Better Equipping Structural Social Workers: Embodying Social Justice Values in Practice

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Abstract

The fundamental values and principles of social work differentiate the profession from others. The purpose of this article is to better contextualize and expand upon the uniquely transformative nature and potential of social work in a Canadian context, with a particular emphasis on structural social work. We will provide a general overview of conventional social work, explore structural social work theory and research specifically, as well as discuss the necessity for increased empirical structural social work research and education. We will further expand upon an emerging research project inspired by, and derived from, Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) students in a structural school of social work, who consistently seek practical wisdom and stories of relevant structural application. Having this practical wisdom and stories of experience will better equip future social workers to maintain structural theory and practice in the field, thus promoting and better enabling social workers to embody the inherent transformative values of the profession.

Introduction

The social work profession is multifaceted, interdisciplinary, and rooted within diverse practice settings in our communities (Hick & Stokes, 2021). Those with an understanding of social work also have an appreciation for the transformative potential (Schott & Weiss, 2016) inherent in social work's fundamental values and principles. However, general perceptions and understandings of social work in greater society are often overshadowed by (negative) misconceptions and assumptions (e.g., social workers remove children from homes). Despite this, the fundamental values and principles of social work differentiate the profession from others and provide opportunities for change at individual, community, and policy levels (Hick & Stokes, 2021). The purpose of this article is to better contextualize and expand upon the uniquely transformative nature and potential of social work in a Canadian context, with a particular emphasis on structural social work. We will provide a general overview of conventional social work, explore structural social work theory and research specifically, as well as discuss the necessity for increased empirical structural social work research. We will further expand upon an emerging research project inspired by, and derived from, Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) students in a structural school of social work who consistently seek practical wisdom and stories of structural social workers to gain insight into how to maintain and practice structural social work in predominantly conventional settings. Having this practical wisdom and stories of experience will better equip future social workers to maintain structural theory and practice in the field, thus promoting and better enabling social workers to embody the inherent transformative values of the profession.

Social Work

Social work is an evidence and practice-based profession (Canadian Association of Social Workers [CASW], n.d., "What is Social Work?" section, para. 2) with a "primary mission to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty" (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2022, "Social Work is a Helping Profession," section, para. 1). In its code of ethics, the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW, 2005) outlines six core values and principles of the profession, including: (a) respect for the inherent dignity and worth of persons, (b) pursuit of social justice, (c) service to humanity, (d) integrity of professional practice, (e) confidentiality in professional practice; and (f) competence in professional practice. Each of these are expanded upon within the code of ethics (CASW, 2005), outlining the expectations of both individual social workers and the profession as a whole. These values and principles are unique, resulting in defining features of the profession which set it apart from others. While this is not an analysis of the code of ethics (CASW, 2005), below we will explore three defining features of the profession of

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social work including its focus on the environmental factors contributing to individual experiences; its levels of practice and work with individuals, families, and communities; its interdisciplinary nature; and finally, its pursuit of social justice.

First, its focus is on the environmental factors contributing to individual experiences of challenge, often resulting in experiences of oppression and marginalization (NASW, 2022). Oppression can be defined as "the domination of subordinate groups in society by a powerful (politically, economically, socially, and culturally) group" (Mullaly & West, 2018, p. 6), whereas marginalization is being excluded from society (Dominelli & Ioakimidis, 2015), or, rather, living in the margins, in the peripheral. Second, social work "responds to needs of individuals, families, groups, and communities and addresses barriers and injustices in organizations and society" (CASW, 2020, "CASW Scope of Practice" section, para. 2). This leads to a third defining feature, the interdisciplinary nature of the profession. To adequately respond to individual, family, group, and community needs, social work collaborates with various stakeholders to "create opportunities for growth, recovery, and personal development" (CASW, 2020, "CASW Scope of Practice" section, para. 2) as well as social change. Finally, social work is grounded in the pursuit of social justice, which we would argue is one of the most defining features of the profession. Social Justice is defined as:

> "A process, not an outcome, which (1) seeks fair (re)distribution of resources, opportunities, and responsibilities; (2) challenges the roots of oppression and injustice; (3) empowers all people to exercise self-determination and realize their full potential; (4) and builds social solidarity and community capacity for collaborative action. (Berkeley Social Welfare, 2022, "Our (working) Definition of Social Justice" section, para. 2)"

While there are fundamental principles and features of the profession of social work, how these principles are adopted and enacted in practice can differ. Often, a contributing factor to how one might practice as a social worker is educational background and the social work theories promoted and adopted therein and afterward. Be-

low we will explore what is considered "conventional" social work practice, as it is currently the dominant model adopted and promoted by social welfare systems in Western nations, including Canada. In many Western nations, *neoliberalism* is the current dominant ideology: a set of beliefs and ways of thinking about society and the world which underpin political and economic theory (and thus policy; Mullaly & Dupré, 2018). Neoliberalism suggests that individual and societal well-being and prosperity are best achieved through minimal state (government) intervention, free markets, and globalization (Aart Scholte, 2010). Aligning with neoliberal ideology is *capitalism*. Using Sternberg's (2015) operational definition, which identifies the essential elements of the concept, "capitalism is an economic system characterised by comprehensive private property, free-market pricing, and the absence of coercion" (p. 389). Fundamentally, capitalism allows for the private sector (e.g., for-profit business owners) to control trade and industry, rather than the state. This often means that political, economic, and social decisions prioritize profit over equity and collective well-being. Neoliberalism and capitalism are so closely woven together that the terms are often confused or used interchangeably. A simple method to differentiate is: neoliberalism = a set of beliefs and a way of thinking about the world, which leads to the adoption of capitalism = an economic system used to "organize" and operate a society.

In neoliberal capitalist societies, the welfare system is often negatively impacted by the belief that individuals do not need state intervention or support to attain well-being. Laissez faire capitalism (Sternberg, 2015) results in systemic and societal inequality as free markets, privatization, and globalization result in stark income inequality (Sowel, 2019). Capitalism results in the organization of society which benefits few at the expense of many. Ultimately, capitalism generates an elite/dominate class which, in turn, leads to the forming of a subordinate class (Wright, 2000). It is within the subordinate class that we see experiences of oppression and marginalization. In welfare states (countries whose governments have adopted a welfare system), when the organization of a society fails to support or promote the well-being of all citizens and meet their basic human needs, it is the responsibility of the state to provide support and relief; the extent of this support

differs based on the adopted model of social welfare within the country (Hick & Stokes, 2021). Social workers are often employed within, or interact closely with, the welfare system, and in recent years with the rise of neoliberalism and capitalism, conventional approaches to social work are frequently adopted, either out of choice or necessity.

Conventional Social Work

Mullaly and West (2018) explain that although the profession of social work can be seen as progressive, its roots are grounded in principles of "social control (of subordinate populations) and oppression" (p.171). Conventional social work derives from the principles of the English Poor Laws of the 1500s and the Charity Organization Society of the 1800s (Mullaly & Dupré, 2018; Peters, 2012). Both approaches originated in England with the idea that poverty was the fault of the individual (Peters, 2012). The approach of the English Poor Laws, a system designed to address poverty, was to punish those experiencing poverty due to the belief that financial difficulty was the result of a lack of motivation to work (Peters, 2012). The Poor Laws were designed to discourage citizens from accessing social welfare and thus benefits were minimal (Hick & Stokes 2021). Accessing social welfare was also socially stigmatized and laden with judgment, which deterred individuals from accessing aid (Hick & Stokes, 2021). The Poor Laws classified people into categories of "deserving" and "undeserving" poor (Golightley & Holloway, 2016; Peters, 2012). Those considered undeserving were viewed as a burden (Golightley & Holloway, 2016) for failing to provide for themselves (Peters, 2012). The few considered deserving of support and aid were due to their hardship being not a fault of their own, such as being ill or "elderly" (Golightley & Holloway, 2016). These historical roots and societal perceptions of the provision of social welfare informed the first formal delivery of "modern-day" social work, the Charity Organization Society (COS), founded in 1800s England (Mullaly & Dupré, 2018).

The COS adopted the notions of deserving and undeserving poor, and within their social welfare system monetary relief was seldom provided in an effort to discourage dependency on the organization (Dumbrill & Yee, 2019; Mullaly & Dupré, 2018; Peters, 2012). The COS constitution stated, "gratuitous relief fosters thriftlessness, indolence, and blamable inefficiency, lessening self-respect and self-reliance" (Charity Organization Society of London (Ont.), 1896, p.12). Therefore, the COS coordinated system relied on what they referred to as "friendly visitors" to intervene and support individuals deemed deserving of support, as they were perceived as unable to make responsible decisions for themselves (Mullaly & Dupré, 2018). Friendly visitors were almost always female volunteers of the upper-middle class who would offer advice and guidance, as well as monitor the individual or family's progress towards self-reliance (Charity Organization Society of London (Ont.), 1896). The focus of the COS was on improving the individual and assisting them to "take responsibility for their own independence and well-being" (Dumbrill & Yee, 2019, p. 248). The COS later became the "Family Welfare Association," and this model is recognized as the roots of the casework model of social work (Dumbrill & Yee, 2019), which remains an adopted approach of social welfare and conventional social work today. Conventional social work practices developed from these historical approaches often do not consider the oppressive circumstances of individuals' lives, and social work education and practice is typically taught from the lens of the dominant group (Mullaly & West, 2018), which has perpetuated this approach to social work.

The historical roots of the English Poor Laws and the COS led to a predominantly narrow understanding of social and personal problems within social welfare and society today. This results in the expectation that social workers help to change individuals rather than societal structures (Mullaly & West, 2018), despite the profession's fundamental values of social justice and viewing environmental factors as contributing to individual experiences of challenge (CASW, 2020; NASW, 2022. According to Healy (2000), many social work activists agree that conventional social work practice regards those utilising social welfare as individually deserving of blame for their personal difficulties. The traditional casework model (Dumbrill & Yee, 2019) of conventional social work practice can contribute to power imbalances and perpetuate pathologizing and victim-blaming, which influences social workers to encourage service-users to "accept and adapt to basically unjust social structures" (Moreau, 1989, p. 7). When working conventionally, as opposed

to structurally, practitioners generally consider the individual problems that arise rather than considering the structure as a whole (Weinberg, 2008). Conventional social work practices focus on finding solutions through personal change via approaches such as clinical, casework, family therapies, strengths, and problem-solving models (Mullaly & Dupré, 2018). Wood and Tully (2006) emphasize that social workers need to be changing the current oppressive systems instead of attempting to change the marginalized or oppressed within the systems.

Additionally, throughout the evolution of social work, organizing bodies and associations have made efforts to have the profession be perceived and accepted as "legitimate" (Gitterman, 2014), which has contributed to the adoption of many conventional methods and theories, as they are viewed as more measurable or quantifiable by capitalist measures (Gitterman, 2014). The historical roots of the profession, viewing individuals as deficient and perceiving social problems as personal, are still deeply entrenched in neoliberal societies and continue to inform and underpin social welfare policy and delivery in the twenty-first century (Nichols & Cooper, 2011). Conventional social work conforms to current capitalist demands where value is placed on high efficiency yet low expenditure, often resulting in program retrenchment, high caseloads, and social worker moral injury (Haight et al., 2016; Mullaly & Dupré, 2018; Spencer et al., 2017). The prioritization of economic factors over productive social change has resulted in managerialism, "a philosophy or discourse that better management will result from using the methods of the for-profit world" (Spencer et al., 2017, p. 71). Managerialism focuses on making organizations "more effective and efficient" through improved business practices, as opposed to knowledge or skills regarding social services (Mullaly & Dupré, 2018, p. 51). This ideology has led to retrenchment of services and resources, and within this "era of fiscal restraints" ethical practice may be jeopardized (Spencer et al., 2017, p. 69). This system of managerialism sustains conventional social work practice, with many workers balancing high caseloads and service-users being provided with limited resources (Mullaly & Dupré, 2018; Spencer et al., 2017). Mullaly and Dupré (2018) emphasize how these current processes make it "impossible to address the economic and social

needs of increasing numbers of people in a meaningful way" and express how due to this challenging method of social work delivery, many associations may have "abandon(ed) their social justice mandate" (p. 53).

In the adoption of such approaches to social welfare and social work, a power imbalance is created and perpetuated between groups. Conventional social work, in an attempt to meet the demands and mitigate restraints created by neoliberal and capitalist ways of organizing society, begins from an order perspective, preserving social hierarchies which continue to benefit those already in a position of power and privilege (elite/dominant class; Weinberg, 2008). Conventional social work seeks little change to the current societal structures that discriminate against and oppress populations based on race, gender, ability, etc. while continuously benefitting the privileged and powerful (Carniol, 1992; Weinberg, 2008). Within these hierarchical structures, the voices of those who wield greater power and privilege are often prioritized, and the voices of disempowered populations are diminished or silenced (Carniol, 1992; Pawar et al., 2018). The state, which determines and distributes social welfare, is predominantly influenced by neoliberal politics and policies and is also hierarchically organized, exercising top-down control (Carniol, 1992). Conventional approaches primarily focus on and maintain the dyadic relationship between social worker and service-user, which can contribute to unbalanced power dynamics (Moreau, 1979; Weinberg, 2008). The adoption of such approaches to social work typically concentrates interventions on individuals and their immediate, personal challenges, and there is limited space or opportunity to explore the environmental or structural factors influencing individual experience (Healy, 2000). Such conventional approaches have been criticized for their shortcomings and oversight of systemic influences, with Bell (2012) emphasizing that a successful future for the social work profession requires a framework that incorporates broader theory, practice knowledge, and service-users' lived experiences.

Conventional social work and settings are not malicious in intent, though in the attempt to meet the growing demands of capitalist and neoliberal states, the fundamental principles of what distinguishes social work from other helping professions

are either forgotten or increasingly challenging to implement. In doing so, conventional social work inadvertently contributes to the perpetuation of inequity, despite often engaging in empathetic, intentional, caring work. Weinberg (2008) argues that the social work profession must work to eliminate injustice rather than maintain the status quo, which serves certain populations "at the expense of others" (p. 1). Social workers who opt to remain neutral on these issues instead of fighting against the continuing injustice are supporting the existing unjust conditions (George & Marlowe, 2005). The social work profession must recognize and integrate the "broader social context" into practice with service-users to work to transform the discriminatory systems that are at the root of social problems (George & Marlowe, 2005, p. 20). Herein lies the transformative potential of structural social work, which seeks to identify and ameliorate the causes of oppression and suffering in social contexts (Weinberg, 2008) by examining the structures contributing to individual experiences of challenge, oppression, and marginalization. As such, structural social work fundamentally aligns with, and embodies, the values and principles outlined in the code of ethics and accounts for the systemic nature of social problems in a way that conventional social work does not, or cannot.

Structural Social Work

Structural social work posits that oppression, and the resultant social problems, stems from power imbalances in societal structures, namely capitalism (Moreau, 1979; Weinberg, 2008). This is a marked departure from conventional social work, which as we explored above, often focuses on the individual rather than their environment (Moreau, 1979). It is important to note that structural social work does not neglect the immediate needs of service-users, and instead recognizes the damaging effects of long-term oppression alongside the necessity of ensuring service users are safe and have their essential and immediate needs and challenges attended to (Mullaly & Dupré, 2018; Mullaly & West, 2018).

Mullaly & Dupré (2018) credit Ruth Middleman and Gale Goldberg with coining the phrase "structural social work" in their 1974 book *Social Service Delivery: A Structural Approach to Social Work Practice*, though they argued that the conceptualization of the term differed at the time, as

"although these authors identified the social environment as the source of social problems, they attributed them to the liberal notion of social disorganization" (p. 200). The understanding of structural social work as it is understood today is largely attributed to Maurice Moreau (1979), who pioneered the development of the practice at Ottawa's Carleton University in the mid-1970s (George & Marlowe, 2005; Mullaly & Dupré, 2018; Peters, 2012). Moreau (1979) believed structural social work to be "an umbrella for the major radical themes of Marxism, feminism, radical humanism, and radical structuralism" (Mullaly & Dupré, 2018, p. 201). Despite being credited with the emergence of structural social work practice theory, Moreau (1979) asserted in his seminal text *A Structural Approach to Social Work Practice* that structural social work was, in fact, "not new, in that it incorporates tasks that social workers have historically undertaken as part of professional commitment and responsibility" (p. 78).

Though Jane Addams and the Chicago Hull House movement are largely credited as being the impetus for modern structural social work, the development of the practice was precipitated by several key moments in Canadian history (Barnoffet al., 2006; Chan, 2018;). Social workers' dissatisfaction with government response to the Great Depression, Moses Coady's work promoting unionization, a shift toward Keynesian economics following WWII, repression of known socialism supporters in the 1940s, and the Canadian Association of Social Workers' lack of proactive leadership all converged to create a social environment fraught with social injustice and clashing social work responses (Chan, 2018). In the decade following the widespread civil rights movements of the 1960s, Canada experienced greater social unrest relating to a growing welfare state, fears of Quebecois separatism, increasingly tense colonial relations, and the expansion of neoliberal capitalism (Carniol, 1992; Chan, 2018). Indeed, these converging social and political concerns allowed for the practice of structural social work to flourish "in the fertile political ground of 1970s Central Canada" (Chan, 2018, p. 26), though it would not enjoy prominence in academia until nearly a decade later (Peters, 2012). In the 50 years since Moreau began his work at Carleton, structural social work has grown as a theory and as a practice to include the ways in which

capitalism, globalization, and neoliberalism give rise to, and intensify, systemic oppression (Weinberg, 2008).

Structural theory integrates "major radical themes of Marxism, feminism, radical humanism, and radical structuralism" (Moreau, 1979, p. 201) alongside "broader anti-discriminatory analyses" (Peters, 2012, p. 25) to conceptualize the ways in which dominant societal structures and institutions propagate oppression. These institutions, according to structural theory, serve a two-fold purpose of further oppressing marginalized groups and allowing those in power to benefit from that oppression (Weinberg, 2008). The primary goal of structural social work is to "dismantle colonialist, patriarchal, and capitalist domination" (Chan, 2018, p. 22) in order to "alleviate the negative effect on people of an exploitative and alienating social order" (George & Marlowe, 2005, p. 7). Weinberg (2008) positions structural social work as a "moral compass," suggesting that it may provide practitioners with guidance in engaging with their practice (p. 1). Several key themes identified in structural social work literature provide insight into how structural theory may work toward dismantling exploitive structures and systems, as well as how it might be conceptualized in practice. These concepts differentiate structural social work from other theoretical approaches and include service-user empowerment, consciousness-raising, and contextualizing the personal as political (Carniol, 1992; Moreau, 1990; Mullaly & Dupré, 2018; Mullaly & West, 2018). These concepts will be further explored below.

Empowerment, as Carniol (1992) argues, is at the heart of structural social work, as it is not merely an activity within the framework but rather the outcome of engaging in the structural approach, a sentiment echoed by Mullaly and Dupré (2018). In this context, empowerment is defined as "a process through which oppressed people lessen their alienation and sense of powerlessness and gain greater control over all aspects of their lives and their social environment" (Mullaly & West, 2018, p. 309). Mullaly and Dupré (2018) argue that empowerment must occur at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels as well as at "the personal, cultural, and structural levels" (p. 308). To this end, Mullaly and Dupré (2018) also share that structural practitioners should ensure that service-users occupy a position

of power within the helping relationship, thus limiting the practitioner's ability to inadvertently reproduce "oppressive patterns and relationships" (p. 300). Through the work of empowerment, individuals become empowered. That is, understanding they have power and control over their lives. Through these structural social work processes, power dynamics shift, and individuals begin to question and challenge oppressive systems.

Closely related to the theme of empowerment is consciousness-raising, which "focuses on raising people's awareness of how a society characterized by dominant-subordinate relations shapes, limits, and dominates the experiences of members of subordinate groups" (Mullaly & Dupré, 2018, p. 297) which, in turn, perpetuates the marginalization of those subordinate groups. In raising service-users' consciousnesses, structural social workers may help individuals to recognize how dominant discourses (see, for example, Foucault, 2002; O'Connor, 2003) and the particular organization of society have resulted in experiences of oppression and marginalization (Mullaly & West, 2018). Moreau (1990) argues one of the key roles played by structural social workers is to challenge the consciousness of the service-user, thus allowing them to find liberation through self-empowerment. Consciousness-raising is located as a central theme of structural social work because it allows for social workers and service-users to collaboratively explore and recognize various forms and experiences of oppression, both in how it is propagated and how it affects them and others directly, thus lessening the likelihood of self-blame and shame (Mullaly & West, 2018). Consciousness-raising is critical to structural social work as it allows for dominant ways of thinking in modern neoliberal capitalist societies to be challenged. Consciousness-raising offers a validating alternative: it is not you, it is the system, and to see meaningful change within society we must challenge and reorganize the systems and break cycles of oppression.

Mullaly and Dupré (2018) define "the personal is political" as the act of "analyzing or discussing how the socio-economic-political context of a society is critical in shaping who we are in terms of our personality formation and what we are in terms of our personal situation" (p. 304). As a technique, it is an integral element to structural social work as it encourages social workers to

better understand oppression in all of its forms and sources by recontextualizing private and personal issues as difficulties stemming from a fundamentally oppressive organizations of society (Mullaly & West, 2018). The 'personal is political' also makes critical connections between the ways in which political decisions and public policy influence personal lived experiences of either privilege or oppression. Government ideology, which we explored above as being neoliberal and capitalist in a Canadian context, influences the priorities of the state. Neoliberal capitalist states inherently prioritize profit over collective well-being, and these ways of understanding and viewing the world are then reflected in policy decisions, which in turn contextualize and define laws and citizen opportunity. Thus, political decisions and the resultant policy outcomes are not neutral, but rather determine who experiences access/marginalization, advantage/disadvantage, and privilege/oppression. In this way we see that there are political influences on personal experiences, whether positive or negative; the *personal experience* is *politically rooted.*

As Dumbrill and Yee (2019) assert, "most social workers and agencies do not set out to practice in a way that treads people down or holds them back," (p. 312); however, because the institutions in which they work are contained within a larger oppressive system, many social workers become complicit in the very oppression they seek to eliminate. Thus, social workers who wish to practice structurally must be keenly aware of their agency's ideologies and practices, as well as remain vigilant of structural theory and application. However, practicing structurally within a decidedly conventional social work agency can be a difficult task. Chan (2018) argues, "given its Marxist politics and direct-action imperative" (p. 27), structural social work is not widely practiced in conventional settings. Indeed, Chan (2018) goes on to share that structural social workers often encounter a great deal of difficulty in their practice, namely in the form of "opposition from funding bodies, senior bureaucrats, and individual social workers" (p. 27). Beyond this, Carniol (1992) cites the overburdening of social workers, primarily in the form of high caseloads and the resultant inability to form a strong helping relationship with service-users, as a barrier faced by structural social workers. Despite Carniol's text being 30 years old, it is echoed in Chan's (2018)

Solidarity and Heart – The Development of Structural Social Work: A Critical Analysis wherein he identifies structural social work's inability to "find a home in any direct care agency" (p. 32) as a failure of the approach. This, we would argue, is further complicated under neoliberalism and capitalism, which promotes managerialism and policies of austerity, where governments retrench and restrict resources within the social welfare system, expecting social workers to compensate and operate despite cutbacks (Clarke & Newman, 2012; Spencer et al., 2017). Social workers are called to advocate for social justice (CASW, 2005), drawing on critical thinking and creativity, which becomes increasingly difficult to do under such constrained and prescribed workplace settings. For many social workers, though particularly structural social workers, the disconnect between the values and principles of social work and workplace settings established under managerialism and austerity measures results in experiences of moral distress; being aware of the ethical thing to do, though feeling powerless to act accordingly as a result of real or perceived constraints (Austin et al., 2005). Social workers often advocate for change at micro, mezzo, and macro levels of practice, which includes unethical and constraining workplace policies and procedures (CASW, 2005). However, this can create conflict for social workers, as Moreau (1990) cautions structural social workers against frequent or intense resistance to agency standards, arguing that "an agency based social worker can only bite the hand that feeds and get away with it for so long before being reprimanded, if not fired" (p. 57).

Baines (2017) explores how the emotional distress caused by ethical compromises in practice can result in three kinds of coping strategies. The first, compliance, is fully adhering to workplace policies and procedures in an attempt to avoid conflict, despite potential negative outcomes for service-users and/or the individual social worker and their ability to uphold their code of ethics and fundamental principles of the profession (Baines, 2017). The second strategy is principled infidelity (Baines, 2017), which involves intentional small acts of resistance against policies and/or procedures. These acts may go unnoticed or be tolerated by superiors, though social workers may still be concerned about the ethical services they are providing, as well as potential job loss (Baines, 2017). Finally, social

workers may adopt the strategy of conscientious objection (Baines, 2017). In this approach, social workers clearly communicate and make apparent the harm the policy/procedure may cause to the service-user, and/or how it violates the social work code of ethics. These strategies of resistance are not independent of one another, and a social worker may mutually engage in one or more strategy at a time depending on the context. What becomes challenging as a structural social worker in conventional settings is finding the right balance of resistance that allows for ethical practice while maintaining structuralism. However, with repeated experiences of moral and emotional distress, some structural social workers fall into the repeated strategy of compliance, which ultimately results in workplace socialization. The goal for structural social workers amidst neoliberal and capitalist policy is to resist compliance and/or the socialization into conventional ways of doing social work, while also maintaining employment (should this be their goal). How to actualize this balance and maintain structural social work in practice within an agency's firm, conventional limits is an oft-asked question and concern amongst structural social workers and social work students alike, as noted by Peters (2012) and Mullaly and Dupré (2018) and observed in my teaching within a structural school of social work.

Moreau (1990) posits that structural social work in practice should primarily involve an examination of a service-user's personal problems as they relate to various structures in their lives. Structural social work suggests that the organization of our society and the resultant structures and systems fundamentally need to be challenged and reorganized to better meet the needs of the collective in meaningful ways. However, given the difficulties experienced by social work students and practitioners regarding the integration of structural theory into practice within conventional settings, it is evident that social workers require methods and techniques that are both effective in practicing structurally and do not put them at risk of great reprimand or job loss from their agency (Mullaly & Dupré, 2018; Peters, 2012;). In the literature, there are some practical examples or techniques for enacting structural social work in practice. For example, Weinberg (2017) discusses the correlation between power and resistance and shares that acts of resistance serve to destabilize and alter power relations, an important concept in

structural theory. Weinberg (2017) suggests "meeting the demands of management does not have to be diametrically opposed to the needs of clients" (p.78) and proposes some tangible ways in which structural social workers might resist conventional, constricting, and thus unethical contexts, including finding overlaps between service-user needs and organizational agendas to create a "win-win"; advocating for and with service-users; and acting as a translator between systems and the service-user. Carniol (1992) also points to the ability of social workers to "unmask" agency practices, the systemic roots of client problems, and help clients to uncover the similar experiences of others. This sentiment is echoed by George and Marlowe (2005) and Moreau (1990), who suggest that a service-user should fully participate in all agency matters pertaining to them, including the ability to view their own case files.

Weinberg (2017) provides examples from her research findings of frontline social workers' practical examples of resistance, such as:

- Encouraging a service-user to contact an obudsperson with a complaint
- Including service-users in case and care meetings
- Allowing service-users to read their files and "translating" the material
- Offering food vouchers beyond the allotted minimum (p. 79)

Weinberg (2017) further encourages structural social workers and students alike to remember that while you may not be able to fully change a particular system or structure, you have more power and influence than you may think. Weinberg (2017) continues to assert that each act of resistance against the conventional or status quo must be perceived as planting seeds of resistance; "you may not know which seeds will flourish… but given your efforts, some will bloom" (p. 78). While these are helpful examples and certainly relate to maintaining structural practice in conventional settings, the findings were derived from an ethics research context and not specifically to maintaining structuralism in practice settings. Thus, additional and expanded practical examples, as well as practical wisdom from practicing structural social workers, would be a positive asset to successfully embodying structural social

work in practice.

Several instances within the existing literature denote the importance of creativity as a method of practicing structural social work (Barnoff et al., 2006; Chan, 2018; Lundy, 2011; Spencer et al., 2017). George et al. (2010) found that two structural social work practitioners in Toronto used documentaries and photography with service users to raise consciousness and empower them. Chan (2018) shares that practitioners' use of creativity may enable them to practice structurally while still operating within a conventional agency and echoes the popularity of photography as a means to achieve this. What is challenging is that creativity in practice is often equally as abstract as structural theory itself and is not a tangible or practical response for BSW students or recent graduates as means to address the disconnect between structural theory and conventional social work practice settings. Students often share that "creativity" as a response to addressing possible barriers to practicing structurally is eliciting more confusion and concern than potential or possibility.

George and Marlowe (2005) argue that the use of direct action, hunger strikes, mass protests, and legal action allowed for a grassroots organization in India to successfully ameliorate caste-based oppression against Dalits. The authors suggest that this manner of direct action should "be considered as an added and an inevitable dimension to the structural social work model to strengthen its pursuit of social change" (George & Marlowe, 2005, p. 19). In structural social work education, we often discuss social justice and action as large grassroots movements or initiatives such as this. Additionally, we explore the usefulness and necessity of rallies, marches, demonstrations, protests, and/or lobbying as means of advocacy, consciousness-raising, and social justice efforts (Mullaly & Dupré, 2018). While there is certainly a place for this in social work in general, though particularly in structural social work, it is also not always realistic or practical advice for students or new graduates in the 21st century who are seeking meaningful ways to practice structural social work in the day-to-day. Students report feeling disconnected from these structural recommendations, as they do not allow for daily structural interaction and practice. Others often report feeling uncomfortable with these approaches, while recognizing there is a time and place for larger

social action movements.

Mullaly and Dupré (2018) point to the ability to be "smart" and "strategic" as a necessity for the structural social worker's survival within agencies and institutions that are largely hostile to the structural approach (p. 325). Further, they share some considerations for carrying out empowerment-based structural social work, including engaging in personal empowerment before structural empowerment, recognizing the privilege and power of the social worker, committing to continually learning about oppressed groups, and avoiding "exploiting the helping encounter" for the benefit of the social worker (Mullaly & Dupré, 2018, p. 309). Further, Lundy (2011) provides a comprehensive text examining structural social work in various settings and contexts from theory, ideology, globalization, and direct practice. While the text is relevant and applicable to social work theory, it provides few hands-on examples of structural social work in practice and is somewhat outdated (Lundy, 2011).

Unfortunately, a number of texts concerning the application of structural social work in the field are outdated. Although Moreau (1990), Carniol (1992), George and Marlowe (2005), Barnoff et al. (2006), Hick et al. (2009), George et al. (2010), and Lundy (2011) provide substantive information on their topics, over ten years have passed since the most recent publication. Hick et al. (2009) provide a thorough and encouraging examination of practical applications of structural social work in context, including areas such as children and youth, community development, mental health, newcomers, queer individuals and groups, and others. The text is written in a Canadian context and provides hopeful practice examples of enacting structural social work (Hick et al., 2009). However, the text was published over a decade ago and it is our hope that we might further contribute to the concrete examples and literature available to BSW students and practitioners seeking inspiration and insight into bridging the gap between structural theory and practice. As explored above, Weinberg (2017) provides research findings and discussions which can be applied to practical applications of structural social work, though the data are derived from ethics research and are not specific to structural social work, but rather to maintaining ethical practice within oft-unethical workplaces. Further, the existing literature fails to provide widely applicable

methods for practicing structural social work in settings constrained by agency limitations. The solutions provided by George et al. (2010), Barnoff et al. (2006), and George and Marlowe (2005) pertain specifically to social work with Toronto-based community and feminist agencies and a grassroots organization in India, respectively. Hunger strikes and photography, for example, may not be relevant in other practice contexts (when considering environmental constraints). While the solutions explored are undoubtedly effective for the organizations outlined in the texts, their efficacy in other forms of practice is unknown. Unfortunately, at this time the remaining literature fails to provide strategies beyond somewhat vague terms related to empowerment, consciousness-raising, and creativity. Though the key themes present within structural social work are certainly important to integrate into practice, social work students may struggle to make meaningful connections between theory and practice without support from the literature (Peters, 2012). A concern arises when examining the most current/relevant literature surrounding structural social work in practice: the documented approaches are invariably too broad or too specific. While these areas of the literature are ultimately useful in exploring structural social work in action, neither succeed in providing social workers with tools for structural practice that are both useful and generalizable to many forms of practice.

Barnoff et al. (2006) note this dearth of literature, sharing that "no research can be found that explores the connections between integrating anti-oppression approaches within social service agencies and the broader social context within which agencies exist" (p. 43). Further, Peters (2012) identified this theme in research, stating that it "suggests this is a timely research topic" (p. 56) while also noting the existing research on structural social work in practice was "piecemeal at best" (p. 63). In the time since these articles by Barnoff et al. (2006) and Peters (2012) were published, the practice of social work has changed and will continue to change due to "economic efficiency, managerialism, deprofessionalization, corporatization, fragmentation, deskilling, and bureaucratization" (Barnoff et al., 2006, p. 43) and the retrenchment of the welfare state. Thus, a substantive look into how current structural social work-

ers are practicing is timely and relevant.

Mullaly and Dupré (2018) describe the experiences of structural social workers in practice as fraught with "frustrations, limitations, and obstacles" (p. 326). Indeed, the lack of substantial literature on practicing structural social work and its nonprescriptive nature results in many social workers having to struggle to "figure this out themselves through a deep understanding of the theories under the umbrella" (Dumbrill & Yee, 2019, p. 230). It is evident that there are gaps in structural social work practice theory. Critiques of the structural approach began to appear in the literature in the 1990s, related to the lack of practice-focused approaches in relation to the depth of theoretical analyses (Mullaly & Dupré, 2018). One criticism of the structural approach can be found in the literature as early as Moreau's (1979) *A Structural Approach to Social Work Practice*, wherein the author cautions against the notion that "social change can be achieved only through large-scale community organizing" (p. 80). Despite this advice, the belief appears to have remained salient in the practice, as Mullaly and Dupré (2018) echo it decades later, arguing that carrying out structural work at the macro level alone fails to effectively realize the goals of structural social work. Participants in research conducted by Barnoff et al. (2006) referred to the ability to practice structural work as "a luxury" and reported difficulty in obtaining funds for structural work, as it is often deemed nonessential or unrealistic by funders' standards (p. 46). Participants in the same study also noted that their ability to engage in structural practice was contingent upon their agency's approach. Agencies whose core values included antioppressive practices often found ways to continue despite low resources and funding, whereas agencies who viewed antioppressive practice as nonessential often eschewed the practice when resources become scarce (Barnoff et al., 2006). Weinberg (2008) argues that structural social work is "insufficient as a comprehensive approach for progressive social workers," but that "it offers support to practitioners in forming ethical relationships" (p. 1). Weinberg (2008) also criticized structural social work for creating a binary between individuals and structures, thus viewing individuals as wholly separate from societal structures, and for presenting the field of social work as a battle between good and evil, often locating

social workers on the "good" side, thus exempting them from doing harm.

Despite the need for a clear and comprehensive approach to structural social work in practice, Mullaly and West (2018) warn against overly prescriptive directives for engaging in structural work, arguing that in doing this, the practice may become oversimplified and service user groups may become stereotyped. Instead, they assert, the structural approach may be more appropriately implemented as a lens through which social workers may view the world and their practice (Mullaly & West, 2018).

Contribution to Social Work Knowledge

As discussed, there is no existent literature from the last decade that examines successful strategies and techniques applied by structural social workers in the field today. This unique paucity of the literature presents an opportunity to inquire about the state of structural social work, the opportunities available to structural social workers, and how practitioners balance resistance and compliance within conventional settings. As a faculty member in a structural social work school in Canada, a recurring theme emerges among BSW students regarding how to adequately maintain structural social work in their daily practice, particularly in conventional settings. There is disconnect and discord between structural and conventional approaches to social work, and students express concern over how to successfully work as a structural social worker in workplaces grounded in opposing theory. Students are eager to hear practical examples and stories which would connect structural theory to practical frontline applications. Thus emerged a research project inspired by, and derived from, BSW students who consistently seek practical wisdom and stories of structural social workers to gain insight into how to maintain and practice structural social work in predominantly conventional settings upon graduation.

The goal of the research is not to be prescriptive, as cautioned against by Mullaly and West (2018), but rather to provide BSW students with practical wisdom, advice, and inspiration for maintaining structural social work, offering examples of applications of structural practice in an Atlantic Canadian context. In the first stages of the research, we will conduct 15-20 semistructured interviews with self-identified structural social workers in Atlantic Canada. The research questions will be student-derived and will be framed as appreciative inquiry questions to generate open-ended discussions about the maintenance of structural social work (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). Appreciative inquiry is a strengths-based approach, which asks positive questions about a topic in order to promote constructive discussions and inspire action (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). The exact questions will be determined by BSW students, though I hypothesize we will be seeking to answer:

1. What inspires you to continue working from a structural lens?
2. What do you believe works well as a structural social worker in predominantly conventional settings?
3. What would structural social work look like if it could be fully implemented in your current work setting?
4. What practical advice do you have to offer to future social workers striving to maintain structuralism in conventional settings?
5. What small changes do you think could be made in your workplace, and social work practice in general, right now to improve structural practices?

It is vital that social work maintains its structural roots and address structural inequality and oppression (Wood & Tully, 2006), which has arguably become increasingly difficult to do within neoliberal and capitalist agendas. To do this, and to reduce experiences of moral and emotional distress within predominantly conventional social work settings, new graduates need an understanding of how to practically engage in structural social work in meaningful and tangible ways. This research will help bridge the gap between theory and practice, which is often a criticism of structural social work theory. Further, the research will help contribute to the outdated literature and application of structural social work. Finally, the research will provide students and existing social workers with tools for structural practice that are both useful and generalizable to many forms of practice, as the findings will be drawn from empirical research, generating practice wisdom and knowledge. The beauty (and limitation?) of structural social work is that it is not necessarily quantifiable and is certainly not prescriptive, which

can at times make it messy and difficult to apply in practice. Having practical wisdom and stories of experience will better equip future social workers to maintain structural theory and practice in the field, thus promoting and better enabling social workers to embody the inherent transformative values of the profession, rather than adopting the strategy of compliance and/or becoming socialized into conventional settings. As a structural social worker and educator, I recognize the need to better equip structural social work students with practical applications of abstract, and at times seemingly outdated, structural theory and concepts. It is my goal and hope that with this research, students may be better prepared to authentically maintain and apply structural principles regardless of their future practice settings. At times, practicing as a structural social worker, aiming to maintain and enact the transformative potential inherent to the social justice profession, can feel isolating. The research findings will provide students and practitioners with encouragement and inspiration, as they will be able to identify with and draw from those who share in their efforts to plant seeds of resistance (Weinberg, 2017). Through the empirical wisdom, students and practitioners will gain an understanding that they are not alone, nor are they expected to radically change our current economic and social structures by themselves. Rather, the findings will generate a sense of connection and community between structural social workers and a recognition of the many ways in which they might contribute to this change and meaningfully empower and impact others as they embark on the transformative social justice journey that is structural social work.

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