

“Without losing what we know”: Dissenting social work in the context of epochal crises

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ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION: This article builds on Fraser’s (2021, 2019) argument that the overlapping crises of social reproduction, climate, economy, and public health have resulted in a splintering of the hegemony of dominant groups. This generates a “wilding of the public sphere” in which groups urgently seek counter-hegemonic storylines and alternative solutions to interwoven crises (Fraser, 2021, n.p.). This article further theorises consent and dissent in social work practice and workplaces.

METHODS: Data were collected using qualitative interviews and a convenience sample of ten executive directors and managers of social services in a large city in Canada. Data were analysed using a constant comparison method involving multiple readings of the field notes and transcripts, until patterns and themes could be discerned.

FINDINGS: The article analyses three themes, namely, dissent as: 1) working on the edges of the state; 2) working on decolonisation including what it means to be a settler; and 3) critical reflection. The themes are then discussed together under a final interwoven theme that is argued to reflect new hegemonies, in particular political world-making, building new emancipatory knowledges, theory, practice and hegemonies.

CONCLUSION: Social-justice-engaged practices can emerge within systems hostile to social solidarity, suggesting that dissent is resilient to neoliberalism though it may sometimes operate quietly and at the level of individual practice. This resistance and the nascent, shared, dissenting narratives can contribute to the de-legitimation of oppressive social structures as social workers search for, and build, more emancipatory approaches.

KEYWORDS: Decolonisation; anti-oppressive practice and theory; critical reflection; critical social work; social work and the state; Nancy Fraser

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While they may hold disputing views, for the most part, employees are presumed to consent to their working conditions and the type and quality of services they deliver (Ackroyd & Thompson, 2022). In the social work world, dissenting views are not uncommon with critical and

anti-oppressive approaches fostering critical reflection, resistance and comprehensive social change (Garrett, 2021; Maylea, 2021; Morley et al., 2017). This suggests that, in social work workplaces that are less than optimal, employee consent may be partial, provisional or dissenting and take the form

of opposition to policies and practices. While some studies have explored the extent to which critical approaches to social work have been enacted in social service workplaces, most conclude that managerialism and other effects of neoliberalism curtail and constrain the expression of social justice themes in the work of social workers (Garrett, 2019; Hyslop, 2018; Lawler, 2018). Other studies focus on micro-analyses (Smith, 2017) by examining the critical practices of individual workers, while still others focus on a meso-analysis of anti-oppressive organisational change (Barnoff, 2017). All point to critical social workers inspirationally positioning themselves as agents of social justice within and outside of their workplaces, but significantly restricted by neoliberalism and other systemic forces.

The challenging contemporary contexts of neoliberalism, the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change and global inequity suggest further theorising of consent and dissent in social work practice and workplaces is required. Building on Gramsci's (2000) concept of epochal crisis, Fraser (2019, 2021) argued that the overlapping crises of social reproduction, climate, economy, and public health have resulted in a splintering of the hegemony of dominant groups. This generates a "wilding of the public sphere" in which the centrist political consensus can no longer hold, and instead, groups on the left and the right urgently seek counter-hegemonic storylines and alternative solutions to interwoven crises (Fraser, 2021, n.p.). Considering the growing disillusionment with the Canadian government's handling of Indigenous issues and the recent discovery of mass unmarked graves at former Residential Schools for Indigenous children, Canada now faces an additional profound crisis. This crisis focuses on the fragmenting of support for centrist approaches to redress colonial travesties, and in their place, increasing calls for far-reaching Indigenisation, decolonisation, and reconciliation (Pete, 2016).

The balance of the article analyses strategies that some critical social workers use to withdraw consent to working within the neoliberal state form, and instead build new emancipatory knowledges, theory, practice and emergent dissenting hegemonies. For the purposes of this article, emancipatory knowledge, theory and practice will be understood as part of the critical tradition in social work, involving anti-oppressive, Indigenous, feminist, anti-racist, Marxist, green, human rights, critical post-structuralist and other liberatory approaches (Kennedy Kish et al., 2017; Sinclair, 2016; Tascon & Ife, 2020). Indigenisation will be understood as part of decolonisation in which Indigenous knowledge systems are brought together with Western knowledge systems to transform spaces, places, and hearts (BC Campus, 2020). This article will contribute to a further theorisation of dissent in social work practice and workplaces.

The balance of the article briefly discusses contexts and theory before moving on to the study from which the preliminary analysis is drawn. The article then explores the three strongest themes found in the data followed by contributions to dissenting and counter-hegemonies. The article wraps up with further discussion of dissent and conclusions. Though the article is based on the Canadian experience, the commonalities of colonialism and neoliberal capitalism provide a shared context and dilemma for dissenting social workers in other regions and contexts, while the dissenting practices and resistance may provide useful for many.

Contexts and theory

This section of the article will briefly engage with the literature on the interlaced contexts of: managerialism and neoliberalism; social work's relationship to the state; and the current context in decolonisation and Indigenisation.

Managerialism and neoliberalism

Neoliberalism is now a four-decade old system that valorises the private market as the solution to all social and economic issues (Peck & Theodore, 2019). The downsizing and contracting out of public goods and services accompanies neoliberalism and produces a hollowed-out system of human services in which those who cannot afford private services are left to cope as well as they can in an underfunded, targeted and residual system (Peck et al., 2018). Neoliberalism is not a monolithic system; various countries, regions and sectors have resisted its integration resulting in patchy adoption and uneven impacts, and occasionally bringing services back into the public sector (Plehwe, 2016).

To manage contracted-out and the remaining public services, most countries adopted a neoliberal-compatible management system known as New Public Management (NPM) or managerialism, in which the explicit goals of efficiency, accountability and cost savings were thought to be achieved through the tight measurement of “outcomes” and employee performance (Baines & Cunningham, 2020). These NPM mechanisms standardised work processes, removing or reducing practices that eluded easy metrics and scripting. The reduced and removed practices were often those associated with social connections and open-ended processes such as building and retaining respectful relationships, mobilising communities around their own issues, service user participation in policy and planning development, and working towards shared goals such as equity, inclusion and social justice (Garrett, 2019; Morley et al., 2017). In social service workplaces, NPM acted as a conduit for neoliberalism, reshaping social services agencies and social work practice, in part by legitimising narrow, measurable, individualised, pro-market responses to social problems (Harris, 2018; Hyslop, 2018; Spolander et al., 2015).

Social work’s relationship to the state

Reacting to #BLM’s (Black Lives Matter) widespread call to defund the police, a significant discourse asserts that social workers should replace police in non-violent community roles that were previously filled by human services until multiple rounds of austerity and funding cuts displaced them (Rubenstein, 2020; Sherraden, 2020). While some see this as an opportunity to regain lost ground and return these services to a more supportive format, others argue that, unless these services are fundamentally reorganised and democratised, social workers will simply become the soft cops of the carceral state (Baines, 2021). The increasingly controlling and sometimes coercive role social workers play for the neoliberal state and the constraints placed on social work practice in the context of managerialism and NPM, suggests that anti-oppressive and decolonising practice will find little space or possibility within state-mandated, funded and rationalised workplaces (Maylea, 2021). Given that neoliberalism saturates most aspects of social life (Hyslop, 2018; Lawler, 2018), it is difficult to operate outside the state’s influence even for organisations not receiving state funding, hence autonomy will always be somewhat circumscribed and an ongoing site of struggle.

The current Canadian context of decolonisation and indigenisation

In 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada delivered its report on the “truth of Survivors, their families, communities and anyone personally affected by the Residential school experience”, a government system administered by churches operating from the 1880s to the 1960s that forcibly removing Indigenous children from their families with the goal of assimilation and separation from all aspects of Indigenous culture (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015). The report contained Ten Principles for Reconciliation and 94 Calls to Action aimed

at all sectors of Canadian society, including child welfare and human services. The report also included warnings from Survivors that mass graves of children could be found at the former Residential schools. In 2021, the first unmarked gravesite was discovered in Kamloops, containing the small bodies of 215 unidentified children; at the time of writing, 1300 unmarked graves have been discovered across Canada (Mosby, 2021). Though the crimes of the Residential schools have appeared in the news periodically since their creation in 1880s, alongside calls for reform, these issues were quickly replaced in the news cycle by other social and political concerns (Norris, 2021). Baskin (2021), an Indigenous social work scholar, argued that the recent outpouring of grief and indignation on the part of non-Indigenous Canada must be turned into concrete actions if this crisis is not to fade into the background of un-kept promises and colonial justifications, genocide and assimilation once again. This article will now turn to ways that anti-oppressive, non-Indigenous social work leaders are seeking and finding spaces outside the state in which to dissent and to practise anti-oppressive, decolonising social work (for an analysis of decolonisation and social work in Aotearoa/ New Zealand, please see McNabb, 2019, in the South Pacific, see Mafile'o & Vakalahi, 2018, and in Australia, see Green & Bennett, 2018).

The study

The larger study from which the data analysed in this article is drawn started before the discoveries of unmarked graves of Indigenous children. It aimed to contribute to the project of decolonisation and Indigenisation by engaging Indigenous and non-Indigenous anti-oppressive practitioners in dialogue on what emancipatory, decolonising practice should entail, what factors inhibit its development and use in the social services workplace and what factors nurture and support it. The data explored in this article come from a very early analysis

of field notes and 10 semi-structured, qualitative interviews with non-Indigenous anti-oppressive social work leaders (executive directors, senior managers, senior social workers) in the non-profit social services sector in a large Canadian city (five women, five men – five non-Indigenous racialised and five White participants). This article draws on extensive field notes taken during interviews. Data analysis is described below. After close consultation with Indigenous scholars and community members in Canada, it was decided that, due to the crisis of the unmarked children's graves at former Residential schools and resulting overload in emotional and community work, Indigenous leaders and organisations would not be contacted for interviews at this point in the study. Instead, Indigenous research participants in Canada will be involved later in the project should demands on their time permit.

All but one research participant had social work degrees, and all but one had graduate degrees. Participants had worked in social services for 3–30 years with a median of 17 years. Using a convenience sample, the interviews were 35 minutes to 1.25 hours, audio recorded and transcribed, and used an interview guide. The convenience sample was assembled by asking social work academics and practitioners to suggest names of social workers practising from an anti-oppressive and/or decolonising lens. The potential participants were then contacted by email to request their participation. In the interviews, the participants were asked about the main challenges facing their organisation; whether they used critical, anti-oppressive and/or decolonising practices; what changes in their work and workplace might enable them to make meaningful changes; and if they undertook critical reflection and/or advocacy as part of their everyday work.

The organisations in which the research participants were employed all focused on marginalised and oppressed populations.

With the exception of one agency – which served immigrant and refugees – the agencies provided services for populations dealing with the overlapping crises of homelessness, trauma, poverty and harmful use of substances, particularly opiates. With the exception of the agency serving immigrants and refugees, 30–35 % of service users were Indigenous people.

Two organisations received no government funding – one was faith-based and received the majority of its funding from its generally left-of-centre congregation and the other was funded by private fundraising and foundations. The agency that served immigrants and refugees received the majority of its funding from government. The seven other agencies held a few government contracts but depended largely on private funding and foundations.

Data were analysed using a constant comparison method involving multiple readings of the field notes and transcripts, until patterns and themes could be discerned (Carey, 2017). Ethics approval was provided by the university involved. Limitations of the study includes the relatively small sample size, possible bias in convenience recruitment strategies, the compressed time for preliminary analysis and the qualitative method itself which generates rich insights that may be applicable in other contexts but is not aimed at generalisation.

Themes

Although more data exist to support the analysis, exemplar quotes will be used to discuss the three strongest themes in the data, namely dissent as: 1) working on the edges of the state; 2) working on decolonisation including what it means to be a settler; and 3) critical reflection. These themes contribute to holding a larger view of social work as being based in social justice that values activism and the ongoing building of emancipatory practice. Findings are reported ethnographically weaving the

voices of the research participants with parts of the literature (Starfield, 2015), including literature, analysis and preliminary contributions to theorising. Although the themes overlap and interweave, they will be discussed separately for purposes of analysis. They will then be discussed together under a final interwoven theme that is argued to reflect new hegemonic narratives, in particular political world-making.

1) Working on the edges of the state

A striking aspect of the research participants was that, with the exception of one, they all worked for organisations entirely or partially funded by charitable foundations (for example, the law foundation) and private fundraising. This placed them on the edges of the government structure and reporting regime (though some government reporting existed for tax purposes and compliance with employment relations and charitable or nonprofit status). The autonomy to develop innovative, anti-oppressive, decolonising services outside of funding constraints was noted by one longtime director, “I think that one of our successes has been nobody cared: nobody in the government gave us money, nobody cared, so we were pretty free. We could do what was needed.”

At various points, all the organisations had experienced government social service contracts and their compliance requirements, and some still received a portion of their money from government contracts (and, as noted earlier, the immigrant and refugee service received the majority of its funding from government). They reported that requirements were far less intrusive and burdensome for foundations and private funders; moreover, they were not required to adopt NPM or other managerial structures. A senior manager noted the difficulty in practising from a social justice perspective when the organisation took on government contracts, “though the core of

[the organisation's name] is anti-oppressive practice, external forces are so strong – corporate structures, colonialism, the business model – they threaten our existence and undermine belief in the participation of people.”

In terms of the reporting regime, some non-government funders adopted what was called “low barrier” reporting where narratives and photographs could be used in place of the extensive statistics and outcome metrics required by government contracts. In other cases, statistics were required by non-government funders, but without the NPM-associated documentation of outcome targets that exacerbated heavy staff workloads and standardised services with an eye to efficiency and cost savings. This provided greater latitude and innovation in the services provided to highly marginalised and oppressed service users and communities.

Less restricted by government regulation of service delivery, the organisations were also able to develop structures and practices outside (or at the edge of) the state form including member-driven services (or community-driven, service user-driven), low barrier service, and services that were deeply compassionate and inclusive. Most of the organisations were member-driven, where the programme and service priorities were decided by people who were also those who most used and needed services. As one research participant noted, “a member is anyone who uses the service. We accept people as they are. Everyone has a place. Everyone can be part of strategic planning and setting priorities.” Other organisations used terms such as *community-driven* or *service user-driven* to describe similar dynamics inviting close participation of those using the services in prioritising which services should be developed and retained. This inclusive, participatory practice stands in contrast to government run and funded organisations that tend to be operated by highly credentialed individuals who draw

on other experts to set priorities and deliver programmes and rarely draw in the voices of those most impacted by programmes and services (Baines, 2017; Harris, 2018).

Low barrier (Here to Help, 2019) also meant a commitment to continuous improvements in service delivery. As one participant noted, “if someone drops into our service frequently but never stays, we have started asking them, ‘what would it take for you to use our services’. We want to remove all barriers.” This extended to identifying the operation of power in the workplace and the organisation as a whole. In the words of a longtime executive director, “we work to reduce and remove things that create power differentials in the organisation, and instead share our power so that our service users feel they can really be part of this community.” Though under-served populations frequently have significant needs for clinical support, clinical services (medical, social work, psychotherapy, physiotherapy) presented particular dilemmas to organisations working to remove barriers and share organisational power. As observed by a number of research participants, “Things have gone more clinical which are very important services for community members but also very disempowering in terms of knowledge sharing and decision making between staff and community members. We have a lot of work to do on sharing power in clinical care.”

Another participant provided a similar comment, “clinical skills are something that we need down here but like you actually have to have humility and respect for those with lived experience of oppression.” Another participant agreed, adding, “we need to be humble in the face of lived experience and have great compassion; clinical skills are not transactional.” Other participants emphasised similar approaches, noting “staff work from a position one of great compassion, always saying, you know, “how can we work together with the community to meet needs because that

would be in everybody's best interest." These thoughts are consistent with the literature; Bennett and Gates (2019) emphasised the importance of twinning humility with compassion in working with Indigenous, LGBTQI+ and other groups that have been oppressed.

Research participants also noted downsides to working at the edge of the state and with less or no state funding. This included: precarious funding (including short grants); a revolving door of donor priorities that rarely met the priorities of community members; never enough money to meet all service needs or to cover important things like anti-oppressive and decolonizing training for staff and community members; inadequate time for more than crisis management particularly in context of the COVID pandemic, and insufficient funding for building and sharing critical knowledge and skills. These concerns echo those funded by government contracts (Harris, 2018; Kennedy Kish et al., 2017). Though none were willing to give up their relative autonomy from the state, similar to those receiving government funding, the participants spoke wistfully of the need for dependable and adequate funding.

Despite the latitude to think creatively about more respectful and inclusive services, some of the participants longed for the space to do more than provide higher quality, more accessible care. One longtime director and activist argued that the "mandate of most social services is too narrow. Our mandates preserve our services rather than finding ways for us to come together working for larger social justice." Another participant argued that "the world is made up of programs. This doesn't build community or social justice. It builds programs." This participant and others argued that a "community development model has been lost. Social policy and social transformation [are] seen as a luxury by direct practice people and narrow services."

2) Decolonisation/accepting one's self as a settler

In terms of being positioned at the edge of state control, research participants spoke of the latitude to, in the words of one longtime activist social worker, "revolutionize our Eurocentric approach and do social justice in our jobs." Decolonization was a strong theme throughout the interviews with participants outlining steps the organisations had taken to advance the recommendations of the aforementioned Truth and Reconciliation Commission, particularly to decolonise one's self, as well as the organisation's leadership and staff, services, practices, policies and knowledge. Identifying the tension between Euro-based emancipatory perspectives (Connell, 2014) such as critical and anti-oppressive social work and the need to decolonise all knowledge and practice, including critical perspectives, one participant asked, "how do we authentically adapt Indigenous and liberatory settler approaches and save the best of both?" Another participant added, "we know [how] to keep the complexity but how do we recognize ourselves with integrity as flawed by a system of colonization and move beyond that system without losing the steps we have made towards social justice?" Accomplishing decolonisation and larger social-justice-engaged transformation was a theme that repeated itself throughout the interview data. A number of research participants emphasised the need to "undertake ongoing actions and activism" as part of decolonisation and to "support Indigenous initiatives in the community."

The process of decolonising one's thoughts and practice was challenging, as one participant noted, "It's painful to accept that I'm a settler, and to accept that I have to decolonize myself in order to help others." This same participant argued that decolonisation:

Starts with modelling respectful listening, awareness and affirming the experience of Indigenous peoples. Settlers cannot go

in trying to make change without first listening to the anger and the experience of Indigenous people, but also the hope. Then we will to begin to understand the church and the government as instruments of colonialism, and be able to decolonize ourselves, our thinking and our actions.

Another research participant asked:

Why would Indigenous people embrace the church or the government given the history of both? As settlers and beneficiaries of unearned privilege, we need to undertake the tasks that Indigenous peoples have asked us to. Education is a big thing that Indigenous people have asked us to take on, educate ourselves and others. We just need to keep doing it while simultaneously moving from education into action, purposeful action aimed at social justice.

A third participant agreed with this strategy, arguing that decolonising one's self includes "Deep soul searching. Setting aside my ego, my opinions and trying to make decisions based on what we hear from Indigenous peoples. Learning, listening, openness and nurturing the involvement of other settlers in this process." Adding greater depth to this analysis, one participant argued that decolonisation involves "bringing into our awareness, our unconscious colonization and challenging it."

In the words of one research participant, at the organisational level this involved:

- 1) expressing a willingness to learn;
- 2) adopting an attitude of humility and admitting culpability; and 3) providing a willingness to be relationship with others seeking far-reaching change. Decolonising social service organisations tended to start with educating leadership, followed by educating frontline employees, reviewing policies and practices for decolonising change, and extending service users' and community members' understanding of

reconciliation and decolonisation. The education itself focused on developing a deeper understanding of Canada's history of colonialism that involved "bringing in Elders and knowledge keepers as well as working through this tough content on our own." Participants were keenly aware of the importance of inviting the participation of Indigenous peoples, and at the same time taking responsibility to educate one's self and each other. One research participant articulated a strong tension in decolonising education, namely that:

Settlers have to be responsible for their own education rather than placing all the work and responsibility on Indigenous people but at the same time Indigenous people have rightfully asserted their right to lead decolonisation, including the re-education of non-Indigenous people about Indigenous beliefs and knowledge. It is complicated to work out how to do both things successfully and without reinstating colonialism. We need to keep talking about it.

One research participant who worked in an agency serving immigrants and refugees noted the importance of sharing the experience of Indigenous peoples with newcomers to Canada. This research participant also emphasised the importance of starting with educating the leadership of the organisation and frontline staff. The organisation had recently worked with a consultant who helped them develop decolonising *educational*s that they planned to also use with service users. Another research participant, with many years of experience in the government, as well as in the non-profit and activist sectors, argued that:

We need knowledge and history, we need to take international standards such as the UNDRIP [United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples] into our lives and our practice, and organisations need to adopt a community development model so that people can

make good policies a reality and take steps closer to emancipation.

Noting the constraints and possibilities of government funding, one longtime executive director noted that, until recently, when “the government finally seriously started funding reconciliation projects, decolonisation didn’t weave into everything we did because we had a business model that had to be sustained and it [decolonisation] wasn’t part of the business model. We hadn’t found a way to make it sustainable” through private funders or foundations. She continued, “Maybe now, with there being a much more global perspective on colonisation and the strength of the Indigenous people, the question about sustaining this work really won’t be off the table, instead *it will be the work* (emphasis in the original).”

3) Critical reflection

The rushed and overloaded context of neoliberal workplaces makes it difficult for social workers to find the head space to critically reflect or to draw in others to identify problems, take action and improve things. Morley et al. (2017) argued that critical social workers need this space to undertake constructive criticism of their own and other’s connections to oppression as well as to integrate emancipatory practices and systems in the complex contexts in which they work. This multi-level reflection allows reflexivity to have critical and transformative potential (Fook & Askeland, 2006) and provides a fertile ground for social workers to use their lived experiences to develop and refine theory, knowledge and practice (Morley et al., 2017; Tascon & Ife, 2019). Finally, critical reflexivity provides a way for social workers to maintain a degree of independence and relative autonomy from neoliberal state, institutional and social discourses and, in the process, generate a space in which to support individual and collective resistance and to nurture widespread social change and justice.

Research participants who had previously worked in the public sector noted that they now had time for critical reflection, “When I worked in [healthcare social work] with a caseload of 300, there was no time for reflection. Now I have a small caseload and there is always hope and always time to reflect.” Similarly, another participant noted that her agency undertook collective reflection, “We always debrief and reflect. This includes looking at hard things like our high level of death and overdose but it also includes looking at our successes and how we can do better.” A participant working for a progressive church-based service noted wryly, “The Church currently does an awful lot of reflection. It’s a good place for it.”

Others noted that in the context of the COVID pandemic, “We don’t have the privilege of reflecting, it’s just go, respond to a crisis.” A second participant asserted that “[a]dvocacy and reflection basically stopped in the pandemic. The need for direct services was too high and too urgent. All our resources went there.” This suggests that, while services at the edge of government restrictions and managerial models can consciously create spaces for critical thought and reflection, these spaces are easily lost in the context of the crises that frequently occur in the context of late neoliberalism.

4) Emergent counter and dissenting hegemonic threads

Earlier in this article, Fraser (2019, 2021) was cited for her work on the overlapping epochal crises of social reproduction, climate, economy, and public health, generating fissures in the hegemony of dominant groups. This fragmentation produces a “wilding of the public sphere” where groups on the left and the right creatively build counter and dissenting hegemonies and alternative solutions (Fraser, 2021, n.p.). Despite the reduced space for critical thought noted in some agencies during the pressurised time of the pandemic, the data suggest that working outside, or at the edges

of, the state permitted some organisations to generate a space in which larger social transformation could become thinkable and do-able. These emergent, dissenting hegemonic threads included the following components: political world-making; working at the margins of the state provides anti-neoliberal possibilities; the importance of being humble and deeply compassionate; and selling a good narrative to get the public on board.

Even though working at the edges of the state may be seen by some as consistent with neoliberal undermining of the public good and social solidarity, the research participants presented themselves as working outside or at the edges of the state in order to be involved in what one research participant called “political world-making”. This political world-making was robustly anti-neoliberal, insightfully combining collectivist (public good and social solidarity), inclusive and equitable (low barrier and member-driven, humble and compassionate), and transformational (decolonisation and anti-oppression practice, community-engagement and participation) practices and goals. Critical reflection provided a ballast to these initiatives and a source of ongoing analysis of practice, policy and the possibilities for far-reaching social change. The participants did not focus their change goals exclusively on their workplaces and service delivery but sought deep-seeded social justice change across society. As one participant put it, “the question is how to sell a good narrative to Canadian society.”

This dissenting hegemonic line finds resonance in various critical literatures. For example, anti-carceral (Atallah et al., 2019) practice models emphasise two equally important components: 1) respect for the first-hand experience of those exploited and oppressed by existing structures and taking leadership from these groups; and 2) holding on to a radical social analysis and building services that foster far-reaching social change. Similarly, Green

and Baldry (2008) argued that Indigenous and anti-oppressive theory both explore the intersecting oppressions that underlie the social relations of injustice and colonialism, and work to expose and positively intervene in these dynamics at the systemic, policy, organisational and individual levels. They argued further that both perspectives have emancipation and social justice as their end goals (Green & Baldry, 2008; see also Baines, 2017).

Clarke (2004) argued that acts of resistance to neoliberalism are a form of expanding the social (see also Aronson & Smith, 2009). The analysis above reveals strategies aimed at building inclusive, low barrier, community or member-driven services and fostering dignity and respect among service users. In effect, these strategies build new social relations within and through their struggle, and generate new practices and social analysis. As such, they expand the social and spaces for liberatory possibilities. In short, the counter-hegemonic practices and processes analysed earlier may contain the seeds and the substance of the new, more equitable social relations required to build a more democratic, socially just and participatory society.

Discussion and conclusions

This article addressed the question of what strategies some critical social workers are using to withdraw consent from working within the neoliberal state form, and instead to build new emancipatory knowledges, theory, practice and emergent hegemonic threads. Drawing on a preliminary analysis of qualitative interview data, this article has argued that some anti-oppressive, decolonising social work executive directors, managers and senior social workers are building new, more liberatory services at the margins of the state and of social work. By working at the edges of the state, workers and organisations are in effect withdrawing their consent to neoliberal state practices that target and constrain service delivery,

and provide rushed and thin services to those in need. This withdrawal of consent is theorised as a form of dissenting, inclusive (low barrier, humble and compassionate), social justice-engaged (decolonising, anti-oppressive) social work.

In this case, rather than exclusively a place of deprivation and exploitation – as a less regulated and managerialised space – these margins can be theorised as a site of resistance and trench warfare. Gramsci (2000) argued that trench warfare, or a process of undermining the hegemony of the oppressive state, is possible by building alternative social structures and social relations that incrementally claim greater social legitimacy, replacing inequitable and oppressive practices. These dissent-based relations and structures can then emerge as a new and eventually dominant, collectivist, democratic, participatory model (Gramsci, 2000). The practices analysed in the article operated at the edges of the state and dominant social relations while simultaneously building new, low-barrier, membership or community-driven, decolonising, and anti-oppressive practices and services. As such, these organisations and practices remained apart and somewhat autonomous from the state form and larger state apparatus. In this relative independence from the state, the organisations and the people they employed were sufficiently autonomous to generate new critical and non-consenting forms of engagement and social-service-engaged change.

This article contributes to the theorisation and practice of dissent in social work workplaces by identifying practices that contributed to an expansion of the social imaginary in which social justice practice is thinkable and do-able. These practices included: 1) working on the edges of the state (as noted above); 2) working on decolonisation including what it means to be a settler; and 3) critical reflection. The article also contributed to a further theorisation of dissent through its analysis of dissenting

hegemonic threads and the possibility of an emerging counter-hegemonic narrative interweaving the new practices in a process of political world-making. The dissenting practices analysed and the potential for further political world-making seem to have been resilient, though in some cases greatly reduced during the overlapping epochal crises of the COVID-19 pandemic, climate change, public health and political economy. The question remains as to whether these dissenting practices can expand beyond organisations working at the edge of the state to the more established and government-funding reliant and managerialised nonprofit and public social service sectors.

Though Fraser (2019, 2021) argued that far-reaching democracy is not possible under the structures of capitalism and Snelgrove et al. (2014) note that the structures of settler colonial capitalism limit possibilities for inclusive emancipation, some evidence exists to suggest dissenting practice can expand to public and mainstream social services. For example, two of the research participants had worked decades in the public sector before moving to work on the margins. They reported that, while overwhelming caseloads, government regulations and neoliberal caprice were everyday aspects of exhausting and often depleting public sector practice, they and their colleagues found small spaces to develop shared counter-narratives to the dominant storylines valorising the private market and social neglect. In the workplace and outside it, they also developed individual and collective identities as workers committed to social justice, social care and resistance and undertook social activism and practice change. These suggest that the seeds of new, more social-justice-engaged identities and practices can bubble up even within a system hostile to social solidarity and collective responsibility. This further suggests that dissent is resilient to neoliberal governance and managerialism though it may sometimes operate quietly and at the level of individual

practice. However, the data and analysis confirm that it occurs even in highly restrictive and managerialised contexts. This resistance and the often nascent, shared, dissenting narratives and identities have the potential to contribute to the de-legitimatisation of hegemonic storylines, and oppressive social structures as social workers search for, and build, more emancipatory approaches.

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