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Article

Covert forms of resistance: Reimagining feminist social work praxis in an increasingly neoliberal world

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Abstract
Social work as a profession has long claimed its roots in and orientations towards social justice. The realities of enacting social justice as a social worker, however, have proven to be more complex than what is typically taught in social work education programs. Neoliberal ideology has so pervasively impacted social work praxis that many burgeoning social workers often face disillusionment, discouragement, and discomfort when settling into the profession. While social workers enter the field emboldened to create meaningful social change, they encounter barriers characteristic of neoliberalism such as managerialism, professionalization, and bureaucracy. As doctoral social work students who have learned, practiced, and taught social work, we have experienced this phenomenon firsthand. In this article, we reflect upon and work to make sense of these experiences, which we frame as a "cruel optimism" of social work, or the "condition of possibility whose realization is discovered either to be impossible, sheer fantasy" (Berlant, 2011, p. 24). Through engaging in a critically reflexive conversational methodology, we consider the breakdown between the social justice theory that students are often taught and the realities of practice that social workers face in the field, as illustrated by three vignettes. This is rooted in particular analysis of feminist social work praxis, of which all the authors subscribe. We then reimagine new ways to practice feminist social work in the neoliberal landscape, including specific recommendations for how to engage in covert forms of resistance as we collectively repoliticize social work praxis.

Keywords
cruel optimism, feminist social work, neoliberalism, social justice praxis, resistance

Résumé
Le travail social, en tant que profession, revendique depuis longtemps ses racines et ses orientations en faveur de la justice sociale. Toutefois, la réalité de la mise en œuvre de la justice sociale par les travailleurs s'avère bien plus complexe que ce qui est généralement enseigné dans les programmes de formation en travail social. L'idéologie néolibérale a influencé de manière si

profonde la praxis du travail social que de nombreux travailleurs sociauxen devenir se heurtent souvent à la désillusion, au découragement et à un sentiment d'inconfort en entrant dans la profession. Bien que les travailleurs sociaux arrivent dans le domaine animés par le désir de provoquer un changement social significatif, ils rencontrent des obstacles caractéristiques du néolibéralisme, tels que le managérialisme, la professionnalisation et la bureaucratie. En tant qu'étudiant·e·s au doctorat en travail social ayant appris, pratiqué et enseigné le travail social, nous avons vécu ce phénomène de première main. Dans cet article, nous réfléchissons à ces expériences et cherchons à leur donner un sens, en les conceptualisant comme un *optimisme cruel* (Berlant, 2011, p. 24) du travail social, soit une « condition de possibilité dont la réalisation se révèle impossible, voire pure fantaisie ». À travers une méthodologie conversationnelle critique et réflexive, nous examinons la rupture entre la théorie de la justice sociale souvent enseignée aux étudiant et la réalité du terrain à laquelle sont confronté·e·s les travailleurs sociaux, illustrée ici par trois vignettes. Cette analyse repose sur une approche particulière de la praxis féministe en travail social, à laquelle adhèrent tou·te·s les auteur·e·s. Nous proposons ensuite de nouvelles façons d'envisager et de pratiquer le travail social féministe dans un contexte néolibéral, en formulant notamment des recommandations concrètes pour s'engager dans des formes de résistance discrètes, dans un effort collectif de repolitisation de la praxis du travail social.

Mots-clés
optimisme cruel, travail social féministe, néolibéralisme, praxis de la justice sociale, résistance

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Introduction

The social justice orientation of social work has come under criticism in scholarly literature over the past number of years (Fortier & Wong, 2019; Gregory, 2021; Morley & Macfarlane, 2014; Morley et al., 2017). Social work, which is foundationally grounded in critical social justice praxis, continues to position itself as a profession that focuses on advancing human rights, social change, and collective liberation (CASW, 2005; IFSW, 2014). Social work is fundamentally framed as a form of community-engaged scholarship that seeks to bridge gaps between theoretical learning in the "ivory tower" and grassroots practice happening on the ground to address the social problems being examined and studied in social work education (Campbell & Baikie, 2012; Dominelli, 2002; Dominelli & Campling, 2002; Duschinsky et al., 2016). Course-based pedagogy is complemented by practicum opportunities where students can enact and actualize their learning in community settings and through community-engaged practices. Once students start practicing social work in the field, however, they are often faced with balancing their social justice-oriented education with navigating a sector that has become highly regulated,

professionalized, and steeped in pervasive neoliberal ideology (Pollack & Rossiter, 2010; Wiegmann, 2017).

This disconnect between social justice principles and the realities of the neoliberal social work practice setting creates unrealistic expectations for students entering the field, and is what we have come to understand as what Lauren Berlant (2011) describes as "cruel optimism." Cruel optimism refers to the attachments that we create in relation to certain fantasies, dreams, and desires (Berlant, 2011). Many students enter the field of social work, for example, with a sense of idealism about wanting to change the world for the better through direct work with people, communities, and social policy. This is a dynamic that we have experienced as new students, observed as educators, and read about (e.g., Csikai & Rozensky, 1997; Ngai & Cheung, 2009). While this idealism in and of itself is not cruel, it becomes cruel when the very means by which one might work towards them also serve as barriers to obtaining them (Berlant, 2011). There is an evident disconnect between the theoretical grounding of social work, what is communicated in social work education, and what social workers are actually able to enact in practice, thus contributing to an overwhelming sense of helplessness (and, eventually, compassion fatigue and burnout) once social work students begin as practicing social workers (Duschinsky et al., 2016; Edwards & Goussios, 2021; Hendrix et al., 2021; Preston & Aslett, 2014). The cruel optimism is magnified at this crux: where social work is situated as a deeply political profession, neoliberal realities instead include various interrelated dimensions. First, it occurs through individualization, referring to the process in which social issues are reduced to individual concern, thus erasing their systemic or structural roots. Second, through sanitization, which is the de-radicalization of social work to instead make it palatable, neutral, and apolitical. And third, via professionalization, the dynamic in which social work becomes institutionalized, de-radicalized, and hyperfocused on bureaucracy. These interconnected processes have resulted in the need for social work education programs to respond to the depoliticized nature of practice.

It is significant to recognize here that social work as a profession maintains its origins in projects of White supremacy, colonization, racism, and carcerality (Fortier & Wong, 2019; Gregory, 2021; Jennissen & Lundy, n.d.; Johnstone, 2018; Johnstone & Lee, 2020; Reamer, 2014). As Gregory (2021) details in a genealogical account of social work, Whiteness has been a defining feature that has permeated the profession and gone unnamed in its historical retellings. In Canada, specifically, social work has been implicated in the colonial project, including residential schools and the Sixties Scoop (Alston-O'Connor, 2010; Blackstock, 2009; Duarte & Selmi, 2023). Social work in Canada is predicated on these foundations and furthers a neoliberal worldview, where the focus is on surveilling people using social services and using transactional and microlevel interventions in our service provision, all for the express purpose of bouncing people back into the labour market and evading a systemic attention to the root causes of social issues in oppressive systems (Brown, 2021; Marthinsen et al., 2021). While important and emerging work has attempted to reckon with these histories, these critical theoretical orientations are often lost when social work education becomes increasingly professionalized and individualized (Gregory, 2021; Joseph, 2015; Joseph, 2021; Leotti, 2021; Richie & Martensen,

2020). Stemming from these histories of oppression and harm, the neoliberal social landscape has continued to shape social work pedagogy and practice in ways that counteract initial claims of social justice.

This paper explores these realizations and their implications for future social work pedagogy and praxis. We first provide background information about the increasingly professionalized and regulated nature of social work as aligned with neoliberal ideologies, including analysis of the depoliticization of social work education. We then move to discuss the ways that Black and critical feminist approaches to social work could shift social work education to encourage students to engage in covert acts of resistance against these neoliberal structures once they begin to practice, including the use of discretionary ethics and the redefining of "professionalism." This discussion concludes with our reflections on the ways in which feminist praxis can politicize social work pedagogy and praxis to recent social justice principles and structural analyses of social problems that social workers are confronting. What is, perhaps, most central to our paper is an understanding of the balance between resisting and working within oppressive systems simultaneously, while also prioritizing social justice action that is most possible or tangible in our circumstances.

Who are we?

We come to this analysis with a combined fifteen years in social work education programs and over 30 years of combined social work practice experience across Canada. While we have vastly different professional social work experiences, we have all come to think critically about our ability to engage in social justice oriented social work while practicing within a sector that has become highly capitalist and individualistic. These lived experiences, as well as our own histories and identities, impact the ways in which we view, understand, and undertake this work.

Alexe is a cisgender and White woman from Calgary, Alberta, which is situated on the traditional lands of the Blackfoot Confederacy and Treaty 7 Territory. She has spent over ten years working as a social worker for various feminist non-profit organizations, namely within the sphere of community development. Her most recent four years of social work practice experience were spent at a drop-in, street-front community and resource centre for women, where she also supervised diploma and Bachelor of Social Work student practicum placements. Maddie is a White, cisgender woman from Hamilton, Ontario, which is situated on the traditional territories of the Erie, Neutral, Huron-Wendat, Haudenosaunee, and Mississaugas, and is covered by the Dish With One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant. She is a social worker and was recently appointed as an Assistant Professor whose research, practice, and community organizing experiences have primarily focused on men's violence intervention and prevention, which includes facilitating voluntary men's allyship circles, mandated domestic violence intervention, and research projects on men's perspectives of anti-violence programming. Rochelle is a cisgender Black woman who currently resides on the traditional territory of many nations, including the Mississaugas of the Credit, the Anishnabeg, the Chippewa, the Haudenosaunee and the Huron-Wendat peoples. She is a former healthcare ethicist and her approach to ethics has

been shaped by her experience as a social worker in hospitals, working with pregnant and parenting individuals as well as children. In addition to direct social work practice, Rochelle has participated in hospital- and community-based committees with the aim of improving support to women and children, and she has just begun an Assistant Professor position alongside her doctoral studies.

Our diverse experiences as social work students, practitioners, and social justice advocates have uniquely shaped our collective approach, which is focused on the necessity of imagining social justice that is explicitly feminist; that is, work that prioritizes the betterment of people of marginalized genders. Together and apart, we have spent countless hours in social work classrooms, led tutorials full of keen undergraduate students, supervised practicum students, and practiced both clinically and in community. All of these lived experiences collided and intertwined in our enrollment in the social work PhD program at McMaster University, where we were able to dissect what we have witnessed as the disconnect between the individualized social work that is being taught in classrooms and the community-engaged social work that is actually required of Black and critical feminist praxis. While we were encouraged to reflect informally beyond our doctoral classes, we intentionally sought each other out to discuss our shared experiences to build community as feminist-identified students in our cohort.

Here, we are specific in our epistemological positioning alongside Black feminism, which focuses explicitly on intersectional feminist analyses and understandings of how anti-Black racism interacts with interlocking systems of oppression, such as misogyny and classism, to produce systemic inequities, marginalization, and violence (Collins, 1990; Crenshaw, 1991; Lorde, 1977). However, we are also cognizant that, as two of us are White, we cannot claim Black feminist epistemologies in our analyses of our own lived experiences. In this, we draw on critical feminism, which focuses more broadly on women's emancipation from what bell hooks (2000) refers to as imperialist White-supremacist capitalist patriarchy, to ground our reflexive praxis (Katsiampoura, 2024; Spivak, 2012). While Black and critical feminisms are not individually monolithic, nor are they borne from the same positions, we draw on them in conversation together to, again, articulate our collective commitment to social justice work that is explicitly concerned with challenging the interlocking systems of oppression that continue to harm women, trans, and non-binary people.

Neoliberalized social work education

Social work has been acutely impacted by neoliberal ideology (Brown, 2021; Hendrix et al., 2021; Hyslop, 2018; Morley & Macfarlane, 2014; Morley et al., 2017; Rossiter & Heron, 2011; Stark, 2018). In education and practice, we have specifically seen increasing shifts towards the prioritization of service users' personal responsibility and individual choice. While working within the confines of and seeking to transform the managerialism embedded within institutions has become a necessary part of social work practice, the neoliberalization of social work praxis has impacted what is possible for theorizing social justice in social work education (Beres et al., 2009; Garrett, 2010; Preston & Aslett, 2014; Reisch & Jani, 2012; Smith, 2008).

Social work is pedagogically situated as a profession fundamentally concerned with social justice, equity, diversity, inclusion, and power. The Canadian Association for Social Work Education (CASWE-ACFTS), for example, envisions a "just world based on humanitarian and democratic ideals that demonstrate respect for the worth, agency, and dignity of all beings" through centering "calls for critical analyses of power relations, the dismantling of inequitable social structures, and solidarity with populations that experience poverty, oppression, and exploitation" (CASWE-ACFTS, n.d., para. 1). Additional literature articulating the purpose and vision of social work emphasizes its roots in politicization, which aims to analyze power and the ways in which personal issues can be reframed as structural and political concerns (Dominelli, 2002; Preston & Aslett, 2014; Reisch & Jani, 2012; Welbourne, 2011).

As Canadian postsecondary institutions assume corporate roles, where education is increasingly privatized, revenue is prioritized, and students become entrepreneurial learners rather than critical thinkers, pedagogy can become highly technical, professional, and apolitical in order to produce the ideal neoliberal subject fit for capitalist working conditions (Garrett, 2010; Preston & Aslett, 2014). As Preston and Aslett (2014) aptly note, this "depoliticization of the learning environment is an overt part of the neoliberal educational policy agenda" (p. 510) and can facilitate growing resistance to challenging neoliberalism within pedagogy and praxis. While this resistance can be overt, as seen in Preston and Aslett's (2014) account of social work students questioning social justice principles seeking to dismantle neoliberalism in a first-year class, it can also be insidious and covert in its depoliticization of social justice, social work, and the relationship between the two. Rather than seeking to disrupt, challenge, and dismantle social structures facilitating social problems, social work research, education, and practice is largely characterized as a highly individualized and transactional process that aims to instill self-sufficiency, independence, capacity, and agency in "clients" through technical and standardized practice (Garrett, 2010; Preston & Aslett, 2014; Reisch & Jani, 2012; Smith, 2008; Welbourne, 2011).

When social justice is predicated on values of social change, transformation, and structural analyses, social work education programs often teach students that they will be making a difference and fighting for justice through their practice, a vision which targets macro level changes. This vision is distorted, however, when emerging social workers enter the field and are burdened with the demands of a neoliberal social landscape predicated on professionalization, de-radical or apolitical practice, and a hyperfocus on micro-level intervention. Here, we argue, the invisible and insidious impacts of neoliberalism facilitate the depoliticization of social work praxis, where social work education teeters conflictingly between upholding social justice values and breeding the ideal neoliberal subject who can work within highly regulated and depoliticized settings. As a result, social justice principles are diluted as approaches to addressing social problems become decontextualized and divorced from their social justice orientations. It is for this reason, among many, that we are drawn to feminist social work praxis, an inherently political approach to engaging in social work both theoretically and in multiple practice-based settings.

Feminist social work praxis

Social work has been historically and contemporarily considered to be women's work (Dominelli, 1996; Khunou et al., 2012; Orme, 2002), which emerged as a form of resistance to the highly medicalized and androcentric approaches to addressing social problems that have underpinned much of western history, which locate issues within marginalized individuals' morals, psyches, and/or behaviours via deficit-based and pathological models (Hick, 2006). The work of women played a significant role in acknowledging and emphasizing the significance of community responsibility in mitigating social problems (Köngeter, 2021). White women are predominantly recognized in literature on social work history and their racist and colonial harms are frequently erased in these retellings (Blackstock, 2009; Chapman & Withers, 2019; Gregory 2021). However, Black women played a significant role in imagining politicized social justice praxis within the social work profession. For example, Bell (2014) details how organized resistance by Black social workers during the Civil Rights Movement demanded tangible changes to their working conditions and recognition, thus calling attention to the interrelationship between White supremacy and capitalism. Black feminists have also organized outside of the social work profession with substantial impacts for bettering social work practice. Examples include the organizing of INCITE! in ending gender-based and state violence and the Combahee River Collective in challenging racism and anti-queer hate in the feminist and Civil Rights movements (INCITE!, 2007; Jackson, 2023). In this process, there was significant effort to politicize interventions to social problems by pointing to their structural facilitators rather than blaming individuals for their lived experiences, which was intimately linked to the popular feminist motif of the personal as political (Branco, 2021; Köngeter, 2021; Strobel, 2002).

Stemming from these histories, social work has subsequently struggled to fully establish itself as a valued profession within the White, colonial, capitalist, cisheteropatriarchal public sphere of the workforce (Dominelli, 2002; hooks, 2000). We make specific note, here, of "cisheteropatriarchy" to point to how the system that harms women also harms trans, non-binary, gender diverse, and queer people. Social work has fought to gain credibility primarily because it is characterized by "seemingly natural feminine qualities of listening and caring," as opposed to the "masculine side of the state [which] is oriented toward economic discipline and law and order" (Weigmann, 2017, p. 101). A product of this struggle for legitimacy has been the efforts to align social work practice with masculine ideas of what is considered "professional," characterized instead by rigidity, regulation, and bureaucracy (Weigmann, 2017). Subsequently, social work students are taught skills such as interviewing, case note documentation, and conducting ecological and risk assessments (Duschinsky et al., 2016; Fine & Teram, 2013; Leotti, 2021; Rossiter & Heron, 2011). Legitimizing social work via professionalization is also seen in medical professions, including psychology, and is reflective of neoliberal sensibilities about a "right" way to do the work to procure economic success, often at the direct expense of those accessing services.

Both because of and despite these histories, we align ourselves with critical and Black feminist thought that acknowledges the gendered and racialized histories of such interventions,

while also resisting dichotomized categories that fail to attend meaningfully to White settler feminism's exclusions of racialized, queer, trans, poor, and disabled women (Hill Collins, 1990; hooks, 2000; Sheehy & Nayak, 2020). The early work of White women social workers is often centered in our social work education, which erases and obfuscates the histories of Black, Indigenous, and racialized feminist organizing in shaping the profession and responses to its shortcomings, many of whom were harmed by early social work (Blackstock, 2009; Chapman & Withers, 2019; Gregory, 2021; Wright et al., 2021). Similarly, Black and critical feminisms made their own theorizations of identity, power, and politics to name the types of marginalization that other modes of thought rendered unthinkable or unknowable when articulated exclusively from a White gaze (Chapman & Withers, 2019; Dillon, 2016; Hill Collins, 1990; hooks, 2000). Black feminism emerged *from* the margins to theorize *the production* of the margins, which it identifies as being produced by both the state and radical and intellectual theories that claim to challenge dominant social structures as illustrated with White settler feminism.

Black feminism seeks to make visible the histories and operations of power enacted by interlocking systems of marginalization that homogenize identity categories and collapse women's diverse experiences into a singular narrative (Hill Collins, 1990; hooks, 2000; Sheehy & Nayak, 2020). While intersectional theorizing is a part of Black feminism and is distinctly analyzing Black women's experiences of oppression, it is often misappropriated to explain other kinds of marginalization outside of Black women's experience (Collins & Bilge, 2020). With this dynamic in mind, we turn to critical and Black feminisms to locate both our reflections on our experiences of social work education and practice and the alternative approaches that we present as being necessary to challenge professionalization and individualization. Part of this process necessitates micro and mezzo praxis to make social justice tangible in our immediate and everyday lives, such as relational and empathic politics that focus on how we can make community with each other and focus on care, understanding, and connection to deliberately resist neoliberalism imbued within the prioritization of certain markers of success, such as productivity and profit (Segal & Wagaman, 2017). However, we also imagine structural change that re-orients our focus on social issues to their systemic roots in White, colonial, capitalist cisheteropatriarchy, whereby we work collectively toward the eradication of these violent conditions via organizing and community. This approach is aligned with our central reflection of the balance between resisting and working within oppressive systems, which requires creativity and responsiveness to enact social justice wherever and whenever possible.

Methodology

To unpack and make sense of our collective experiences, we are methodologically rooted in reflection and conversation as exploratory pedagogical tools. The examples that we present in this discussion are borne from conversations that were both formal (e.g., in seminar) and informal (e.g., outside of class). While such dialogues were part of our doctoral class spaces, particularly when we were asked to talk about feminist readings, we also sought each other out

beyond the classroom to discuss shared experiences, ideas, tensions, and goals as students who self-identified as feminist researchers and practitioners. The notion of conversation as a starting point for action is rooted in Black feminism and calls for us to recognize our roles and examine how we function as we use language to transform silence into action (Lorde, 1977). hooks and West (1991) further contributed to the use of dialogue as transformative by highlighting the reflective act and reflexive capacity of conversation, which they called "breaking bread." Recognizing that "dialogue was one of the ways where that sense of mutual witness and testimony could be made manifest" (p. 1), breaking bread calls us to wrestle with the past and present and with theory and practice in an effort to advance a more just society (hooks & West, 1991). Additionally, Sheehy and Nayak (2018, 2020) use conversation as a methodological process to demonstrate this kind of transformation, demonstrating both the power of breaking silence through speaking out and the power of documenting forms of activism (Sheehy & Nayak, 2020, p. 254). Our use of vignetted personal stories in conversation with each other takes up the transformative action of conversational method by creating a space to facilitate and incorporate practices of reflexivity. Furthermore, our use of conversation as feminist praxis furthers our central argument: that slowing down, "breaking bread" (hooks & West, 1991) as a metaphor for sharing, connecting, and nurturing Black feminist thought, and centering relationality, can disrupt the neoliberal practices that we aim to resist. Just as Sheehy and Nayak (2020) examine "the in-between space" (p. 235) as an intentional opposition to static ideological boundaries, each vignette that we present illustrates both the challenges of the neoliberalization and depoliticization of social work.

Vignettes

Cruel optimism permeates social work pedagogy and praxis. To illustrate the intricacies of this, we draw upon three brief vignettes from each of our personal, educational, and professional experiences and enter into a reflective conversation. Namely, we aim to explore how these processes can (1) hierarchize feminist social work, (2) facilitate a sense of discouragement about "real" and meaningful social work practice among budding social workers and inspire a troubling internalization of "power-over" approaches to social work practice, and (3) reveal a disconnect between the expectations bestowed upon social workers and the constrained realities of their professional environment.

Feminist social work education (Alexe)

As there is currently no accreditation standard requirement for social work education programs in Canada to teach feminist social work (CASWE-ACFTS, 2021) – that is, what Dominelli (2002) defines as practices that recognize and challenge patriarchal ideas and dynamics that oppress, marginalize, and harm women – the content and quality of this feminist social work education is largely dependent on the institution providing it. Integrating feminist social work into social work education programs is inconsistent, contingent on the philosophy of that particular school or person who is designing the curriculum. If feminist social work is taught, it

is often framed as a form of social work exclusively concerned with and provided to women, thus distancing feminist social work from "mainstream" social work curriculum (which typically assumes a position of gender neutrality and as being agender/de-gendered) and completely negating the politics and power structures deeply implicated in facilitating women's oppression more broadly. Moreover, the distillation of feminist social work to social work with women is frequently done in a way that assumes who those women are, further centering White, straight, cisgender, and able-bodied notions of womanhood that are prevalent in mainstream Canada.

During my community social work practice experience, where I supervised many social work student practicum placements, this inconsistency of feminist social work education was made evident. Practicing at a community and resource centre for women in inner-city Calgary, both diploma and bachelor level social work students would arrive keen to start working with women. Often to their surprise however, a large portion of their placement work would include having casual and informal conversations with women about their lives. Given the community drop-in setting, there were plenty of opportunities to simply chat with women about their families, histories, and stories. Sometimes, a referral to the food bank or the phone numbers to shelters may have been provided following these conversations, but this was not what was expected of these interactions. There was no documentation or note-taking required – we considered this to simply be women connecting with women, regardless of what their role was intended to be in that space. These informal conversations were a feminist practice that deliberately disrupted hierarchies of knowledge and notions of power by viewing connection as necessary and legitimate.

While relationship and community building were often identified as important social work skills in pedagogical spaces, the nonlinear and slow nature of these processes in practice served as a site of frustration for many of the students that I supervised. It was common for students to see and understand the social worker/"client" relationship as primarily transactional, ultimately serving an end goal of "helping" women who had come to the centre to "receive help." Many social work students struggled to see the meaning of their work in this community development space, and were disappointed that they hadn't developed tangible skills in case note documentation or reporting, citing the need to build upon these skills for their longer-term social work career goals. While I aimed to challenge these ideas through student supervision, this did little to address the issue at its root. In "feminist social work," distilled to social work with women, analysis of how the personal is political was largely lost. Resisting surveillance by choosing not to engage in detailed documentation with service users was, in itself, a covert form of resistance. This takeaway demonstrates the significance of what feminist social work education could offer students, such as seeing the value of "informal" work and relationship-building.

Am I doing social work? (Maddie)

As an eager social work undergraduate student entering my first field placement, I had high hopes of making a difference in the local community. My social work education centred around

two conflicting ideas: first, we were frequently prompted by our instructors and syllabi to resist dichotomizing micro and macro social work practice as they were framed as inextricably linked; second, the expectations to walk the line between structural and individual analyses were often communicated within the scope of "typical" social work practice, where our courses suggested that interactions with service users would be in the context of structured intake, assessment, counselling, and documentation within an organization. Flanked by these two paradoxical requirements – *be critical of structures but also work within them* – I wobbled into the field with a determination to learn how to be a "real" social worker.

Despite my keen motivation to situate my social work practice within structural analyses, I felt quite disappointed. Specifically, my expectations about "making a difference" were quickly dashed. Rather than addressing the social structures shaping service users' experiences, we were frequently undertaking informal activities that I saw as having nothing to do with the issues they were experiencing. For example, I found myself frustrated when I was asked to take service users to a recreational centre every week for exercise and games. Aside from feeling that I was not engaging with macro analyses at all, I also felt that I was not "counselling" service users on an individual level, which felt like a failure after my education had primed me to believe that these were ideal social work practices. I found myself trapped somewhere between having the power to gate-keep service users and feeling powerless to reimagine my role in the organization as something that I could see as "meaningful."

In articulating a feminist epistemology, which I began to do as a second-year student when I took a feminist social work class, I was unknowingly reifying and perpetuating neoliberal ideas of what counts as "legitimate" or "real" social work. In placing value on acquiring and practicing professional skills, such as clear-cut counselling or risk assessment, I de-valued the everyday practices that built community, such as bringing service users to recreational activities, cooking with them, helping clean the facilities, and chatting informally. I also bring in an analysis here of how I subscribed to a kind of neoliberal feminism, one that was hyperfocused on my individual success via becoming a professional in possession of the power to "make a difference," which was at the direct expense of a critical feminist worldview that would focus on community care, empathic politics, and seeing value in the rapport and relationality between and among service providers and service users (Kendall, 2021; Pollack & Rossiter, 2010). As I progressed through my social work education, I sought to actively challenge these assumptions and standards about "real" social work to, instead, see value in all processes of community-building, which is something that particularly came to fruition in my feminist organizing against gender-based and sexual violence via participation in co-organizing *Take Back the Night*, where I proudly set up and took down tables, coordinated attendees' access to the Disabled and Aged Regional Transit (DART) system to alternatively participate in the march, and chatted informally with those I was making community with during the event.

Stifling systems (Rochelle)

When I was first introduced to perinatal social work in a hospital setting, I quickly recognized the unspoken expectations of the role that were communicated to me during my orientation. There were norms and values associated with working in a Women and Children's space that I had not previously experienced while working in other areas of the hospital. Surveillance was an expected and normal practice for each member of the team, and I was charged with the additional responsibility of determining the most appropriate form of policing of the parent and family. It was my responsibility to hear concerns from the interprofessional team and make my own judgments about parental capacity, as well as to engage child welfare where there were fears about the birthing person's ability to be a "good mother" – age appropriate, of stable financial means, sober, and self-less (Collins, 1999; Davin, 1997; Garwood, 2014). Although parents and care providers were said to be working together as a team in the care of the infants, there was always the unspoken divide between the two groups. I didn't understand how social work focused on supporting the treatment and care of women/birthing people and infants didn't centre the needs and experiences of those we were supporting – mother/parent-child dyads.

As I started to better understand the implications of the norms and values held in the spaces in which I worked, as well as what these meant for how I functioned as a social worker, I started to take up practices that covertly resisted the norms I had observed. I found ways to create space during daily check-ins with the healthcare team for parents who felt powerless in their infant's care. I fostered conversations with parents outside of the structures of assessment and planning to give space to their experiences, perspectives, and concerns about the restrictions they were feeling in the hospital environment. Further, and where possible, I worked with physicians and nurses to foster a kind of care environment where parents were empowered to engage in care activities in a way that enhanced their capacities without scrutiny and judgment. These practices were rooted in feminism. However, despite my efforts, there were times when I was reminded of my role in the program and function on the team through verbal nudges from leaders and senior staff, such as, "Remember, the baby is our patient. The mother is not." These statements reoriented me to surveillance and policing in the name of protecting and ensuring safety for our primary patient – the baby. In those moments, I felt nudged into a kind of work that was more closely aligned with program norms and hospital functions than with the kind of social work practice that I was taught. While this tension was deeply unsettling to navigate, it also created moments of covert resistance to hyper-individual and neoliberal ideas permeating how I was "taught" to do service provision. Naming and educating students about this resistance via feminist epistemologies are essential; when I didn't have a name for it, it often made it more difficult to do in my everyday work.

Collectively, in our conversations — both formally and informally — we realized that the ideologies of social justice we valued continued to be challenged or erased by the embedded ideologies of the systems in which we found ourselves.

Discussion

While these vignettes span three different experiences, our doctoral classes allowed us to join together and identify common themes between and among them. Our stories merge to ground and reveal the cruel optimisms of social work that tangles with its depoliticization in deeply troubling ways. Each of us were concerned with "doing real and effective social work," which largely reflected the androcentric, neoliberal, and bureaucratic understandings of practice that we believed to be central to legitimate helping professions. Simultaneously, we were often troubled by the perceived rigidity of the structures that we were working within and the limitations of creating meaningful social change. In both informal practices and highly regulated settings, we felt as though our contributions to the field were inadequate and illegitimate in the broader quest for social justice.

While this tension can manifest in challenging ways for social work students, where they feel trapped between "power" and "powerlessness" and feel like they are not "real" social workers, it can also facilitate the internalization of neoliberal subjectivities (Duschinsky et al., 2016). Namely, due to the sanitization of structural analyses in social work education through increasing understanding of professionalized practice, students outside of structured social work might grasp at power wherever they can in an attempt to legitimize what they have come to interpret as illegitimate social work practice. Simultaneously, students working in structured and highly regulated social work settings can come to enact and uphold power structures that further individualize the social problems the profession is seeking to address and redress. Implicit within these dynamics is the assumption that individualized, structured, and clinical social work interventions are the most important and effective forms of the work, thus framing informal settings and practices as somehow illegitimate or insignificant, therefore propagating a hierarchy of knowledge. Lastly, the constraints of the social work practice setting, where professional expectations set out for the social worker often appear to contradict the confining settings that they work within, can leave social workers in uncomfortable places where they shoulder guilt, responsibility, and self-imposed pressure to alleviate or resolve these tensions in the absence of institutional support.

We bring these vignettes together to name the cruel optimism present within allegedly social justice-oriented social work education, where pedagogy romanticizes "making a difference," and its unsettling relationship with the insidious forces of neoliberalism. From each of our experiences, we express a kind of disillusionment, where disconnects between social justice and social work practice left us feeling dissatisfied, flailing, insecure, and concerned with the legitimacy of our own education, practice, and professional identities. The pressures to embrace a neoliberal subjectivity — one that is fundamentally concerned with *how* you do something and not *why* — continue to permeate social work pedagogy and praxis.

In the processes of our reflections, we found that feminist social work praxis offered an avenue to understanding our experiences as important to challenging the professionalized constraints of the spaces we work within and presenting alternative approaches that enact the social justice principles that social work claims to be committed to. Namely, feminist social work

recognizes and appreciates seemingly informal practices and those that covertly challenge institutional restrictions as legitimate, real, and aligned with the pursuit of social change (Dominelli, 2002). By focusing on meeting people where they are, building rapport, and offering support regardless of institutional limitations, we prioritize values of respect, dignity, service to humanity, and the pursuit of social justice (CASW, 2005). In what follows, we offer ways of enacting this feminist praxis via covert forms of resistance, discretionary ethics, and redefining professionalism.

Covert forms of resistance

As we have conversationally reflected upon our experiences, we have come to agree that countering the increasingly neoliberal and depoliticized nature of social work that devalues feminist social work's approach to relationality, care, and connection requires engaging in covert forms of resistance, a subtle paradigm shift away from the passive neoliberal subject and toward an active agent of change. We point to covert forms of resistance because we recognize that overt resistance may not be accessible nor realistic for the purpose of maintaining employment, financial stability, or workplace relationships. Covert resistance aligns with feminist praxis by offering an option that challenges the androcentric, neoliberal status quo in small ways that materialize in larger changes over time. Attending to tensions in social work praxis by subverting institutional policies and advancing unauthorized actions can contribute to outcomes that are regarded as ethically and morally defensible (Fine & Teram, 2013).

These forms of resistance require an acknowledgement of the nuanced, conflicting experiences of moral distress, grappling with moral high-ground, evaluation of the risks involved in decision-making, as well as an acceptance of the isolation associated with maintaining the secrecy of the action (Fine & Teram, 2013; Lynch & Forde, 2016; Weinberg, 2009; Weinberg & Banks, 2019). Moral distress is often identified by the experience of an awareness of the "right" thing to do, but knowing and feeling barriers that block the ability to "do the right thing" (Jameton, 1993; Lynch & Forde, 2016; Weinberg & Banks, 2019). Wrestling with tensions of this kind makes the social worker experiencing moral distress intimately aware of the relevant issues at stake, such as the need to abide by organizational policies to maintain their employment, and the core values advancing the seemingly best approach, such as the desire to work towards a socially just solution. After much time deconstructing and reconstructing cases where institutional policies prevent the right thing from being done, social workers may find themselves becoming clearer about what is unjust within the system and why it may be justifiable to covertly circumvent rules to achieve what is good for the service user and working in alignment with social justice (Weinberg & Banks, 2019).

While advocating for covert resistance, we heartily acknowledge that this concept may be difficult to imagine or conceptualize in a professional culture that values adherence to structure and policy, particularly for newly practicing social workers. We respect that there is a delicate balance to be found between resisting systems while also working within them, and believe that there are ways to be gentle with ourselves while also remaining accountable to our commitments

to challenge the status quo and work towards social justice. Through reflecting on the ways that we, personally, have resisted these structures, we have thus identified sites of resistance that could be useful in politicizing social work practice.

Practicing discretionary ethics

One way of exercising covert forms of resistance is through the use of what we identify as "discretionary ethics," which refers to a process that is best applied in contexts where the time required to initiate and enact systemic change is too significant and where there is a potential for harm to the people that we work with while the system is changing (Fine & Teram, 2013). It aims to recentre the wellbeing of the individual through the process of examining the material risks and benefits of the situation, including those to the service provider and service user. Additionally, discretionary ethics requires a "robust sense of what ought to be done and a drive to act accordingly" (Fine & Teram, 2013, p. 1320). Essential to the sense of what ought to be done is a comprehensive values exploration in order to ground and frame one's understanding of the issue. In this way, social workers can begin to push back.

Discretionary ethics allows for the critical analysis of programs, services, and systems, specifically identifying the ways in which they exclude certain people or neglect the impacts of particular circumstances. Discretionary ethics could, for example, include subverting or working around restrictive organizational policies, such as those that exist at food bank programs across the country. The majority of food banks require that people and families disclose their monthly incomes and expenses, essentially surveilling the types of people that access services to ensure that they are "deserving" enough. Many people and families who are experiencing food insecurity, however, do not meet these income and expense requirements. Practicing discretionary ethics in these types of situations, which may include prompting individuals to consider and include additional monthly expenses that they have incurred or to exclude earnings that they may have received in under-the-table work, could be considered a covert form of resistance against these neoliberal systems. Maddie has firsthand experience of working in the only youth-focused food bank in Hamilton, where she saw how restrictive policies regarding access adversely impacted service users, and she actively enacted the practices we describe to resist this gate-keeping. We essentially propose that social workers align themselves with the people that we are working with, as opposed to the systems that we work within, in an active effort to redistribute power and create more equitable relations. Such approaches could be integrated into social work curriculum to better attend to the complexities of service provision and aid students in identifying and resisting unethical hierarchies.

The notion of aligning with the people that we are working with instead of the systems that we are working within would have offered new perspectives for each of us in our work. For example, Alexe refused to further surveillance via her documentation while working with marginalized women; Maddie resisted penalization of criminalized service users for being late to group programming; and Rochelle challenged alienating practices in service provision for mothers. Resistance is a foundational praxis in feminist organizing, whereby any and all attempts

to challenge cisheteropatriarchal power and its various micro, mezzo, and macro iterations is recognized as essential work (Alinia, 2015; Thomas & Davies, 2005). Resisting expectations about advancing organizational interests in small, inconspicuous ways would have offered a place where the work would have aligned more closely with the social justice values taught in school. Resistance in the form of discretionary ethics could have been enacted by taking advantage of opportunities to align with and support service users where their interests were at odds with organizational priorities. It could also include intentionally protecting the service user's interests by articulating concerns in a way that forced the organization to attend to the service user's needs. In addition to creating a space for addressing moral tensions of doing social justice work in neoliberal landscapes, these covert acts have potential to inspire broader discussions within the organization, leading to more substantial and material change.

Redefining professionalism

On the note of rooting social work practice in equitable relationship, and in considering the many ways in which social work has worked to morph itself to acceptable standards of professionalism, as defined by cisheteropatriarchal and capitalist expectations, we propose a reimagining of the very concept of social work "professionalism." Professionalism, as it currently stands, embodies cisheteropatriarchal and capitalist traits such as unemotionality and productivity. We are curious about what a professionalized social justice praxis might actually look like when instead rooted in a feminist ethic of care that embraces emotionality, relationship, and mutual vulnerability (Dominelli, 2002; Held, 2006a). It has been written, after all, that "there can be care without justice" but that "there can be no justice without care" (Held, 2006b, p. 17). Aligned with the reflective conversational methodology that grounded our thinking for this discussion, we point to the power of conversation for addressing the isolation that comes with neoliberalized social work practice and the moral distress that may come with resisting it (Weinberg, 2009).

To this end, we have questions about what it might look like if we encouraged practicing social workers to engage in traditionally feminized methods of resistance, such as conversations with each other about injustices in their workplaces and beyond. Aligned with what Black feminists have described as "breaking bread" and community care, via prioritizing connection and dialogue with other women for the express purpose of resisting the hyperindividualism of neoliberal feminism, we wonder about the possibilities of building these networks (hooks & West, 1991; Kendall, 2021). What would social work practice look like if we encouraged the types of vulnerable relationships required for meaningful social justice work? How might we instead embrace emotionality and vulnerability to form radical communities of social work practice? What would it look like, for example, if the third-year version of Maddie and the students practicing under Alexe's supervision were trained to consider the seemingly mundane and informal conversations that they were having in practice as relationship building, instead reframing and understanding those conversations as a foundational component of social justice

work? Such ideas have been explored in Black feminist texts, including the creation of bridges as described by hooks (2002).

We believe that an emotionally attuned and relational understanding of social work professionalism would drastically change the ways in which we are able to resist neoliberalization, managerialism, and injustice. It is here that we point to a growing body of literature that explores how engaging in practices such as gossip can be interpreted and deployed as a tactic of direct action. Small talk — commonly gendered and labeled as gossip—has been written about as a site of knowledge and a tool used primarily by women to share knowledge and uncover experiences of injustice (Cifor, 2016; Hagel, 2018; Lagalisse, 2013; Peters, 2020). Gossip is largely interpreted as "women's conversations in 'private' homes about 'personal' matters" (Lagalisse, 2013, p. 113) and largely dismissed as a serious or legitimate form of communication (Cifor, 2016). Interestingly, however, if we think about the underground consciousness-raising practices of the second-wave feminist movement in North America (Rosenthal, 1981), we can quickly see that the raising of collective consciousness was also rooted in what we might now call gossip. However, aligned with Black and critical feminist epistemology, we would be remiss to not mention how the works of Black and racialized women were appropriated by White women during this time period, such as claiming ownership of terms like "gossip" when it was practiced by women in the Global South to inspire political change in men-dominated settings (Chowdhury & Philipose, 2016; Guendouizi, 2001; Ray, 2013). By building relationships and engaging in conversation with each other, drawing connections between and noticing similarities in experiences, we are able to link our personal to the political. This also addresses forms of isolation inherent in experiences of moral distress. There lies great political power in the simple act of gossip (Cifor, 2016; Hagelin, 2018).

To further ground this concept of gossip as a site of feminist resistance against the increasingly neoliberal and professionalized practice of social work, we would like to think hypothetically about how this might have operationalized in Alexe's supervision of social work students. What form of social justice-oriented practice might have emerged if students were instead trained in pedagogical spaces to reject cisheteropatriarchal ideas of professionalized boundary setting? Had students been trained to value the slow, nonlinear nature of building relationships, perhaps there may have been more opportunities to connect with women and come to understand their experiences as inherently political. It is beyond the scope of this paper to offer a pedagogical analysis; however, grounded in the reflections emerging from our vignettes about our experiences as students, practitioners, and now educators, we recommend imagining social work education that explicitly integrates structural analyses about White, colonial, and capitalist cisheteropatriarchy and how it shapes our current concerns of neoliberalism in the profession. Such an endeavour is historiographical and future-oriented. As articulated by Gebhard et al. (2022) and Chapman and Withers (2019), social work education necessitates a reckoning with the profession's history, which is rooted in White supremacy, colonialism, imperialism, and violence, as it has created the conditions for harm to happen via modern practices of individualization, professionalization, and de-radicalization. If social work practice

is not reduced to transactional interactions of seeking or accessing help and, instead, embraced conversation, storytelling of alternate and contested histories, and the spectrum of emotions that comes along with it all as professional practice, we wonder what might be possible.

Conclusion

This discussion has sought to explore the tensions inherent within the cruel optimism in social work education and praxis, particularly by naming the disconnects between social justice idealisms and the ways in which neoliberalization facilitates the depoliticization and professionalization of social work. Through the use of a critically reflexive conversational methodology informed by Black feminist thought and the exploration of three vignettes, we mobilized our individual and collective reflections stemming from our doctoral work to explore how this cruel optimism plays out in everyday experiences of pedagogy and practice. While these tensions feel difficult to settle or resolve due to their systemic origins in cisheteropatriarchal capitalism, we have posed potential considerations for resisting these processes and dynamics, including engaging in covert forms of resistance, teaching and practicing discretionary ethics, and utilizing politicized feminist methods to redefine professional practice. While these tactics can be taken up in a variety of ways, often through small acts of resistance like skirting around punitive institutional policies and carefully thinking through the implications of allegedly ethical procedures, they can be quite meaningful in service provision.

We recognize that many of our suggestions — and the ideas put forth in previous literature on resistance — ultimately still place the burden of responsibility on individuals to resist, work within, or work around these confines of the professional setting. This dynamic is central to our critiques and the ways in which the neoliberalization, professionalization, and depoliticization of social work de-contextualizes and individualizes social problems and service delivery to the direct detriment of the emerging social work student and the service users they interact with. Without structural analyses and upheaval, social workers will be overwhelmed by the pressures of trying to "change" a system that was designed to be this way: transactional, surveillance-based, and sanitized. While it is in no way a fulsome solution, we urge social work pedagogy to openly name and challenge the disconnects between social justice and social work praxis rather than assuming that their relationship is inherent. However, we also believe that covert forms of resistance can serve as a beacon of hope; as vessels of genuine optimism. Social justice work does not have to be large-scale or grand: if we slow down, break bread, and move forward from a place of relationality and care, we can engage in small acts of collective resistance towards a more socially just world.

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