"Between a Rock and a Hard place": Negotiating the Neoliberal Regulation of Social Work Practice and Education

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ABSTRACT: In this paper, I reflect on the neoliberalization of social service and educational institutions by using as a departure point a recent province of Alberta Health Services (AHS) Corporate Directive instructing social work schools to implement training on standardized reporting and investigation protocols in cases of "adult abuse and neglect" as a condition for student placement and employment. The neoliberalization of practice, I propose, is articulated through corporate-oriented and professional competency discourses, which together with ongoing processes of restructuring in social work institutions, submit social work to a governmental regime that shapes practice and social workers as neoliberal. The neoliberalization of practice occurs in coordination with similar processes taking place in the university in which professional programs, such as social work, are being constituted and regulated through market-driven educational discourses and the neoliberal re-structuring of the university. The author argues that the neoliberalization of social work practice and education is posing important challenges for educators committed to critical pedagogical projects in social work. These challenges require a commitment to ongoing pedagogical practices that promote and foment critical thinking and commitments to social change situated in the political contingencies of neoliberalism.

KEYWORDS: Neoliberalism, Education, Social Work, Alberta Health Services

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INTRODUCTION

Recently, the province of Alberta Health Services (AHS) issued a "Corporate Directive" (hereafter referred as the Directive) instructing schools of social work wishing to place students in their programs to comply with the education requirements of their "adult abuse and neglect" policy. Under the title *Keeping Everyone Safe,* the Directive aimed at targeting "efforts to increase AHS representatives' knowledge about patient abuse prevention, awareness and reporting" in order to maintain "safety" as one of AHS's "core values" (2012a, 1). The Directive indicated that in order for students to be able to do placements and/or be employed in AHS, social work curriculum needed to include information, knowledge and skills related to awareness, prevention and reporting of adult abuse and neglect. Specifically, students had to be trained, not on assessment and counselling – generally associated with social work clinical skills – but rather on standardized reporting protocols, investigation techniques and discipline procedures, as well as on the detection and management of the risk associated with allegations of "patient abuse by AHS representatives." Social work curriculum, the Directive indicated, was also expected to train social workers in the provincial "internal" and "mandatory" reporting procedures in order to ensure "a standardized approach to business and operating practices" as well as "quality service and cost-efficient operations" (2012a, 1).

The Directive is part of a current trend in Canada and other western countries in which social work practice is being subjected to disciplinary devices. These devices include managerial technologies that minutely regulate practice processes and outcomes, and remove discretion and decision-making powers from the hands of social workers and their clients; changes to budget formulas that reorient social service provisions towards corporate models of cost-effectiveness and efficiency; evidence-based practice models that focus practice towards the achievement of deliverable outcomes; and, entry-level competency profiles that regulate professional registration and licensing, facilitate the labour mobility of social workers and introduce standardized conceptions of practice (Rossiter and Heron, 2011; Aronson and Hemingway, 2011). In this paper I argue that these disciplinary, regulatory and standardizing technologies – of which the Directive is a case in point – are part of a process of transformation that, not only is turning social work into a tool of neoliberalism, but also is producing social work and social workers as neoliberal. Furthermore, the expectations of social service institutions that universities train social workers in standardized, evidence and

competency-based practice models converge with similar processes of neoliberalization underway in higher education. The effect of this is the alignment of social work and social work education with a neoliberal regime whose goal is to squeeze critical practice and educational projects out of social work, and shape social workers and educators to become neoliberal subjects.

I use a Foucaultian notion of governmentality, which I discuss in the first section of the paper, as a useful conceptual tool for charting neoliberalization processes at macro and micro levels in practice and education (Foucault, 2007). A governementality framework allows us not only to understand neoliberalism as a politico-economic and social system, but also to theorize it as an onto-epistemological project that consistently shapes social environments, social policies, state institutions, and the subject that is captured and lives within these environments, policies and institutions. In the second part of this paper, I discuss the neoliberalization of practice by using the Directive as a starting point to explore how the social work practice discourses it contains, as well as its location within ongoing institutional changes, work to align social work and social workers with a neoliberal governmentality. In the third part of this paper, I make my way from practice to education and describe how instruments such as the Directive and the recently instituted *Entry-Level Competency Profile for Social Workers in Canada* (CCSWR, 2012) find a receptive environment in universities that are themselves also being subjected to processes of neoliberalization. I pay attention to the governmental effects of neoliberalism in the daily work of academics and the effects of neoliberalism for critical social work pedagogical projects. In the concluding section, I explore some of the possible pedagogical, political and ethical commitments that a resistance to neoliberalism necessitates from critical social work educators.

This paper is not intended to be an exhaustive analysis of the AHS Directive or of health, welfare or education reform. Nor is the paper intended as a condemnation of adult abuse and neglect policies. Rather, the paper is a reflection of how instruments such as the AHS Directive use discourses of abuse and neglect prevention to sneak neoliberalism into practice and education and subject practitioners and educators to its regulation and discipline. While these kinds of instruments are a manifestation of neoliberal discourses that produce and regulate practice and pedagogical encounters, their power lies in their consistency with institutional reforms underway in social service institutions and in the university.

NEOLIBERALISM AS A GOVERNMENTAL REGIME

In the field of political economy, neoliberalism is generally associated with a western economic model that, since the 1990s, has prompted a wide array of structural social, political and economic reforms. Neoliberalism is responsible for the deregulation of the market, the expansion of financial capitalism, the imposition of free-market economies in the Global South, the submission of the state to the needs of the economy, the advancement of neoconservative agendas, the privileging of corporate interests over community interests, and the reduction of state responsibility for marginalized and vulnerable populations (Brenner and Theodore, 2002; Garrett 2010; Mahon, 2008). Neoliberalism leads to welfare reform whereby universal systems of social support and benefits are dismantled to give way to means-tested programs that reduce benefits and increase regulation, police and individual responsibility (McDonald and Marston, 2005; Teghtsoonian, 2009). As a result, Brown (2005, 46) argues, neoliberalism creates a significant rupture in the historical "modest ethical gap" between economy and polity leading to what Wallace and Pease (2011) suggest is the loss of state-centred institutions and the distribution of social theories that install the idea of the moral blindness and impartiality of the market (Bauman, 2000; 2001; Davies and Bansel, 2007; Lemke, 2002; Rose, 1996).

While the impact of neoliberalism on state, economic and social institutions becomes readily observable through a structural institutional analysis, neoliberalism reflects some critical conditions that are not easily explainable through a purely top-down analysis of neoliberalism as repressive power, or as a hegemonic ideology that sustains false consciousness. As Dey (2014) observes, analyses that overemphasize the role of institutions, privilege an understanding of power as purely repressive, or promote a conception of neoliberalism as simply an ideological untruth can make us blind to the multiple ways in which power circulates through social relations, how it produces truth, and how power relations and truth regimes shape the subject. A purely institutional analysis, for example, can result in overlooking an important condition of neoliberalism: its effects in producing subjects that, while suffering the detrimental effects of neoliberal de/regulation, nevertheless internalize neoliberal discourses and use them to understand themselves and others as rational, calculative, enterprising, and individually responsibilized subjects (Brown 2005; Burchell, 1996).

Foucault (2007) proposed governmentality as a conceptual framework to interrogate state power not only in its institutional and political manifestations, but also in its effects at the level of individual life and human relations. As Lemke (2008) indicates, governmentality is part of Foucault's larger preoccupation with the interrelation of power, knowledge and subjectivity and it cannot be divorced from Foucault's concern with the discursive constitution of the subject. Thus, governmentality, Burchell (1996, 20) suggests, refers to a "contact point" between techniques of domination applied through the state apparatus and techniques of the self deployed through subjectivity discourses. Therefore, while not rejecting a structural analysis, governmentality opens an opportunity for conceptualizing neoliberalism as a complexity of social power relations and material elements sustained by truth regimes that reach from the centrality of the state to the very soul of the subject/citizen (Foucault, 2007; Burchell, 1996; Gordon, 1991; Miller and Rose, 2008). Further, a governmental framework uncovers neoliberalism's reliance on the deployment of power-knowledge devices that, rather than describing, produce a reality and the subject who inhabits that reality.

Governmentality allows us to see the onto-epistemological project that is neoliberalism and its efforts to explicitly and specifically produce the social environment and the subject who becomes known, and knows herself, within that environment. Brown (2005, 42) argues that neoliberalism not only defines, but also interpolates the subject to become *homo economicus* who, by adopting neoliberal technologies of self, comes into being through highly prescribed discourses of rationality and calculability that "equate moral responsibility with rational action." As Rose (1999, 152) adds, neoliberalism introduces a market rationality into discourses of subjectivity making it possible for subjects to "translate their activities into financial terms, to seek to maximize productivity… to cut out waste, to restructure activities that [are] not cost-effective, to choose between priorities in terms of their relative costs and benefits, to become more or less like a financial manager of their own professional activities." Through these subject-making discourses, subjects can experience the mutually sustaining technologies of abandonment and regulation that result from neoliberal reform as conditions that foster their personal choice and individual freedom.

A governmental conceptual framework is, therefore, useful for my exploration of the neoliberalization of social work because it allows me to situate documents and policies such as the AHS Directive in the context of ongoing institutional neoliberal changes taking place in

social work institutions and the university. It also makes possible the exploration of these policies as devices that contain, articulate, deploy and distribute neoliberal power-knowledge in order to minutely produce and regulate practice and educational encounters and the subjects that participate in them. As I argue in the next two sections of this paper, the Directive reflects not only neoliberal institutional changes, but also renders practice and practitioners, as well as education and educators explicitly thinkable, knowable and governable in ways that are coherent with the neoliberal regime (Miller and Rose, 1990). I begin the next section with a brief analysis of the AHS Directive in order to render explicit the discourses of practice and professional subjectivity manifested within its text and to situate it within the ongoing institutional neoliberal transformation of social work practice and the neoliberal regulation of social work practitioners.

THE AHS CORPORATE DIRECTIVE AND THE NEOLIBERALIZATION OF PRACTICE

The neoliberalization of social work practice can be observed in the way in which instruments such as the Directive delineate a discursive field of action for social work and produce and organize professional encounters and ideal professional performance. The Directive, for instance, seizes discourses of safety and abuse prevention and binds them to neoliberal practice discourses of calculability, objectivity, risk management and standardization. Practice becomes neoliberal by producing health services as restricted and organized around principles of cost-efficient, standardized approaches to "business and operating practices," which have as their main objective the calculation and management of risk and the reduction of personal bias through the imposition of standardized practice processes (2012a, 1). Risk management, Parton (1999) suggests, shifts the focus of practice from meeting the needs of service users to the assessment and calculation of cost and liability. Risk, he continues, "gives the impression of calculability and objectivity" (102), concepts that become perfectly logical within neoliberal discourses of cost-benefit calculations that submit social work to the market mentality that, Brown (2005, 40) observes, characterize neoliberalism's constructive project.

Neoliberal market rationalities are sustained by discourses of practise standardization that reduce risk associated with social workers who either over-step professional boundaries or exercise personalized judgement. Discourses of standardization capture

interpersonal and potentially unpredictable social work relationships within a rationality of objectivity, predictability, calculability and rational action. For example, a literature review prepared by AHS to support the formulation of the Directive (2012b, 4) identifies carefully circumscribed practice and policy approaches with regards to "physical interaction," "same sex" chaperoning, "knock and enter policies," and staff "screening." We see here the careful management of practice encounters in which the bodies of professionals and clients are placed and regulated according to minutely staged practice procedures that can be assessed and calculated according to their capacity to comply with standards of practice. Furthermore, we see the disciplinary work of practice discourses that indicate, for example, that staff screening should "go beyond criminal record checks, and include screening for past interpersonal violence, stress, emotional instability, substance abuse and previous complaints of abuse" (4). Abuse and neglect become the result of individualized actions, errors in judgment, and personal miscalculations and deviance. These conditions can be prevented and eliminated through the imposition of carefully regulated practice standards, and through careful screening and institutional disciplinary actions taking place within the context of a market mentality dominated by market-oriented discourses of cost efficiency.

A significant objective of standardized practice discourses is the elimination of personal and cultural bias by creating apparently objective definitions of abuse manageable through regulated practice. For example, using child abuse literature the literature review mentioned above states that a major obstacle to effective recognition of abuse and neglect is "the [service] provider's *personal and cultural* values (when child-rearing practices *are viewed through his/her own set of lenses based on his/her personal upbringing and own set of cultural values*) conflicting with legal [and institutional] definitions of abuse" (AHS, 2012b, 3, emphasis added). The solution to this potential conflict is the constitution of standardized and apparently unbiased and objective definitions of abuse and the distribution of this definition – for which it is necessary to recruit the assistance of the university – to each and every practitioner. While personal and cultural bias are produced here as dangerous risk, the neoliberal and historically specific discursive construction of notions of abuse and practice, along with the manner in which these discourses are already embedded in white, middle class and heteronormative values, are disguised under apparently objective legal and institutional definitions.

It is important to restate that it is not the prevention of adult abuse and neglect that I question in this analysis, but rather how such prevention is articulated exclusively in a neoliberal framework of practice. The regulatory, disciplinarian and normalizing bureaucratic processes these practices enact on the populations that are subjected to them, and on social work professionals who enact them, are obscured when standardized, cost-efficient and risk-managerial approaches are unproblematically presented as unbiased and objective solutions to abuse (Drinkwater, 2005; Waldschmidt, 2005). Furthermore, the modest headways that anti-racist, anti-colonial and culturally aware approaches to practice have made in social work become null when cultural values are produced as the cause of abuse and neglect, and practice is subjected to market-driven calculability.

The constitution of social work subjectivities is a critical effect of the neoliberalization of social work. Such constitution is mediated through discourses of self-regulation and competency that effectively produce social workers as policing agents, individually responsible for their own actions and as well as for the regulation and policing of others. For instance, the Directive instructs social workers to adopt behaviours of self-discipline and self-alignment (through the adoption and incorporation of the standard practices already discussed) as well as to engage in the surveillance of others, including potentially abusive and culturally biased colleagues and unscrupulous patients (AHS, 2012a, 3). Visible is the discursive production of the "competent professional" who is skilled in the identification, calculation and elimination of personal bias and the identification of abusive behaviour; knowledgeable and competent in relation to standard reporting and risk reducing protocols; and capable of identifying clients who are lying about abuse experiences. Competency, understood along the lines set up by the Directive, becomes a marker of rationality and prudence that is akin, as Brown (2005, 42) suggests, with neoliberal discourses of subjectivity embedded in "rational deliberation," "individual responsibility" and risk management. In fact, the calculation, management and individualization of risk in cases of abuse become not simply a matter of social or institutional policy, but come to define the moral behaviour of social workers.

The Directive is embedded within ongoing neoliberalization processes taking place in social work institutions that sustain, and are sustained by, the practice discourses manifested in the Directive. In addition to the welfare reform strategies already mentioned, the social work field is being relentlessly shaped as neoliberal through, for

example, power-knowledge regimes that reconstitute the welfare state as excessively costly both economically and socially in order to justify not only budget cuts and the privatization of care, but also the reconceptualization of funding structures and state responsibility (Ferguson and Lavalette, 2004; Garrett 2010). Social workers experience budget cuts and the restructuring of funding programs that shift funding regimes from core-funding to project-based funding (Ogbor, 2001), and from funding concerned with the support of vulnerable populations to funding concerned with enticing, if not forcing, those populations into the labour market (Morrow, Hankivsky and Varcoe, 2004). Social workers are required, within these regimes, to work under conditions of increasing insecurity and vulnerability (Baines, 2006; Smith, 2007). They are also required to negotiate regimes of practice that are increasingly concerned with regulation, surveillance and control of marginalized and vulnerable populations, and with the valorization of human action almost exclusively through discourses of productivity and individual responsibilization and autonomy (Morrow et al., 2004; Pulkingham, Fuller, and Kershaw, 2010; Teghtsoonian, 2009). Women, especially women raising children, the poor, racialized minorities, peoples with disabilities, and other marginalized groups, bear the brunt of these neoliberalizing processes; they experience most concretely the direct effects of a neoliberal regime that criminalizes poverty and need, privatizes responsibility and individualizes the social effects of neoliberalism (Moffatt, 1999; McDonald and Marston, 2005; Melamed, 2006).

Under these conditions, social work becomes not simply a social institution required to negotiate the neoliberal regime. Rather, it is itself shaped as neoliberal through, for example, the submission of practice to managerial policies, corporate discourses of cost-efficiency and evidence-based models that intimately regulate helping relationships (Dominelli, 2009). The recently instituted "entry-level competency profile for social workers in Canada" developed and imposed by the Canadian Council of Social Work Regulators (2012) is another case in point. The profile summarizes the skills and competencies that social workers in Canada should demonstrate in order to qualify for registration in the professional colleges and for practice in any of the provinces. Disguised within discourses about the need to create high quality standardized systems of practice – practice discourses very much in tune with the Directive – this competency profile combines some of the standardised practice discourses I have already discussed with efforts to submit social work to neoliberal labour discourses of mobility, flexibility, insecurity

and market dependability (Rossiter and Heron, 2011; Aronson and Hemingway, 2011). As is the case with the Directive, the social worker in the competency profile is the worker capable of "skilful" engagement in the management, regulation and standardized discipline of populations. Yet, as is the case with most other examples of how neoliberalism represents itself, these determined social functions of social work are presented as devoid of ideology, as simply the 'natural' and most commonsensical way of doing social work, and as a set of de-politicized, rational, objective and evidence-based techniques.

The neoliberalization of social work is also supported by the introduction of technologically mediated reporting, assessment and managerial technologies such as Computer Business Systems (CBS's), computer databases, and managerial systems that not only capture the work of social workers within complex information technologies, but also dictate the outcome of practice in ways that are removed from the actual interpersonal relationships historically so central to the work of helping (Harris 2003, Wallace and Pease, 2011). As Head (2014, 5) observes in his book on the use of CBS's in white collar professions and human service work, these systems introduce industrial "regimes of quantification, targeting and control" into decisions regarding how many patients or clients or, in the context of the university, how many students should be processed within a system of work that resembles the industrial production line. The central effect of these technologies is the production of mindless, or, as Head calls them, "dumber" professionals whose practice does not require much more than imputing information and following direction.

Technology mediated assessment and practice tools and their related standardized competency profiles and evidence based practice discourses, in turn, render social work practice, and the professionals and clients in them, permanently visible within managerial regimes concerned with the minute calculation of practice (Morgan and Payne, 2002; Tsui and Cheung, 2004; van Heugten, 2011), and with the shaping of social work along discourses of marketability (O'Connor, 2002). Managerialism, as is the case with computerized practice and assessment technologies, produce social workers not as expert professionals capable of independent thought and judgement, but as workers whose expertise and thinking abilities are not only unnecessary, but also discouraged. Most importantly, managerialism conceptualizes society as market. As Tsui and Cheung (2004, p. 439) argue:

"Managerialism views society as a market with competing interests, not a community with a common goal. In a market, the important

elements are supply, demand and price; not support, dignity and peace. Market value is the ultimate standard for decision making. Managers care about the profit of the enterprise, not the benefit of clients. Their pursuit is market share, not sharing. They work for being well, not for the well-being of others. The spirit of community and the value of society have been shelved and replaced by commercial principle – the maximization of profits."

Neoliberalism, as deployed through technologies of practice and management, seeks to shape the very subjectivities of social workers and how they think of themselves, their practice and their encounters and relationships with clients. As Garrett (2010, 343) observes, the aim of neoliberalism is to install a "new 'common sense'" and to ensure that social workers not only "begin to think and act in a manner which is conducive to neoliberalism," but also experience neoliberal governmentality as something to be freely embraced. "The political and economic aspiration," continues Garrett, is "to prompt a cultural shift - even, perhaps, to change the soul [of social workers]" (Garrett, 2003). Neoliberalism shows its onto-epistemological character in social work not only in the way in which social work regulates, disciplines and cares or fails to care for certain life, but also in the manner in which it installs power-knowledge regimes that produce desirable conduct and shape both practice and practitioner. Consequently, while authors such as Green (2009) suggest that the management models imposed through neoliberalism interfere with wise or ethical professional action, a governmental analysis allows us to argue that neoliberalism has the capacity to delineate the very notion of morality and ethics and the subject that engages in moral and ethical practice.

THE NEOLIBERAL UNIVERSITY

The Directive arrived in my email inbox through the General Counsel Office of the university where I taught at the time, attached to a message that clearly and succinctly instructed the school to comply with its expectations "to have specific content on adult abuse and neglect in our curriculum for our students to be able to practice in the Alberta Health Services" (P. Miller, personal communication, June 14, 2012). The Directive generated mixed responses among my colleagues, with some faculty wholeheartedly embracing and actively searching for ways to comply with its expectations, and others expressing not only concern about its contents, but also frustration and incredulity at the audacity of an agency telling us how to do our job. These discussions

reflected long-standing debates taking place in the university over the role and function of education and its relationship to the labour market. In social work, these debates have, for the most part, been characterized by discussions over whether social work education should teach clinical and competency skills or theory and critical thinking skills (Burke, 1996; Moffatt, 2001). Pedagogical approaches that centre the teaching of professional competencies advance the idea that technical knowledge and practices skills prepare practitioners for 'good', objective, transparent and evidence based practice, and reduce the potential of harm to client populations (Cheetham and Chivers, 2005). As Bogo, Mishna, and Regehr (2011, 276), for instance, argue, the teaching of "competence models can provide a transparent blueprint of what students can expect to learn, what teachers will ensure is provided, what practitioners have a responsibility to master, and what consumers and policymakers can expect" from the social work profession.

Conversely, critical approaches to social work education insist on unpacking the social power relations that determine the living conditions of individuals and communities and inform and delimit helping relationships (Baines, 2006; de Montigny, 1995; Fook, 2003; Gilbert & Powell, 2009; Ife, Healy, Spratt, and Solomon, 2004; Lindsay, 1994). In other words, critical social work approaches adhere to a political commitment to considering the social power relations (racism, patriarchy, class inequality, colonialism, heteronormativity, etc.) that inform individual conditions, resisting individualizing conceptions of social problems, and working with individuals and communities towards social change. This commitment is reflected in anti-oppressive, anti-racist, feminist, class conscious, anti-colonial, etc. approaches to social work practice that politicize social problems and seek to create socially conscious, flexible and creative helping relationships. The purpose of critical social work is not simply to graduate readily employable social workers who can blindly follow the rules, but also to produce professionals capable of unpacking normative practice discourses and resisting oppressive social structures.

Furthermore, critical social work turns the analytical gaze towards the profession itself in order to unpack professional complicity in historical and contemporary conditions of injustice and to uncover how the reliance on skills and competency helps to secure hegemonic professional identities. As Jeffery (2005, 411) suggests, within a profession historically charged with the "benevolent treatment of society's marginalized and 'unfortunate' individuals and groups," demands for skills

and competencies are not only unsurprising, but also speak to a deeply embedded professional identity centred on the premise that the capacity to 'skilfully do' social work intimately defines who social workers become (see also Heron 2007; Margolin, 1997). By interrogating the very conception of competency skills and their reliance on what Schick (1998, 277) calls "technical-rational solutions," critical social work interrogates the impetus demonstrated in competency-based training programs to "entrench and privilege a unitary and specific understanding of social work theory, practice, and education" (Campbell, 2011, 311; Campbell and Whitmore, 2004; Fook, 2011; Martinell and Jacobsson, 2012). As Campbell (2011, 312) argues, competency-based educational approaches are grounded on un-examined assumptions that social workers share or should share the same values and ethics and that social work knowledge can be captured within a set of "pre-defined, discrete, measurable tasks." Critical approaches to social work education, therefore, promote learning experiences that not only explore the power relations at work in helping and social workers' complicity in the perpetuations of conditions of social injustice, but also entice students to explore their own motivations to become social workers and to find security in the acquisition of competency skills (Jeffery and Nelson, 2011).

At first sight, competency-based and clinical social work education programs with their focus on teaching technical knowledge appear to be well-equipped to meet the expectations included in the Directive and to impart knowledge that can ensure standardized, cost-efficient practice. Yet, I would argue that neoliberalism is specifically shaping education, including competency-based education, within a market driven rationality that might not be what proponents of competency-based social work education intend. The neoliberalization of social work is sustained not only by the changes in practice I previously discussed, but also by similar processes of neoliberal transformation underway in the university itself that facilitate the unobstructed transition of the Directive and the power-knowledge regimes it contains and advances, from practice to education. Neoliberalizing processes in the university are insidiously shaping higher education, undermining critical pedagogical approaches, including critical social work, while capturing and re-constituting professional and competency-based education as neoliberal (van Heugten, 2011).

Neoliberalism results in concrete structural and material conditions in the university such as, for example, the proletarianization of education through increased numbers of seasonal instructors who labour for low

pay and under insecure working conditions; the introduction of corporate, business oriented approaches to the management, evaluation and regulation of universities and their research and educational agendas; and, the reconstitution of education along consumer-driven, customer service and profit-seeking neoliberal values (Canaan and Shumar, 2008; Church, 2008; Naidoo, 2008). These material and structural conditions are combined with an increased emphasis on profit and the corporatization of the university that require departments to increase registration while confronting budget restrictions and reductions as well as to implement auditing techniques and funding formulas that are dependent on economic impact (Ball, 2012; Shore, 2010).[2] While economic restructuring and budget cuts are at times presented as the result of crises, discourses of efficiency, streamlining and efficacy attach themselves to crisis discourses and in more insidious ways shape the neoliberal university (Lewis, 2008).

Neoliberalization shapes the nature of university education though the articulation of, for example, discourses of 'human capital' and 'knowledge-based global economy' that capitalize knowledge and turn education from the pursuit of knowledge into an individualized consumer-driven pursuit for profit (Shore, 2010). "Attached to this sense of schools as producers of 'human capital,'" argues Apple (2006, 23), "is an equally crucial cultural agenda [that] involves radically changing how we think of ourselves and what the goals of schooling should be." Along with the reorientation of universities towards international markets, which conjures up old colonial forms of knowledge production and distribution, as Lim, Duggan and Muñoz (2010, 133) argue, "the intensification of professional training as a first priority is also helping to promote profit, entrepreneurial innovation, and university brand names." This shift becomes perfectly logical for, as Lyotard observes, "the question now asked by the professionalist student, the State or institutions of higher education is no longer 'Is it true?' but 'What use is it?'" (cited in Ahmed, 2012, 84).

Lewis (2008, 46) observes that the neoliberal restructuring of higher education "is not serendipitous. It has been triggered by specific political and economic shifts in ideology that are making a global sweep and catching education up in its wake, not by coincidence but because the

[2] For example, many universities in Canada have implemented tools such as the "Academic and Administrative Program Reviews." Informed by the US Dickeson approach, these program reviews are founded on the economic theoretical premise that periods of scarcity and austerity offer the perfect opportunity for 'refocusing' and prioritizing funding in educational programs (Dickeson, 2010).

control of education is a significant component of the process." In social work, neoliberalism finds expression in competency-based educational discourses that, as van Heugten (2011) argues, emphasize the standardization of taken-for-granted professional practices. While these professional practices gain dominance, they are themselves being produced as tools for the introduction of economic and neoliberal imperatives into social work education. As Rossiter and Heron (2011, 306) suggest, neoliberalism captures competency-based social work education and shapes it to conform to normative discourses of labour flexibility and market calculability and dependability that "eliminate the intellectual and ethical foundations of the profession in favour of rudderless behaviours." The alignment of the curriculum with neoliberal governmentality serves, as Giroux (2002) observes, to discredit and sacrifice social justice interests, override democratic agendas and regulate intellectual curiosity in favour of producing education as totally dependent on market relations (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2001). Therefore, competency-based education becomes, van Heugten (2011, 175) continues, the 'Trojan horse' "via which an emphasis on competency, skills, essentialist ideology, and knowledge for practice in agencies will squeeze critical social science and critical scientists out of the social work academy."

Within the neoliberal university, social work curriculum is expected to produce social workers who can simply follow the neoliberal rules of the game and conduct themselves uncritically within established neoliberal practice models. Education is supposed to train social workers who can apply the neoliberal welfare reform policies already mentioned in ways that have concrete material consequences for peoples and communities with which social workers come into contact (Garrett, 2003, 2010; Lymbery, 2003; Rosenman, 2007). Furthermore, the neoliberalization of social work education results in the technocratization of social work teaching in which professional training becomes about the transference of technical skills and competencies. Through the work of teaching, neoliberalism ultimately produces the academic subject who lives and works in the neoliberal university and who, through the already mentioned processes of regulation, management, and reporting of research and teaching labour, herself is disciplined into becoming a neoliberal subject. As Gill (2010) observes, academic capitalism and the corporate university are insidiously shaping academic work, creating conditions not only for the *intensification* of academic work – through institutional expectations that academics do more with less – but also its *extensification,* understood as the virtual elimination of the academic office walls and the expectations that academic work will be done anywhere

and everywhere. Computer mediated technologies such as Moodle and their application to teaching models such as online teaching, with their accompanying discourses of 'accessibility' and teaching "innovation," play a critical role in insidiously shaping the kind of neoliberal scholars we are required to become. As Gill (2010, Chapter 17, para. 12) continues, a critical analysis of neoliberalism in the university "directs our attention to new and emerging forms of discipline, which operate as technologies of selfhood that bring into being the endless self-monitoring, planning, prioritizing 'responsibilized' subject required by the contemporary university."

In addition to the structural and institutional constraints and discursive shifts previously identified, neoliberalism infiltrates education by informing the kinds of encounters we experience in the classroom. Students, especially those already practicing in the field, come into social work classrooms already experiencing neoliberal regulation and, as a result, their expectations that we teach them competency skills and the standardized practice protocols contained in the Directive are not surprising. Additionally, if we accept that neoliberalism insidiously produces subjectivities, we can see how students come into the classroom already being produced as neoliberal subjects. In my teaching experience, I have several times been confronted with resistance on the part of students to course content, resistance that is expressed in market-driven language that allows students to argue, for example, that the critical thinking skills I teach 'are not what they are paying for,' or that they 'are not getting their money's worth' in the course. This language of the market makes it perfectly logical to question curriculum content that challenges neoliberalism and the historical role of social work and its foundation on race, gender and class conditions of inequality, for example. In neoliberal governmentality, the ideal citizen is the consumer citizen and subjectivity expressed in the language of the market becomes perfectly logical and commonsensical. As Lim et al. (2010, 131) argue, neoliberal "common sense is the water and [students] are the fish."

CONCLUSION

As the title of this paper suggests, neoliberalism is placing critical social work and its pedagogical projects between "a rock and a hard place." We, those committed to critical social work, are being squeezed between relentless processes of neoliberal welfare and institutional restructuring taking place in social and human service institutions, and similar neoliberalization processes taking place in the university. While the detrimental effects of this squeezing experience should not be

underestimated, I would like to suggest that this narrow space between the rocky side of neoliberal practice and the hard place of the neoliberal university constitutes an important vantage point from which to reflect on the political and pedagogical challenges that neoliberalism presents as well as the commitments that teaching against the grain of neoliberalization requires from critical social work educators. In other words, while, as van Heugten (2011) suggests, neoliberalism attempts to squeeze critical social work out of the university, it is within critical social work that we can mount a critique and a political challenge to neoliberalism, critique and challenge that can still take place in the university classroom and within the contours of critical pedagogical projects.

As I have argued in this paper, neoliberalism is more than an economic model; it encompasses a multiplicity of discursive and material conditions that serve the purpose of shaping society, its institutions and the subjects that exists within them. Power-knowledge regimes produce the university as a marketplace in which student-consumers acquire skills and competencies and in which education is defined as responsible for producing "specialized, highly trained workers" that will enable "the nation and its elite workers to compete 'freely' on the global economic stage" (Canaan and Shumar, 2008, 5). Moreover, neoliberalism aligns the university to its social project by constituting it not only as the place where the production of neoliberal knowledge is enticed, but also where that knowledge is deployed through education for the purpose of producing the neoliberal student and future professional. Neoliberalism, in other words, constitutes the university not only as a product of neoliberalism, but also as an instrumental site in which the biopolitical and ontological project of neoliberalism is accomplished. That is, the university becomes an example of what Foucault (1990, 103) called a "dense transfer point for power relations" that have specific effects, not only in the production of knowledge, but also in the constitution of subjectivity.

Nevertheless, the constitution of the neoliberal subject is not a passive process; neither is neoliberalism a complete project. Again, Foucault (1980; 1982; 1995) is helpful here for he argued that power is not a possession but a relationship that flows in a network of social processes in dynamic, always in-flux, and never completed, ways. Neoliberalism and its ontological project, while presenting itself as all encompassing and the only available reality, is in fact a project in the making. I have used 'processes of neoliberalization' and 'neoliberalizing processes' as expressions throughout this paper precisely to call attention to the

ongoing and incomplete project that is neoliberalism. Similarly, subject formation, the ontological constitution of the neoliberal subject, is also a project in the making. As Foucault (1994c, 225) proposed, the constitution of the subject is mediated by power-knowledge regimes, but requires active work on the part of the subject, work that "permit[s] individuals to affect by their own means, or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thought, conducts and ways of being so as to transform themselves" into subjects.

This conception of neoliberalism as a project in the making and the subject as actively implicated in her own constitution opens up important possibilities for a politicized commitment to render neoliberal governmentality and the subject of that governmentality visible and thinkable. That is, critical pedagogical projects can render neoliberalism and the neoliberal subject specifically and politically thinkable. This is a pedagogical commitment to interrogate discourses of practice that, while disguising themselves under the cloak of good practice and even justice, in fact work to sneak neoliberalism into our very sense of being/doing social work. This is also a commitment to render unquestionable realities *questionable* in ways that problematize apparently stable power mechanisms in order to interrogate their making, rationality and apparent coherence (Bay, 2011, 231). In the context of competency discourses and the educational demands of policies such as the Directive, a critical pedagogical project may, for example, not only make us, students and academics, aware of the competencies and practice protocols that are being demanded, but also render visible, questionable, and thinkable the social power relations that produce and sustain these discourses and demands, as well as their location within neoliberalization processes. This interrogation can lead to collaborative and politically strategic processes of resistance as well as to the development of alliances between social workers, educators, communities and clients.

The pedagogical commitment I propose is a commitment to a pedagogy of thinking. Arendt (2003; 2006) in her work on totalitarianism and the Holocaust argued that a central condition of totalitarianism is the constitutions of subjects who are incapable of thought. While some may argue that neoliberalism is not comparable to Nazi totalitarianism, I want to call attention to the increasing totalizing effects of neoliberalism, its historical consolidation as the only viable socio-economic regime after the fall of the Berlin wall and the eastern front, and its progressive distribution in the global context. Furthermore, as I have discussed in this paper, neoliberalism installs systems and technologies of practice, work and

subjectivity that aim at limiting, if not removing, the capacity for critical thought from the actions associated with social work. As Arendt (1978, 4) argued, the imposition of standardized systems of management "have the socially recognized function of protecting us against reality, that is, against the claim on our thinking that all events and facts make by virtue of their existence." If we carry Arendt's work into the realm of teaching, we can argue that in the face of totalizing regimes such a neoliberalism, we need to commit to a pedagogy of constant critical thought. Critical thought, understood as an activity that by its very nature searches for the roots of problems, is fundamentally contrary to the mindless effect of neoliberal governmentality. This commitment to thinking does not adhere to a set of practices, competencies, standards, or codes of conduct that by their mere existence may promote thoughtlessness. Neither is thinking a purely intellectual or elitist endeavour. Rather, a commitment to thinking is a commitment to engage in a constant dialogue with oneself so as to continuously examine social events and our role in them (Assy, 1998).

This commitment to a pedagogical project of thinking means a commitment to thinking *through* and thinking *with*: This is a commitment to thinking through the social conditions and power relations that affect us and surround us in order to render visible the totalizing effects of neoliberalism. This is also a commitment to thinking with others – or at least in the company of others – as a political strategy to undermine the individualizing effects of neoliberalism. This commitment to a thinking pedagogy is fundamentally a commitment to a situated pedagogical project that anchors our thinking in the socio-political realities of our present, a present that becomes the object of thinking as well as of change. Thinking, therefore, is a commitment to remain anchored in the world; it is as an activity that takes place in the world and in the social conditions within which we are being produced and in which we produce ourselves as subjects (Macias, 2012).

In addition to rendering neoliberalism and its effects on practice and education critically and politically thinkable, the commitment to a pedagogy of thinking I propose encompasses a commitment to uncovering, unpacking and, through thinking, disrupting the ontological project of neoliberalism. Freire (2006) argued that education has a fundamental ontological function in creating spaces for the re-imagination of the self. A commitment to thinking in social work education needs to translate, therefore, into pedagogical practices that create spaces in the classroom for politically conscious exercises in the re-imagination of ourselves and/

in the world. I regularly ask my students what would a world outside capitalism and neoliberalism look like. Many times the answers remind me how old I am for many of my students were born after the fall of the Berlin wall, or were too young when the current regime started to assert itself. As a political refugee who is the product of global conflicts in which I was part of, and who participated in movements that were actively imagining a world otherwise, I think that enticing and at times even coercing students to re-imagine other ways of being and doing social work is not just a politically urgent project, but also an ethical demand.

In committing to a constant and vigilant process of critique that looks at how neoliberalism penetrates not only our practice but also our very sense of self, we can potentially, as Foucault suggests, "separate out, from the contingency that has made us what we are, the possibility of no longer being, doing, thinking what we are, do, or think" Such a commitment to thinking in social work can, I hope, open possibilities for meaningful resistance to the neoliberalization of social work education and practice.

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