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*Editorial*

## **Social justice in action: Showcasing the work of doctoral students in social work (part 1)**

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As we introduce the first of a two-part *Transformative Social Work* special issue titled: “Social justice in action: Showcasing the work of doctoral students in social work”—an initiative born from the 2024 Montreal edition of the annual Canadian Social Work Doctoral Student Network (CSWDSN) conference—we emphasize the need to open a space for doctoral students to regenerate social work knowledge and transform it to address contemporary social issues. As such, this commitment illustrates the significance of doctoral education in social work pedagogy, research, and practice. This issue features six manuscripts representing a mix of reflexive and empirically based works.

Fundamentally, social work rests on the principle of social justice (Pierson, 2024). While the term is recognized as multifaceted (Craig, 2018), encompassing a broad range of areas of life and grounded by a set of core values such as respect, inclusion, and fairness (Craig, 2023), a social work knowledge base showcasing the potential for socially just principles to move research and practice forward amidst ongoing global and local injustices is both timely and warranted. Eliminating injustice is not sufficient to attain social justice. Rather, as Reisch (2014) so aptly stated over a decade ago, it “requires us to address fundamental questions about human nature and social relationships about the distribution of resources, power, status, rights, access, and opportunities; and about how decisions regarding this distribution are made” (p. 1). And yet the world continues to grapple with unprecedented crises and deeply unsettling events, including an escalation of civil wars (Craig, 2023), a lingering exacerbation of injustices following the COVID-19 pandemic (Craig, 2023; Patel et al., 2020; Tung & Cloutier, 2023), communities disproportionately affected by climate change (Ali et al., 2024; Byskov & Hyams, 2022; Levy et al., 2015), new and worsening inequities generated by the rise in artificial intelligence and machine learning, particularly regarding their impact on marginalized groups (Lutz, 2019; Stephens, 2024), such as women and girls (Stephens, 2024), and a steady rise in exclusionary and discriminatory policies, predominantly in areas like immigration and state-sanctioned violence (Cohen et al., 2021).

In the face of these escalating challenges, which further divide communities, social work practitioners, researchers, policymakers, and educators must work collectively to steer an

increasingly difficult path toward social justice. The social work doctorate students and recent graduates who participated in this special issue contribute to this endeavor through their projects, ideas, reflections, and recommendations. In this way, as “stewards of the discipline” (Golde & Walker, 2006, p. 5), they are fulfilling their “great responsibility to the profession, playing a central role in its preservation and further evolution as a field of study” (Anastas & Kuerbis, 2009, p. 72).

By providing a platform for the voices, perspectives, experiences, ideas, and practices of doctoral students both nationally and internationally, this special issue aims to exemplify how academic forums can foster social justice by supporting dialogue, nurturing collective engagement, and sparking a desire for action.

With this in mind, the editing team of the special issue is delighted to introduce this first of a two-part series which features articles written by doctoral students foregrounding a diversity of issues related to social work pedagogy, policy, and practice. Each work begins by rendering visible the ways in which Euro-centric, Westernized and neo-liberal ideals shape social work by serving to exclude and even harm groups of people, addressing a range of issues, such as education, youth and their experience of mental health, child welfare, bereavement and immigration policies and practices, to name a few. However, in each case, the authors of these works also offer concrete pathways forward towards advancing a more socially just and inclusive world. The reading order of these papers considers how advancing social justice begins in the classroom, with the first papers raising the issue within education, before extending to reflections and practice—first locally, then globally.

The first paper in this series, titled “Voice from the field: decolonizing subject for more just epistemology,” presents an autobiographical reflection in which the author, Muhammad Izzul Haq, explores their experiences as a university lecturer in both Quebec, Canada, and their home country, Indonesia. The manuscript highlights the author’s efforts to ensure that their pedagogy aligns with and respects the cultural context in which their students learn and live. Drawing on concepts such as *Ubuntu* and *gotong royong* and linking them to concrete classroom examples, this paper illustrates how educators can move beyond colonial Western and Euro-centric binaries in ways to help transform the classroom to become a space of dialogue to facilitate transformative education and practice.

Alexe Bernier, Maddie Brockbank, and Rochelle Maurice coauthored the second paper “Covert forms of resistance: Reimagining feminist social work praxis in an increasingly neoliberal world.” The authors critique how neoliberal and cisheteropatriarchal perspectives shape social work education and practice. They highlight the significant limitations of these dominant frameworks—including managerialism, bureaucracy, surveillance-based micro-level intervention, exclusion, and discrimination—which ultimately harm marginalized communities. The paper argues for a greater emphasis on feminist approaches, particularly Black feminist perspectives, in social work education. This shift is especially crucial for students who often experience disillusionment upon entering the job market, as they encounter a stark contrast between the values and ideals taught in academia and the neoliberal structures governing social work practice. Through insightful academic, professional, and personal reflections, the authors

advocate for a practice rooted in connection and community-building. They also present strategies to resist harmful systemic mindsets and advance meaningful change toward a more just and equitable social work practice.

The third paper in this series, titled “Beyond risk: Transforming child welfare through reflexivity and relationships,” written by Sarah Tremblett, critically examines the Anglo-American child welfare system, which relies on a risk-focused approach rooted in colonial history—an approach that ultimately harms the very children and families it aims to protect. Through thoughtful personal reflections, including experiences as a child welfare worker with Indigenous communities, the author offers a nuanced perspective of how the system’s reductionist lens can exacerbate harms. Like others, the author also presents pathways for reform, advocating for a shift toward a care-centered approach that moves away from an individualistic focus on deficits and towards a truth-telling relationality-oriented system grounded in justice and compassion.

The fourth paper titled “The homeless grief - The loss of non-kin family: Middle-aged immigrant experience of disenfranchised grief over a friend’s death in Western society,” written by Sabina Mezhibovsky, invites readers on a journey of the author’s experiences of immigration, friendship, and unrecognized grief. This compelling and insightful personal account illuminates the unique meaning of friendships within the context of immigration. It reminds us that Westernized understandings of grief and loss disenfranchise the profound grief experiences that can accompany women who have experienced the painful loss of a critical friendship. This paper also offers valuable recommendations on how expanding our approaches to grief through policy and practice can legitimize and acknowledge these otherwise “homeless” relationships and grief experiences.

Written by Jacqueline Colting Stol and Nellie Alcaraz and titled “*Bayanihan* during the COVID-19 pandemic: Grounding in community organizing and social movement praxis toward transformative social work,” the fifth paper explores the experiences of Filipino migrant workers in Canada during the COVID-19 pandemic and their efforts to address the community’s needs by establishing mutual aid networks. Like many other immigrant and racialized communities, Filipino migrants faced multiple injustices during the pandemic, exacerbated by rising anti-immigrant and xenophobic sentiment, as well as precarity, exclusion, and heightened exposure to the virus. Through two case studies in Montreal and Calgary, the paper illustrates how Filipino community-led mutual aid initiatives emerged to provide essential support where existing systems fell short. The authors emphasize the significance of community-led and community-centered approaches in addressing structural inequities and ensuring meaningful, responsive support for marginalized groups.

In the sixth paper, titled “Using photo-voice to understand factors affecting mental health at a boarding school in China,” authors Victoria J. Huang and Xiaoxu Zhang examine Chinese youths’ experiences and perspectives on mental health through individual interviews. The findings reveal that their experiences are shaped by optimism, social cohesion, and personal motivation, as well as how these factors manifest in their daily lives. These elements play a dual role, influencing both stress and feelings of hope. They serve as both challenges and resources

when navigating difficulties. The project seeks to destigmatize mental health in a cultural context where it remains taboo by adopting a more tangible and accessible approach. Instead of relying on Western frameworks, it prioritizes methods that are culturally relevant to Chinese youth.

Advancing social justice, all contributing authors urge us to “work carefully in relationship with each other to enhance dignity, self-worth, and justice in what limited communal spaces we have left” (Todd, 2023, p. 87). As we introduce this special issue and highlight the work of new and emerging scholars, educators, practitioners, and policymakers, we are reminded of the important responsibilities placed on the shoulders of these scholars. We also open the space to transform the social work knowledge base to adapt and be more interactive with current trends and tensions shaping our global realities today.

It is important to acknowledge those who played a key role in bringing this special issue series to life. If not for the social work doctoral students at the University of British Columbia who sought a lasting solution to the loneliness and isolation experienced by PhD students during their doctoral journey by founding the CSWDSN, this special issue would never have seen the light of day. This special issue builds upon the network’s ongoing work, furthering its mission to unite social work doctoral students and provide them with a dedicated space for collaboration and exchange. A further glimpse into the origins of the network and its aims will be offered in our second issue of this two-part series.

The successful completion of this project is a reflection of the collaborative contributions of the editorial team members. The PhD students on the team initially came together to discuss what a special issue might entail. Faculty members were then invited to join the editorial team, offering their expertise and supporting the students throughout the process. All team members actively contributed to drafting the special issue proposal.

As the PhD student lead, Johanne oversaw all aspects of the publication process once the special issue was announced. This included assigning and soliciting reviewers, supplementing feedback to authors, and managing all communications with contributing authors and journal staff. Other student members of the editorial team took on a range of tasks aligned with their availability and areas of expertise, including providing input on the suitability of submitted papers for the special issue and contributing to the review process. Faculty members on the editorial team supported the editorial process by providing mentorship and guidance to Johanne as required. This included reviewing and supplementing editorial feedback, weighing in on editorial decisions, and reviewing and providing input on the editorial introduction.

The editorial team would also like to acknowledge the professors and the social work doctoral students who are not included in the author list, but who nonetheless played a key role in helping to launch this special issue: Myriam Dubé, Oscar E. Firbank, Beck Gower, and Manon Masse. Thank you for your input during brainstorming sessions and discussions as the idea of the special issue evolved.

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