

“Stretcher Bearers of Society:” Social Work, Neoliberalism and Post-Pandemic Canada

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ABSTRACT: American academic, Porter Lee, (1929) distinguished between social workers who were either radical or conservative. Some preferred to repair society and others preferred to repair people. This distinction he referred to as cause and function – cause being those economic and social structures that give rise to the personal problems in individuals’ everyday lives; function being those direct interventions that social workers employ to “help” individuals and families overcome their personal problems, usually understood in psychological, pathological terms. C. Wright Mills (1959) made a similar distinction between troubles and issues. Essentially, he argued that in liberal capitalism widespread public issues are frequently attributed to and treated as problems of individual dysfunction rather than as outcomes of the socio-economic structure of the state. This paper argues that social work in English-speaking Canada has lost its once important voice in social reform and, by pursuing professional recognition and protection, has focused its education and direct practice almost entirely on clinical intervention. Even in the post-pandemic aftermath – it has merely adapted to continued neoliberalism, managerialism, and accountability. Rather than vigorously pursuing social change, social work has remained stuck in its role described by Cassidy (1933) as “the stretcher bearers of society.”

KEYWORDS: Neoliberalism; Social Policy; Social Reform; Social Work Education; Welfare State Retrenchment

Introduction

In this paper it is argued that social work primarily in English-speaking Canada² has, over time, lost what was once its significant influence in advocating for social change and reform. Beginning with social work’s beginning development as a profession in the early twentieth century, the paper traces the enduring tension in its practice between those who thought its primary emphasis on work with impoverished peoples ought to be on social justice, social reform or even social revolution, and those who placed its primary emphasis on the individual redemption of those who lived in poverty and the reconstruction of their character (Mencher, 1967; Finkel, 2006).

This tension has never been resolved and, with the rise of neoliberalism beginning in the late twentieth century, together with social work achieving long sought after professional recognition, clinical forms of practice have gained supremacy over practice focused on community development and social policy. Despite the many gaps in health care and social security exposed during the COVID-19 pandemic, the post-pandemic period has produced little change in how

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² The history of social work in Québec, where French is the dominant language, is different from that in the rest of Canada where English is dominant. The McGill University School of Social Work educated social workers mainly to serve the Protestant, English-speaking population of Montréal. The rest of Québec, (including Montréal’s French-speaking population) was dominated by the influence of the Roman Catholic church which, through its various charities tended to the needs of the destitute and vulnerable populations of the province. Social work, as a profession, did not begin to emerge fully until 1942 and 1943 with the establishment of schools of social work at Université de Montréal and Université de Laval respectively. 1943 also saw the formation of L’ Association professionnelle des auxiliaires sociaux (Professional Association of Social Auxiliaries). Nevertheless, the influence of the Catholic church remained until its demise during the Quiet Revolution of the 1960s which changed Québec into a largely secular, civil society.

social work continues to practice, nor has social work been vocal in advocating for reform to address those gaps.

Origins of Social Work and its Internal Tension

Social work in its modern iteration originated in the late period of the industrial revolutions of both the United Kingdom and the United States – thus, its fledgling forms emerged in the latter years of the nineteenth century as a response to the enormous social dislocations, social squalor, extreme poverty and extraordinary inequalities resulting from industrialization and the realignment of class relations. The division in emphasis on practice described in the Introduction was situated mainly in the differences between the Settlement House Movement (SHM) – which generally focused on social reform – and the Charity Organisation Society (COS) which focused on individual change. The SHM (in Britain at least) had strong ties to the Fabian Society and ideas associated with social planning and positive state intervention in the provision of housing, public health programs, community parks, recreation, and stronger measures of income support. The SHM was based on principles of common humanity and fellowship and the notion that a scientific (sociological) understanding of the causes and outcomes of poverty would lead to solutions that bettered the entire community (Mencher, 1967; Kendall, 2000; Jennissen and Lundy, 2011).

In contrast the COS believed that poverty was the outcome of the individual character of the poor which was exacerbated by indiscriminate charity (alms giving) that merely encouraged dissolute behaviour. Only a scientific (psychological) understanding of both the individual and consequently the measured application of philanthropy would result in the elimination of poverty (Mencher, 1967; Kendall, 2000; Jennissen and Lundy, 2011). Arguably, therefore, the SHM eventually spawned social work practice methodologies that included community work, social policy and social research that supported both, while the COS spawned casework (and off shoots like child and family work) and research that supported these more individually focused interventions. Not that these divisions were hard and fast. In some settlements and agencies, the application of both principles co-existed with broader community development initiatives occurring concurrently with services to individuals and families.

Still, there began to emerge in Britain, the United States and later in Canada, education and training for social workers which emphasized one or other of the approaches. While Mary Richmond is credited with the first major book on social casework practice methodology (*Social Diagnosis*, 1917), the American social work academic, Porter Lee (1929) identified the tension in social work between what he termed *cause and function*. Social workers interested in cause were principally concerned with social policy and reform; social workers interested in function were principally concerned with working with individuals and their individualized problems (Lee, 1929). Lee observed that individual temperament likely determined a worker's preference: some social workers were suited to working on broader social issues, others were better suited to working with individuals. In any case, Lee understood that social work had a linked dichotomy and did not dismiss or minimize the importance of cause (social issues and social policy) in social work. Cause and function were a dominant thread in social work education curricula – including in Canada – for almost 75 years in the 20th century. Indeed, even by 1974, William Schwartz, the social group work theorist, continued to recognize cause and function as the main attributes of social work definition and practice (Schwartz, 1974).

Social Work, Social Reform and the Response of Social Work Education, 1930-1975

The moral imperatives that drove the rise of social work – embodied mainly in the Social Gospel Movement in Canada (Cook, 1985) – gave way to the need for science and empirical research to inform and provide the basis for both effective casework practice and social policies upon which a better society could be built. In Canada, the drive for more research was shared by practice-oriented and reform-oriented groups who, *importantly, both considered themselves representative of social work and jointly sought professional status and recognition*. The division between those who placed emphasis on practice versus those who placed emphasis on reform was not hard and fast. Many of those who were primarily interested in practice nevertheless despaired the social conditions in which most of their clients lived and supported the broad movements and calls for social reform.

Thus, within this emerging umbrella of social work arose the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) founded in 1926, the Canadian Conference on Social Work in 1928 and the Canadian Council on Child and Family Welfare in 1930 (originally the Canadian Council on Child Welfare, 1920 and later, The Canadian Welfare Council [CWC], 1935) (Jennissen and Lundy, 2011). Infused in these organizations was the influence of new social workers and social work educators emanating from the two earliest schools of social work in Canada, one at the University of Toronto founded in 1914 and the second at McGill University in Montreal founded in 1918 (Moffatt, 2001). It was this coalescence of practice-based agencies, reform advocacy organizations and social work educators that provided a vibrant and determined social work presence in the drive towards meaningful social reform and the policies that would flow from that reform.

Social Work and the Great Depression. The Great Depression of the 1930s was a defining period for social work in Canada and the approach it would take – or not – in building a case for social reform and progressive social policies (Moffatt, 2001). As governments at the federal, provincial and municipal levels grappled with the impact of the Depression, social work became part of the debate over what was to be done and what role social work should play in bringing the economic crisis to an end. The difference in opinion within social work is best described by Wills who identified two main streams: “(1) ‘slow interpretation’ with a focus on fact-finding, neutrality, and the objectivity of science, and (2) ‘direct action’ in which social workers had an analysis of the conflict and contradictions within a social and economic context and believed in the potential for direct engagement to make changes within political systems” (Wills, 1995, p. 96-7). These two approaches at least recognized there were greater socio-economic problems to be addressed. There was a third strand within social work that did not see any role for social workers to play other than intervening with individuals and tending to their misery as if it was solely a personal problem. One worker proclaimed, “We are not social reformers: we are social workers” (Parker, 1934, p. 2).

Nevertheless, if social work was to intervene effectively in work with clients it had also to understand the nature of the social problems that gave rise to private troubles. Irving (1992) argues that there was a strong movement within social agencies – particularly those in Montreal and Toronto – to conduct social research so that social workers might have a better idea of the real nature and extent of the problems that poverty-stricken persons faced. Indeed, there was a symbiosis between the research and practice arms of these agencies: that what workers experienced at the frontline could also inform the research and that the research would form the basis for new or reformed social policy and intervention. It was however, the two dominant schools of social work at the time, McGill and Toronto that began to take the lead in both teaching, conducting social research and utilizing the findings to promote social planning and reform.

Prominent among the researchers were Leonard Marsh and Harry Cassidy, both graduates of the London School of Economics, and both greatly influenced by Fabian Socialism. Marsh headed research at McGill's school of social work, Cassidy at Toronto's school. Both believed that social work practice had to be informed by research and that social work had a strong role to play in the development of social policy (Irving, 1992). Indeed, the influence of social work in building a case for widespread social reform in Canada during this period was enormous. Cassidy and Marsh were among the founding members of the League for Social Reconstruction modelled on the British Fabian Society. The League had two central purposes: the conduct of research and proposing social reform. While the League was not a social work organization, the presence of Cassidy and Marsh ensured a strong social work perspective. In 1935, the League published a book, *Social Planning for Canada* which, according to Moscovitch (1983) had a significant influence on social thinking in Canada at the time and was "a major summation of social research and ideas for social reform" (p. viii).

Social work also made major contributions to the *Royal Commission on Dominion-Provincial Relations* (commonly known as the Rowell-Sirois Commission) that was formed in 1937 in response to the financial crises experienced by the provinces and municipalities as they struggled to meet the hardships of the Depression. Not only did social work make representations through its professional body, the CASW but also through the Canadian Welfare Council (CWC) with which it had very strong ties and with which it developed a powerful alliance in influencing government social policy (Tillotson, 1997, p. 148; Finkel, 2006, pp. 117-18). The report of the Rowell-Sirois Commission was among the most important in Canada's history and formed the basis both for the introduction of a stronger role for the federal government in economic planning, in social policy and in the eventual formation of the welfare state. In all these activities social work played a strong role in pointing out cause at the root of widespread individual problems (Guest, 2003; Jennissen and Lundy, 2011).

Besides its contributions to the Rowell-Sirois Commission, social work had an important role in probably Canada's most significant and influential social policy document produced during the war, the 1943 *Report on Social Security for Canada*, popularly referred to as the Marsh Report after its principal author, Leonard Marsh. Besides his contribution to *Social Planning for Canada*, Marsh had already worked with Beveridge in Britain and brought the scope of the Beveridge Report into the Canadian arena. Marsh produced the report with the assistance of a research team that included three social workers, Bessie Touzel, George Davidson and Stuart Jaffary. While the federal government did not embrace the Marsh Report many of its ideas and principles were embodied in its own response, The Green Book. It too was based on many briefs and representations made by social work and formed the basis for the emergence of Canada's modest welfare state in the post-World War Two period (Guest, 2003; Jennissen and Lundy, 2011).

The Post-War Welfare State and The Growth of Social Work Education

The rise of welfare state measures and programs during and after the World War II period resulted in an increased demand for trained social workers. Many universities responded by instituting new schools of social work in Halifax (Dalhousie University), Winnipeg (University of Manitoba), Montréal (Université de Montréal), Québec City (Laval University: 1943) and Ottawa (University of Ottawa/now at Carleton University). Thus, by 1950 there were eight schools of social work in Canada; two were in western Canada³, one in Atlantic Canada, three in Québec and two in Ontario (Jennissen and Lundy, 2011, p. 152). Ironically, curricula still focused primarily on

³ A school had been established in Vancouver at the University of British Columbia in 1929.

casework practice methodology rooted in both Freudian and emerging schools of thought in psychology (Shewell, 2022a). This pattern persisted through the 1950s and is described by Jennissen and Lundy (2011) as social work's conservative decade, largely due to the Cold War and the association of social programs with socialism and communism.

This conservatism in practice changed considerably during the 1960s when a resurgence in social policy development occurred linked primarily to the persistence of poverty in Canada (Finkel, 2006). There was also an increasing ground swell of demands for increased local accountability and citizen participation in the organization and functioning of social services, especially towards the end of the decade and into the 1970s (Guest, 2003). During the 1960s and up to 1976, 15 new schools of social work were established – 3 in Atlantic Canada, 2 in Québec, 7 in Ontario and 3 in western Canada. Thus, by 1976 there were 23 schools of social work throughout the country. Most schools during the 1960s had developed two-year MSW programs as the preferred degree following a bachelor's degree usually in the humanities and social sciences.

Nevertheless, the continued emphasis on a direct practice MSW reflected social work's continuing drive for full professional status and its adherence to clinical casework. The young social work academic, Brian Wharf (1966), commenting on the obsession with the MSW and its proclivity for clinical casework and pathologizing the individual, declaimed that social workers should “relinquish their preoccupation with the treatment of pathology and devote attention to social reform, policy planning and administration” (p.134). His words echoed a similar admonition by Wooton (1959) who, according to Rogowski (2020) thought social work “was concentrating on theories of intra or, at best, inter-psychic processes rather than the economic and political sources of problems” (p.41). Professionalism, it seemed, could only be defined through function, not cause.

By the late 1960s social work education curricula were becoming more generic – three models of intervention were often taught (casework, group work and community organization – and sometimes all three as integrated practice) together with social research, social policy and human development. Some schools offered interested students the option of focusing more on social policy rather than on direct intervention – even though no Canadian text on social policy existed. Casework and group work as modes of direct intervention remained clinically focused although group work also incorporated more practical uses such as self-help and task functions. These shifts in curricula partly reflected the general rise in social activism during the 1960s. Nevertheless, social workers, because of their own policy advocacy during the 1940s and the reforms that ensued, were now working primarily in government agencies that delivered either statutory or non-statutory social services or in non-profit, charitable social services subject to their own policies but often wholly or partly funded by the state.

Despite social work's influence on social policy both through its presence in government public service and through important non-governmental organizations like the CWC (subsequently re-named the Canadian Council on Social Development) social work had become comfortably institutionalized. Schools of social work generally responded to the field rather than proactively challenging the policies that governed practice, much less the socio-economic system that gave rise to those policies (Shewell, 2018; 2022). In sum, social work had found itself; by the late 1960s its more conservative practice tendencies persisted and, by virtue of its own influence in developing the welfare state, had created its own practice preserves.

The Critiques of the Welfare State and of Social Work

By the late 1960s Canada's principal welfare state measures were scarcely in place than several developments began to occur or were already occurring which, over time, further served to undermine social work's engagement in social policy and its concern for collective well-being and social action. The critiques of social work and of the welfare state came from three main sources: the feminist left, progressive sociology and the business (corporate) right.

The Welfare State Critique from the Feminist Left. The first development which was certainly occurring by the time the welfare state was fully in place was the rise of second wave feminism and its critique of welfare state programs. The feminist critique struck at the core of the welfare state's patriarchal framework and its implicit understanding of the role and function of the traditional, nuclear, two-parent family in liberal capitalist states. Many, if not all programs and benefits emanated from the fundamental assumption that the male was the head of the household and the main breadwinner. Women's organizations relentlessly pointed out that many benefits were based on the premise that women were still the primary homemakers and care givers and that the relationship between men and women was profoundly unequal and inequitable inside and outside the workplace. Rather than enhancing their status as supposedly equal citizens of the country the welfare state reinforced their unequal status (Finkel, 2004; Cohen, 1997). This critique, of course, was not unique to Canada. For example, Ann Oakley (2014), the daughter of Richard Titmuss and a prominent British sociologist, made this same analysis as did Elizabeth Wilson in her 1977 monograph, *Women and the Welfare State*. Importantly, Cohen (1997) has observed that the feminist critique of the welfare state was not intended to undermine it, rather it was intended to strengthen it by recognizing women as equals and insuring that through its programs it was fully inclusive and delivered on the services that women demanded.

The Marxist Sociology Critique of Social Work. In the mid- to late 1970s Marxist sociology, in its critique of the welfare state as a prop for capitalism, launched withering attacks on social work and its role in the welfare state, accusing social work of simply maintaining the status quo and working to promote individual adjustment to an oppressive, exploitative system (Moreau and Leonard, 1989). The welfare state represented a compromise between the forces of capitalism and corporate interests and the threat – overt or underlying – of the working classes to overthrow the entire socio-economic system and replace it with a socialist order (Macpherson, 1965). It was an act of appeasement and legitimation (Finkel, 2004, p.152). At the base of the welfare state lay a class analysis and the notion of class struggle. As observed earlier in the paper the welfare state, because it represented a compromise, did not fundamentally alter how social work practiced; instead, it provided a reliable, well-funded framework within which to practice.

The Marxist broadsides at the welfare state and the practice of social work during the late 1960s and into the 1970s resulted in a re-awakening to radical social work and, in some schools at least, a more radical analysis of what social workers were doing and what they ought to be doing (Bailey and Brake, 1975). Social work as it was practiced simply abetted the rich and powerful and their oppression of the poor; this was morally repugnant. Instead, social work needed “to challenge the economic and political order that gives rise to so much disadvantage and misery” (Howe, 2009, p.126) and adopt and work towards a vision of society free of class oppression. In Canada, one of the first schools to adopt radical social work was Carleton University in Ottawa which became a leader in developing structural social work, an approach rooted in political economy and Marxist theory. At the time, as Maurice Moreau and his colleagues began to develop structural social work he was challenged by a fellow colleague, Helen Levine to account for the

role of women in what was fundamentally a patriarchal society (Moreau and Leonard, 1989). Carleton then continued to develop a social work curriculum based strongly in feminist Marxism.

The Critique from the Corporate Right. The welfare state critiques from the left were certainly valid but, unfortunately, they also left it vulnerable to further attack by big business and the corporate right. In truth, the right had never much cared for the welfare state viewing it more as a necessary evil to maintain social solidarity after World War Two (Lightman and Lightman, 2017; Garrett, 2021). Social programs as well as other government measures to intervene in the economy were too costly and had to be brought under control. A more targeted, residual approach to welfare and social security was far preferred (Guest, 2003). These critiques from the right – forcefully argued by right-wing think tanks and corporate lobbies – first came to a head following the energy crises of the 1970s, a period of high unemployment, inflation and a stagnant economy resulting in what was termed, ‘*stagflation*’ – something which was apparently not possible according to Keynesian economic theory. The growth of government since World War Two, taxes and social spending were out of control as were the pay demands of unionized labour (Lightman and Lightman, 2017; Rice and Prince, 2013).

In response to the critiques from the right the federal government gradually shifted responsibility for social spending to the Department of Finance and Treasury Board. In 1993 the Progressive Conservative government split the Department of Health and Welfare in two and renamed the Welfare division, the Department of Human Resources Development, an obvious indication of a move away from collective security to both individual responsibility and the reproduction of labour. The discourse on the welfare state began to change rapidly as Canada and its economy, like those of other western countries, entered into free trade agreements, globalization and economic re-structuring (Teeple, 2000). Fiscal restraint, debt and deficit management, welfare selectivity and individual responsibility for personal welfare became the dominant mantras for social and public policies. These mantras, in other words, signaled the rise of neoliberalism (Finkel, 2006; Lightman and Lightman, 2017). Concurrently, as these profound shifts in welfare state discourse intensified, social work’s voice and influence on social policy sharply declined.

By the first decade of the 21st century social policy formulation and decision-making had largely shifted to Canada’s Department of Finance. Since 1975, when the Bank of Canada adopted monetarism as formal policy and the federal cabinet adopted a budget restraint policy, ‘virtually all discussion of social policy in Canada has been couched in the language of fiscal capacity’ (Lightman and Irving, 1991, p.71). Besides social work’s loss of influence in social policy, the fiscalization of policy and the sharp turn away from universal to targeted programs have resulted in social work being reduced to mere functionaries of a highly bureaucratized, centralized system (Rice and Prince, 2013). In this capacity, *casework remains the principal method of intervention*, both because it contains social issues as a personal trouble or problem, and because it perfectly conforms to a managerial system that can easily measure its cost effectiveness and efficiency. This shift away from social work as a contributor to social policy formulation is reflected in most schools of social work curricula; direct practice has regained and/or retained its prominence. Social policy, while still a required course is taught to give students a context for practice but is usually worth no more than one full term credit (Shewell et al., 2021).

Public Administration, Welfare State Retrenchment, Social Work Competence and Accountability

The Growth of Schools of Public Administration and Public Policy. A significant development that accompanied first, the growth in the size of government and public service since World War Two and second, the need to develop, manage and administer public policies effectively and efficiently has been the establishment of university-based schools and programs in public policy and administration. Arguably, especially during the period of welfare state retrenchment to the present, the growth of these schools and programs has also reflected and contributed to the weakened influence of social work on social policy in Canada. Social work educators have not strongly resisted this incursion into what had been an emerging field of study in Canadian social work during the phase of the welfare state.⁴ Rather, the old fissure between those oriented towards social reform and those oriented towards direct practice has been exacerbated to the detriment of social policy. This does not mean that social work in Canada has become purely practice focused, nor does it mean that social work does not pursue social justice. However, it does mean that social work has reframed how it understands and values the pursuit of social justice. This is discussed in the next section of the paper.

At this juncture, however, it is important to explore briefly the rise of education in public administration since World War Two and its growing impact on public policy and, more narrowly, social policy. Before the war, in 1936, Dalhousie University in Halifax began to offer some courses in public administration and was the only university to do so. The courses were only part of another degree and did not constitute a comprehensive program at the time. After World War Two, however, the growth of the federal public service accelerated in response to the recommendations of the previously mentioned Rowell-Sirois Commission and to increased expectations of government to play a more active role in providing services and intervening in the economy. This growth demanded more trained public servants and, in response, Carleton University in Ottawa established the first School of Public Administration in Canada in 1953. It granted a certificate and a master's degree in public administration (MPA).

Over the next two decades five additional educational institutions offered programs in public administration: Toronto Metropolitan University (formerly Ryerson Polytechnic) began offering a certificate in 1962 and an advanced certificate in 1964. In 1969 the Québec provincial government established the Ecole nationale d'administration publique which offered a diploma and a MPA. Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario established a school of public administration in 1970. It was housed in the Department of Political Science and later became the School of Policy Studies. Finally, the University of Western Ontario began to offer a diploma in public administration in 1974 while Dalhousie finally began to offer a MPA in 1968. Notably, Dalhousie became a school of public administration in 1975 (Shewell, 2022b). Thus, during the period following the war until 1974 six different educational institutions offered programs in public administration. These programs at the time were mainly focused on organization and the broad processes of administration, the constitutional context of Canadian government administration, budgeting, research and evaluation, and public policy in its broadest scope. They were not usually focused on specific policy areas.

⁴ It was not until 1975 that Canada's first book on social policy was published. This was Andrew Armitage's *Social Welfare in Canada: Ideals, Realities and Future Paths*. This was followed in 1980 by Dennis Guest's

The Emergence of Social Security in Canada. Guest's was largely an historical account rather than an analytical, discursive text. Keith Banting's, *The Welfare State and Canadian Federalism* was published in 1987. Of note, both Armitage and Guest were social workers, Banting was a political scientist.

The period of welfare state retrenchment and of restraint on government growth paradoxically witnessed a significant growth in the number of educational programs in public administration and the broadening of their scope to include public policy. It could be reasonably argued that this growth was in response to political and big business pressure to bring government spending under control, to make government expenditure more transparent and accountable and to bring greater rationalization to government programs. Altogether a total of 16 additional new programs and schools were established between 1975 and 2022 and 15 of these were established after 2005 (Shewell, 2022b). In addition to the Institute of Public Administration in Canada established in 1947, a body representing the professional interests of public servants, the Canadian Association of Programs in Public Administration (CAPPA) was established in 1987. CAPPA was established to support and promote public administration education in Canada. It also serves as an accrediting body, although accreditation is voluntary and only six schools/programs of its 25 institutional members have obtained that status (Shewell, 2022b).

A cursory review of the available curricula on each school's website revealed that eight of them (or about one third of the total number) offered at least one course in social policy. This may seem comparable to offerings in schools of social work, but social policy courses in schools of public policy and administration are taught in the context of a generic bundle including courses on policy development, evaluation, costing and analysis. What has this meant for social work and social work education? Few, if any, schools of social work in Canada, offer social policy in such a complete context. It is becoming increasingly apparent then, that the full study of social policy is being incorporated into education for public administration and public policy while in social work curricula it remains somewhat of an appendage. The influence of social work ideals and values is consequently lost in the development of social policy, or its influence is subsumed under other policy advocacy organizations.

Perhaps, in the final analysis, social work in Canada is destined to be primarily a clinical practice profession – that is certainly now the measure of competence by its various provincial boards and colleges that grant registered status and protect use of title (Jennissen and Lundy, 2011; Canadian Council of Social Work Regulators, 2012). Each province and territory in Canada regulate social work competence through its own set of criteria by which eligibility for registration is determined and an individual is granted social worker title. The criteria vary from province to province but in the main each province adapts the competency criteria developed by the Canadian Council of Social Work Regulators (CCSWR) in 2012. There are 152 competencies of which only 13 (0.08%) are policy related and are identified under the category, “Improving policies and practices” (CCSWR, 2012). Social workers who work primarily in what is termed, policy practice, might now find they are unable to call themselves by the very professional title for which they were educated.

The Introduction of Critical Theory

Previously in the paper it was discussed how Carleton University, with the development of structural social work, had responded to the Marxist critique of social work during the 1970s. However, in general, social work and social work education responded in mixed fashion. One response was to dispute the critique by claiming that social work as a profession could not mix politics with practice: a social worker had to remain neutral, non-judgmental and non-directive in direct intervention; a second, was to embrace the critique and to radicalize practice as was the case in the United Kingdom and the call to action by Bailey and Brake (1975).

There were also ‘in between’ responses; that is, those social work educators and schools that accepted sociology’s critique but acknowledged it in a lukewarm fashion. Some introduced minor reforms to their curricula incorporating more attention to community work – often incorporating the more radical methods of Saul Alinsky (1971), developing forms of integrated social work practice (casework, group work, community organization) or substituting formulaic casework with more dynamic forms of therapies arising from Rogerian and Gestalt theories that empowered and “freed” individuals from the constraints of their psychological blockages. Another mid-range response came from Pincus and Minahan (1973) who applied a systems approach to social work practice, an approach that recognized clients as living in a society in which they were affected by many interrelated but sometimes competing systems. These systems could also be out of balance. Despite these and similar ‘new’ theories, none really questioned the fundamental organization of liberal society and its economic, social and political institutions. Instead, they tended to protect the status quo (Shewell, 2022a).

By the 1990s social work education and practice arguably existed on a spectrum of radical to conservative approaches; this was the situation when postmodern and critical theory began to infuse social work thought. Sociology during the 1990s – had tempered its embrace of Marxism with Foucauldian thinking and with critical theory emanating from the Frankfurt school of thought. Power could not be only explained by class and economic exploitation as Marxist theory did. As Howe observes, “It [Marxist theory] didn’t seem to explain the oppression and domination suffered by many other groups in society. Women were being oppressed by men, children by adults, minority ethnic groups by majority ethnic groups, and gay men and lesbian women by heterosexual men and women” (Howe, 2009, p. 131).

Social work ought not to be working towards some modern, grand, utopian vision based on the notion of social progress because, as Foucault argued, that simply doesn’t exist. Instead, social thinkers and consequently social workers need to understand “how dominant groups and their ‘discourses’ define social relationships” (Howe, 2009, p. 132). Dominant groups create dominant forms of knowledge accepted as truths, truths which are translated into professional practice by experts who define what is normal and identify and treat those who can be determined to be abnormal. The service user likewise accepts these truths and thus accepts the control those truths exert over them. Social work, among other professions like psychiatry and psychology had fallen into the dominant discourse trap, of governmentality (Howe, 2009, pp. 133-34). It was the job of social workers to reflect on their own accepted truths and to assist service users to explore and discover their own identity and narrative and to reject identities (including diagnoses) imposed on them. This came to be known as critical, reflective practice.

In Canada, this interpretation of social work practice resonated strongly in the context of the country’s high degree of diversity and multiculturalism, and where minority ethnic and racialized groups, as well as others including the disabled and those in sexuality and gender diverse communities were and are frequently victims of oppression and marginalization. The impact of this re-direction in social work was significant. If there were no universal truths and no grand vision to be pursued, then social justice had to be pursued not through broad social policies but through how social workers engaged with individuals, groups and communities of identity and how they advocated for their rights and social equality. In this sense, social work has somewhat backed away from its role in influencing government on social policy affecting the social collective, especially those that arise specifically from the exploitative nature of liberal capitalism.

The Impact of Welfare State Retrenchment and Neoliberalism

The impact of welfare state retrenchment, neoliberalism and managerialism might reasonably have resulted in the attrition of social work services and educational bodies. In fact, the opposite occurred. From 1975 to the present, twenty-one (21) new schools of social work were established – an almost 100% increase over the period of the welfare state and its development. The remarkable growth of social work education in Canada during the retrenchment period can be explained, I think, by demographic factors (Canada's population increased by about 65% since 1975, from just over 23 million to just over 38 million in 2021) and by the confluence of neoliberalism and critical theory – both of those last two developments in many ways favoured a focus on social casework. Neoliberalism's focus on social services that are targeted, effectively managed and evaluated and that contain social problems by individualizing them lends itself to casework intervention.

The focus of critical theory, while not exactly sympathetic to neoliberal thought, nevertheless lent itself to casework intervention rather than to social policy. It must also be said that not all schools adopted critical theory as the basis of their pedagogy, many have taught other forms of direct casework practice based on psychological theory including cognitive behavioural therapy, strengths-based practice and so on. The net impact however has been that a much larger population has increased the demand for individualized social services which, in turn, has resulted in a greater demand for social workers in direct practice. Consequently, social policy focused on more collective, universal objectives has diminished in importance within most schools of social work. While it provides the context for direct practice, it is not seen as a dominant area of social work engagement.

Conclusion: Social Work Since COVID-19

If any recent, single event might have re-awakened social work to the need for a collective demand for social reform reflective of social solidarity and equality, the Covid-19 pandemic was that event. But that has not happened in Canada. Instead, there would seem to be a doubling down on direct practice often framed in the language of social justice though that is not fully explained or defined (Jennissen and Lundy, 2011, p. 301). The reliance on casework as a fundamental practice mode has never been supplanted, and this has continued in the aftermath of the pandemic. Indeed, during the height of the pandemic when lockdowns prevailed, many social workers – excepting those providing some statutory services like child protection – turned to online platforms to provide casework services. Boards of registration and colleges that control title and assess competence have not signalled any movement towards a clear, comprehensive inclusion of those persons whose degrees are in social work but whose work is primarily in policy, planning and community work. There has been no impetus to do so since neoliberalism has retained its dominance and as argued, clinical approaches to social work conform well to the neoliberal agenda.

Nothing has structurally changed, nor has social work developed a collective consciousness beyond acting as “the stretcher bearers of society” (Cassidy, 1933, p. 2) and mopping up after capitalism (Collier, 1984). Mainstream social work continues to be concerned with social adjustment, not social change and reform. While vulnerable and marginalised populations in Canada were those most adversely affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, little organized demand has collectively arisen from social work to institute the kinds of social change required to minimise or eliminate the risks faced by those populations. Garrett (2021) explores the dimensions of neoliberalism that underpin how those in liberal democracies are socialized to think about and

understand the society in which they live. Garrett argues that those living in liberal democratic states are so embedded in its ideology and the language it has produced that they are scarcely aware of it – they have simply internalised its dominance.

Canadian social work academic François Boudreau (2022) writes a cautionary statement for social work in the post-pandemic period.

The neoliberal version of human action in the world thus remains very problematic, because it still places the individual before society and property before solidarity. Everywhere on the planet, individualistic interests and that of corporate entities are generally placed above the ethics of collective life and the well-being of the people. This way of seeing and organizing society has ... led humanity into an alarming impasse, especially with regard to the depth, diversity and dignity of human cultures and the ecological conditions of existence. It is society as a whole that loses its humanistic content, and it brings social relations back to its simplest utilitarian and instrumental expression of the individual: we could think here of a friendly fascism in the manner imagined by Huxley, where society pushes the idea that happiness is to be found in consumption... Here is where we stand: humanity as a whole is now faced with a new paradigm, truly global and profoundly worldwide, in all the meanings and implications of these terms. ... But there is still a lot to be done to clarify and unify our collective understanding of the world we are moving towards. For now, we are fumbling at high speed towards a menacing unknown. (pp. 80-81).

The implications of Boudreau's warning for social work are clear. Social casework is not sufficient. It may help to heal personal wounds, but it cannot address the underlying social and economic structural forces that engender those wounds. Social work, to embrace its full meaning, must resolve the enduring tension between cause and function and revitalise that part of its radical tradition which can mobilize social action, develop policies that address collective needs and, in short, work towards a society of equality and social solidarity

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