

**Occupying Social Work:
Unpacking Connections and Contradictions in the Social Work/Activist Divide**

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Abstract

We are interested in how social work and activism fit, connect and contradict each other. As academics, activists and social workers, we consistently grapple with the tensions between these realms and how we configure ourselves and our work into these spaces. This pilot project was initially undertaken by Emma, an undergraduate social work student, under the supervision of May, an assistant professor of social work, as a means of blending our diverse identities and subject positions while allowing us to analyze the relationships between social work and activism. We were able to use our own different roles and ideas as a jumping off point that led to Emma interviewing eight other people (who identified, variously, as social workers and/or activists), allowing for a rich and multifarious conversation to emerge. While neither social work nor activism nor any other form of protest and resistance can single-handedly engender utopia, this research has confirmed what our lived experiences have suggested: that individual connections, communities, social movements, educational models and radical alternatives must continue an engaged dialogue in order to constructively co-exist.

Keywords: social work, activism, neo-liberalism, community education

We are interested in how social work and activism fit. As academics, activists and social workers, we consistently grapple with the tensions between these realms and how we configure ourselves and our work into these sometimes contradictory spaces. In the summer of 2012, we had the opportunity to begin to explore these topics. This pilot project was initially undertaken by Emma, an undergraduate social work student, under the supervision of May, an assistant professor of social work, as part of the Undergraduate Research Opportunities (URO) program of Ryerson University. We saw the project as a way of blending our diverse identities and subject positions while allowing us to analyze the relationships between social work and activism and education. We were able to use our own different roles and ideas as a jumping off point that led to Emma interviewing eight other people (who identified, variously, as social workers and/or activists), allowing for a rich and multifarious conversation to emerge.

We were not looking for definitive conclusions, and were unsurprised that none emerged. Purposefully vague, the exploration into the interrelationship of social work and activism in this paper is informed by the grassroots experiences of activists themselves – social work students, long-time organizers and activists, recent graduates, resisters, educators. Not only does this study document and validate the sometimes silenced or hidden work of social workers and activists or those who identify as both, it intends to deconstruct theoretical and practical binaries that can often create divisions in our collective struggle for change. Subsequently, we are devoted to a re-

envisioning of anti-oppressive social work practice and theory as it continues to gain theoretical dominance in the field of social work and social services (Baines, 2011). Both educating and studying within the framework of anti-oppressive practice at Ryerson University, we are acutely aware of the strengths and challenges of this framework. We do not propose an outright rejection of AOP as we see the shortcomings of theory transferred into practice. Rather, we suggest a re-working of this practice theory in a critically reflexive pursuit that allows more room for multiple frameworks and worldviews to coexist, guide, and revive our commitment to social justice and transformative social work practice.

This pilot project comes from a personal place of constant resistance to neoliberal regimes and discourses and the effects of government restructuring that dissolve our spaces to practice activism and exercise our individual and collective strength. As discussed above, social work theory and practice have historically been fraught with inherent binaries, contradictions and divisions that are still prevalent today (Abramovitz, 1998; Baines, 2011; Gilbert et al., 2004). These schisms, which are reinforced by dominant discourses in society and benefit a local and global neo-liberal agenda, are too often compliantly maintained by the workers themselves. Social workers must be constantly aware of highly surveilled governmental spaces that pit us against one another and reinforce power differentials between those who deliver services and those who use services. A neo-liberal focus can be seen as an “unfortunate but logical outgrowth of a capitalist system based on maximizing individual wealth rather than overall social well being” (Baines, 2011, p. 29). Practically, neoliberalism articulates a disdain for human suffering and sees such suffering rooted in individual choices rather than systemic or structural oppressions. Within a social work context, this type of regime can be characterized by the ongoing restructuring of our workplaces resulting in diminished spaces for resistance and reconstruction. Neo-liberalism manifests in both covert and overt measures such as increased case loads, longer waiting lists and insufficient financial and human resources (Smith, 2011a, 2011b). Our heightened awareness of the limitations of working and living under conditions of neo-liberalism remind us of the need for reflexivity as a core skill of critical anti-oppressive practice.

Reflexivity

Through exploring the connection between self-reflection and our critical approach and feminist post-structural lens, we attempt to situate ourselves in this study. Drawing on the discourses which inform us as researchers during our interactions with other community members, we view the implications of those discourses. Given the community-based approach we have taken, here it is important to uphold that through community work and community based research we are critical of how this work continues to secure whiteness and consequently viewing this practice as one of uncertainty, grappling with its limits, even as we attempt to unsettle our privilege through this process (Todd, 2011). Rather than situate ourselves within a community work discourse that is widely understood as, “heroic, professional, or sceptical practice, it would be more helpful to understand it as ambivalent; as having multiple and often contradictory effects that mirror the complex social relationships in which we operate (Todd, 2005 as cited in Todd, 2011).

Further, we aim for the transferable, rather than generalizable knowledge that comes through reflective and reflexive research practice (Fook, 2000). As a result, we want to go

beyond merely identifying our varying social locations and then abandoning our reflexivity for the remainder of our analysis. We borrow from Heron (2005), who asserts that we must delve deeper into the process of self-location in critical social work, which is a cornerstone of anti-oppressive practice (AOP), so as to be cautious of the ‘double comfort’ of naming our privilege in practice and in this case, as researchers (p. 344). Heron (2005) explains this concept as, “the comfort of demonstrating that one is critically aware, and the comfort of *not* needing to act to undo privilege” (p. 344). Here, Emma will first discuss the use of reflexivity in her role as primary researcher:

The constant process of questioning my own power and privilege and conversely, my own experiences with various forms of oppression, is an ongoing struggle for me as I continue to procure a social work degree within the institution of post-secondary education and as an activist, struggling for transformative change. In conjunction with the constant and ever-changing process of critical self-reflection is the process of critical reflection within the communities that I identify with. The coupling of such processes of analysis has informed my role as a researcher in this project. In class and in the field of research and activism, I question myself, my peers, and the system from which we study and practice. I question why, when we study within an anti-oppressive framework, there remains a lingering fear amongst my peers and educators to take this a step further, to abandon grand narratives as solutions for change and get creative - to teach and learn in alternative and fluid ways. Throughout my practice as a community organizer and facilitator I have noticed a disconnect between social work, activism and education as well as a theoretical gap between anti-oppressive practice theory and how this framework actually plays out in practice. My peers have expressed similar sentiments within social work education, often feeling alienated or disconnected from the literature and social positionings of academics who shape our social work education. How do we teach, learn and practice social justice social work? What does this look like?

My very limited attempt to address these questions is to begin by documenting the hard work of individuals and communities who practice activism in the pursuit of creating alternatives that work for everyone. This ‘hard work’ is something I witnessed firsthand, organizing with activists and community members in various settings in Toronto. Less publicly perceivable is the hard work of subversive educators and front-line workers who actively live and breathe their commitment to social justice and change. Lastly, my own activism and personal vindication for pursuing this project stems from my experiences with gender oppression and sanism in its’ various forms and my subsequent resistance to neo-liberal policies and practices from critical, feminist and post-structural positions. This is my daily practice. This is why I am writing this paper.

May also reflects on her role as a reflexive academic and supervisor:

I feel like my activist consciousness is continually being honed through my scholarly inquiry. My academic work forces me to confront inequality and my teaching practice reminds me of the limitations of social work as an agent of change in most field contexts. As a result, I feel that I am more critically conscious than I have ever been before. At the same time, and partially as a result of the demands of my job and family, my activist activity has diminished over the last few years. I wonder sometimes if teaching my students to resist and contest systems is enough. I

wonder if teaching my children to avoid conformity is activism or just a privilege of my current middle-class status. I wonder if writing about inequality and oppression, privilege and history, can take up my voice when I no longer take to the streets.

My activism is informed by feminist inquiry as well as my embodied lived experiences as an ambiguously racialized woman from a working class family. Suddenly, however, I'm "the prof" and I struggle to figure out how to place this newly achieved unambiguous class and professional privilege alongside my commitment to social transformation. When I first met Emma, she was heavily involved in Occupy and I was in awe of her energy and passion. As a result, when the opportunity arose for me to supervise her inquiry into the connections and contradictions between social work and activism more completely, I jumped at the chance. This project has allowed me to continue to interrogate my role as an activist who cannot always perform activism in obvious ways, and it has allowed me to consider what creative activist opportunities I may have as a social work educator.

Our reflexivity began with our unique subject positions and life circumstances, but grew as we began to analyze interviews undertaken with research participants. We will next describe our methodological approach to this research topic and then discuss our identified themes and findings derived from the eight interviews.

Methodology

This project was informed by feminist post-structuralist epistemologies. Specifically, we undertook a critical discourse analysis, attempting to understand the discursive moments of activism and social work within a broader political context. As a result, we deliberately sought out interviews with participants who live on the activist-social work continuum, and sought to understand them in the context of a wider epistemology of social work and activism as dialogic and politically saturated activities and identities. Such an approach is discourse analysis "with an attitude" (van Dijk, 2001, p. 96). Our work was informed by the pedagogy of black feminists, including Audre Lorde, bell hooks, and Angela Davis, who reject the idea that gender oppression is experienced evenly by all women. In addition, we were guided by poststructuralist ideas, informed heavily by Foucault, that threaten the sanctity of identity categories and fixed truths. Post-structural feminism likewise guided our research practice through the active pursuit of deconstructing dominant discourses such as patriarchy and locating inherent binaries in a strategic way through the celebration of difference, and through highlighting the importance of identity and multiple subjectivities. Our discourse analysis thus drew on writing from Butler, Halberstam, Spivak and others. To this end, our focus was on interviewing activist participants and analyzing particular discursive moments¹. Participants were sought out using a snowball sample and drew from the activist and academic networks of Emma as the primary researcher.

¹ Following on the work of Foucault and other postmodern/poststructuralist scholars, we consider all interactions as discourses. Thus we view "discursive moments" as engagement with our participants in their words, dress, surroundings, relationships, affects and other performances. While all discursive moments were relevant for analysis, following the writing of critical discourses analysts such as van Dijk, van Leeuwen and Wodak, we intentionally focused on moments that spoke to existing structures of oppression and privilege and that gave challenge to established orders or truths.

Eight community members were interviewed for approximately 30-40 minutes each. The interviews were recorded and transcripts were analyzed by both researchers.

In the same way that we attempt to situate ourselves within the tradition of critical discourse analysis in this pilot project, it is important to try our best to reflexively locate the participants as we attempt to dig deeper into the interrelationship between social work, activism and education. Among the eight participants that we interviewed, all identified as activists, albeit with conflicting and contentious feelings toward the label. Three participants formally identified as social workers, one participant identified as an educator and five participants identified as students (three of whom were studying in social work programs). Two participants identified as community workers and community organizers. Throughout this paper, we will further reflect on how the reflexive positionality of the individuals in this study may have influenced their relationship to social work and activism. Participants were diverse across spectrums of gender, ability, class, race and sexuality. Because of the small sample and the multiple subject positions embodied by each participant, however, the people in this pilot study are not easily categorized within traditional categories of identity politics.

While the primary methodology was critical discourse analysis, it is essential to note that this methodology was undertaken in the context of a broader engagement with the field and practice of activism within an urban setting. To this end, Emma drew from her extensive engagement with activist networks and activities. Following in the tradition of critical discourse analysis, we found that this type of engagement provides a rich and nuanced means of analysis. This project allowed for shared understandings and points of entry to the topic of inquiry that enriched the in-depth analyses of the eight individuals who were interviewed. To this end, the "subjects" of the research were allies, and a baseline level of ideological agreement was generally met.

Keeping this immersive engagement in mind, the interviews were semi-structured and conversational in style. They were able to achieve a degree of intimacy based on the legitimacy of Emma's connections. It was clear to all the participants that she did not view their activist involvement at arm's length, but instead sought to understand the intricacies and complications of social work and activism from the inside out. Furthermore, the tacit (and sometimes explicit) agreement between researcher and research subjects allowed for very fervent opinions to be expressed.

This approach begs many questions- about the legitimacy of this type of critical approach as well as the implications of research that is unapologetically biased, that begins with specific political orientations. Such a context allows for the communication of powerful observations that are borne of shared values and activities. Furthermore, this type of approach disrupts the traditional schism between the studied and those who study, allowing for a porous interaction between researcher and researched. We felt that this was the only possible way of undertaking this research in ways that remained true to our epistemological origins. Finally, since we believe that all research is borne of subjective and biased beliefs, we sought to be explicit about the ideological grounding of our research. We do not aim to produce research that is verifiable, but rather to extend the observation that we are at an important moment in the history of activist movement, and that such engagement requires further close observation and discussion by social

workers. We began many discussions with activists and allies and hope that our analysis of these interactions thus opens the dialogue to further conversation about the fascinating and provocative activities that are currently occurring across the globe.

Discussion

Upon analysis, we found that four major themes emerged from the interviews: the relationship between social work and activism; the impact of identity and community; the role of the education system generally and social work education specifically; and the need for alternatives and models of resistance. We will now consider a discussion of these themes, aiming to let the voices of participants take centre stage.

The relationship between social work and activism is uneasy and unstable. In certain respects, social work has drawn on historical activist roots (Abramovitz 1998 & 2005; Baines, 2011; Gilbert et al., 2004; Ross, 2011); likewise, contemporary strands of social work are informed by radical or anti-oppressive ideals of social transformation (Baines, 2011; Smith, 2011b.). Nonetheless, some social workers express discomfort at the notion of an activist model of social work while some activists may disdain social work as too involved with the practicalities of state administration to engage in radical action (Ross, 2011). By contrast, Ross (2011) asserts that,

...far too much energy is devoted to maintaining these divisions, to ostracizing and labeling other activists as inadequate or conversely as too radical. The result is that we construct those with whom we could be aligned as problematic or enemies. We run the risk of closing ourselves off from understanding and valuing the activist practice operating across the many sites in which we practice (p. 263).

Notably, many of the participants in this study initially expressed hesitation or confusion at the notion of a relationship between social work and activism, lending credence to the notion of a dominant discourse of the two as formally disconnected. Nonetheless, upon reflection, participants drew out the complex and complicated ways that the social work and activism are related, albeit often in ways characterized by uncertainty.

Relationships

Participant Maria identified as a woman who immigrated to North America and now engages in solidarity work in Toronto as a social worker/community worker and an activist. She suggested that social work and activism are inescapably both intertwined and contradictory: “Social work to me is activism... but I think that most of the time when people try to package it into these professions, it’s like you have to be detached and you cannot be political...” Theresa, a MAD-identified social work student, social worker, and activist suggests, by contrast, that the major distinction between social work and activism is semantic, “I will say there’s a divide in my limited experience, but it’s not necessarily because people believe you need to be an activist *or* a social worker. I think there are restrictions within organizations that make it difficult and also we need to survive!.. There’s no point in me being an activist with absolutely no money because I’m

not going to be able to take care of myself or my kid, and that's not doing anyone any good." Here, Theresa points to the need to uphold the normative model of professional practice while maintaining a transformative politic internally. This theme was expanded upon by many participants who felt that despite an activist consciousness, the specifics of a neo-liberal context governing both social work and the lives of individual workers may make activism in professional contexts extremely risky. Nonetheless, as Theresa asserts, the maintenance of an activist consciousness may result in subtle amendments to working practice.

Contradictions

While some participants felt that there were clear parallels between social work and activism, others felt that it was not simply the trappings of social work which made it distinct from activism. For example, Felix, a racialized male student who identified exclusively as an activist with no formal social work education suggested that, "The spirit behind social work of solving people's problems is actually antithetical to the way social work is generally practiced under capitalism. The majority of social workers will be forced... to actually get paid by the state, but the state does it to curb precisely the kind of actions that are necessary to what your job as a social worker should be". Felix suggests that the role of social work within the state apparatus is to control people (to borrow from Margolin, 1997) "under cover of kindness", and that as such, social work as a profession contradicts the goal of social transformation that informs activism.

Greg, who identified as a racialized, male social work student, community organizer and who has a highly contentious and at times, strategic relationship self-identifying as an activist, echoed this position, arguing that, "the people who have professionalized the act of helping other individuals are the same individuals who create the oppression that we need help with". This approach of placing social work under suspicion (Rossiter, 2001) was articulated by many participants. Nonetheless, the overwhelming position was that some relationship does exist between social work and activism. Such an analysis also acknowledged that both realms (activism and social work) are themselves shot through with contradiction and debate. Regarding activism, Becky, who self-identified as a female student and activist with no formal social work education, states "As much as it's a circle, it's not like a nice empty circle, but the middle of the circle's just jumbled with intersecting lines... it's kind of like a big web to weave your way through". Given the great degree of internal dissension among social workers and activists, it is therefore unsurprising that the relationship between them is similarly fraught.

Social Work and Activism Can be Co-Constitutive

While participants were unresolved on the precise relationship between social work and activism, they were enthusiastic in their desire to see the two inform one another further. Although many progressive social workers are already engaging in activities along the "activist continuum" (Ross, 2011) that centre around organization, education, mobilizations, advocacy, and solidarity to name a few, participants suggested that with respect to social work practice, there is room for improvement. Participants suggested that nascent (and seasoned!) social workers must develop a robust political voice, and that an engagement in activist practice provides an ideal context in which to do so. Greg states that "...there is no micro social work

without macro social work. In an environment with the realities that we live in right now... you can't have love without activism. You must not love people if you don't understand the level of attack and violence that's happening right now from people that claim to be our government, that claim to be innocent companies and so on and so forth." Greg suggests that in order to do "good" social work, social workers need to constantly maintain an awareness of the broader political context, an awareness that is often amplified in activist circles. Maria concurs: "I think I would find it very difficult to separate the two... if you're going to be doing social work... it's all about supporting communities and helping communities... engage. That's not much different from activists... many activists do exactly what you're [social workers] doing."

While there was near unanimity among participants about the desirability of both politicized and activist consciousness within social work practice, participants were surprisingly passionate about the need for social work sensibilities to inform activist work. As Becky argues, "... In an ideal world, social work is kind of pulling activism down from this very political and aggressive sounding thing of 'yeah, we're going to go change things!' to a much more like 'no, here are the problems that our communities are facing' and actually creating more sustainable, on-the-ground changes in addition to the larger political fight to get the problems acknowledged." Becky, like other participants, suggested that while activism can politicize social work, social work can inject a note of tangibility to activism. Marco, a recent MSW graduate who identified as a racialized male and clinical social worker says "I feel like social work can really play a pivotal role in terms of bringing a sense of realism to the activism movement." Daniel, who identifies as white male community organizer, and who maintains a complex relationship with activism, further suggests that a social work consciousness may engender a greater degree of empathy and inclusion, traits which are sometimes less explicitly reflected upon in activist movements: "I think that social work definitely can inform activists. There's so many activists that don't know how to put themselves in another person's shoes."

Participants felt particularly strongly that the considerable social work literature on burnout (Abramovitz, 1998 & 2005; Baines, 2011; Ross, 2011; Rossiter, 2001) could be extremely useful to activists who often work in less structured environments. Ashley, a female participant who teaches a University course, and who identified as an activist and community organizer, suggests that "... the burnout factor and the anger factor get high because people aren't allowed to shut off..." Future research may be well placed to consider ways that social work literature and practice could be usefully applied to activist work in order to guard against burnout.

Challenges

Given the consensus that social work and activism have a great deal to offer one another, we must consider the factors which keep the two realms distinct from one another (at best) and suspicious and disdainful of one another (at worst). The dominant discourse of activists as nihilistic and dangerous radicals, a view that is sadly echoed in much mainstream social work literature (Benjamin, 2011), may limit social workers' involvement in activism, particularly in social work environments increasingly characterized by surveillance and fear (Abramovitz, 2005; Smith, 2011b). Likewise, the dominant discourse of social workers as either impotent or dangerously coercive may engender a hesitation among activists to embrace social work's professional values. The specific context of neo-liberalism which has resulted in an increasingly

professionalized, managerialized and compartmentalized social work solidifies the notion of social work as a completely distinct enterprise from activism (Peck & Tickell, 2002; Smith, 2011b). Yet participants who bridge these realms expressed a wistfulness for a continued relationship between them; as Becky states, “In an ideal world, social work *is* activism”.

Identity and Community: It’s Personal

For many of the participants, their interest and engagement with social work and/or activism was ignited by personal experiences. For instance, many of the participants alluded to the idea of activism as not just part of what you *do*, but also, and perhaps more importantly, part of who you *are* and how you interact and form relationships on a day to day basis. Ross (2011) explains this as a reconceptualization of activism, wherein we view our social work activism along a continuum rather than in binary terms. When asked to describe what her activism ‘looks like,’ Teresa reflects, ...it’s also what I do with my daughter, it’s also what I do when I walk down the street...So it’s about trying new things instead of sticking to the status quo...let’s create a space where people can try a new way of living and if it doesn’t work out, that’s okay too.” Teresa personally reflects on her own activism as both a practice and a philosophy in which resistance, identity and day-to-day activism are inseparable. It is noteworthy that Theresa’s reflections throughout the interview may have been shaped by her explicit self-identification as a MAD individual, a ‘madvocate’ (Poole et al, 2012), and a single mother. Although struggles with sanism and the stigma attached to being a single mother had been disempowering at times, Theresa spoke from a place of empowerment while still maintaining a complicated relationship with social work education and activism. Maria further advances Theresa’s conceptualization of activism and identity by explaining, “I try as much as I can to be very aware and...conscientious of how I live my life and how I exercise my consumerism or *not*...and just to be aware that everything we do has an impact in the world.”

Through their unique methods of actively acquiring and sharing new knowledge, participants explained how they extended this personal pursuit to their communities, collectively searching for alternative ways of knowing, thinking and living in the world. How do we come to activism? Why do we choose to become social workers? This study indicates a process more complex than merely a personal choice to be more empathetic, altruistic or compassionate. Yes, it’s personal for many of us, but as Maria and many other participants in this study reiterate, what is personal is always political.

Critical Self-Reflection: Moving Beyond Social Location

As social workers, activists and educators, we must move beyond merely stating our social location. As Heron asserts, “Mentioning social location does not necessarily lead to interrogation of power relations...” (p. 343) just like, “admitting one’s privilege does not necessarily unsettle its operation” (p. 344). Just as we attempted to critically reflect on our own roles as researchers, academics and activist community members in this study and in this paper, participants similarly overtly recognized the importance of critical self-reflection² and/or reflexivity in their own practice as social workers, activists, students and educators. For example,

² Heron (2005) defines the term ‘critical’ as an opposition to interlocking relations of power that pervade social work encounters.

Theresa explains, “I don’t want to be the activist who says, ‘only my way is right’ because the moment I’m *sure* about being right, I will never question myself”. In the same regard, Marco reflects on how his personal self-questioning and critical consciousness intersects with privilege explaining that, “experiencing the dichotomy of privilege and then coming home to a less-privileged community really opened my eyes to the injustices that take place even in our own city every day that go unquestioned”. Here it is clear that Marco’s multifaceted experiences as a racialized student, and later social worker, have heavily informed his views on social work, anti-oppressive practice, and activism.

For Heron (2005), self-reflection is the cornerstone of anti-oppressive practice, as it opens up knowledge about our identities and our location within the social order. Thus, a deep questioning of our identities as social workers and activists within a neo-liberal context is critical in discontinuing practices that only prop up and maintain our current system. During the interview process it became clear that this ‘deep questioning’ and critical self-reflection is often messy, multi-layered, contentious and enlightening. For instance, both Greg and Daniel identified overtly as anti-state, anti-capitalist and anti-authoritarian in their struggle for change. What was surprising about this is that they both continued to comment on governmental social work practice and to discuss creative ways to resist neo-liberalism from within the system. Upon further analysis, half of the participants expressed anti-state sentiments throughout their interviews while still maintaining either jobs within the field of social work practice or a belief in the continued necessity of social work practice. This reflection insinuates our complicated relationship with social work as a profession, particularly in the context of government-funded agencies. This also suggests the need for an ongoing critique of state functioning within social work education and scholarship. Through critical self-reflection, activists and social workers can challenge the fixed, compartmentalized, professionalized and static conceptions of how we work and the meaning we create in our relationships with one another (Heron, 2005; Napier, 2010).

Activism and Identity: Tensions

In all the interviews, participants were asked when they began to identify as activists. This question brought up multiple responses that more often than not elicited narratives of personal experiences within participants’ communities, with oppression, with displacement, and with anger or outrage towards injustice. Although all the participants identify as activists from various different vantage points, the term comes with a lot of baggage and is changed by different contexts over time. Ashley explains,

I think it’s a process. To self-identify as an activist was likely a...15-year process that started off in high school and developed with political awareness and education and increasing comfort with expressing my own opinions to others and then expressing my opinions in a public forum, whether that’s through protest, or writing, or art or whatever. And gaining comfort with that? And then gaining comfort with the idea that this was activism and that’s what I was participating in and I could self-describe that way as an activist... And I think there’s a lot of negative baggage that goes along with that term...

Similarly, participants made reference to the ‘negative baggage’ that comes along with self-identifying as a social worker. Greg refuses to identify as either a social worker or an activist

as a consequence of the potentially negative connotations attached to both concepts and practices. Through Greg's reflections in the interview, his rejection of such labels are heavily informed by his community organizing mostly for the self-determination of marginalized and racialized populations and against ideas such as white supremacy, which he believes are still highly prevalent in the social work profession. His reflection on the uneasiness that goes along with claiming activism as part of one's identity is emblematic of the complicated intersections of power and privilege that are continuing to be propelled by an ever-advancing neo-liberal agenda. Maria explains that she never had to identify as an activist until she came to Canada: "I wasn't aware that I was an activist until I came to Canada because really in [her home country], I was just kind of an everyday person that was engaged in political action like everybody else..." Maria's social positioning as a woman who has had to emigrate from a perceived "underdeveloped" country adds great depth to this argument. This depth is characterized by Maria's unique response to the question of her relationship to activism explaining that she had only felt the need to identify as an activist when she moved to Canada from a country she was forced to flee in the midst of armed struggle

For Maria her self-identity as an activist in North America is still very much rooted in her culture and the history of her country of origin. However, Greg, who was raised in Toronto, also identifies very much with the socio-historical context from which his community is situated: "I definitely engage in grassroots community work...it's more based on an understanding of the narrative of my community... our history, and our contemporary reality ...when you understand those two things, then there's a duty to support the needs of the people that surround you." These stories illustrate the nuances and multiple layers of identity that exist within the activist community in Toronto and subsequently amongst the social work community as well.

Creating Community as a Form of Resistance

Community is a dominant theme that fluidly weaves its way through this study, informed by participants' experiences with social work, activism and education. As mentioned earlier in this paper, we are critical of the professional origins of community work in settler countries like Canada, England and the United States, for example and so reflect upon this theme that emerged in the research in the context of a history of white supremacy and colonisation (Todd, 2011). However, we attempt to demonstrate community members' reflections about the importance of creating community as a form of resistance, albeit from a point of uncertainty and ongoing reflection that community work in this context is cannot be separated from racial inequality (Todd, 2011).

Marco illustrates the relationship between building community and social movements as part of a social work identity: "I think it's extremely important. Building community...if you're not building community, then what is a movement, right? And...if social workers are not building community, then that aspect of mobilization is not taking place." In addition Becky describes her identity as an activist as something that cannot be understood independently from community, insinuating the importance of a holistic approach to activism: "...just like...my fellow activists aren't just coworkers that I see during the day and I never see again, it's about...creating an actual *bond* between other people working for change... creating community is a form of resistance in and of itself."

Lastly, Greg offers his interpretation of the interconnectedness of community, identity and social work activism: "...it's seldom that I've ever seen real transformative work done by somebody who comes into a community... the people who I've seen do create the most transformative change that is truly self-determined and sustainable? It's always been from...individuals who have a life-long relationship with a community and a people." Greg's story and the stories of all the participants in this study give prominence to grassroots activism at all levels of practice.

Education

Virtually all of the participants in this study were involved in university education in some capacity, including faculty members in several disciplines and several social work students. It is therefore unsurprising that a key theme identified by all participants was the difficulty in figuring out the role of social work activism in the context of formal social work education. On the one hand, some participants felt, like Theresa, that "social work school... gave me a language to talk about activism. I didn't know that I was an activist before." Others, like Greg, suggested that, "...the social workers or the youth workers or the community people who have done the greatest transformative work have never done so with a base in academic theory." Greg suggests that the "deep questioning" (Besthorn, 2003, p. 3) required of critical community activist work may not be possible within a formal educational environment, while Theresa, who is very critical of formal education at other points in her interview, nonetheless finds a home for deep questioning through her social work education.

An examination of both participants' remarks and the literature on radical social work education suggests that the tension articulated by Greg and Theresa is endemic to radical education. As De Maria states "[a]rguably radical pedagogy, with its non-empirical, non-linear, dialectic modes of thought and action, is more difficult to teach and more difficult to learn than a pedagogy based on a simple trilogy of values, knowledge, and practice" (1992, p. 246). In order to begin to understand the relationship between formal education and social work activism, it is therefore prudent to discuss both the strengths and tensions between these two realms.

Strengths of Social Work Education

Obviously, social work education encompasses a very wide range of ideologies and practices and thus cannot be taken as a monolithic enterprise. Within the context of anti-oppressive practice taught in the Ryerson University School of Social Work (where the authors teach and learn, and from where several participants were drawn), however, some interviewees saw the potential for "a-ha! moments" of radical transformation. Asked about his path to activism, Marco states that "I think it happened in my first year at Ryerson University, the Bachelor of Social Work program... I think when I started to gain more of a critical analysis of the implications and the ramifications [of what I do]." Many participants cited their social work education as a site which, in the words of Adrienne Chambon, "...shook our complacency, rattled our certainties and unhinged us from our secure moorings" (1999, p. 53). Yet precisely this strong critical awareness allowed many participants to view the challenges facing radical education. For example, Theresa viewed social work education as a site of resistance to more

problematic structures of university governance, “I kind of see social work school as the one lone advocate working at Ontario Works. Trying to tell us ‘you can do this. It’s not your fault. You can make this change.’ But they’re still working within a system.” In making this analogy, Theresa notes both the best intentions of social work education, as well as the real limitations of working within a formal educational model. Expanding on her earlier point, Theresa muses, “...it’s really weird because an activist for me is someone who challenges, who creates spaces for alternative ways to view reality, right? And we’re still taught... in the university we sit at desks, we write exams, it’s still ableist in a lot of ways.”

Tensions Between Social Work Education and Activism

Participants were very aware of the dual contradiction between social work education and activism. The dominance of professionalizing discourses in both social work and academic realms have the potential to completely undermine even the most radical pedagogy. De Maria asks us the essential question: “...how can radicalism be introduced and sustained in social work education when that process itself is part of a subtle hegemonic oppression?” (1992, p.238). Maria echoed De Maria’s frustrations, noting that “...you can learn so much from school and from textbooks.... I would suggest that a lot of the textbooks are probably written in such a way that they are creating the social worker as a professional that will serve the system.” Maria names a conundrum: social work departments must simultaneously create “job-ready” candidates while ideally nonetheless inspiring activist ideals. The disparities between these two outcomes highlight the tensions between social work and activism both within education and beyond into the realms of professional practice. Ares (2006) suggests that “[w]hile critical theory offers important insights and calls to action in teaching, the translation to practice can be difficult to negotiate for a variety of reasons, including structural, bureaucratic, and policy constraints.” (p. 1) Greg notes these constraints, but also suggests that social work education may provoke only a limited awareness of structural inequality:

...even in [anti-oppressive practice] training at school, we might name the effects of oppression and name all the detailed, specific effects of it and how it affects every person in every different way, but who we never name is who’s perpetrating it. And when it comes to that conversation, people become quiet. And that’s really the only conversation that matters because we’ve talked everything else to death.

Greg challenges us to take our reflexivity further, to consider the ways that we are implicated in our own privilege as both individuals and social work professionals, suggesting that our silence at the critical moment of the conversation may itself be a form of complicity with oppressive structures.

Alternative Education

Wong (2004) reminds us, provocatively, “...in a time when diversity of worldviews has increasingly gained legitimacy, how we facilitate meaningful dialogues between people locating in both intersecting and conflicting discursive frames becomes more important for the co-construction of a just society” (p. 1). Fundamentally, many participants came to the same conclusion that social work education must rest alongside other sites of consciousness raising,

informal education and community awareness. Seeking alternatives, Maria exhorts us: "...let's build something totally different! Let's imagine a different way of supporting people and creating communities and self-governance." To the same end, Besthorn (2003) suggests that "social work must also begin to stand with other professionals, community associations, grassroots organizations and global advocacy groups to facilitate collective empowerment—to assist marginalized peoples everywhere to gain access to needed change that refosters commitment to the health and wellbeing of human communities and ecological systems" (p. 14).

Rossiter comes to a more difficult conclusion, suggesting,

I am painfully aware that what I want my students to learn bears little relation to the social work they will be expected to perform. If they do well in my classes, they will not be particularly desirable in employment settings. Worse, they may be alienated and depressed by the gap between critical social work education and doing social work as a job. I think these are difficult dilemmas for critical social work, and they are made worse by the conservative nature of the times. (2001, n.p.)

Theresa reminds us that the goal is critical questioning as an ongoing life-long process that views social work education as one of many points of entry, not a finish line: "I recognize that I have a lot of space because people have given me space, time, mentoring to figure out what this is... I don't want to lose this opportunity to research what I'm doing and why." Theresa's words remind us that we must all continually consider what we are doing, and why.

Creating an alternative system and challenging social injustice, inequality and oppression in its various forms was viewed as essential by both the researchers and participants of this study. These alternatives were envisioned through both small and large scale actions, both within and beyond traditional systems. For Theresa, marching and attending rallies is a traditional yet simultaneously rejuvenating form of activism and collective self-care³: "...it gives me hope and I *always* feel rejuvenated after...So it's about *really questioning things* and I feel because we don't have a media that supports alternative ways of being, that being visible and doing the marching is very useful." Similarly, Felix illustrates the need for collective struggle in creating alternatives, "Its collective strength. And through collective *struggle*, people see that they're not alone, they break through the atomization that society tries to instill, and they also win certain gains which give them a political confidence – we can fight and we can win!" While there have been many critiques of practicing activism and working towards systemic change from within the system, Daniel challenges this somewhat simplistic critique, "It's like the idea that you can't simultaneously...disagree with a structure that you're in *and* try to use it as the only effective structure to still get help to people and *yes* to change the system..." Daniel suggests that there are multiple and nuanced ways in which both activists and social workers can engage in effective, grassroots change resisting the notion of activism and social work as oppositional systems.

³ This critical, collective notion of self-care can be borrowed from Proffitt (2011): "If we situate self-care in a framework that values community, advocacy, and social justice, then taking care of ourselves is indivisible from taking care of others" (p. 286).

For Theresa and other participants in this study, more traditional forms of resistance and grassroots mobilization must coexist with multiple, creative and reflexive methods of transformative change at all levels of practice. Ashley explains, “You know I think social justice is almost a paradox because you have to, you have to *live it*. And you can change how you live and how you interact in community, but the changes at the systemic level are slower to come.” Similarly, other participants explained how ‘living’ your activism, day-to-day, is integral to creating alternatives and working towards systemic change and vice versa – the two enable each other to occur.

Social Movements as a Vehicle for Change

Baines (2011) describes part of what ‘works’ when attempting to build the bridge between the commonly upheld social work-activism divide is to participate and/or make linkages with social movements. Although these linkages provide valuable possibilities for overtly politicizing social work practice and almost all participants in this study emphasized the necessity of social movements as a progressive tool for change, there were contrasting beliefs about the role that social workers should play in social movements. For example, while Felix notes the absolute imperative of social workers to actively participate in social movements to work towards revolutionary change, Daniel reflects on the nuances of social work’s role within social movements explaining,

...if I can...do a little bit of extra good by sticking around and doing all this unnecessary paperwork that people have lying around and get that finished, rather than going to the protest, I might do that. Maybe that wouldn’t even exist if that managerial style was there and I wouldn’t have to make that choice between social work and protest. But if I was going to choose I would probably want to choose between something that is going to make somebody else’s life easier around the office so that they can do actual social work, or so that I can do actual social work.

Daniel and many others explain that in an ‘ideal world’ there would be no difference between social work and activism and similarly, we would not have to choose between organizing in a social movement or filling out standardized forms at a social work agency. Maria, as a social worker and community activist, brings prominence to this point, suggesting that, “I think that being out there and connecting with social movements ... it’s really important because it gives you *perspective* and it gives you *context*...and it gives you a much better feel for the community you’re going to serve.” Social movements can also be a niche from which to create community, another important site for alternative practice. Ashley reflects,

I think social movements are required because people need big ideas to work with and to work through and communities spring up around these movements...And none of those problems were created by an individual, they were created within community and none of them can be solved by an individual, they all have to be solved within community. And a social movement can provide that community.

In the past few years, we have seen communities spring up in Toronto through various social movements and a rapidly changing political landscape. However, creating community,

specifically communities within the ideology of social movements, can seem like an overwhelmingly challenging process. Our pursuit of systemic change, however, and indeed individual and community transformation is a struggle that can be strengthened by our working together and constant critical reflection about those who are just as voraciously attempting to divide us, pit us against one another and continue to forcefully advance neoliberal restructuring on both a discursive and more pragmatic level.

Conclusions

This project has only reaffirmed our belief in the collective need to actively resist the detrimental effects of the marketization of social work within a dominant neoliberal regime. We are committed to occupying a profession in which the values inherent to anti-oppressive theory and practice and the pursuit of alternative ways of knowing and creating are so close to our hearts. By radicalizing our education as learners and teachers of social work and activism, continuing to document the grassroots initiatives of social workers and activists alike, and by deconstructing harmful binaries and subsequent divisions that we unquestioningly maintain we can continue to find common grounds, common causes and work together to build a system that works for everyone.

The current, growing global resistance to neoliberalism and austerity and the uprising that is transpiring worldwide indicates the fundamental imperative of social movements as a vehicle for change (Abramovitz, 1998; Mishra 1999). This paper and the participants in this study have reflected on the operation of social work and activism, illustrating the various and creative means by which we pursue justice, anti-oppression and alternative ways of practicing our resistance on individual, community and structural levels. While honouring the disparate yet interconnected and equally meaningful ways that we choose to participate in activism, participants strongly articulated the need for social movements in our pursuit of transformative change as a result of the current neoliberal context. We maintain the continuation of community-based research practices that go beyond mere documentation of voices from the ground, the invisible people who work so tirelessly and those who may not be so privileged as to undertake inquiry in this way.

Neoliberalism is not a single monolith and it cannot be met with a monolithic response. Our experiences of social work and activism speak to the need for multiple, varied and interconnected responses to the growing systemic inequalities we view around us. Fundamentally, the only consistent thread along the activist continuum was the need for change: as Ashley poignantly stated, "...if you're not speaking up, you are maintaining the status quo". Less consistent, yet repeatedly articulated throughout the interviews, was the idea that in an 'ideal world,' social work *is* activism. This leads us to question the various grounds on which the profession of social work is built and the contemporary trend of maintaining social work as a passive, depoliticized and individualist undertaking. The alternatives put forth by this study suggest a deeply alternative social work that capitalizes on collectivism and community over individualism and passivity.

The participants of this study remind us, in Teresa's words, that the goal is "finding your niche" within social work and activist realms. They remind us of the fruitfulness of a cross-

pollinated intersection between social work and activism, of the many lessons we may learn by blending these areas and of the pitfalls we may avoid by learning from social work and activism's respective failures. While neither social work nor activism nor any other form of protest and resistance can single-handedly engender utopia, this research has confirmed what our lived experiences have suggested: that individual connections, communities, social movements, educational models and radical alternatives must continue an engaged dialogue in order to constructively co-exist. We look forward to the continued fruits of these moments of cross-pollination.

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