Canadian Social Welfare and Structural Social Work

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Abstract

In teaching introductory courses to social welfare and social work at an Atlantic Canadian University, we found it challenging to find succinct articles that would link important historical and contemporary social welfare issues in the context of the profession of social work. The goal of this article is to make critical connections between structural social work specifically, and the Canadian welfare system, written at an introductory level. We will explore: the welfare state, social welfare approaches, historical and developmental phases of the Canadian welfare system, and ways forward rooted in social justice. By exploring social welfare and the welfare state throughout Canadian history, our goal is to highlight the importance of moving beyond a conventional approach to social work and social welfare and recognizing the value of adopting a structural approach.

Introduction

Prospective social work students are often hesitant and question the relevance and necessity of learning about the historical and current contexts of Canadian social welfare and the welfare state. In teaching introductory courses to social welfare and social work at an Atlantic Canadian University, we found it challenging to find succinct articles that would link important historical and contemporary social welfare issues in the context of the profession of social work in Canada. While there are many foundational and important texts on both social welfare and social work, the goal of this article is to fill a gap in the literature by creating a more accessible article that provides a general and historical overview of social welfare and social work in Canada, written at an introductory level. Moreover, by exploring social welfare and the welfare state throughout Canadian history, our goal is to highlight the importance of moving beyond a conventional approach to social work and recognizing the value of adopting a structural approach. We further aim to help make critical connections between social work and the Canadian welfare system, including: the welfare state, social welfare approaches, historical and developmental phases of the Canadian welfare system, and ways forward rooted in social justice. We acknowledge that the history and context of social welfare and social work in Canada is extensive and nuanced (which explains the reason these areas are typically explored in textbooks instead of articles). As such, this article is not meant to be a comprehensive overview of social welfare and social work, but rather it is a general overview and exploration.

Before we begin, it is important to recognize that this article is being written on the land of Wolastoqiyik, Wəlastəkewiyik/ Maliseet First Nations of Turtle Island, now widely known as Canada. For the purposes of this article, and to contextualize the state within the current colonial context, we will use the colonial name of the land: Canada (Chrismas, 2016). It is also essential to acknowledge that mainstream Canadian history, and much of the literature we are drawing upon, is narrated from a settler-colonial perspective that does not capture the breadth of diverse populations' realities in Canada, but rather centers the voice and experience of a white, European perspective and experience.

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Social Work

Social work is a multifaceted and interdisciplinary profession, rooted within diverse practice settings in our communities (Hick & Stokes, 2021). Social work is an evidence- and practice-based profession (Canadian Association of Social Workers [CASW], n.d) 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). The fundamental values and principles of social work differentiate the profession from others and provide opportunities for intervention at various levels of practice (Hick & Stokes, 2021). Interventions can occur at one or multiple levels, ranging from a micro level (direct work with individuals and communities), meso level (promoting effective and humane operation of systems that individuals and communities interact with), and macro level (development and reform of social policy and system operations [Hare, 2004; Blok, 2012]).

While dedicated to promoting social change at all levels, the profession finds itself in the middle of both "personal troubles" and "public ills", as the problems individuals and communities face are closely connected to broader societal concerns (Jennissen & Lundy, 2014). The fundamental principles and features of the profession of social work provide guidance on how to promote social change and justice. How these principles are adopted and enacted in practice can differ. Often, contributing factors to how one might practice as a social worker include personal experiences, educational background, and social work theories promoted and adopted therein and afterward. These theories are largely influenced by the so-called "two" traditions of social work that continue to guide the profession that today: Charity Organization Societies (COS) and Settlement House Movement (SHM; Kam, 2014).

First, COS emphasized personal needs and individual treatment and were based on the belief that citizens who needed support were unable to make responsible decisions for themselves (Kam, 2014; Mullaly & Dupré, 2018). "Friendly visitors," what we would now refer to as social workers or case workers, provided advice, guidance, and monitoring to people in need, although financial support was rarely provided based on the belief that it would create dependence (Charity Organization Society of London (Ont.), 1896; Dumbrill & Yee, 2019). Second, the SHM aspired for social reform and social justice (Hare, 2004; Kam, 2014). The SHM took the position that poverty was not a result of individuals' efforts but rather a result of adverse social conditions that individuals had no control over (Abramovitz, 1998). Through this model, services and support were provided in an attempt to remedy the "social ills" individuals were experiencing at that time (Abramovitz,1998). The evolution of these two primary traditions of social work throughout history largely influenced two dominant approaches to social work: conventional and structural.

Conventional Social Work

Conventional 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). Although social work is often perceived as progressive, its roots are grounded in principles of "social control (of subordinate populations) and oppression" (Mullaly & West, 2018, p.171). In other words, conventional social work aims to support citizens

who are in need, but inadvertently, doing so often maintains and further reinforces the societal order and relations that force citizens to rely on these very services and supports (Blok, 2012).

Conventional social work and settings are not malicious in intent; they are a response to meet the growing demands of capitalist and neoliberal states. Through this process, the fundamental principles of what distinguishes social work from other helping professions are either forgotten or increasingly challenging to implement. Structural social work offers transformative potential, as this approach 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.

Structural Social Work

Structural social work posits that an imbalance of power in social structures causes oppression and resultant social problems (Moreau, 1979; Weinberg, 2008). Structural social work aims to "dismantle colonialist, patriarchal, and capitalist domination" (Chan, 2018, p. 22). Key approaches within a structural approach to dismantling oppressive systems and societies include service-user empowerment, consciousness-raising, and contextualizing the personal as political (Carniol, 1992; Moreau, 1990; Mullaly & Dupré, 2018; Mullaly & West, 2018).

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). Closely related, consciousness-raising "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). Finally, "the personal is political" is defined by Mullay and Dupré (2018) 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). 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. Through these structural social work processes, power dynamics shift, and individuals begin to question and challenge oppressive systems.

In welfare states (countries whose governments have adopted a welfare system—more on this below), when the organization of a society fails to support or promote the well-being of all citizens, 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. What is essential to recognize is that society's organizational structure that fails to adequately support all citizens does not occur by chance, but rather is a result of deliberate choices and resource allocation made by a government which is influenced by society's prerogative. Thus, understanding the social welfare system and how structural social work relates is pivotal to successful social justice and change.

Social Welfare and The Welfare State

When a country uses the power of the government to adjust market forces to alleviate personal struggles, such as poverty and unemployment, by providing social welfare support and services to its citizens, it is considered to be a "welfare state" (Hick & Stokes, 2021). Thus, by definition, Canada is a welfare state, aligning with Canada's reputation of being a benevolent and prosperous

country that takes care of its citizens. From this understanding, it can be assumed that all Canadians' well-being and needs are met. If you have found your way to this article, you likely have an understanding that this is not the reality for many Canadians. Below we will explore what factors influence how citizen needs are determined and understood, discuss the gap between what individuals need and what aid they receive, and examine some of the ways social welfare fails in its intention and efforts.

Social welfare, also referred to as the social safety net, is the way by which a society provides social, economic, and health benefits to members who are, or who have been deemed, unable to obtain such types of benefits by themselves (Stoesz, 1989; Raphael, 2020). In theory, the purpose of social welfare is to alleviate suffering by providing resources for citizens who do not have the means to self-sufficiently meet their needs or well-being. The level of support social welfare provides is often measured by a government's determination of human needs rather than by what is actually needed to meet individual well-being (Chappell, 2013).

Welfare systems can include an array of monetary and nonmonetary supports that contribute to a person's overall well-being and are comprised of a mixture of social network supports (i.e., family and friends), public welfare (provides aid directly to citizens through government funding/services), and private welfare (provides resources and services to citizens through nongovernmental channels; Hick & Stokes, 2021; Stoesz, 1989). In Canada, social welfare can be categorized into two streams of delivery. First, Income Security refers to monetary or other material benefits provided directly to citizens to meet minimum income levels, such as Social Assistance or designated funds for mental and physical health services (i.e., medication; Hick & Stokes, 2021). Secondly, Social Services provide nonmonetary assistance in the community and public services such as shelters, child-care centers, mental health and substance use programs, and criminal justice services (Hick & Stokes, 2021). The degree to which each of these factors makes up the welfare system varies depending on contextual factors (values, norms, societal ideology, governmental parties) and contemporary challenges (economics, citizen pressure, environmental degradation; Hick & Stokes, 2021). This will be expanded upon in the next section as we explore four approaches to social welfare: residual, institutional, structural, and social investment.

Approaches to Social Welfare

Residual

The residual approach to social welfare is considered a temporary, time-limited response provided to citizens in need only when all other resources within the market and family have been exhausted (Hick & Stokes, 2021; Sainsbury, 1991). This model relies heavily on a means-testing method to determine who and what benefits citizens will receive (Chomik et al., 2015). Means-testing is "based on a comparison of a person's income, assets… or other proxy measures of disadvantage" and involves the evaluation of other basic criterion such as age or previous contributions made to a program (Chomik et al., 2015, p.3). The residual model is primarily targeted towards those who are deemed to be in the most need and provides minimal benefits to discourage reliance on the system and to make it undesirable to use (Hick & Stokes, 2021). Though Canada has adopted other approaches to social welfare for brief periods in history, our welfare state traditionally, and currently, adopts a residual model of social welfare.

Institutional

The institutional approach to social welfare is underpinned by the idea that an individual's welfare is the responsibility of the collective and that legitimate help should be available through the public (Esping-Andersen & Korpi,

1986; Hick & Stokes, 2021). It aims to even out economic stratification or status differences among citizens under the recognition that all needs cannot be met through family and work and as a result, publicly funded programs and supports have a responsibility to address these gaps (Hick & Stokes, 2021). The institutional approach promotes the idea that "all citizens should be equally entitled to a decent standard of living, and that full social citizenship and rights should be guaranteed unconditionally" (Esping-Andersen & Korpi, 1986, p.40). Near the end of World War II, there was a rise of institutional approaches to social welfare across industrialized countries, including Canada.

Nordic/Structural

The "Nordic" model of social welfare is fundamentally based on principles of universality and egalitarianism that have "a comprehensive public responsibility for the welfare and well-being of citizens and residents, implying a large public sector" (Knutsen, 2017, p. 2). This approach is committed to equality, universal rights, and generous social security systems that extend over the entire population to protect against "social risks" such as unemployment, sickness, old age, and disability (Knutsen, 2017). In a Nordic approach, the government is understood to play a strong and active role in which political decisions are made by compromises between political parties that represent various class or economic interests (Knutsen, 2017). This approach to social welfare is aptly named after the group of (Nordic) countries who are responsible for developing the model. It is also referred to as the structural model of social welfare, as it mirrors many of the values of the structural social work approach, including social justice and equity and the recognition that many personal challenges are politically rooted.

Social Investment Approach

In the past few decades, a "social investment" approach to social welfare has been introduced. This approach moves beyond the goal of meeting individuals' economic needs and adopts the goal of inclusion, equity, and social justice (Hick & Stokes, 2021). The social investment approach is grounded in the belief that investment and addressing structural inequities faced by vulnerable and disadvantaged populations can directly impact all aspects of well-being and require change at multiple levels, not just intervention at the individual level. A Canadian program that reflects this approach is postsecondary grants and loans, with larger grants allotted to disadvantaged groups such as students who identify as Indigenous or with a disability (Hick & Stokes, 2021). The difference between this approach and the Nordic approach is that often a social investment model initiates comprehensive programs/services designed to meet the needs of target groups (often marginalized or oppressed groups), though it does not appear to adopt the comprehensive governmental or structural reform to the extent of the Nordic model. Now that we have covered four prominent approaches to social welfare, it is important to discuss the roots and developmental phases of the Canadian social welfare system, which also helps to contextualize social workers' roles within this system.

Phases of Canadian Social Welfare Historical Origins: Indigenous Community Helping

In exploring social welfare and social work in a Canadian context, it is first important to acknowledge the rich histories and traditions of helping within Indigenous communities, which existed long before the beginnings of the profession of social work (Czyzewski & Tester, 2014). Colonialism is a structure, "or set of policies and practices where a political power from one territory

exerts control in a different territory," through both territorial expansion and human marginalization (Choate et al., 2022, p. 96; Czyzewski & Tester, 2014). Long before colonization began with the arrival of Europeans on Turtle Island, Indigenous communities established community-based living. Communities were comprised of individuals who held different roles, which contributed to the entire community's well-being (Baskin & Sinclair, 2015). Indigenous communities were, and continue to be, grounded in the belief of inextricable interconnectedness between individuals, communities, and the land that we exist upon (Albert, 2017). As such, these communities lived through the concept contemporary social work refers to as "person-in-environment," as well as values in celebration of diversity and knowledge-sharing towards healing, helping, and empowerment of all (Gray et al., 2007).

It is important to recognize that modern day colonial social work adopted resembling features of Indigenous helping, in many ways repackaging the knowledge, wisdom, and values that existed long before contact, and culturally appropriated aspects of Indigenous cultures' community of care. Colonial social work, as a profession, has both perpetuated and responded to colonial harm, industrialization, and consequences of capitalism and neoliberalism. Indigenous and other marginalized communities have been subjected to these colonial practices, which have had harmful effects on communities' ability to enact their traditional practices of language, traditions, culture, medicine, and general community-based living (MacDonald & Steenbeek, 2015).

Phase 1: The Elizabethan Poor Laws (The Colonial Period, 1600-1867)

The first phase of contemporary social welfare, as it exists today, can be traced to the period prior to colonization (Hick & Stokes, 2021). During this time, social welfare was provided by parishes and charitable foundations in the absence of social security provided by the state (Smith-Carrier, 2020). This began to shift with the introduction of The English Poor Laws of 1601 in Britain that remained in place until the early 1900s. As a British colony, Canada adopted these laws and approach to social welfare. Under the Elizabethan Poor Laws, social welfare aimed to provide minimum assistance to those who were deemed worthy and addressed poverty through the belief that providing individuals with meager support would motivate them to seek employment and provide for themselves (Peters, 2012). This should sound familiar, as these notions are reflected in the residual model of social welfare, which is rooted in these laws from 400 years ago.

The Poor laws separated who would and would not receive assistance based on an individual-blaming model that distinguished citizens as either the "deserving" or "underserving" poor (Hick & Stokes, 2021). The "deserving" poor were those who were infirm, disabled, or elderly and were described as people who had good moral character and were experiencing bad luck through no fault of their own (Smith-Carrier, 2020; Hick & Stokes, 2021). To be categorized as the "deserving poor," one had to prove to the state that they exhausted all other possible revenues including family and private organizations (Hick & Stokes, 2021). The government took limited responsibility over the "deserving poor." Indoor and outdoor relief was provided to the deserving poor. Indoor relief was established through almshouses, institutions designed to "house" deserving poor and reduce some of the costs in supporting these individuals (Hick & Stokes, 2021). Outdoor relief provided food, clothing items, and other tangible supports, though individuals were responsible for their own shelter/housing (Hick & Stokes, 2021). The deserving poor who were considered "able-bodied" and capable of work could be forced into "workhouses." Workhouses were institutions

with poor living conditions in which individuals were forced to "earn their aid" through work in the workhouse itself, or by being "contracted out," often to complete dangerous and/or undesirable jobs employers could not find other workers for (Hick & Stokes, 2021). For all deserving poor, whether receiving indoor or outdoor relief, the financial assistance received was less than minimum wage at the time to discourage use. Relief was also highly stigmatized in an effort to deter people from seeking support.

In contrast, the "undeserving" poor were those who were able-bodied and otherwise deemed to be employable (Smith-Carrier, 2020). The "undeserving poor" were viewed as lazy or morally degenerate and were understood as being poor as a result of personal failings such as laziness, weak character, or dubious morals (Hick & Stokes, 2021). As such, the government took no responsibility for the undeserving (Hick & Stokes, 2021). Governments lack of support for these individuals forced families to take responsibility for their dependent children and/or other kin regardless of the family's income or resources (Hick & Stokes, 2021). In choosing to deliver aid in these ways, we begin to see the roots of intergenerational poverty and disadvantage of certain groups, due to the government's downloading of responsibility to individuals and families. People classified as "undeserving" could also face being placed in prisons in an attempt to change their attitudes about work (Hick & Stokes, 2021). This system was adopted to provide the minimum amount of assistance required to keep nondissolute people alive while blaming them for their inability to find work (Hick & Stokes, 2021).

Poor Laws is one of the first places we see evidence of the process by which government categorized citizens by principles of worthiness, creating a stratification of value placed on personhood in society and, correspondingly, how resources are allocated inequitably. These principles stayed in place in British colonies, including Canada, for centuries and continue to be founding principles of how our society and welfare systems are organized today (Hick & Stokes, 2021). For instance, Poor Laws is where we see the origins of less eligibility and means-testing, prominent social welfare principles that remain today. Less eligibility refers to the bare minimum of monetary value provided to citizens to ensure the amount received was lower than minimum wage (Hick & Stokes, 2021).

Phase 2: Industrial Period (1868-1940)

During the second phase, the residual social welfare model that stigmatized poverty and provided minimal relief persisted. However, with the increase of socialists and reformists there was a shift away from the dominant ideology that perpetuated the idea that people were the cause of their own poverty (Hick & Stokes, 2021). Much of this shift can be attributed to the sociopolitical context of the time that had economic repercussions that affected the masses of society. This meant that poverty could no longer be attributed solely to problems people were experiencing on an individual level, but clearly reflected consequences of the political and economic climate of the time that affected society as a whole. This included industrialization, the Great Depression, citizen unrest, and the effects of World War II.

Between 1867-1940, industrialization occurred rapidly as people came from both abroad and rural communities into towns and cities with the promise of employment (Hick & Stokes, 2021). In response to the increased number of people working, injuries and deaths in the workplace increased. Although not mandatory, many employers and the rising labour movement introduced and supported Worker's Compensation programs that would require employers to provide both short and long-term financial support to injured workers and families without blame or judgment, regardless of the employer's finan-

cial situation (Hick & Stokes, 2021). These programs marked a critical shift from the previous residual model of welfare, as benefits were paid in cash and were recognized as a right (Hick & Stokes, 2021).

The Industrial period of the welfare system was also marked by the introduction of the Mother's Allowance Act in Manitoba in 1916 (Hick & Stokes, 2021). While work compensation programs were primarily design for men, women's rights activists fought for what would become The Mother's Allowance Act, which provided financial support to women who were raising children alone and did not have adequate income (Hick & Stokes, 2021). Unlike workers compensation programs, The Mother's Allowance program was permeated with principles of worthiness, as eligibility was determined by "good women" (i.e., widows, husbands who were too ill to work) and "fallen women" (i.e., single mothers; Hick & Stokes, 2021). Funds provided to eligible women were too little, requiring many women to work at least part-time to survive (Hick & Stokes, 2021).

Although Liberal and Conservative governments were not keen to introduce federal income programs despite their introduction in other industrialized countries postwar, Canada introduced the Old Age Pension Act in 1927. Under this Act, the federal government could provide up to ten dollars (purchasing power of $174 today) per recipient per month when it was matched by provincial investments (Hick & Stokes, 2021). Eligibility was restricted to individuals who were over the age of 70, were British subjects for over 20 years, or who were Metis, and who had passed a means-test demonstrating they were in financial need and had no other available support (Hick & Stokes, 2021). While it was available to a certain subset of the population, funds were insufficient to make ends meet and the means-test was strict and humiliating (Chappell, 2013).

Shortly after the introduction of the Old Age Pension Act, the 1929 United States stock market crashed, leading to economic collapse across the globe, including Canada, resulting in widespread poverty and unemployment during a time known as the Great Depression (Hick & Stokes, 2021). In 1932 the government announced that the unemployed, homeless, and single men would only receive financial support if they attended relief camps to do hard labour (Hick & Stokes, 2021). There was a societal shift during the Great Depression as citizens who previously believed poverty was a result of moral flaws began to recognize they, too, were now poor, at no fault of their own but rather because of political and economic organization and decision-making outside of their control. In subsequent years, citizens unrest against poor working conditions and poverty continued to grow, leading to the Ottawa Trek in 1935 that demanded the government close relief camps and offer other employment opportunities, or provide financial relief equivalent to that received in the camps (Hick & Stokes, 2021). This protest created a foundation for the change in labour reforms that happened in 1940, when the Unemployment Insurance Act (now known as Employment Insurance) was enacted (Hick & Stokes, 2021). This established a fundamental pillar for Canadians' social safety net, though still required people to be assessed on a means-test of financial need (Hick & Stokes, 2021). The passing of this Act in 1940 made Canada the last industrialized country to adopt a contributory-based Unemployment Income program, although it did not include seasonal workers, women, or Indigenous individuals – these changes came much later (Hick & Stokes, 2021).

Throughout World War II, instability for Canadian citizens continued to rise. Many veterans that returned were unable to find employment or were unable to work do due physical or mental consequences of their services. The growing awareness of the suffering veterans were experiencing resulted in citizens putting pressure on the government

to provide more social and medical support (Hick & Stokes, 2021). Together, the consequences of the Great Depression and World War II resulted in a shift in societal and political ideologies of how government support should be viewed and allocated (Hick & Stokes, 2021).

Phase 3: Welfare State Period (1941-1974)

The transition to the welfare state period was marked by an increase of social welfare programs, fueled by the idea that economic growth and social programs could be "partner policies," meaning the state could support the well-being of its citizens **and** enjoy economic prosperity (Hick & Stokes, 2021). The federal government began to take responsibility and interest in providing welfare support to people in need (Chappell, 2013). This period saw an exponential rise in welfare expenditure that was instrumental in establishing Canada's welfare state. We will explore some of the social welfare outcomes of this phase, though for a more detailed examination, we highly recommend you consider exploring Hick and Stokes' (2021) text, which we have successfully used in our introductory courses. The text provides a comprehensive and detailed overview of these (and many more) important concepts of social welfare in Canada, and you will see we draw upon it below.

The Family Allowance Act, introduced in 1944, was the first universal income security program in Canada that eliminated means testing and provided financial support to all families with children, regardless of income (Chappell, 2013; Hick, 2014). In 1952, the federal government took responsibility for the Old Age Security Act by providing universal taxable monthly payments to Canadians beginning at the age of 70 (Hick & Stokes, 2021). Between 1966 and 1996, the Canada Assistance Program (CAP) provided standardized income and social assistance to many Canadians and was designed to meet citizen's needs, regardless of the cause of such needs (Hick, 2014). CAP is often considered in the literature as the first cost-sharing income program, though we do note that the initial Old Age Pension Act also saw cost sharing between federal and provincial governments. CAP served as the foundation of income and social programs until 1996 (Hick & Stokes, 2021). Another notable advance within the Canadian welfare system during this period includes the introduction the Medical Care Act in 1966, which was replaced by the Canada Health Act in 1984. These programs allocated the responsibility of providing public health care onto provincial and federal governments (Naylor et al., 2020).

By the 1970s, social programs were so widespread that they impacted the lives of most Canadians. However, as income and social programs began to grow, systemic and structural inequalities for vulnerable populations (i.e., older adults, Indigenous populations) were apparent and repeatedly revealed in government reports (Hick & Stokes, 2021). This period of increased social security spending without the elimination or reduction of poverty resulted in a shift to increasing financial support to those in greatest need, ultimately eroding the principle of universality and reintroducing the principles grounded in the residual model of social welfare (Hick & Stokes, 2021).

Phase 4: The Rise of Neoliberalism (1975-2005)

By the late 1970s, conservative thinking was widespread, suggesting government overspending on social programs was largely responsible for the economic situation of the country (Hick & Stokes, 2021). During this period, the corporate sector united and demanded the government reduce their involvement, lower taxes, and allow the private sector to address market issues (Hick & Stokes, 2021). As such, this period is marked by a neoliberal restructuring of the welfare state (Hick & Stokes, 2021). Neoliberalism, as an

ideology, encompasses a set of beliefs about the world and society that underpin political and economic theory, suggesting that collective well-being and prosperity are achieved through minimal government intervention, globalization, and free markets (Aart Scholte, 2010). Neoliberalism can be seen as a set of beliefs that can shape how one sees the world (Sternberg, 2015), allowing for the private sector to have significant control over the livelihood of Canadian citizens.

In the advent of the rise of neoliberalism, Canada saw a shift in policies reflecting government reduced support and welfare spending. This shift in government funding represented a downloading of responsibility onto individuals and families (Hick, 2014). Throughout the 1980s to 1990s, existing social programs were selectively funded, and transfer payments to health care and social programs were significantly reduced. For instance, in 1989, the Family Allowance Act that provided universal income to families with children regardless of income was replaced by the Child Care Tax Benefit, which reintroduced means-testing eligibility criteria (Hick & Stokes, 2021). By the late 1990s, many social programs had entirely disappeared or were significantly diluted (Hick & Stokes, 2021). For instance, the Canadian Health Act was replaced by the Canada Health and Social Transfer System which provided cash in block transfers to provinces for health care, post-secondary education, and social programs (Hick & Stokes, 2021). Although this gave provincial and territorial governments the power to decide how the money was being spent, they were also receiving less cash transfers, which resulted in a restriction of the welfare system (Hick & Stokes, 2021).

This shift in defunding the welfare state continued to fuel growing income inequality which was only further supported by the 2000 Liberal campaign that resulted in economic tax cuts that favored the wealthiest members of society (Hick & Stokes, 2021). The cost-cutting left low-income citizens extremely susceptible to poverty and increasingly vulnerable to the precarious economy (Hick & Stokes, 2021). By 2006, the Canadian government established its new mentality directed towards depleting the pre-existing social support programs, resulting in spikes in child and family poverty as the result of a shrinking welfare state; otherwise known as retrenchment (Hick & Stokes, 2021).

Phase 5: Retrenchment and Recovery (2006 - present)

Building upon cutbacks that were already taking place, the retrenchment phase begun when the Conservative Government, led by Stephen Harper, assumed power in 2006 (Hick & Stokes, 2021). Retrenchment occurs when a government downsizes, restructures, or redefines their role within the social assistance program as a means of addressing budget deficits or public debt (Rose, 2004). More colloquially, this is referred to as ‘starving the beast’ and meant governments could argue that taxes had been cut so much that there was now no available funding for social programs (Hick & Stokes, 2021). The Harper government believed that when the marketplace is left alone, goods and services will be distributed to those who worked for it, thus incentivizing it for those who did not (Hick & Stokes, 2021). However, this neoliberal view had a negative effect on social policy, resulting in a growing income gap between the wealthy and poor (Hick & Stokes, 2021). With the substantial social support cutbacks, income inequality continued to expand to as much as 20.5% between 1981-2010 (Breau, 2015).

The Conservative government made steady cutbacks of social programs that were in place to provide a safety net for the dangers of the market economy (Hick & Stokes, 2021). For instance, the National Day Care program and the Universal Child Care Benefit that provided support to all citizens with dependents was replaced by the Canadian Childcare Benefit where eligibility was based

on income, limiting who could access the program (Hick & Stokes, 2021). In addition to social welfare cutbacks, First Nations services continued to be piecemeal and deliberately underfunded (Hick & Stokes, 2021). The recession from 2008-2010 forced the government to reluctantly agree to increase Employment Income benefits (Hick & Stokes, 2021). By 2015, the Liberal government led by Justin Trudeau committed to much-needed change in Canada, including, but not limited to, the legalization of marijuana; a commitment to evidence-based policies; and efforts to relieve family and child poverty, expand parental leave and child care, invest in mental health support, combat sexism and racism, redress injustice of Indigenous peoples, invest in service for seniors and persons with disabilities, and prioritize climate change (Hick & Stokes, 2021). While the Liberal government remained committed to addressing the issue of child and family poverty, nothing could have prepared the party, or Canadian citizens, for the global pandemic that reached Canada in 2020.

Phase 6: Covid Times (Present)

In the winter of 2019-2020, the novel coronavirus (COVID-19) spread rapidly across the globe, posing significant risks to the health and well-being of citizens (Hick & Stokes, 2021). By March 2020, federal and provincial leaders worked together to "lock down" provinces and territories across Canada (Hick & Stokes, 2021). To mitigate economic effects of the pandemic, the federal government implemented emergency financial income to citizens, including wage and rent subsidies, increased child benefits, mortgage payment deferrals, disability payments, and grants to businesses, among others (Hick & Stokes, 2021).

The immediacy and necessity of these programs illuminated deeply entrenched inequality in Canadian society and distribution of welfare services (Hick & Stokes, 2021). For instance, the most common income security program was the Canada Emergency Response Benefit that provided $2,000 a month to employed and self-employed Canadians who were unable to work due to COVID-19 (Hick & Stokes, 2021; Government of Canada, 2023). At the same time, a single adult in Nova Scotia accessing social assistance would receive a maximum amount of $950 a month for rent and all other living expenses (Province of Nova Scotia, 2022). This meant that those relying upon Canada's "safety net" were receiving 48% of what the federal government determined to be necessary for Canadians to continue to live during COVID-19. This discrepancy highlights the way principles of Elizabethan Poor Laws persist today, as Canada's response to welfare provision has deeply entrenched ideas of being "deserving" and "undeserving."

Canada's response was one that could be defined as "emergency neoliberalism" in how it only provided temporary support as to not "unravel" the preexisting system (Bryant et al., 2020). Those most impacted by the social and physiological effects of COVID-19 were those who were already most vulnerable, including the working poor, immigrant workers, racial minorities, and individuals living in underfunded and resourced care homes (Hick & Stokes, 2021). When the pandemic began in 2020, Canada's welfare state was already eroded due to neoliberal approaches to welfare provision that had been adopted since the 1970s (Hick & Stokes, 2021).

Although it is too soon to predict all of the widespread consequences of COVID-19, it is known that the pandemic has increased levels of anxiety and depression (Dozois & Mental Health Research Canada, 2021), increased the risk and experience of intimate partner violence (Buttell & Ferreira, 2020; Moreira & Pinto da Costa, 2020), increased the prevalence of food insecurity (Niles et al., 2020), and demonstrably impacted racialized communities at disproportionate rates to their white counterparts in terms of hospitalizations and deaths from the virus (Millett et al.,

2020). While the impacts of the pandemic are still unfolding, it is evident that the contemporary and historic responses to the provision of social welfare have not been, and will not be, enough. This, among other social, political, economic, and environmental events, has highlighted the need for social workers more than ever. We argue that to practice in line with our professional values and code of ethics as social workers, we must move away from conventional approaches to welfare that aim to "fill the gaps" and move to a structural approach, which encourages reform to the very systems that privilege some and oppressive others.

Structural Social Work and Canadian Social Welfare

As we have explored, throughout Canadian history, social welfare models are malleable, largely reflecting sociopolitical factors, pressures, and values of the corresponding timeframe. The needs of humans to achieve well-being have predominantly remained consistent throughout time. However, the degree and quality of social welfare services citizens have received have been inconsistent. In this way, we can come to understand how welfare systems and services often do not put the well-being of citizens at the forefront of concern, but instead how economic and ideological perspectives of political parties often dictate decision-making.

The similarities of the government's response to World War II and COVID-19 are stark. In fact, Canada's Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau, equated the approach taken during COVID-19 to the one that was taken in response to the Second World War, 80 years earlier (Hick & Stokes, 2021). The impacts of the pandemic led to a rapid expansion of social welfare comparable to what had once been seen in response to World War II (Burdnell Wilson et al., 2020). In both events, ideology surrounding human welfare shifted from being an individual failing to a collective responsibility in acknowledgment of broader social and political influences on citizen circumstances. That is, it was an event that affected the masses and permeated into the lives of all citizens regardless of socioeconomic status. It would be nearly impossible to blame individuals for their experiences of distress and poverty in either of these circumstances. What becomes clear when isolating these two events and governments' responses in each is that resources and supports aiming to meet the well-being of citizens are reflective of governments' deliberate choice in how they distribute Canadians' resources based on principles of worthiness. Through this understanding, it is apparent that the government has the **choice** to invest in social welfare and to provide for the well-being of citizens (for example: the government could immediately find the resources [money] to suddenly provide social aid for all Canadians during the pandemic) or to continue to prioritize profit through a neoliberal and capitalist mindset.

Welfare models have both evolved and devolved over time; however, dominant ideologies such as worthiness, less eligibility, and means-testing rooted in the Elizabethan Poor Laws have been repackaged in our welfare system throughout history and continue today. While Canada's residual model, rooted in neoliberal and capitalist ideals, prevails and results in a normalization of who is "deserving" of support (and how much), we argue from a structural social work approach that the welfare state must be restructured. To dismantle inequity and experiences of oppression and marginalization, welfare services and government decision-making need to be guided by citizens' welfare needs. In this way, government policy and action reflect the needs and well-being of citizens, addressing the root causes of social problems.

Herein lies the connection between structural social work and social welfare: the system and structures (that is, the welfare state

and social welfare system, among others) are inadequate, inequitable, and create stratification between groups and classes of people. Societally, because of historical and current values and beliefs, we often then blame individuals who are at the disadvantaged end of this stratification for “not pulling their weight” in society. That is, we blame the individual for political and structural issues that are being done **to** them; oppressed and marginalized individuals are often collateral damage of broken sociopolitical and economic systems. Structural social work suggests that rather than being complacent with the current organization of these systems and structures, we must strategically organize and advocate for change at the structural level so that this cycle of blame can be interrupted, and social justice and equity can be achieved for all individuals (rather than just some). The welfare state and social safety net have changed historically and can do so again. Structural social work posits that the change should be one that addresses the realities of human experiences and chooses justice and egalitarianism above all else.

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