Critical Social Work: Past, Present and Future, Some Introductory Thoughts

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Introduction

The recognition and celebration of Canada's 150th birthday provided occasion to reflect critically on the history of social work within this country, a history that is perhaps in equal parts both laudable and blameworthy. Canadian social work scholars have often been at the forefront of advancing the profession's theory and practice. The unique social, historical, and political context of Canada has generated specific challenges and opportunities for social work and its governmental and professional regulation. Regulatory, geopolitical, ideological, and contemporary social issues require that social work, as both a discipline and a profession, prepares itself to meet the challenge of coming decades. This special issue contains contributions of celebrated Canadian social work scholars who, working within their area of expertise and using a long-time perspective (rather than the presentist perspective so characteristic of social work), draw on the past both to understand the present and inform the future of social work in Canada and, potentially, elsewhere.

Social work is a complex discipline that has a rich theory and practice history, as much due to diverse practice contexts as to multiple and sometimes antinomian ideological positions held by social work practitioners and academics. In the early development of the profession, these ideological differences were reflected in the two main practice branches, the Charity Organization Society and the Settlement House Movement (Jennissen & Lundy, 2011; Reisch & Andrews, 2014). In more recent decades, ideological tensions persist within the social work profession generally and within the Canadian context in specific ways. The influence of managerialism and market-driven approaches in a neoliberal globalized climate, in Canada and

elsewhere, has created a widely debated trend toward diagnostic education and training, and professional licensure. While such debates sometimes create fertile ground for scholarship, discussion, and professional change, they also generate contradictions within the education and practice of social work, sometimes leading to confusion about our professional purpose. In social work, as in other disciplines, it is often the critical visionaries, those with eclectic minds, working at the edges of a discipline's philosophical, theoretical, and practice parameters, who provide invaluable opportunities for reflection, introspection, and productive debate, nudging thought, theory, language, and practice forward in important and necessary ways for societal good and service-user wellbeing (Harcourt, 2011; Levine, 2004).

In November 2017, a conference[1] was held at St. Thomas University, bringing together some of the most visionary and critical social work scholars in Canada to discuss the past, present, and future of social work from their area of specialization. This Special Issue is a collection of some of the papers presented. The authors cover a range of topics, including structural social work, social policy, Indigenous social work, ecosocial work, community mental health, mad studies, disability studies, LGBTQ2SIQ, and social work with immigrants. Using a long, multidirectional lens, each author makes recommendations for future directions for social work practice, pedagogy, policy, and research, with implications both within Canadian borders and beyond to global fields of study.

The first article, by Hugh Shewell, uses a structural lens to trace and discuss some of the key debates in social work in the Canadian context. Exploring the division between idealism and empiricism and the professional social work identities that developed in association with these two philosophical positions, the author examines the impact on education and practice, and

[1] This conference was funded by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Connection Grant.

investigates themes of marginalization, exclusion, and oppression. While many have identified the need to connect social work theory and practice, Shewell argues the need to connect practice with purpose to safeguard the profession from practice devoid of social purpose and vice versa. To this end, the author asserts structural social work should not only focus on both social purpose and practice but also the imperative of their interdependence.

Cyndy Baskin, in the second article, critically interrogates the social work profession in Canada, using a long timeline to denounce oppressive social work practices with Indigenous Peoples, connecting such practices within colonial and neocolonial attitudes, approaches, and structures. Presenting pre-contact Indigenous worldviews, and the devastating attacks settler-colonialists perpetrated through epistemic, ontological, physical, ecological, and micro-organismic violence, Baskin highlights the resiliency of Indigenous Peoples and the resurgence of their unique and invaluable understandings and helping methods. Within this context, the article then turns to the many ways Indigenous helpers are responding to countless issues with dedication and proficiency. Though social work has had (and in many ways continues to have) a reprehensible relationship with Indigenous Peoples in Canada (and elsewhere), Baskin sees the way forward as necessarily involving collaboration between Indigenous and non-Indigenous social work professionals for the healing and well-being of all.

In the third article, John Coates and Mel Gray discuss ecosocial work, including not only its development but also professional resistance to considering this area as fitting within the parameters of social work. With increasing awareness of climate change and mounting environmental concerns, environmental considerations have become more common within scholarly social work literature, theory, practice, and discourse. Coates and Gray argue, however, that much of this work is limited by anthropocentric and modernist understandings and values.

Constrained by these perspectives, the social work profession has not recognized the value of transitional discourses, and missed opportunities to engage more fully with environmental issues and realities. Having identified a lack of ecocentric understandings and practices in ecosocial work and having seen the many ways this lack diminishes the possibility of a robust social work response to the environmental crisis, Coates and Gray argue the need to move toward and establish an ecocentric foundation, outlining a variety of transformative ramifications that would follow from such a paradigm shift.

Charmaine Williams makes a compelling argument, in the fourth article of this collection, for the social work profession to reorient its commitment to family well-being. While social work has long had an interest in family health, evidenced by a wealth of scholarly literature and related practice modalities, a changing political climate with unfavourable social, economic, and social services outcomes requires new ways of thinking about social work with families. Using a "siege" metaphor, Williams outlines the deleterious impact of neoliberalism, identifying the ways family support, integrity, and caregiving are undermined through the faulty framing of service provision within a political milieu aimed at economic bottom lines. In this context families and caregivers are expected to reshape themselves to fulfil the economic agenda of the nation state rather than accessing and receiving services premised on an ethic of care. Williams argues through critical social work praxis, families can be aided in the struggle to militate against the primacy placed on the economy at the expense of family and individual health.

The fifth article, by Izumi Sakamoto, M. Anum Syed, Heidi Zhang, Daphne Jeyapal, Jane Ku, and Rupaleem Bhuyan problematizes the international reputation Canada enjoys as a multicultural country and a welcoming land of resettlement premised on diversity and inclusion. Using print media, the authors examine the phrase "Canadian experience," evincing the irony

inherent in an expression that at once signifies both national pride and putative identity and the exclusion of immigrants from the workforce. The authors point to the ways the phrase operates to produce and reinforce marginalization of immigrants by requiring Canadian experience to acquire a job and their needing said job to acquire Canadian experience, thereby effectively creating a Catch 22. Sakamoto, Syed, Zhang, Jeyapal, Ku, and Bhuyan then use a critical perspective to conceptualize understandings of identity in a more truly inclusive framework, that of immigration integration. The article ends with queries designed to guide anti-oppressive social work praxis with immigrants, creating avenues for unmasking taking-for-granted assumptions, mitigating vulnerabilities, and promoting policy change.

Nick Mulé's article, the sixth in this collection, also critiques the Canadian state, identifying how it has operated, and continues to operate, to oppress lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, transgender, 2-spirit, queer, and intersex groups and individuals. Although social work has contributed, and continues to contribute, to the oppression of LGBT2QI communities, there exist opportunities for helpful collaboration and connection because of the profession's strong social justice focus. After discussing the fluidity of terminology and complex social intersections present in LGBT2QI communities, Mulé introduces queer liberation theory, the foundation from which he operates that holds promise in applied contexts. It is with this critical lens that the author then explores social work ethics, values, and principles as they pertain to those who are gender and sexually diverse, bearing in mind the sometimes conflicting, sometimes converging terrain of legal and social justice. With social justice at its core, the article ends with strategies to acknowledge ongoing challenges and create positive change to address the concerns and needs of LGBT2QI communities and persons.

The final article, by Marilyn Dupré, discusses the emergence of the social model of disability and a forty-year history of disability studies and activism, exploring the various forces and critical theories that have transformed the social model of disability and led to its noteworthy resurfacing as Critical Disability Studies. Dupré investigates the several ways social work theory, practice, and education have treated disability throughout this same time frame, identifying attempts by the profession to mirror public health discourse. The article identifies the inadequacies of social work approaches addressing disability that are not premised on Critical Disability Studies because they fail to consider the ways an able-bodied society and social construct functions to oppress persons living with disabilities on multiple levels, including individual, cultural, and structural. Dupré asserts the need for progressive social work education, and, by extension, social work theory and practice, to be informed by Critical Disability Studies if the profession is to work respectfully and skillfully with disability realities.

The expert contributions made by the several authors included in this special issue represent many of the enduring issues for social work. While these papers are certainly a springboard for discussion, and not an endpoint, we welcome them and their critical, provocative articulations as a starting point in the debate for the vision of social work in Canada and abroad over the next ten years.

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