

Article

Doctoral student voices on justice, ethics, and change: A roundtable article on reimagining social work

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Abstract

This roundtable article brings together five doctoral students and recent graduates in social work from diverse backgrounds and institutional contexts, united by their involvement in the Canadian Social Work Doctoral Student Network's annual conference leadership and a shared commitment to social justice. Through collective reflection grounded in their doctoral experiences, the contributors explore the many manifestations of social (in)justice in social work, rethinking its history and practices, critically engaging with academic innovations, and fostering creativity as a means of activism. Responding to three core questions, they engage in a dialogue that surfaces critical tensions, hopes, and calls to action, centering voices often marginalized in the academy. Throughout, they also touch on different manuscripts that are part of this special issue. This discussion offers a transformative perspective on contemporary debates, envisioning what social work can become—and what it must confront—through a relational and justice-oriented lens.

Keywords

social justice; social work doctorate students; roundtable

Résumé

Cet article sous forme de table ronde réunit cinq doctorantes et jeunes diplômées en travail social issues de divers horizons et contextes institutionnels, unies par leur implication dans le colloque annuel du Réseau Canadien des Doctorant·es en Travail Social et par leur engagement commun en faveur de la justice sociale. À partir d'une réflexion collective fondée sur leurs expériences doctorales, les autrices explorent les nombreuses manifestations de l'(in)justice sociale dans le travail social. Leur échange invite à repenser l'histoire et les pratiques du travail social, à s'engager de manière critique dans les innovations académiques et à encourager la créativité comme moyen d'activisme. Répondant à trois questions centrales, elles prennent part à un échange qui révèle des zones de friction, fait émerger des perspectives d'espoir et ouvre sur de

possibles leviers d'action, en mettant l'accent sur des voix souvent marginalisées dans le monde universitaire. Tout au long de leur échange, elles évoquent également différents manuscrits faisant partie de ce numéro spécial. Cette discussion offre une perspective transformatrice sur les débats contemporains, envisageant ce que le travail social peut devenir - et ce qu'il doit affronter – dans une perspective critique, réflexive, relationnelle et orientée vers la justice.

Mots clés

justice sociale; étudiantes au doctorat en travail social; table ronde

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Introduction

The idea for this special issue began at the 2023 Canadian Social Work Doctorate Student Network (CSWDSN) conference held at the University of Calgary and coincided with the launch of this journal. The initiative then moved forward and took shape through the leadership of the 2024 conference. Three of the authors co-chaired the 2024 CSWDSN conference in Montreal and invited the co-chairs of the previous edition, who had been instrumental in passing the mantle of conference organization, to collaborate on planning the special issue of which this paper is a part. They also engaged in deeper discussions around the theme and invited the former co-chairs to share their reflections in the form of an article. The initial authors felt it was important to include a richer, more in-depth representation of experiences, which led to the invitation of a fifth author, also a CSWDSN colleague and friend, whose remarkable professional, academic, and personal journey complements and completes those of the other contributors. These collective efforts and shared perspectives culminated in the creation of this paper, co-authored by all five.

Through our discussions, we came to realize that we recognized a shared frustration with the limitations of academic research that still often sidelines lived experiences, perpetuates colonial structures, and isolates scholars from the communities they serve. We decided to co-create this dialogue not just to critique, but to imagine together what social work might become if we centre relationality, justice, and radical presence.

Social justice evokes a range of concepts, including freedom, equity, anti-oppression, democracy, diversity, anti-discrimination, human rights, peace, and activism (Bhuyan et al., 2017; Jeyapal, 2017; Lundy, 2011; Martínez Herrero & Charnley, 2020). While social work is expected to uphold the principle of social justice, authors have observed that the profession has often remained too silent in response to past and recent civil, social, and racial unrest (BlackDeer

& Ocampo, 2022; Jeyapal, 2017). The profession bears a troubling legacy, having contributed to perpetuating and even creating severe injustices. Social work plays a critical role, especially during significant events such as the global coronavirus pandemic, which serve as stark reminders of how hard-won rights can be swiftly overturned, exacerbating injustices and inequities (Bhanot et al., 2021; Mensah & Williams, 2022). By critiquing social work's historical and current shortcomings, the cited authors, among others, are fostering a shift in how social justice is integrated into both the theory and practice of social work.

This growing awareness underscores the profession's past failures to proactively address inequities and injustices, thus failing the very individuals it seeks to serve (Duarte & Selmi, 2023; Lundy, 2013). Such reflection is particularly important given that social work—along with the individuals, families, and communities it serves, as well as its practitioners and scholars—has been adversely affected by the neoliberal perspective that has reshaped social care and services on a global scale (Ferguson & Lavalette, 2006; Martínez Herrero & Charnley, 2020; Roy et al., 2024; Spolander et al., 2014). With its emphasis on individualism, capitalism and marketization, managerialism, and risk (Martínez Herrero & Charnley, 2020; Roy et al., 2024; Spolander et al., 2014), this exclusive and restrictive framework continues to hinder social work's efforts to advocate for social justice effectively.

Critically examining the field of social work—its history, perspectives, and practices—is intrinsically linked to proposing and implementing tangible measures that advance social justice. This transformative process must occur across various domains, including education (Bhuyan et al., 2017; Goode et al., 2021), research (Danso, 2014; Walton, 2021), practice (Dominelli et al., 2014; Jeyapal, 2017), and society on a global scale.

As future leaders and experts in these areas, social work doctorate students have a vital role to play in fostering this dialogue and driving fundamental changes within the profession. Their efforts contribute to the collective struggle to uphold and promote social justice within social work. This paper amplifies the voices and experiences of five social work doctorate students and recent graduates, shedding light on critical issues related to social justice and the profession as a whole.

Methodology

This manuscript provides insight into the thoughts, experiences, and lives of five individuals—current or recent doctoral students, practitioners, and professors—representing five Canadian universities. They are at different stages of their doctoral journeys and involved in a diverse array of projects that explore a wide range of subjects. They share their perspectives and link them to the special issue's manuscripts in a round table format. The following offers a quick introduction to the authors.

Johanne Thomson-Sweeny recently completed her doctorate degree at the School of Social Work at Université de Montréal (UdeM), Quebec, Canada. She is presently a postdoctoral fellow at the School of Social Work at McGill University.

Chloé Souesme is currently undertaking her PhD in the School of Social Work at Université du Québec à Montréal, in Montreal, Quebec, in addition to being a teaching and research assistant at the Haute école de travail social de Genève (HES-SO), in Switzerland.

Amanda Keller recently completed her PhD in the School of Social Work at McGill University in Montreal, Quebec. She is starting her postdoctorate at the Université de Montréal in January 2026.

Christina Tortorelli is pursuing her PhD in the Faculty of Social Work at the University of Calgary. She is also a professor at Mount Royal University, in Calgary, Alberta.

Jolene Heida is pursuing her PhD in the School of Social at York University in Toronto, Ontario. She is also a practitioner.

To better structure the informal discussions the co-authors had around the overall theme of this article and the different manuscripts, three questions were crafted in alignment with the rationale for this special issue:

1. How has your identity and lived experience influenced your research or practice?
2. How is your commitment to social justice manifested in your work, including the methods or strategies you use to promote equity, justice, and inclusion?
3. What future directions do you foresee for your work or the field of social work in addressing systemic inequities and promoting justice and inclusion?

The five authors were invited to respond to these questions, drawing from their professional, academic, social, and personal experiences, and making connections to the special issue manuscripts. In response to the first question, each author introduces themselves through the lens of their positionality. For the second question, the authors' answers are interwoven to create a cohesive dialogue about the ways in which social justice shapes their work and their lives. For the third question, the authors articulate their vision for a more just and equitable future. Connections to the special issue manuscripts emerge in the second and third questions. The discussions conclude with a summary that integrates the overarching themes discussed throughout the paper.

How has your identity and lived experience influenced your research or practice?

Chloé

My background lies at the intersection of various contexts. I am a social worker trained in France, now a doctoral candidate in social work in Canada, and a teaching and research assistant in Switzerland. Like many people in the academic world, I evolve in a framework where forms of precariousness and privilege coexist. My social position - a white, middle-class, university-educated woman - gives me certain opportunities. Being aware of these privileges means constantly questioning my role and posture in the research I carry out, as well as reflecting on the aims of this work, whether from a societal, collective, or individual point of view.

That said, encounters with people in the early days of my social work career have fueled me to find and develop tools for social change. When I graduated as a social worker, I realized that there was a missing link in the chain of social change, that accompanying people was significant and profoundly necessary, but that on its own, it could not be enough. The gap between people's reality, the prescript of social work professionals, and legal and political contexts seemed so incoherent to me, that I felt the need to go further. It became necessary to find other tools to understand and act for major and structural changes, so that the people concerned by social work first, and the professionals too, are heard. In my opinion, it's the complementarity of types of action in different spaces, which support the action of social justice.

Jolene

Awina Kayi? (English translation – Who are you?)

I come to the PhD program as a practitioner with over 20 years' experience in the field of social work, and more importantly as a mother, Auntie, and grandmother of mixed Métis (Cree-Scottish) and settler ancestry. As my life narrative continues to unfold, I draw knowledge from many of the experiences I have had and consider them medicines in my bundle. I have spent a great deal of my life navigating spaces of non-belonging; in the form of poverty, dislocation, trauma, and my own identity. I grew up in a small rural area in Northwestern Ontario and while I was raised in deep connection with the land, my family was disconnected from our traditional Indigenous teachings and connections to our culture. As a mixed Indigenous/settler person, non-belonging was ever present in school, white society, and at times community. Ironically, I have become more grounded in an understanding of who I am partially through my academic journey as it has provided me with access to critical knowledge which connects the impact of settler colonialism and my own lived experiences, and has provided opportunities to develop important relationships with other Indigenous people, many of whom are also finding their way home to themselves and their culture. Learning about who I am and where my ancestors are from has been a significant part of the decolonization of my own mind, and healing from what Absolon (2022) refers to as inherited colonial trauma. For generations in my family this recognition, remembering, and reconciling with our colonial past (and present) has been an unacknowledged and dismembered path. I bring this lived history to my PhD journey, and it fuels my commitment to activism, social change, unsettling social work, and Indigenizing academic spaces.

Amanda

As a Vanier Scholar in the School of Social Work at McGill University, I have certainly had privilege in my PhD journey. However, my path to higher education was anything but straightforward as this was a midlife career shift for me. Having worked for eight years as a clinician and community organizer, I entered graduate school with a deep sense of purpose, despite the risk of leaving a permanent clinical position. My decision was not taken lightly but it was driven by a clear desire to shape systems that had once shaped me. Having aged out of institutionalized child welfare placements some fifteen years before starting my PhD, this

experience forged my entire career. As an alumni and established child welfare advocate, I was invited to participate in countless research studies initially as a “resilience story” and, more recently, to help form participatory research committees. While these invitations might seem like an act of empowerment, and sometimes they were, my experience engaging in participatory projects has been fraught with challenges. These insights now shape my doctoral research, my public scholarship, and my commitment to co-developing ethical, accountable research practices alongside those with lived experiences. I feel strongly that we need to change the paradigm when doing research with vulnerable people.

Christina

For 23 years, I worked for the provincial government as a delegated child welfare practitioner. A third of my career was spent immersed in front line work directly intersecting with children, families, and community agencies to assess risk and determine next steps. For two thirds of this journey, I led the organization through management and senior leadership developing programs, policies, and legislation and overseeing and consulting on many of the highest risk situations across the province. Thinking back about my entry into the legislated work of child welfare, I was ill-prepared for the intense responsibility that the various roles required. I had worked with community agencies where I intersected significantly with child welfare and families who were reeling from the life-changing and life-disrupting experience of having the government in an oversight role in their families. My work was to provide clinical support, guidance, and work in collaboration with a team of other professionals across multiple agencies.

During my first weeks at child welfare, I was exposed to the most terrible abuses inflicted on children, families who wanted support to improve their circumstances, and parents who wanted to but could not provide safety and security for their children. I stopped thinking that I had seen it all because something else would always come along that was unbelievable and yet the experience of children and families that was hard to understand, navigate, and come to terms with.

Leadership allowed me to take up opportunities to make a positive difference, provide input on legislation, policy, and practice at a time when the freedom to create was supported and seen as positive. Reflecting on my experiences is something that I engage in often, critically thinking about the safety net that is needed for children and families, the history of child welfare intervening harshly with colonized determination to assimilate Indigenous children into White society. I am both proud of my work and embarrassed and angered by the continuation of practices that are grounded in bias and highlighted by the increasing percentage of Indigenous children residing in government placements.

The result is my current work as a teacher of new social workers and an academic researching areas of child welfare that are unexplored, elevating voices of those who are directly involved and advocating for changes across the system to better assist those in need. Focusing on biased practices, the over-representation of Indigenous children involved with the child welfare system, policy and practice changes, and the challenges experienced by the workforce.

Johanne

Through my work and personal experience, I have a greater appreciation for Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's critique of what she calls "the single story." The single story is a notion associated with stereotypes, both negative and positive, in which a person is recognized and perceived according to a single characteristic of their identity. The single story does not consider a person's other identity traits. I do not identify myself solely as "Black", but certain individuals identify me as such and, with a distorted perspective, treat me accordingly. However, I am more than a Black person and my work has enabled me to reflect my non-singular identity.

As a person adopted from Haiti into a White anglophone family who lived in a rural town in a French community, I have often felt lost in a position of "in between" and dual "non-belonging," which complexifies my identity. At times, I wondered where and how I belonged, especially in a community in which it seemed I was able to count the number of Black people on one hand. It was during my master's program in social work that I truly began to critically examine how I was perceived by others, how I was treated, and how I viewed myself in relation to those perceptions. Because of my own experience, I am more aware of the single stories that I can rely on when meeting new people and working with them. Through my research, I aim to show how phenomena and various realities are experienced differently by individuals within the same or similar group. In this way, my goal is to deconstruct the single story and contribute to people being understood as complex, nuanced, individuals.

How is your commitment to social justice manifested in your work, including the methods or strategies you use to promote equity, justice, and inclusion?

The following section provides a multifaceted discussion on how social justice is enacted in different contexts. It highlights the tensions, challenges, and opportunities that arise when working towards equity and inclusion. Examining the intersections between these perspectives sheds light on persistent structural and systemic barriers, as well as the concrete strategies that contribute to meaningful and sustainable change.

Jolene

As I learn my ancestral language Michif, one of the concepts that has deeply resonated with me as I learn is "Ni kishkisin", which roughly translates to "I remember." I relate to this concept of "re-membling" as putting together parts of ourselves that have been dismembered by the violence of colonial systems. This re-membling is not a simple concept of recalling something from the past, but a weaving together of Indigenous knowledges, lived experiences, and the strength of our ceremonies, communities, and teachings – things that settler colonialism has attempted to dismember. The resilience and resistance of minoritized communities is powerfully illustrated in Lydia Pandian and Elizabeth Grigg's paper on street theatre with the transgender community in India. The authors explore how this community has endured profound losses due to colonial injustices, yet continues to resist in diverse and creative ways. Street theatre emerges

as a vital medium through which the community reclaims and rearticulates its ways of being and living. Re-membering I believe is a continuation of cumulative resistance led by generations of Indigenous people and reinvigorated by the necessity of having Indigenous leadership in scholarship to challenge the impact of colonialism on our collective beings.

Johanne

What Jolene shares about *Ni Kishkisin* feels deeply meaningful to me. This concept makes me think of how resisting a dominant framework also requires unlearning. I believe a big part of advancing social justice is through unlearning practices and knowledge that have been historically exclusionary. The beliefs that these practices and knowledge have led to are insidious. Unlearning these ideologies requires societal and individual effort, motivation, and determination. Advocating for social justice means exploring and using critical frameworks, adopting new approaches, and avoiding the repetition of exclusionary practices and ways of thinking.

This is why I am glad this issue includes papers that highlight how advocating for social justice in social work begins in the classroom. The authors offer insights and strategies to reshape and advance social work pedagogy. For example, there is Alexe Bernier, Maddie Brockbank, and Rochelle Maurice' article on the importance of using feminist approaches in social work education, or Amilah Baksh, Alison K. Parnell, Shoshana Pollack, Maxxine Rattner, and Andrew Tibbetts' paper. Their article presents the possible harms that minoritized social work students, but also professors or lecturers, can face in academic settings. It makes you wonder how such harms are possible in a discipline rooted in helping others, especially those from different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds. Creating a space that is accepting and welcoming of difference needs to start with how we treat one another as peers.

To me, promoting social justice also involves overcoming my fears, continuously learning and unlearning, a complex process that Maxxine Rattner alludes to, and finding spaces where I can actively promote justice. I co-founded the antiracist and inclusion committee at the School of Social Work at UdeM. I was actively involved from before the committee's conception to the end of my doctorate in 2024. My involvement in this committee is one of my greatest achievements with regards to breaking down barriers to inclusion and promoting social justice for minoritized groups. Being part of the committee has enabled me to contribute to the antiracist vision of the School of Social Work.

Amanda

I love what Jolene shares about re-membering, and feel that the Indigenous communities' strength, resilience, and stewardship could help flip our paradigms towards a more just discipline and world. Like Johanne, I also had the opportunity to promote social justice when I co-founded CARE Jeunesse, a non-profit organization providing peer support to foster care alumni in Quebec. Through my experience with this organization, I experienced the advantages, but also the downsides of participatory action research. Our organization, which was volunteer-led and

under-resourced at that time, was seen as a “gateway” to foster youth and alumni. But reciprocity was often missing. Researchers wanted access to our membership but offered little in return. They did not support our initiatives, offer co-authorships, or provide resources to sustain our work. They simply wanted “participants” or committee members for their projects and unfortunately, some of the requests turned out to be completely unethical. After reading the Tri-Counsel’s Chapter 9 guidelines, I think most of those principles are applicable to many cultural communities, and simply a part of doing ethical research. Returning to Lydia Pandian and Elizabeth Grigg’s article on street theatre, it’s striking how members of the transgender community were deeply involved in the project—not just as participants, but as collaborators, co-researchers, and performers. Their involvement feels grounded in agency rather than exploitation. Ensuring that participants from marginalized communities have genuine agency is a cornerstone of ethical and just research. The authors of this paper thoughtfully highlight the importance of ethics in research, emphasizing that being ethical also means fostering care, safety, and trust.

Chloé

Amanda’s account of how researchers have engaged with members of her organization leads me to reflect on my own positionality and stance in relation to critical approaches and disability studies, as well as on the responsibilities I carry towards the participants in my research. I do not have lived experience related to my research interest in disability studies. The claim that research should be carried out solely by the people concerned runs the risk of reproducing new exclusions within a discriminated group – the situation of people labelled/with intellectual disabilities is a case in point. That said, this does not in itself lessen the risk I run of reproducing a form of ordinary discrimination myself.

It also imposes a constant vigilance to avoid contributing to the creation and continuation of epistemic and social injustices. This involves deep reflection on my entire research approach. This brings to mind Anjali Upadhyaya-O’Brien’s manuscript on epistemic injustices. The author compellingly presents the troubling history of entire communities whose voices and knowledge have been dismissed and discredited. I recognize that I occupy a position of epistemic privilege—something that, as the author explains, has historically been used as a tool to marginalize and oppress minoritized groups. Pushing back against this means, for example, paying close attention to the lives of the people concerned, to their voices, their experiences, and the meaning they construct around what they live. It’s also about understanding what they are going through, what they are saying, and what they are thinking, which is at the heart of my work. My aim is not to find out whether their analysis “makes sense” according to a certain standard, whether it seems “true.” It’s to understand what they’re experiencing, what makes them feel good or what impacts them negatively. This posture implies not thinking for others, or projecting oneself onto what “should” be felt.

Amanda

I agree with what Chloé is saying about the deep responsibility researchers should hold to their participants, especially in participatory research. In one very frustrating participatory project several members of our advisory group, many of whom were care alumni, experienced significant harm: work contracts were dishonored, payments delayed or denied, and vulnerable youth were asked to share traumatic stories publicly without emotional support. These committee members occupied a liminal space where they had neither the rights of employees nor the protections afforded to participants under research ethics boards, leaving them vulnerable to the whims of an uninformed researcher. Although this project was intended to empower the committee members, it ultimately failed to do so.

As an aspiring PhD student, I felt powerless. I resigned, alongside other youths and two professors. Despite these resignations, the research project continued unabated. No changes were made to the structure of the advisory committee, and no accountability was demanded of the researcher or the implicated institutions.

Christina

As Amanda's example and experience illustrate, bringing change to the system is challenging. My entry into the social work space was a journey over many years as I worked, learned, and raised a family through both fabulous and trying times. My motto which I share readily with others is to say yes, take a risk and trust that you will grow from the experience. Moving from government to academia perhaps exemplifies this motto and has expanded options to affect social justice that I did not anticipate. The restrictions for those working within a politically driven environment were untethered and I very early on had the opportunity to speak to the media about an upcoming legislative change impacting young adults who had been involved with child welfare. A fire was lit within me that stoked a long-standing need to inform and influence a system in need of significant change, to support those in the field who are trying their best despite policies to the contrary and to educate the next generation of social workers to be aware of self and others, exercise effective advocacy, sustain themselves all within an increasingly centralized, authoritarian, neo-liberal agenda. That passion continues as I focus my attention broadly on social work practice and specifically on the child welfare sector. It was heartening to read Sarah Tremblett's paper, which emphasizes the central role of relationships in challenging a neoliberal approach to child welfare. The author reflects on being inspired by their "relationships with supervisors, colleagues, parents/caregivers, and children, past and present, that move beyond checklists and documentation, toward authenticity, care, honesty, and trust." (p. 3). As social workers, the relationships we cultivate can be pivotal, serving as powerful tools for fostering meaningful, ethical, and transformative practice. The relationships that I established and nurtured over my career in government, partnering with community and taking the risk to reach beyond have been pivotal for engaging in my current work.

Jolene

I appreciate how Amanda and Chris bring both the individual and collective dimensions to systemic change that occurs within the dynamic of tension and interconnection of resistance, refusal, and re-membering. By showcasing the diverse manuscripts, this special issue brings attention to these two key dimensions of resistance. Through sharing personal experiences and individual initiatives against social injustices, the authors highlight the significance of resistance at the personal level. At the same time, they reflect on their relationships, with colleagues, peers, research participants, and those they support, offering powerful examples of how resistance is also collective, and must be grounded in community. On the individual level, this makes me think about the power of showing up as our full, authentic selves as researchers and proponents of social justice and social change. But on a collective level, as a mixed Indigenous woman, resistance for me is rooted in and nurtured by the land and grows in vibrant communities and future generations embraced by knowledge of their culture. This vision is fueled by important work happening at community levels by social activism movements and land defenders alike, who are highlighting the urgent need for change in the ways we organize and resist the impact of capitalism, settler colonialism, and imperialism. In this way re-membering and asserting Indigenous ontologies and pedagogies are crucial elements of sustainable futurities.

What future directions do you foresee for your work or the field of social work in addressing systemic inequities and promoting justice and inclusion?

The future of social work is shaped by evolving challenges, critical reflections, and the need for transformative approaches. As social work continues to address systemic inequities, emerging issues such as participatory research ethics, knowledge dissemination, and pedagogy demand renewed attention. The following reflections explore these pressing concerns, questioning dominant paradigms and advocating for alternative models rooted in equity and social transformation. From reimagining inclusion in educational spaces to addressing research practices and amplifying marginalized voices, these perspectives highlight the urgent need for progressive transformation.

Chloé

It seems to me that one of the most vital keys for social work is to work to open the boundaries between the people concerned by social work action, professional communities and the academic world, so that we can work together more effectively to build a humanity based on the recognition of our interdependence, social justice, and the diversity of our lived experience.

Johanne

I share Chloé's perspective. Working together is essential. Opening the boundaries as Chloé mentions can lead to better connection between the players involved. This idea of connection makes me think especially of my role and responsibilities if I were to become a university

professor. How do I better connect with students and research participants? In this way, I found Muhammad Izzul Haq's article inspiring. The author actively works to align their teaching practices with the cultural realities of their students, fostering deeper and more meaningful connections in the classroom. I think this approach not only strengthens relationships with students, but also encourages them to cultivate strong, empathetic connections with the individuals, families, groups, and communities they will serve in their future practice. Taking the time to learn about the students' experiences, to listen to their stories, and to understand their feelings and opinions will be crucial. Creating connections with the students means diving into their backgrounds to discover where they come from, to be open to their lived experiences and expertise, and learning from them. Similar to what the others mentioned in response to the previous question, fostering connection goes beyond individuals – it involves immersing myself in the community tied to my research. Prioritize spending time with these communities to build trust and understanding and ensure their voices are heard and valued throughout the research process. Though I am horrified to hear of Amanda's unethical participation research experience, she also shares how we can contribute to better research practice.

Amanda

I appreciate that Johanne mentions her role and responsibilities as a potential professor and researcher. And I'm glad that Johanne, and others, are allowing me to share my experience. To further what can be done for ethical research practice, as graduate students and emerging academics, we – those who are learning to become the next generation of researchers – have a responsibility to do and demand better. Participatory approaches are supposed to redistribute power and ensure that research is co-developed with communities, not simply “done to them.” This requires more than good intentions. It requires accountability structures, clear role definitions, fair pay, and follow-through on commitments. We have to be in a position to ask, “is this testimony appropriate and necessary?” It is not enough to seek “input” from communities. We must share power, resources, and credit. We must pay people fairly, honour our commitments, and remember that community members are not “data points” but human beings with dignity. Protections must be built into contracts. We have to ask: is our participatory approach truly participatory, or is it just symbolic inclusion? The path to ethical research is not always clear or comfortable. When we work in a space with people who have lived experiences different than our own, we will make mistakes along the way. Sharing errors in judgement, support and inclusion would help to create a more just future. We should be continually reflecting on ethics and developing a framework for best practices. Insist on accountability. Ask how your university's ethics board defines and protects those with lived experience in “advisory roles.” Go above and beyond what ethics requires when working with marginalized or vulnerable people and commit to continued learning about best practices.

Jolene

Like Johanne and Amanda, I also think of my responsibility as a scholar. As a person from mixed ancestry whose work is tied to the sovereignty and self-determination of Indigenous peoples, I believe it is an extension of my responsibility to co-create spaces of belonging so that radical change is possible, and our collective futures are spaces we want to belong to. The CSWDSN is one such space. The network has created meaningful opportunities for doctoral students to connect and build a genuine community. Its creation was both innovative and radical. Since its inception, the network has shaped the doctoral journeys of its members, offering a space where they can advocate for just change, such as contributing to this special issue, alongside others who share a commitment to transformation.

Christina

I would like to revisit what Chloé and Johanne mentioned about opening boundaries. When I reflect on the idea of opening boundaries, I consider the importance of exploring ways and means to disseminate critical information is a key topic of interest – getting the information out of academic journals and into the hands of the community for collective action should be a goal across the social work profession. I see myself as a student, partner, mentor, and advocate as I continue on this journey.

Jolene

Yes, opening boundaries and fostering connections is crucial; however, we must carefully consider how to co-create spaces where individuals and groups traditionally subject to oppression and unequal power dynamics are genuinely included and meaningfully integrated. Really, inclusion is an interesting concept. Johane speaks to building connections and inclusion in the classroom. However, as an academic institution, we can open our doors and our classroom to include Indigenous and racialized students but this does not mean they feel a sense of belonging. This belonging may take a fundamental shifting of settler understanding of this concept. My understanding of belonging is that it is relational – it is built on concepts of reciprocity, respect, and community. To facilitate belonging, we can collectively co-create spaces where knowledge does not deny, obscure, or delegitimize the lived realities of racialized people. When we approach the academy as a community, we can open our understandings of the work from many minds and voices. Community building, care, and centering our relational responsibilities in this way shifts not just what we teach but how; a foundational element in equitable settler – Indigenous futurities (Koleszar-Green, 2019).

I see pedagogies for the futures we envision as being radical and liberatory when based on care, relational responsibility, community, and resurgent Indigenous knowledges. In order to do this, I believe, we must bring the full force of our beings into our classrooms and communities. As a mixed Indigenous person, this is a radical anti-colonial act of resistance to the violence of colonialism and patriarchy which threatens to silence me through the lure of assimilation. Bringing all my knowledges as equally relevant and valuable includes blood memory, traditional

teachings, ceremony, visions, as well as a life full of lived experiences and pained realities which come from street involvement, poverty, and marginalization. This radical presence is an embodied approach to co-creating learning and sharing spaces with students so that they can examine and interpret their own knowledges which shape them as community members and future social workers. This approach guides me to extend the classroom back into the community and onto the land, where learning, knowledge creation, and activism are collectively intertwined. I believe radical presence as part of our pedagogy is necessary for building emancipatory futurities.

Chloé

Jolene emphasizes the realities of Indigenous and Black people, and justly so, but what other kinds of knowledge and experience remain ignored, sidelined? What domination mechanisms continue to be reproduced, despite a heightened awareness of inequalities? For example, in regard to people labelled/with intellectual disabilities, their reality encourages us to think more widely about our models of society and our conceptions of normality, autonomy, citizenship, and humanity. What collective action do we need to take, at different levels, to guarantee effective respect for human diversity? This issue presents a diverse range of groups who have experienced, and continue to experience, violence and oppression. The breadth of perspectives is striking, and it is vital to bring attention to their lived realities and the injustices they face. Some of the experiences highlighted are often invisible, such as what Sabina Mezhbovsky refers to as “homeless” grief: the unrecognized mourning felt by immigrant individuals when they lose a friendship to death. The author explains how this lack of acknowledgment can deepen and complicate their experience of grief.

Johanne

Sabina’s piece left a strong impression on me; its poignancy and depth made it especially compelling. Chloé’s questions are insightful. I believe that even among those who face injustice, there are groups that unfortunately continue to be overlooked, in research and in society. In my line of research, this is the case with birth families, the biological families of those who have been adopted. We hear very little about birth families in the media, and they are scarce in scientific literature. I regret that it is only as I am doing my postdoctoral research that I will be exploring birth family experiences.

When Chris mentions “getting the information out of academic journals and into the hands of the community,” she’s talking about making research accessible. While the issue is grounded in academic scholarship, it is refreshing to see authors incorporate creative methods into their research projects. Jolene and Amanda referenced the street theatre article, and Victoria J. Huang and Xiaoxu Zhang’s piece on using photo-voice with youth to explore mental health and well-being offers another compelling example. These creative approaches not only make research more accessible, but also provide meaningful insight into the lived realities of individuals, groups, and communities. To build more meaningful relationships with communities, social

work must incorporate creative and participatory approaches into its research and practice. Making research accessible is one of my goals not only for my postdoctoral project, but also as a potential future researcher. I aim to explore birth family and other minoritized experiences in ways that are more accessible—not just for participants, but also for society as a whole. To achieve this, I plan to use methods, such as arts-based approaches, that are easier to grasp and help make the explored realities more concrete and relatable. Research that is more relatable has the potential to foster stronger connections between communities.

Conclusion

This roundtable reflects our collective effort to speak from where we stand and to connect across differences. As doctoral students and recent graduates, we brought our full selves – our stories, our critiques, our contradictions – into a shared space. We found common ground through conversation and found echoes of care, resistance, and urgency in one another’s words. In doing so we reject the false neutrality of academic writing and instead insist we centre our lived experiences, values, and responsibilities.

Together, we explored strategies for advancing social justice at both personal, institutional, and systemic levels. Our collaboration itself became a site of resistance: a space where solidarity could thrive and where academic voice could be both critical and compassionate.

We first connected through the CSWDSN, which has provided an invaluable space to engage with like-minded individuals and collectively strategize ways to promote social justice. The CSWDSN has fostered a vibrant community where members can share experiences and ideas, significantly contributing to reimagining and enacting a more equitable future.

However, we are aware that the values of community and relationality often clash with the neoliberal framework that governs academia and social work with logics that emphasize individualism, competition, and social isolation (Spolander et al., 2014). While reading the manuscripts of this special issue, the authors of this roundtable paper found it disheartening to encounter accounts of the struggles faced by non-Western regions in resisting imposed Western mentalities—approaches that often fail to reflect the needs, interests, and lived realities of local communities. As Walton (2021) reminds us, the Western worldview, is defined by “separation, determinism and reductionism” (Walton, 2021, p. 512). At the same time, it is enriching to explore perspectives from diverse parts of the world. The articles part of this special issue present a wide range of recommendations and strategies for confronting injustice at multiple levels, all firmly rooted in regional contexts. Coming from a Western country shaped by a Western mindset, it is humbling to witness how authors from other regions are actively resisting oppression and violence. Their work underscores a vital truth: Western nations do not hold all the answers, despite often assuming they do. There is much for Western social workers to learn from the insights, resilience, and practices of their counterparts around the globe. Our vision for social work resists fragmentation and reductionism. We call for a return to collective responsibility, for spaces of belonging, and for knowledge grounded in connection.

This round table is not a conclusion. It is an offering – a practice of radical presence, an insistence that our futures must be built differently, together.

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