Guest Editorial—Social Justice and an Ethic of Care

This special issue includes papers originally presented at the University of British Columbia’s School of Social Work’s 90th Anniversary International Symposium held in Vancouver, Canada, on February 24–25, 2020. Reflecting their strong commitment to international partnership and collaboration, the 90th Anniversary Symposium was cosponsored by the Department of Applied Social Sciences, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Sixty-eight scholars from 11 countries including Hong Kong, Australia, the United States, and Canada participated in 2 days of papers and discussion on the theme of social justice and an ethic of care.

In the tradition of critical reflexivity that is central to our discipline (Morley, 2016, 2020), when social work looks back over many years of social justice research and education, we have many things to be proud of, but we also can identify instances where we failed to embrace a sufficiently critical and in-depth analysis and, unintentionally, ended up standing on the wrong side of history. Ioakimidis and Trimikliniotis (2020) argue that the prevailing approach in social work history is to ignore the profession’s “complicity, or at least acquiescence, in acts of state violence and institutionalised oppression” (p. 2). As Ioakimidis and Trimikliniotis (2020) note further, “One side of social work’s history inflicted unspeakable damage to some of the most vulnerable people in society” (p. 13).

Ioakimidis and Trimikliniotis (2020) argue that three broad factors facilitated the profession’s involvement in activities on the wrong side of history: (1) a focus on social work as a purely technical and apolitical activity; (2) prioritizing the self-image and status of the profession over commitment to equity and the human rights of the communities served sometimes leading to participation in pseudoscience including eugenics, rigid positivism particularly psychiatric and biomedical models, and the uncritical involvement in government projects including the Nazi government in Germany and the Franco fascist government in Spain; and (3) individualizing ethical dilemmas by reducing complex political debates to questions of individual skill and responsibility.

Regrettably, there are moments in the history of social work where significant portions of the profession focused on one or more of the factors mentioned above. Individuals and educators uncritically joined the mainstream practice in ways that contributed to the harm experienced by a number of groups including Indigenous peoples, racialized populations, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning, Intersex, Asexual and Two-Spirit people, women, people with disabilities, and other people experiencing deep-seated, multilayered, interwoven, and hard-to-solve social, economic, physical, and mental health problems. Fortunately, critical thought and resistance to social injustice are also central and foundational components of social work (Kennedy-Kish et al., 2017; Pease et al., 2016; Strier & Bershtling, 2016).

For example, there have always been social workers who resigned their jobs instead of enforcing policies that they felt to be immoral and oppressive. Similarly, there have always been social workers who advocated for service users and policy change from within the system and outside of it (Kennedy-Kish et al., 2017). There have also been those who quietly or openly bent rules in the organizations in which they were employed and sometimes openly confronting oppressive situation and “flying under the radar” of injurious and exclusionary regulations in order to defend the dignity and entitlements of service users and the larger community (Davies, 2017; Morley, 2020). There have also been many, like the many social workers we currently see involved in Black Lives Matter protests worldwide, who are prepared to undertake ongoing activism to challenge taken-for-granted injustices and inequities and push policy makers and elected officials beyond their comfort zones to new social justice-engaged practices and policies.

At the University of British Columbia, in conjunction with our colleagues at The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, we marked our 90th anniversary by recommitting ourselves to social justice and to continuing to develop a social justice and an ethic of care in social work theory and practice. This special issue is part of the continual building of critical analysis, research, and pedagogy that will permit social work to be firmly enshrined on the right side of history and human rights. The nine articles in this special issue reflect this critical tradition and commitment to theory, knowledge, and practice.

Drawing on postmodern critique and feminist, narrative, and collaborative-based practice rooted in critical theory, Catrina Brown writes compellingly about the need to develop critical clinical social work approaches to direct practice. Analyzing critical skills including counterviewing and counter-storying, Brown argues that the critical clinical approach permits service users to develop more livable and preferred narratives despite the constraints of neoliberalism on social work mental health practice. Critical clinical approaches provide a way to meld macro- and microdynamics by expanding social workers’ capacities to address the social and structural determinants of mental health and its influence on the abilities of social workers to
practice social justice–based social work alongside interventions that address individual pain and suffering.

Tara LaRose and Brian Deltor also explore the power of storytelling in their analysis of a digital storytelling project based in a public library. The project was aimed at enhancing the digital literacy of social work practitioners and students, increasing and diversifying their use of a public library technology hub, and extending social work leadership knowledge among students and practitioners through the creation and sharing of leadership-focused digital stories. Confirming that project participants initially approached the technology with fear but soon found collective confidence in its use, the article and the research project it analyzes emphasize the need to question who is empowered as a user of technology, what rules and prohibitions are linked to social workers’ use of technology in practice, and how these processes reflect power relations at play within the profession.

In addition to practice perspective and approaches, authors in this special issue have shared perspectives on social justice realities faced by various vulnerable groups. Johnstone’s paper examined how social work practice in mental health could be emancipated from the medical model to center social justice as the focal point through the use of narrative and anti-oppressive approaches. Similarly, the review research project of Kia and associates has emphasized material inequities among sexual and gender minorities. While anti-poverty work is conceptualized as social work’s commitment to social justice, sexual and gender minority groups are also faced with the intersectionality impacts of age, race, immigrant status, and indigenous status. Human rights and social justice implications are also presented in the qualitative study on how legislation in British Columbia is implemented for the protection of vulnerable adults from harm in Braun’s work. The balance between older adults’ consents and mandatory involvement of service providers are the key themes emerged in the results presented. The implications of shortages in resources and organizational structural issues on how social justice is achieved are also examined. Drawing on the example of homeless men in Vancouver and medical respite care at the point of discharge from the hospital, Sarah Canham, Chris Danielsen, Scott Small, and Harvey Bosma argue that the voices and perspectives of vulnerable people need to be central to research methods involving them. Canham et al. interviewed 15 patients and 11 providers to develop a set of recommendations aimed at appropriate and respectful engagement of vulnerable people in patient-oriented research.

Extending our knowledge of child well-being and child welfare, Camilla Lo and Yuet Wing Cho undertook a systematic review of select child maltreatment literature to identify community-based interventions with the goal of identifying effective interventions and their core components. Their review suggests that a combination of informal and formal interventions may be the most useful approach to prevention and decisive support of families and children.

In addition to practice with vulnerable social groups, social work education plays a critical role in sustaining social justice knowledge, skills, and efforts of social work students. Onalu and Okoye have examined students’ perspectives toward the curriculum of a social work program in Nigeria. Their findings call for changes in the delivery of social work education by strengthening social justice content and strategies. As fieldwork education is central to the social work profession, Kostecki and associates have examined the adoption of critical pedagogy in social work field supervision and presented various key approaches for strengthening social work students’ capacity to be critical thinkers and practitioners.

To conclude, the joint international symposium co-organized by the two social work schools has facilitated the global involvement of many authors who are eager to further contextualize social justice in social work practice via research findings, conceptualizations within practice approaches, engagement with vulnerable groups, and critical approaches to social work education. The collective efforts of authors in this special issue highlight the importance of multiple perspectives and approaches to shaping future pathways of building social justice in the discipline of social work.

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