by Andoni Alonso, Silvia Ferreira and David Alonso, provides us with a wonderful context for exploring the issue: "Middle Class Evolving to Precariat: Labor Conditions for the 21st Century". They confirm that the term "middle class" has become confusing as the middle class is immersed in a society that has no chance of recovering its high consumption levels. Consumption as a result of income should not be the main factor to identify them as a political entity. The authors argue that the middle classes must view society as a whole and focus on interdependence, taking into account the lower classes that make up the largest share of society.

The paper by Marta Blanco goes in a complementary direction. She shows how "Community mediation is a tool for citizen participation in public policy." Community mediation is a new public service, which seeks to promote active citizen participation by offering routes for citizens to be involved in conflict resolution and public policy. Mediation may act as a useful vehicle to strengthen the sense of belonging to a community and hence assist in the development of active (and responsible) citizenship. In fact, many Spanish scientific studies show how mediation has become one of the main assets to deal with the crisis.

Melissa Lopez came from the Philippines with a very interesting paper titled "Multidimensional Family SES Indices: Variations between Middle-Class and Working-Student Samples." She shows how Family SES Indices serve as a critical criterion for selecting beneficiaries of social work programs for youth. The analysis for constructing an index was carried out using three different samples: two largely middle-class undergraduate samples and one less socioeconomically advantaged working-student sample. The usefulness of the constructed indices can be seen within the framework of the so-called dominance approach to multidimensional poverty measurement (Gravel 2010) and this can be analogously applied when cut-off points are set for the constructed indices for purposes of selecting beneficiaries of social work programs.

Many aspects of the working middle class and society in general have been affected by the economic disruptions caused by the crisis. In "Labor, Health and the Middle Classes: Do Spanish Youth Have to Jeopardize Their Health to Find a Job?," Antonio López Peláez of the UNED found that youth in Spain not only face an unemployment rate of 50 percent, but the employment that is available is more hazardous. Youth in Spain "experience higher accident rates, increased work intensity and workloads, more physical and psychological risks, and must work in shifts and at night in a higher percentage than other age groups." This riskier

employment has the potential to negatively affect the long-term career prospects of Spanish youth and lead to increased social exclusion (López Peláez & Pinilla 2005, 15).

In the paper titled "Crisis, social classes, employment and education," Fernando de Lucas presents two possibilities. The middle classes in Spain exist and will continue to exist supported by their circular class trajectories (education, health, work, pensions) and it is possible that, with the passage of time, they may even recover ground and improve their situation in comparison with the pre-crisis past. But this may not happen, in which case post-modernity will be revealed as an end of history in which the main meta-narrative, progress, will be dead and no future era will be better than the past. In the end, he reaches the conclusion that the middle class and social classes will persist although they have suffered a contradiction that challenges the idea of progress.

Finally, Enrique Pastor focuses his attention on the local level. He aims to show us that the local sphere is an experimental environment for trying new processes of social innovation and participation as a way to combine political leadership and citizen participation. He provides us with very valuable information about the most common mechanisms of citizen participation in Spanish social service policy through local councils, institutes and non-formal mechanisms of participation. The results of his research allow identifying the possibilities, limitations and trends of regional social welfare councils in terms of their capacity to influence the process of democratization in building policies of personal services at the municipal level.

A short summary such as this cannot do justice to the papers of this special issue, but may pique the reader's curiosity. Two main themes stand out. The first is an unprecedented issue in our country: the inclusion of the middle class as an object of study by researchers in the social services field. And, secondly, the fact that all the articles in this issue, which were written by renowned Spanish researchers, emphasize interdependence, mediation, participation, and inclusion versus exclusion. These statements may not seem "novel." One might be tempted to think that the middle class is a common, and even obvious, topic of social work research. But the obvious contrasts with the reality, because in Spain, the middle class has not been the object of study or intervention by social services, and this proactive and inclusive language has not formed part of the prevailing discourse, even in a decade marked by crisis. However, this themed issue shows how the obvious and reality have now begun to merge.

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