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Swimming Against the Tide: The Relational Praxis of Social Justice in Social Work

by

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Submitted to the Faculty of Social Work
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for
Doctor of Philosophy in Social Work
Wilfrid Laurier University

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What we choose to emphasize in this complex history will determine our lives. If we see only the worst, it destroys our capacity to do something. While you may feel foolish to remain hopeful when it seems all hope is gone, you should still keep that hope.

~ Howard Zinn

Swimming Against the Tide: The Relational Praxis of Social Justice in Social Work

Abstract

This qualitative research study explores the praxis of social justice by social workers who identify as practising social justice-oriented social work in southern Ontario, Canada. The research is set against the backdrop of the evolution of social justice in social work, its practice in the current neoliberal environment, and its continued significance in the profession. The project draws on critical and liberal social justice philosophies to ask the question: “What does social justice praxis look like in the context of contemporary social work?” This is a crucial question because as social justice has moved to the foreground of social work education and professional parlance, the theorization and specifics of social justice praxis remain particular to the historic, socio-geopolitical context in which it is understood and practised. There are few studies that connect both how social workers find meaning in the term *social justice* and how this understanding is operationalized in their everyday work.

Using a critical progressive postmodern lens, I employed a qualitative constructivist grounded theory methodology to uncover the political elements of social justice in both theory and practice. Data were gathered from individual interviews with 20 experienced social workers who were recruited on the basis that social justice grounded their social work practice. The approach to this research is distinguished by an analysis that considers the context of the findings within the unique Canadian sociopolitical landscape and the evolution of professional social work in Canada, complemented by critical insights into the embodied experiences of the participants.

In this study, I found that social justice is conceptualized and applied as relational. The motivation to pursue social justice in practice is developed through early experiences of

adversity coupled with having relationships with mentors or role models, both being significant for foregrounding social justice. Praxis is continued through a number of intersecting intrapersonal elements that connect the personal to the professional as conscious, intentional, and purposeful practice that points to reflexivity in the actions in the everyday work and lives of social workers. At a theoretical level, the analysis teases out the specific element of social justice theories that underscore that social justice is relational, and the need for recognition before the redistribution. In this study, Recognition theory by Axel Honneth is the bridge between social justice as a theory and practice

The everyday practices are interpersonal, complex, entwined, and grounded in relational approaches and skills. In contrast, social workers face hegemonic barriers and constraints that do not provide opportunities to make changes beyond the community level. These constraints also make them professionally vulnerable to loss of position and reputation through weaponizing of potential complaints to the Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Service Workers. However, these social workers strategically manoeuvre around the barriers and constraints experienced in the neoliberal climate by using their professional and positional wisdom to advocate for both individual and local systemic change.

The research points to the need for a clear ideological theoretical framework, much needed professional and educational supports, and training for social workers who practise social justice. Lastly, social workers, the profession, and social work education need to go beyond seeing social justice as only relevant to macro practice.

Dedication

For Matthew, my son, for giving me a reason to continue to “do” social justice work in my everyday world. Thank you for keeping me humble and reminding me to walk my talk. You are my greatest inspiration, motivation, and hope for a better world.

Acknowledgements

The journey through the PhD can be exhilarating, disheartening, and sometimes both simultaneously. I am thankful for all of these moments because they have all contributed to my learning and growth, personally and professionally.

I am reminded of a quote by Philip Seymour Hoffman - It's important to say that actors can't act alone; it's impossible. What we have to do is support each other.

Many people are to be thanked for their support- I will try to capture them all.

Dr. Deena Mandell, for your support, nurturing, nudging, and challenging me to think and write in ways I did not know were possible. I have appreciated your humour and our many conversations about the PhD and social justice in its many contexts in social work. Drs. Suzy Comerford, Maryam Khan, and Laura Mastronardi, for your belief in my ability to finish the PhD, your support and assistance in helping me to grow, think, and explore my PhD in ways that seemed beyond my imagination. Thank you for your sense of humour and friendship. As a committee, I am honoured by your presence, generosity of time, and ability to think with you and explore ideas. Dr. Michael Woodford, for your expertise in research methodology.

Thank you to all my participants, for your dedication and bravery in your commitment to social justice work; without you, this dissertation would not have been possible.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The concept of *social justice* is central to the profession of social work; however, its definition is relative (Walzer, 1983), depends on political perspectives (Gaus, 2000; Heywood, 2012), and has changed significantly throughout history (Reisch, 2002). For Plato, Aristotle, and other ancient philosophers, social justice was a means to remedy inequities between individuals in each specific stratum of society (Reisch, 2002) but not across heterogeneous groups. As such, social justice created different rules for different classes of people and, thereby, preserved the elite class. Contemporary Western concepts of social justice have evolved since then to both inspire revolutionary change in political, social, and economic systems for marginalized and disenfranchised groups of people. These concepts have also been used to rationalize the maintenance of those same systems (Reisch & Garvin, 2015, p. 43) that aim to marginalize and disenfranchise.

Contemporary understandings of social justice are based on the ideas of 20th-century philosophers who discuss concepts of fairness, capacity, access, inclusion in the democratic process, identity and recognition. The work of John Rawls, Amartya Sen, Martha Nussbaum, Axel Honneth, Nancy Fraser, and Iris Marion Young has been particularly influential. These scholars arrive at a definition of social justice after they consider issues of who is deserving of justice, understandings of equality and equity, distribution of both material and psychological resources, and democratic civic engagement (N. Fraser, 2009; Miller, 1999; Sandel, 2009). Common themes run through these ideas of social justice: the pursuit of a fair and just society, the promotion of wellness, and decreased human suffering (Nussbaum, 2006; Prilleltensky, 2012). In some instances, however, social justice is for some but not all individuals and groups of people.

Social justice in social work is based on political tenets arising from the above political philosophers. The literature argues that social work practice is not value-free and is inherently political (Baines, 2011). Social work as a profession claims social justice as a foundational tenet in the Code of Ethics. However, Galambos (2008) noted that although social justice is a core value, discussions about it in social work take different philosophical approaches, and sometimes an intersection of these approaches could inform an understanding of justice in the profession.

The problem with claiming social justice as a foundational value is that, as studies reveal, social justice is a murky and muddled concept that can be interpreted along a continuum from the conservative right to the progressive left. Beyond the conceptual difficulties, there are significant tensions in the manifestation of social justice in practice, including the division between micro and macro practice (Garrett, 2009; Kam, 2014), competition between individual self-determination and collective social justice (Abramowitz, 1998; Figueira-McDonough, 1993), and a decline in the practice of social justice within social work (Chu et al., 2009; Ferguson, 2008; Kam, 2014; Solas, 2008; Specht & Courtney, 1994). From a radical perspective, Turbett et al. (2014) claimed that it is beyond the scope of social work to look to the emancipation of society. Postmodernists Witkin and Irving (2014) queried whether there is even such a thing as social justice and, if so, whether it is a realizable possibility. Ife (2012), Reichert (2011), and Witkin (1998) posited that justice would be served if the profession connected social justice to human rights.

From a liberal standpoint, Reisch and Garvin (2015) posit that “self-determination, empowerment and personal freedom” are concepts linking social work practice with social justice (p. 72). For structural scholar Bob Mullaly (2007), the goal of social justice is not only the distribution of goods but also social equality, so that individuals can develop to their full capacity

and fully participate in social, political, and cultural life. Solas (2008) claimed that radical egalitarianism is the only means of promoting social justice because “anything less is bound to perpetuate injustice” (p. 124).

While, there is little doubt about the importance of social justice in social work (Caputo, 2002; Fook, 2014), the many diverse and contradictory interpretations of the term have made it difficult to define (Fook, 2014; Galambos, 2008; A.M. McLaughlin, 2006; Reisch, 2002; Wakefield, 1988a). However, many competing and convincing theories of social justice are relevant to the practice of social justice in social work in the 21st century. For practitioners at all levels, social justice is not just about the definition of the term; it necessitates an understanding of the political worldview that underlies the practice of social justice (Capeheart & Milovanovic, 2007). It is this worldview that positions the practitioner to work towards social justice for people marginalized by oppression.

My doctoral work explores how social justice is conceptualized and practised within social work. The literature focuses on social justice in social work from a vast array of perspectives, which claim to fulfill our ethical mandate across different practice dimensions from micro (Finn & Jacobson, 2003; A. M. McLaughlin, 2002; Parker, 2003; Saleebey, 1996; Singh & Salazar, 2010; Swenson, 1998; Wakefield, 1988b; Waldegrave & Tamasese, 1994) to macro practice (Figueira-McDonough, 2006; Gill 1973; Gray et al., 2014; Ledwith, 2005; Mullaly, 2010; Newman & Yeates, 2008; Green et al., 2011). Yet, social justice has no explicit definition in the Canadian social work *Code of Ethics* (Canadian Association of Social Workers [CASW], 2005a)—even though its pursuit is intended to govern the conduct of social work practitioners (Galambos, 2008). This conceptual ambiguity is curious, given that the principle of social justice

is given a central role in the Code of Ethics. This has been the motivation for the focus of my dissertation.

The Purpose of the Study

Consistent with calls in the literature to look deeply at social workers' conceptualization of social justice given the multiplicity of definitions (Solas, 2006; Witkin & Irving, 2014), exploring workers' everyday practices provides the opportunity to understand the meaning that social workers make of their commitment to social justice in their work. The purpose of this study was to explore the praxis and everyday practices of social justice in social work.

I ask the question, *What do social workers who aim to be working toward social justice have to say about their praxis and practices?*

Since social justice is a core tenet of social work, this study will contribute towards understanding how social workers make meaning of the term *social justice* and their everyday practices in the field. While the Canadian Code of Ethics presents a murky and muddled conception of social justice, social workers make meaning of the term through experiences of adversity and ability to see and be mentored by those who do good work in the community. The study revealed that *recognition* is the theoretical bridge that underlies the understanding and extends to the relational everyday practices of social justice in the everyday work of social workers. While social justice continues to be a focus in social work education and scholarship, the realities of a neoliberal climate have implications for how social workers resist injustice and continue to practise social justice in their everyday work. Hence, social workers need explicit support from the profession if the operationalization of social justice is to continue to be a reality in practice. In my view, based on the findings in the study, we need to clarify an ideological framework or direction for social justice practice and consider how we practise and teach

concepts like social justice across the curriculum and in field education. I would also suggest that social workers who are committed to social justice in their work need better support from the profession's regulatory bodies and membership organizations. These ideas will be explored in detail through the findings and discussion chapters (chapters 5 and 6).

My Personal and Professional Pursuit of Social Justice

I came to this research with the lens of an activist-scholar. The following personal and professional orientations describe my examination of social justice within social work practice from that lens: (a) my deep and continuing commitment to the profession over three decades of social work practice with marginalized, oppressed populations, and (b) a lifelong passion for social justice based on my personal experiences of disconnection and powerlessness in my family of origin and my culture.

I entered the social service field over three decades ago to bring about change—personal change, change for those with whom I worked, and (although I did not realize it at the time) change in social structures. My desire arose after experiencing abuse within my family and a sense of disconnection from an Anglo-Indian culture that I did not understand. This disconnection intersected with my perceived privilege as partly British and the experience of oppression and discrimination because of my skin colour and Indian descent. However, I developed a strong sense of identity and power as a woman rooted in a complex, nuanced intersection of a matriarchal family, a long lineage that emphasized survival from trauma, and a consistent ability to develop my own capacity and strength. Also, identifying with my British roots provided me with a sense of entitlement to what I saw as my rights, including the right to speak up, to have my voice heard, and to participate in society.

Throughout my life, I have also experienced and witnessed social injustice firsthand as a woman from poor, working-class roots, and, in particular, as an immigrant to Canada, a woman of colour, a lesbian, a single mother with a now-grown child, a social work practitioner, and now a social work educator working in academia. Early in my social work career, I observed the disconnect between the understanding of social justice and the degree to which social work practitioners operationalized it. Rossiter (2001) maintains there is no innocence in helping, and therefore, my idealism and dreams of improving the lives of children, youth, families, and communities met some harsh realities. In the 1990s, while working as a social worker in southern Ontario, I experienced the devolution and fragmentation of social services, a lack of resources, increasing discrimination and harshness in society, and ignorance about the systemic oppression that marginalized and vulnerable groups face. As I progressed through different social service jobs during that decade, I realized that I was complicit in these systems by following rigid and limiting policies and processes for service users. I developed an understanding of the larger structural work needed to alleviate oppression and erase the margins that isolated individuals, families, and communities from full societal participation and citizenship. I recognized that my professional ability to affect change was limited and that even constructive anger would only take me so far.

I grew increasingly disquieted about how to practise from a socially just perspective. I struggled with engaging meaningfully with vulnerable individuals and recognized how my practice manifested issues of inequity and oppression. I wrestled with the way social services engaged with vulnerable individuals and communities and my silence in maintaining these systems. I therefore started to alter my practice to confront managers on unjust policies, challenge colleagues on elitist practice, and inform clients about their rights and the avenues to

pursue them. I continued to work with clients with an understanding centred on the nuances and complexity of their lived experiences.

After graduating from an MSW program, I became an instructor and field adviser in both a community college and a master's-level program in social work. I taught courses about social justice, oppression, marginalization, social policy, and diversity in Canada. I increasingly recognized that much of my practice involved addressing issues of privilege in the profession and challenging how social work was complicit with systems of inequity and oppression by upholding inequitable processes and structures.

As a social work practitioner and educator, I was ethically conflicted about the ways I was required to maintain the status quo as I continued to practise and teach. My activist-scholar persona propelled me to take action and my research question started to form. To this end, I began to wonder how other social workers who profess a commitment to social justice find meaning in the term. Finding meaning in this context looks beyond abstract definitions to understanding the values, experiences, and positionalities (Postan-Aizik et al., 2019) that make up the reasons that social work practitioners make a commitment to social justice in their practice. In addition, we “talk the talk” in the profession about social justice being a foundational value, but I had developed serious questions about whether we “walk the walk.” I wanted my research question to investigate the extent to which the values were consistent with behaviour or actions in practise. Argyris and Schon (as cited in Savaya & Gardner, 2012) suggest that an individual's behaviours are guided by two theories: espoused theories (the values that we believe guide our behaviour) and theory in action (the values that motivate our behaviour). Many of us are unaware that the values we embrace may not be reflected in our efforts (Savaya & Gardner, 2012). In my practice experience and throughout my academic journey in the MSW and now the

PhD program, I have become increasingly convinced that social justice must be more than rhetoric in the practice of social work.

For me, social justice is first and foremost political work because it is inherently about who has power. This political lens has emerged from and been informed by both my personal and my professional experiences. Social justice is about who has the power to make decisions for those who are marginalized and vulnerable and who gets to decide the quality of life for individuals, families, and communities. This is the positioning with which I come to this research project, and as an activist-scholar I clearly see that this research is a political project and, therefore, not value-neutral. My understanding of the world is that the personal is political: people's everyday lives are impacted by and impact the society in which we live. I see social justice as both a philosophy and an action, each inextricably intertwined with the other. I believe that understanding multiple underlying political assumptions of the term *social justice* is crucial to knowing what we are genuinely discussing when we talk about social justice as foundational to social work. Further, I want to understand how this understanding is manifested in everyday practices or actions of social workers who are committed to social justice.

Epistemological Stance

Without understanding the various interpretations, assumptions, values, and power dynamics (Postan-Aizik et al., 2019) behind various conceptualizations of social justice in social work, practitioners struggle with the meaning, goals, and practice of social justice (Mullaly, 2010). To gain this understanding, I used critical progressive postmodernism as a theoretical approach to investigate the embedded assumptions and perspectives underlying the murky insertion of social justice into social work (Fook, 2002). Critical postmodernism recognizes different ways of knowing (Fook, 2003), critiques the status quo, and considers “language as the

basis for critique and action” (Best & Kellner, 1991, p. 22). It seeks to uncover underlying political and social assumptions (Foster, 1999), raising new questions about how social work practitioners come to understand social justice and the manifestation of that understanding in their everyday practices.

A critical postmodern lens has inspired me to explore the underlying assumptions behind social justice, as well as the world view(s) that shape the approaches that social workers use to further social justice in micro and macro practice. This lens provides me with an opportunity to consider the differing understandings of social justice in social work. Critical theory embraces an emancipatory purpose by emphasizing political and transformational processes (Finn & Jacobson, 2008) to expose the underlying assumptions about social justice in social work (Agger, 1991). Together with critical theory, postmodernism submits that positivism conceals assumptions that necessitate such exposure (Agger, 1991), and asserts that historical, social, political, and cultural contexts shape the understanding and practice of social justice (Mullaly, 2007). Critical postmodernism first invites understanding based on the material structures of oppression and marginalization. It then connects this understanding with historical and contextual discussions underlying social justice philosophies, arguments, and approaches in social work.

Postmodernism forms a continuum from the conservative or extreme relativist position to the more progressive postmodernism of resistance, which more closely aligns with the radical politics of social transformation (Lane, 1999, p. 137). “Progressive” postmodernism refers to the school of thought that aligns and engages with critical theory and focuses on how local and individual concerns interact with social and political forces (D’Amico, 2007) to further social justice.

A critical progressive postmodern framework, therefore, supports the development of an integrated understanding of critical theory and postmodernism by challenging and reducing the modernist limitations of binary thinking such as either/or, and universal/relative (C. G. Brown, 2012). Critical progressive postmodernism is a necessary departure from both an essentialist view of modernity (absolute and totalizing truths) and a conservative view of postmodernism (relative and approximate truths) (Liebenberg, 1988). Both these approaches risk being fixed, ahistorical, and deterministic if their prevailing assumptions are not interrogated and deconstructed (C. G. Brown, 2012).

Critical progressive postmodernism understands power not only from a top-down perspective that is repressive and marginalizing but also from a lateral, relational perspective where power is everywhere and can support and reproduce dominant relations (Healy, 2001). Power can be understood as emerging from the bottom up where it can be used to empower and resist domination and oppression (Pease et al., 2003). Critical postmodernism is a multiperspective theory that would provide opportunities to articulate different standpoints, respect their differences, and unpack common interests (Best & Kellner, 1991, p. 267).

A critical progressive postmodern perspective uncovers dominant assumptions about the political values and ideology that underpin social justice and their assimilation into social work. It questions the belief of a value-free (Agger, 1991) modernist understanding of social justice. It is about “unsettling, reorienting and redefining” (Chambon et al., 1999, p. 53) what we know about social justice in social work. Critical progressive postmodernism provides an opportunity to interrogate the tensions, contradictions, opportunities, and barriers to the practice of social justice in social work.

An Overview

In this chapter, I have introduced my understanding and rationale for my research study as well as my epistemological orientation. In the next chapter I provide three elements of the context in which social justice is practised in Canadian social work: (a) a contemporary historical context in terms of the last one hundred years, (b) the current climate in which social justice is practised, and (c) current research about social justice in social work.

Chapter 2: Situating Social Justice in Social Work in Canada

The Historical Context of Canadian Social Work

In 21st-century, pluralist¹ Canada, the ethos of egalitarianism and a belief in both individual and collective rights are widely accepted. Alongside this ethos, social work has developed to serve and enhance the well-being of clients and service users. However, liberalism and a legacy of individualism have also historically provided foundations for Canadian social work (Gil, 1998). As a result, Canadian social work has a long history rooted in self-determination and individualism and, paradoxically, a long history rooted in social and distributive justice (Baines, 2011; Ferguson, 2008; Lundy, 2011).

The two differing approaches to Canadian social work practice began in the period between the 1880s and 1920s known as the Progressive Era. During this time, industrialization, urbanization, and immigration (Lundy & van Wormer, 2007) introduced an intersecting multitude of social problems including unemployment, poverty, housing deficits, substandard housing conditions, diseases, and ill health (Jennissen & Lundy, 2011, p. 1). These social problems were indicative of a period of crisis in Western countries and rooted in the move from rural areas and the loss of the mutual aid inherent in rural communities. The move to urban areas, where political corruption and a lack of resources were pronounced for those who experienced poverty, emphasized the inequities between the classes. This was an impetus for leaders of social movements to call for social change.

In the early part of the Progressive Era, relief for these social problems were provided by church-based charities, which included some in the Settlement Houses Movement (SHM) and

¹ a state of society in which members of diverse ethnic, racial, religious, or social groups maintain and develop their traditional culture or special interest within the confines of a common civilization (“Pluralism,” n.d.)

others in the Charitable Organization Society (COS), the focus of which was to provide food and shelter for the poor. However, as each defined social problems (and solutions) differently, they developed different responses to poverty and social injustice and, as a result, two differing approaches to social work practice and education developed (Lundy, 2011). The COS emphasized a scientific approach to assistance based on self-determination and providing limited resources, which led to policing, supervision, surveillance, and registration of those in need of assistance. Contemporary case work practice in social work is rooted in the work of the COS. The SHM valued inclusion rather than equality and served those experiencing poverty by living among the community and serving the poor directly. They also drew on wealthy benefactors to fund their work. In contemporary social work, sectors of practice such as community organizing and group work have roots in the SHM. Both of these movements grew out of Britain and evolved in North America during the same period (1920s). Both focused on alleviating poverty, but they had different foundations, perspectives, and strategies to address people living in poverty

The practice of social justice in the Canadian profession of social work has ebbed and flowed throughout the last 100-plus years. Jennissen and Lundy (2014) document social work's historically fractured relationship with social justice in Canada. These tensions and approaches in practice continue to the present day. The following section describes the historical development of the social work profession in Canada and the origins of the professional and educational tensions that continue to exist between the legacy of individualism and the pursuit of social justice. Both the SHM and the COS had roots in social justice reform in their respective early development. The SHM sought to achieve social justice through community development and

political activism. The COS pursued social justice by engaging individuals in their own individual advocacy and personal agency (Haynes & White, 1999).

Settlement House Movement (SHM)

The pursuit of social justice in social work has its roots in the SHM in Britain, the United States, and Canada (Heinonen & Spearman, 2006, p. 10). Canada's settlement houses were modelled after Toynbee Hall, founded in London, England, in 1884. While there were significantly larger numbers of houses in Britain and the United States, Canada established 13 settlement establishments (James, 2001, p. 66). Jane Addams's work at Hull House in Chicago influenced social justice in Canada by combining SHMs with social gospel principles to promote a progressive Christian response to social problems (Jennisson & Lundy, 2011, p. 5).

Settlement houses were intended "to act as a bridge between disparate social groups, as a research facility to aid in the scientific investigation of social problems, and as a 'laboratory' for the development of innovative social programs which, if they proved beneficial, state or community agencies could adopt" (James, 2001, p. 65). Acting on the "principle of social responsibility" (Haynes & White, 1999, p. 386), settlement house workers developed programs to address the unique needs of the communities and neighbourhoods in which they worked and resided (Haynes & White, 1999, p. 386). The movement evolved from a charity, church-based movement to a secular movement primarily based on the community-based model (Jennissen & Lundy, 2011). The SHM began to explain that the structural roots of social "problems were a result of society's failure, not the individual's weaknesses" (Haynes & White, 1999, p. 386). However, the SHM was criticized by some for receiving financial support from the elite class and thereby supporting the status quo (Haynes & White, 1999) of benevolence and charity from the industrialists and the wealthy class.

The SHM became less influential in the 1920s as a result of growing urban populations and the belief that the SHM was not effective in meeting the needs of those living in poverty, and the push for more government interventions. Because of the perceived threats of Marxism, the Russian Revolution, and World War I, the SHM's social reform ideas were viewed with suspicion and seen as subversive by the Canadian state (Jennissen & Lundy, 2011). Further, SHM was seen as perpetuating the status quo but also as social activism. This perception was further supported by increasing conservatism, labour unrest, and the belief that poverty would result in violence by the working class (Jennissen & Lundy, 2011).

During the Progressive Era, the professionalization of social work became the preoccupation of the profession. In the speech "Is Social Work a Profession?" in 1915, Abraham Flexner asserted that social work was not a profession and saw practitioners as technicians with a narrow focus on individual issues with no reference to working for structural change. This difference became the basis of the professional and educational tensions that continue to exist between a social justice and social reform approach on the one hand and a casework approach to social work on the other (Jennissen & Lundy, 2011; Lundy, 2011).

Charity Organization Society (COS)

The COS began in Britain in 1869. The first Canadian COS opened in Toronto in 1888 (Heinonen & Spearman, 2006). The COS was based on the Poor Laws and the charity model. Relief was provided with in-kind charity, and only to those deemed "deserving" and "worthy" (Jennissen & Lundy, 2011). In-kind charity was provided based on the principle of personal responsibility and the premise that individuals could help themselves and assist one another. Friendly visiting was the cornerstone of the early COSs, which emphasized the importance of continued personal contact with families and individuals until a case was successfully completed

(Heinonen & Spearman, 2006). “Successful completion” was based on a systematic, rationalistic, professional approach to social work practice.

During this time, the COS also developed the first social work training program in Canada in 1910 at the University of Toronto, followed by a similar program at McGill University (Jennisson & Lundy, 2011). Mary Richmond, one of America’s social work pioneers, was a founding contributor to a predominantly individual focus on a social casework framework that included concepts of diagnosis, assessment, and treatment, borrowed from the emerging fields of psychology and psychiatry at the time. This stark shift from community organizing to casework was the basis of the medical model of social work practice. Richmond was also a pioneer in developing ideas of the strengths-based perspective, the therapeutic relationship, and an understanding of the person-in-their-environment in social work (Heinonen & Spearman, 2006), which perpetuated the notion of individual responsibility. The COS casework approach was very much aligned with the dominant values and beliefs of the time, including notions of deserving and undeserving poor and the belief that social problems originated in the individual or family. This alignment played a significant role in social work’s professional identity, practice frameworks and techniques and social work education (Lundy, 2011).

While COS’s contributions to social work were significant, the same tenets described above were the basis for criticisms of the COS legacies. The COS response to social inequalities and poverty maintained and embedded dominant social values, thereby perpetuating class, racial, ethnic, and gender bias while maintaining the superiority of the middle and upper class, men, white people, and those who were British or Scottish in ethnic origin (Dominelli, 2002; Haynes & White, 1999; Heinonen & Spearman, 2006).

A century later, social work in both education and practice continues to mitigate these divergent tensions amidst the varied interpretations and practice of social justice.

Social Justice to the End of the 20th Century

Progressive forms of social work have dated from pre-professionalization to current critical forms of social work, fading and reigniting based on the social and political climate (Abramovitz, 1998). The Great Depression of the 1930s revived the need to centralize social justice in social work. In Canada, the economic collapse resulted in mass unemployment, homelessness, and poverty (Hick, 2007). This created a significant change in the Canadian political arena and initiated the welfare state.

The social gospel movement brought together a coalition from socialist groups and the labour movement to create the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation (CCF), the first Canadian socialist party and the precursor of today's New Democratic Party (NDP). The goal of the CCF was to establish universal program for pensions, health and welfare, children, and unemployment (J. T. Morley, 2021). The government began to assume responsibility for social welfare and the redistribution of resources.

During this time, social work was at a crossroads as described by Bertha Reynolds (1963), a social worker in the Rank and File movement:

Social work today is standing at the crossroads. It may go on with its face toward the past, bolstering up the decaying profit system, having to defend what is indefensible for the sake of money, which pays for its services. On the other hand it may envision a future in which professional social services as well as education, medical services and the like shall be the unquestioned right of all, conferred not as a benefit but as society's only way of maintaining itself. (p. 143)

In *Regulating the Poor: The Functions of Public Welfare*, Piven and Cloward (1971) describe two primary functions of the welfare state—the maintenance of civil order and the regulation of low-wage labour, both intended to keep the capitalist system stable. During the era between the mid-1950s and the 1970s, social workers began to be involved in service delivery and political reform. During this time, social workers were required to simultaneously perform a social control function in the access and delivery of resources and a social care function by helping people (Jennisson & Lundy, 2011).

During the 1940s, some social work practitioners developed a more politicized perspective. Even so, except for a handful of social work activists, the profession was significantly absent from engaging in social action and social reform, remaining focused primarily on direct practice, and legitimizing the profession (Jennissen & Lundy, 2011). The social work scholars, educators, and practitioners who did invest in social action did so outside of the profession since they received little support within social work (Jennissen & Lundy, 2011).

In the 1950s, the Communist scare, conservative ideology, and public protest at the expansion of the welfare state made it difficult for any reform or social justice social work practice to be undertaken in Canada. This era also saw the professionalization of social work deepen its fractured relationship with social justice (Carniol, 2010; Jennissen & Lundy, 2011), maintaining ongoing tensions and turbulence in social work practice and education (Reisch, 2002).

The 1960s brought social and political unrest from civil rights movements that challenged the social and institutional status quo. There was greater recognition of the structures that marginalized, oppressed, and disenfranchised groups. Such movements sought more actively to

create a more just society. The scholarship of community activism by social activist Saul Alinsky (1971) began to be studied in social work education as a part of the critique of the profession. Community development (from the SHM movement) regained prominence in social work education and became a formalized part of the curriculum in Canada, including community organizing as a specialization (Lundy, 2011).

From the mid-1960s into the 1970s, social work educators lamented that the profession had moved away from its emancipatory social roots and that individual clinical practice was out of step with a more politicized client base (Specht & Courtney, 1994; Shapiro, as cited in Jennissen & Lundy, 2014). Due to the entrenchment of conservative values in Canadian society (Jennissen & Lundy, 2011), social work's discontent with its own diagnostic practice approaches called for methods that connected individual issues to public policies (Schwartz, as cited in Jennissen & Lundy, 2011). This discontent invited the profession to bridge the gap between the micro-focused ambitions of clinical practice and the macro-oriented desires of justice that were more liberating on a structural level. Social work education, therefore, embarked on a renewed discussion of emancipatory social justice (Fook, 2014; Healy, 2000; Mullaly, 2007) The most salient framework was the Structural Approach, developed by Canadian Maurice Moreau as an emancipatory approach for social work (Carniol, 2010). This early version of a structural approach to practice was significant to furthering progressive forms of social work and connected individual problems while looking at the underlying causes of social problems (Fook, 2002) and their impacts in creating unequal relationships between individuals (M. Weinberg, 2008).

In the late 20th century, Canada enshrined civil and political democracy with the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (1982). The Charter constitutionally established

notions of equality and freedom that became an irrevocable part of Canadian national identity (Woodford, 2005). The federal Human Rights Commission, established in 1977, and various provincial human rights tribunals protected the values of the Charter and served as a means to promote and enforce citizens' basic rights (Government of Canada, 2022).

In the mid-1980s, shortly after the adoption of the Charter, governments around the world experienced another wave of economic crises. Neoliberal and conservative political agendas were on the rise and resulted in the dismantling of the welfare state, the beginning of privatization, and the proliferation of economic and social globalization. These factors severely diminished the welfare state's ability to meet the needs of those who were marginalized in society. It also tied the hands of social workers, who maintained that social reform was a part of their work within this harsh neoliberal climate (Dominelli, 1997; Mullaly, 2007; Reamer, 1993; Reisch, 2002). Even with a commitment to universal programs that were a significant improvement in the lives of Canadians, Canada began to distance itself from the welfare state by dismantling social programs (Jennissen & Lundy, 2011; Mullaly, 2007) and furthered a reliance on the free market and capitalism. The lack of response from the profession nationally did not stop local jurisdictions from reiterating a call to be more focused on social justice issues (Jennissen & Lundy, 2011, p. 283).

The rise of globalization since the 1980s remains the current challenge for the practice of social justice in Canada. In addition to economic reform, globalization also encompasses political, cultural, social, and political aspects that raise significant intersectional issues for nation-states. These issues include challenges in maintaining national boundaries and political sovereignty, the movement of labour, the impact of cultural diversity, the maintenance of specific geopolitical welfare policies, and human rights (Ife, 2012).

The tension and challenge of globalization is a

clash between two opposing views of society: on the one side are people who seek open borders for increasing the mobility of their investment, trade, labour, and money flows with minimal government intervention; and on the other are those who make social justice their priority and call for globalization from below, attempting to build a shared international sense of how best to meet societal needs around the world. (Ghorayshi et al., 2007, p. 216)

In the 1990s, globalization deepened inequality in Canada when the Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement came into effect in 1989 (later superseded by NAFTA, which included Mexico, and then by the Canada–U.S.–Mexico Agreement). This agreement had an impact on the mobility of labour and income distribution, primarily for more vulnerable work sectors such as trades and unskilled labour (Schwanen, 2001). It also renewed the discussion of the diminished future of the welfare state (Barlow, 1999). During this time, social work was criticized for its movement away from its social justice roots (Ritter, 2007; Specht & Courtney, 1994). However, globalization also increased the call for a more explicit inclusion of social justice in social work practice and education. Scholars continued to challenge social work’s underlying assumptions of social control or social emancipation (Mullaly & West, 2018; Specht & Courtney, 1994) within this neoliberal environment.

Specht and Courtney (1994) argued that “social work [had] abandoned its mission to help the poor and oppressed and instead focus[ed] on devoting their energies and talents to careers in psychotherapy” (p. 4). Scholars at this particular time challenged Specht and Courtney’s arguments about the conflict between social justice and direct practice by outlining social justice practices in clinical social work (Finn & Jacobson, 2008; A. M. McLaughlin, 2002; Swenson,

1998; Wakefield, 1988b; Waldegrave & Tamasese, 1994) and connecting front-line social work with anti-oppressive practice (Baines, 2011). During this period, critical social work emerged and has continued into the 21st century with contemporary discussions connecting postmodernism and the analysis of power (Heron, 2005; Lundy, 2011; Mullaly, 2007; Rossiter, 2005), language, and discourse (Healy, 2000; Mullaly, 2007; Ife, 2016). This adoption of critical approaches along with transformative methods continues to remind the social work profession of the importance of incorporating social justice in social work practice.

Social justice as a foundational principle in social work has deep roots. The practice of social justice in the profession of social work has had a fractured relationship throughout the last 100 years. It has usually been practised by a few in times of austerity and crisis based on particular social, cultural, and political developments in Canadian society. Additionally, the tensions in practice continue into the 21st century and include more than the legacy of individualism and the continued tension between social activism and social casework. The tensions also must now include the entrenchment of neoliberalism in the West, particularly in Canada and more specifically in social work. Social justice is, therefore, more complex, contextual, and challenging for social workers.

Social Work Practice in the Current Neoliberal Climate

As summarized in the previous section, Canadian social work has developed in response to issues manifested by urbanization, industrialization, and capitalism. Over the last 40 years, a new form of capitalism and globalization has emerged as a radical free market ideology (L. Watts & Hodgson, 2019) with the advancement of neoliberalism as a destructive economic and social worldview and practice that disenfranchises many and maintains the status quo for those in elite and privileged positions. No uniform definition for neoliberalism exists; however, many

scholars agree that it represents underlying values that support and maintain the status quo and promote individualism, market fundamentalism, and privatization (Garrow & Hasenfeld, 2014; Midgley, 2001; Mulally, 2007; Ritzer, 2008). While neoliberalism can provide stability and support to societal systems, it also promotes economic inequality, dependency, and individualistic values, all of which can restrict community organizing and social change (Choudry & Shragge, 2011; Pyles, 2009). Neoliberalism is also seen as a way to dismantle social welfare and promote policies that are market-driven to shift wealth and power to corporations at the expense of citizens (Brownlee, 2005; S. George, 1999).

Neoliberalism is not a homogeneous ideology. It has been characterized as having positive and negative characteristics across a continuum, having spawned a variety of innovations such as developing proficiency and cost-effective measures in human and social services which can be seen to have both positive and negative effects. Neoliberalism has also institutionalized the free-market philosophy through organizational processes within and across diverse worldwide geopolitical contexts (Gray et al., 2015, p. 150), which have been described as the privatization of everything (M. Watts, 1994).

Neoliberalism presents free-market capitalism as the most efficient way to resolve issues in society (Spolander et al., 2016). However, neoliberalism in its current form moves away from free-market economics that rest on supply and demand toward the intentional manipulation of markets that serve the wealthy and powerful elites (Gray et. al., 2015). In this form, neoliberalism promotes inequality and is problematic in its promotion of individual and social well-being because it dismantles social programs. Many social work scholars contend that neoliberalism is central to the creation and perpetuation of injustice (Ife, 2016; Mullaly, 2007; Nipperess & Pease, 2016). It has had a dramatic impact on all dimensions of practice in social

work, acting as a barrier to furthering a commitment to social justice, both in the past (Jennissen & Lundy, 2011) and in present social work practice (Belkin-Martinez & Fleck-Henderson, 2014; Brady & O'Connor, 2014; Lundy, 2011).

The current neoliberal political environment in Canada impacts social work, leaving its workers to struggle with scarce resources, scramble amid funding cuts, cope with top-heavy structures, and juggle incongruent policies, agency mandates, and social attitudes. Mainstream social work functions within this structure and may be apolitical and neutral, with little critical perspective (Dominelli, 1997). This environment has left an opening for neoliberalism, globalization, and free trade to progressively reshape social work as a profession into an evidence-based enterprise (Baines, 2011; Lundy, 2011; Mullaly, 2007). The move toward “evidence” (usually essentialized to client numbers and efficiency) neglects the profession’s foundational principle of social justice. Further, some scholars believe social work continues to suffer from an identity crisis (Westhues et al., 2001) between its social-structural and individual-empiricist roots.

Most social workers are employed or funded via governments. This makes it challenging to suggest practices that counter neoliberalism because such ideas jeopardize the funding necessary for those who use social services to live on a day-to-day basis (Baines, 2011). Privatizing social services and health care under free trade makes it impossible to adhere to standard environmental, health, and social security standards (Lundy, 2011). Since many social workers are employed in these sectors, they too face threats to their ethical call to challenge the state and work for the rights of people who are vulnerable and marginalized (Garrow & Hasenfeld, 2014). The rise of the private sector in providing social services means services related to social care and intervention are now a commodity to be bought and sold as part of a

business transaction (Dominelli & Hoogvelt, 1996), the value of which fluctuates according to business principles and market valuations. The neoliberal emphasis on evidence-based practice limits community practice to ventures that are scientific, neutral, value-free, and best left to professionals (Brady & O'Connor, 2014). This approach also maintains that change occurs incrementally within the system, rather than changing the system itself (Brady, 2012; Mullaly, 2007).

Unfortunately, for all social workers and particularly those who practise social justice, professional regulations have taken a business orientation (Harris, 1998), leaving the field struggling with evidence-based models and persistent oversight through managerialism. Managerialism and bureaucratization of the profession leave little time for social justice practice (Gray et al., 2015), as social work practitioners contend with requirements to do more with fewer resources and employ business models that require time spent on micromanaging output and performance (Belkin-Martinez & Fleck-Henderson, 2014; G. Bradley et al., 2010; Lundy, 2011). Social work has been forced to rationalize privatized delivery in health and social service and reduced roles of government in service provision (Ferguson & Woodward, 2009; Garrett, 2014; Lawler, 2013). Further, neoliberal managerialism and bureaucratization “create powerlessness-inducing structures and environments in which social workers are discouraged from fulfilling social justice ideals, and in consequence social workers are more concerned with rationing resources than with social reform activities” (Kam, 2014, p. 730). This creates pressure to find “ways to do it” with less focus on the context of the clients’ issues (Rossiter, 2005, p. 194). In addition to managerialism and bureaucratization, contingent, part-time, and nonunion work environments, increased instability for social workers, demands for longer work hours, and the

stress to meet higher demands leave little time to focus on issues of justice (Belkin-Martinez & Fleck-Henderson, 2014).

The neoliberal agenda thus leaves social work struggling to understand service delivery for vulnerable people in a neoliberal context. Caputo (2002) has even questioned whether social justice is possible given the neoliberal, capitalist forces which dominate North America (Belkin-Martinez & Fleck-Henderson, 2014). The call for social justice in social work continues into the 21st century with complex interconnections between capitalism, globalization, and neoliberal practice climates. Social work in North America contends with structural inequities associated with globalization processes that overvalue the market and undervalue citizenship participation, institutions' responses, and social justice (Baines, 2011; Carniol, 2010; Fook, 2002; Mullaly, 2007; Turbett et al., 2014). Society's most vulnerable suffer the most (Lundy, 2011) as they become even less eligible for already scarce resources. The erosion of the welfare state is the result of a lack of state intervention and the overvaluing of free-market solutions that privilege those who have most to gain. In other words, social justice in contemporary Canadian social work is maintained under a neoliberal regime where the focus of social justice is based on individual freedoms (CASW, 2005a) but not institutional adjustments or societal transformation. While there is considerable international scholarship that explores the practice of social justice in social work, few studies do so in a Canadian geopolitical, sociocultural context and, more specifically, in southern Ontario, Canada. Considering the implications of neoliberalism, globalization, and capitalism, the conceptualization and practice of social justice by social workers in its various domains becomes salient.

There is also scant research examining the commitment of experienced practitioners and how this commitment is manifested in their everyday practice, particularly in a neoliberal climate

in Canada. However, social justice is embedded in the Canadian Social Work Code of Ethics as a foundational and organizing principle. Therefore, it is critical to understand how social justice is conceptualized in the current iteration of the Canadian Association of Social Workers *Code of Ethics* (CASW, 2005a).

Canadian Association of Social Work Code of Ethics

Social justice is a consistent foundational value in many social work codes of ethics globally. However, given the different constructions of historical, geopolitical, cultural, and social contexts of nation-states, social justice is interpreted differently in different jurisdictions. The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) suggests that social work is widely agreed to have its origins in humanitarian and democratic principles (Blennberger, 2006) and “a responsibility to engage people in achieving social justice, in relation to society generally, and in relation to the people with whom they work” (International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW], 2018, para. 7). The IFSW also claims an adherence to challenging discrimination and institutional oppression, respect for diversity, access to equitable resources and wealth, challenging unjust policies and practices, and building solidarity (IFSW, 2018). The IFSW suggests these requirements be met by social workers on the basis of the cultural, economic, social, and geopolitical context of their particular national code of ethics.

In Canada, social work has claimed social justice as a foundational value since its inception (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2014; Payne, 2005). Professional associations such as the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) and the Ontario Association of Social Workers (OASW), regulatory social work bodies such as the Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Service Workers (OCSWSSW), accrediting bodies such as the Canadian Association of Social Work Education (CASWE), and all academic institutions demand that social workers

respect and work toward social justice. Currently, social justice is embedded as a foundational value in the Canadian Association of Social Workers *Code of Ethics* (CASW, 2005a) and as an aim for practice, research, and education. The CASW *Code of Ethics* (2005a) states in the “Pursuit of Social Justice” principle:

Social workers believe in the obligation of people, individually and collectively, to provide resources, services and opportunities for the overall benefit of humanity and to afford them protection from harm. Social workers promote social fairness and the equitable distribution of resources, and act to reduce barriers and expand choice for all persons, with special regard for those who are marginalized, disadvantaged, vulnerable, and/or have exceptional needs. Social workers oppose prejudice and discrimination against any person or group of persons, on any grounds, and specifically challenge views and actions that stereotype particular persons or groups. (p. 5).

The “Pursuit of Social Justice” principle highlights the commitment of the profession to promoting social justice for the most vulnerable in society by ensuring the equitable distribution of resources, services, and opportunities. The notions of “fairness”, “equitable,” and “basic human needs” reflect assumptions about how to further social justice based on divergent political worldviews. Briskman (2001) maintains that since the Code of Ethics does not clearly articulate the underlying assumptions of these notions, social workers cannot understand how to practise from this professional ethical requirement. In other words, there are no concrete practice guidelines or requirements of social justice in professional practice.

In Principle 3 regarding “Service to Humanity,” the CASW (2005a) states:

The social work profession upholds service in the interests of others, consistent with social justice, as a core professional objective. In professional practice, social workers

balance individual needs, and rights and freedoms with collective interests in the service of humanity. When acting in a professional capacity, social workers place professional service before personal goals or advantage, and use their power and authority in disciplined and responsible ways that serve society. The social work profession contributes to knowledge and skills that assist in the management of conflicts and the wide-ranging consequences of conflict. (p. 5)

The principle of “Service to Humanity” builds on social workers’ commitment to social justice and integrates the balance between individual needs and the public good. In terms of a specific role for social workers, this principle highlights the obligation of social workers to use their knowledge and skills to address and manage conflict. However, without clarity, social workers are left with an inability to distinguish the balance between individual needs and the public good. Also, the statement lacks clarity and direction as to the type and source of conflict which social workers are to engage and manage. Social workers are further left with the challenge of determining how far they can go to “manage” conflict, especially if the conflict involves the competing values of oppressive practices, processes, and outcomes from the state, their workplaces, and/or the profession.

The CASW *Guidelines for Ethical Practice* (2005b), also maintains that social workers have an ethical responsibility to society by participating in social action, advocacy, human rights actions both locally and globally, and promotes “safeguard[ing] the rights of and confirm[ing] equity and social justice for all people” (p. 25) as a guideline for practice. However, Figueira-McDonough (2006) suggests that social work is complicit in “rhetorical window dressing” (p. 3) when we claim a commitment to social justice without specifying how we operationalize that commitment. Consequently, social workers who practise in different dimensions (micro, macro)

of practice grapple with the meaning of ethical responsibility and the practice of social justice in the face of such contradictions and contested ideas.

The *Code of Ethics* has also been criticized as having a limited view of social justice. Even though social justice is a central value, its meaning is unclear and contested (Solas, 2008, p. 124) and the *Code* contains divergent priorities and principles. These divergences are not discussed, nor are the actions for social justice translated into practice (Clark, 1999). This is because there is a “lack of philosophical foundations, application of ethical theory or any reference to normative concepts” (Stewart, 2013, p. 165) applied to the concept of social justice in the *Code of Ethics*. As discussed earlier, the use of language does not unpack the philosophical foundations, nor does social justice have implications for practice without outlining the requirements in the Standards of Practice in the *Code of Ethics*.

Noble and Briskman (1996) maintain that social justice conceptualizations place a “high value on individualism, independence, and homogeneity of the client characterized by liberal democracies” (p. 3). Scanlon and Longres (2001) and O’Brien (2011) posit that there are no explicit definitions of social justice to enable practitioners to create their own meaning. In *Subversive Action: Extralegal Practices for Social Justice*, Alex Hundert (2015), a left-wing radical activist, suggests that professional social workers use the *Code of Ethics* to oppress clients through their authority. He asserts that “enforcement of a particular set of standards and ethical codes is very much a central part of the ways that modern (and postmodern systems of oppression operate” (Hundert & Mandell, 2015, p. 19).

The *Code of Ethics* maintains a (re)distributive view of social justice that simply compensates victims of social injustice and does nothing to remedy structural injustices that perpetuate the inequalities and inequities experienced by people who are marginalized and

oppressed because of their identities (Mullaly, 2007, p. 52). The *Code* also fails to address the types of social justice it is calling for, who really benefits from justice (Solas, 2008), and what it includes and omits (L. Watts & Hodgson, 2019).

The following section discusses how social justice has been understood across current empirical research studies about social justice in social work.

Situating Social Justice in Current Empirical Research in Social Work Practice

Social justice has been an essential foundation in both historical and contemporary discussions in social work. There have been several studies focused on the ways in which social justice is taken up in social work and how social workers understand and practise social justice (Irizarry et al., 2016; Morgaine, 2014; O'Brien, 2011). In this section studies will be explored based on how social justice is taken up in social work. There have been a few studies that have explored how social workers understand social justice conceptually (Irizarry et al., 2016; Morgaine, 2014; O'Brien, 2011, 2017; Olson et al., 2013). In the clinical empirical studies, researchers explored the conceptual understanding of social justice in clinical practice (A.M. McLaughlin, 2011), across different practice contexts (A. M. McLaughlin et al., 2015, 2017), and how social justice is operationalized in private practice (Slater, 2020). Hair (2015) explored the process of developing social justice practice through clinical supervision.

Over the last twelve years several studies have focused on the ways in which social justice is taken up in social work and how social workers understand social justice (Irizarry et al., 2016; Morgaine, 2014; O'Brien, 2011). This section describes empirical studies conducted over the last 12 years in Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States. This focus is due partly to U.S. and British influences on social work in Canada, and partly to these nations having

similar geopolitical contexts to Canada's. I begin with the earliest studies, as they have laid the foundation for more recent ones.

A New Zealand study (O'Brien, 2011) explored the many social justice ideas that were reflected in the different dimensions of social work practice. O'Brien (2011) found that social workers maintained social justice as central to their work, primarily understood at the individual level as "equality" and "fairness." However, equality and fairness took on different meanings for practitioners. O'Brien (2011) unpacked the various meanings of equality and fairness across the ideological spectrum, and concluded that some of these meanings uphold the status quo by wanting to have clients cope with barriers they face. One participant stated, "Advocacy, broker, networking, case manager type roles with organizations to ensure that [the] client has a voice and can cope with injustices that mentally ill persons live with in society" (O'Brien, 2011, p. 180). Another participant's understanding was more strongly aligned to social justice at the macro level: "My belief that this was oppressive, discriminatory and possibly antiracist behaviour provided confidence to challenge the behaviour of a consultant who was near the top of the DHB [District Health Board] hierarchy" (O'Brien, 2011, p. 180).

O'Brien (2011) also maintained that working on structural-level issues is stressful and demanding for social work practitioners. He also concluded that while deconstructing equality and fairness across its multiple meanings is a strong foundation for social justice practice, further research needs to be done exploring how social work practitioners understand social justice based on reducing social exclusion. He maintained that while practitioners report that social justice is part of their social work practice, further exploration is needed to identify how the operationalize social justice in their daily practices. His focus on the social change elements of

social justice left critics to paint an incomplete picture of the social justice work that social workers do in their practice.

In the United States, Morgaine's (2014) study explored the social work practitioners and students conceptualization of social justice. She conducted her study with 17 MSW students, practitioners, and educators and found that while some participants struggled to conceptualize social justice, many identified social justice as individual and rights-based with fairness and access being the primary focus. Morgaine contended that to move beyond this liberal understanding of social justice, diverse perspectives and a plurality of practitioners' experiences should be explored in future research about how social justice is conceptualized.

In Morgaine's (2014) study, participants shared their difficulties in applying social justice ideals in their workplaces because they perceived that work with clients was insufficient to create systemic and cultural changes. Morgaine concluded that little attention has been paid to how social workers understand social justice praxis—why social workers find meaning in the term, and whether and how they manifest this knowledge into action in their work. She also maintained that practitioners' experiences around time constraints and feeling overwhelmed with political and systemic aspects of social justice work is perhaps rooted in their suspicion about the perceived connections to radicalism and socialism.

Both Morgaine (2014) and O'Brien (2011) indicated that social workers often believe they were not doing enough social justice work as conceptualized at the macro level, i.e., through policy or institutional change work. This leaves social justice endeavours at the individual and micro level, and depending on how social justice is conceptualized (i.e., from an individualized perspective)—can lean toward blaming the victim and maintaining the status quo.

A study of social work practitioners by Olson et al. (2013), with 41 participants from diverse settings in the midwestern United States, found that participants were committed to their responsibility to social justice as defined by the American National Association of Social Workers (NASW) *Code of Ethics*. Further, similar to the workers in Morgaine's (2014) and O'Brien's (2011) studies, practitioners articulated at times vague and broad meanings in their understanding of social justice. Participants referred to terms such as *values, morals, fairness, equal rights and opportunity, social responsibility, resource redistribution, and a decent standard of living*. They also used the language of social justice, including terms such as *advocacy, empowerment, and rights* (Hawkins et al., 2001). As seen in other studies (O'Brien, 2011), this lack of a common understanding of the language used to describe social justice underlines the need to unpack the assumptions that underlie the term *social justice* to better understand how practitioners extend these understandings to their practice.

Social workers' advocacy is based on a liberal paradigm which seeks to equalize both rights and obligations (Olson et al., 2013). Olson et al. (2013) stated that "the category of justice to which discussions in social work usually refer is distributive justice, which refers to the way economic and social goods, services, rights and opportunities are distributed in a society" (p. 25). In this regard, study participants valued a collaborative approach between client, social worker, community, and government to alleviate the burden of injustice, instead of its being the social workers' responsibility alone. Further, practitioners also voiced frustration about being vulnerable to burnout due to dominant neoliberal and conservative views that were the prevailing discourse and constrained their social justice practices. While Olson et al. (2013) found that social workers' advocacy is based on a liberal paradigm (which seeks to equalize both rights and

obligations), they did not discuss the underlying ideological assumptions or the implications of equalizing both rights and obligations.

Irizarry et al. (2016) conducted a study with 12 experienced social work practitioners in a focus group in Adelaide, Australia. Participants were asked to provide insights and experiences about how the people they work with move from experiences of trauma and loss associated with unjust policies and practices toward seeking and obtaining social justice. They found that practitioners had difficulty defining social justice and how it translated into their practice (Irizarry et al., 2016). However, like O'Brien (2011), Irizarry et al. found that practitioners' discussions were synergetic with Just Practice as a conceptual framework to incorporate meaning, context, and power as important to their social justice practice. More specifically, they emphasized history (understanding the history that shapes client's lives) and possibility (a way to look forward from the history that made clients who they were) as key themes in social justice practice. They also maintained that it is important to be aware of barriers that constrain social justice, including the tensions between agency mandates and social work ethics, issues about power in terms of funding allocation, and the role of social workers in multidisciplinary settings.

According to Irizarry et al. (2016), practitioners noted barriers to social justice work when their clients were marginalized, and the need for a multitude of perspectives and a plurality of professional social work practices that were compatible with social justice. Irizarry et al. noted that such perspectives and practices must also consider the uniqueness of social work practice dimensions and contexts. Additionally, they asserted that the profession needs to incorporate the rich lived experience of practitioners and how they operationalize social justice in everyday practice. Ultimately, the study speaks to the intricacies and nuances of postmodernism to create a myriad of possibilities toward social justice in professional practice.

The studies above concur in showing that participants were not unified on the definition of social justice and that there was no unifying conceptual clarity on the term. Each study used a different theoretical perspective. O'Brien (2011) used critical conceptualization of social justice through the work of Nancy Fraser (2004), and like Irizarry et al. (2016) connected it to the Just Practice approach. Yet neither O'Brien (2011) nor Irizarry et al. (2016) unpacked the assumptions from their particular geopolitical social and cultural contexts of Australia and New Zealand. Participants in the U.S studies by Morgaine (2014) and Olson et al. (2013) conceptualized social justice based on liberal concepts of fairness and individual and rights-based underpinnings. However, neither explored the underlying assumptions of social justice based on liberal individualism. As in the studies in Australia and New Zealand, the U.S studies did not situate their studies based on a particular geopolitical, cultural, and social context.

The above studies provide overlapping elements such as the importance of social justice and lack of conceptual clarity (Irizarry et al., 2016; Morgaine, 2014; O'Brien, 2011; Olson et al., 2013). Some uncover advocacy practice as being important for social justice work (O'Brien, 2011; Olson et al., 2013), while others make visible the constraints on social justice work (Irizarry et al., 2016). However, the lack of clarity about the concept of social justice can reinforce a type of "practitioner paralysis" in enacting social justice in their work as practitioners and makes it difficult for practitioners to connect the personal issues of their clients to social problems. It can also make it difficult for practitioners to grasp the connection to practices at the systemic level. In addition, the importance of understanding the geopolitical and social context of practice helps situate social justice in terms of its development within the context of that nation-state before comparisons can be made more globally.

A few studies over the last 12 years explore the conceptualization and use of social justice in micro dimensions of practice (A. M. McLaughlin, 2011), in particular, sector-specific contexts such as child welfare (A. M. McLaughlin et al., 2015, 2017) and practitioners in private practice (Slater, 2020). Hair (2015) also studied social justice and clinical supervision as a way to develop and enhance social justice-oriented clinical practice.

A. M. McLaughlin (2011) conducted a qualitative study with 18 Canadian clinical social workers in western Canada relating to how they conceptualize and use the notion of social justice in their practice. She used a liberal discourse and Critical Theory to frame her exploration of social justice with clinical practitioners. The study identified three core categories of how social justice is understood by clinical practitioners: (a) social justice and injustice reside in social systems (e.g., health care policy); (b) social justice is a fair and equitable allocation of resources, and (c) social justice is the process of every person being respected and valued as transformative respect (A. M. McLaughlin, 2011). However, A. M. McLaughlin (2011) also maintained that clinical social workers might perceive their daily clinical work as less about social justice if they see social justice as structural or primarily systemic issues. It was also proposed, however, that when social justice is conceptualized as access to resources or as relationships with marginalized clients, clinicians saw a clearer link between their daily work and social justice.

A. M. McLaughlin's (2011) contributions to the social justice literature lies in her positioning her research in a Canadian context, her use of both liberal and critical theories particularly Axel Honneth's Recognition Theory and her immersion in Iris Marion Young's Politics of Difference. This combination framed her discussion of social justice with clinical social work practitioners. She exposed the misassumption that social justice work is legitimate only when it is aimed at policy or structural-level changes. The study also underscored some of

the tensions involved in practising social justice in clinical practice by describing the ethical concerns of politicizing work with clients. Similar to Olson et al. (2013) and Irizarry et al. (2016), A.M. McLaughlin's (2011) research contained an explicit discussion of the issues raised by the constraints of the neoliberal climate.

Further, A.M. McLaughlin calls for a multidimensional approach for social justice in social work. She uses liberal distributive literature to make her argument while identifying the need to pay attention to Recognition and Identity Theory but she does not explicitly elucidate the political underpinnings of social justice from both liberal and critical perspectives. This oversight contributes to the continuing lack of clarity among social justice perspectives.

A. M. McLaughlin et al. (2015) conducted a qualitative study on social justice and child protection workers in Canada. Using individual interviews with 25 practitioners and focus groups with 19 of the same practitioners, they showed that social justice is both a goal and a process in social work practice. Participants conceptualized social justice as a goal toward greater equality, fairness, and rights. Yet they also saw social justice as a relational process grounded in empowerment and respect within the therapeutic relationship. They recognized that inequity significantly impacted their client's abilities to be successful and believed that social justice was relational and required social workers to engage authentically with clients.

Participants focused on the relational aspect of their practice and reflected on their personal biases and their use of power and its contribution to maintaining injustice (A. M. McLaughlin et al., 2015). Over time, and with more experience, practitioners' commitment to social justice in their work moved from tenuous to tenacious (A. M. McLaughlin et al., 2017). More experienced practitioners who had a solid understanding of the system in which they worked tended to assert social justice as central to their work. They thought about their work

through a structural lens, were reflective about their use of power, and preferred a collaborative approach to practice with clients.

Slater's (2020) research also focused on a particular sector of clinical practitioners. She conducted a small qualitative research study with nine social workers in private practice in the United States to explore how social workers define social justice and how they integrate it into their private practice settings. Slater maintained that practitioners' meanings of social justice aligned with NASW's value of social justice in the USA. Practitioners were also especially aware of the relationship with individual struggles, their environment, and structural inequities. The awareness of the structural issues that individuals contend with is an important element for social justice practice.

Additionally, participants were aware of the importance of addressing social injustice on behalf of their clients' needs as per NASW ethical standards (Slater, 2020). Participants maintained that lived experiences brought them to social work, and while they aligned with social work's mission to promote social justice, they needed more guidance about how to incorporate social justice into social work private practice. However, participants also claimed that private practice allowed them to have more autonomy and flexibility to engage institutions without fear of reprisal when advocating for their clients, as opposed to just an increase in compensation for their work. The study findings also suggested that private practitioners integrate social justice into their practice and would do more social justice work if they were provided with more training and professional development on how to be more competent in clinical advocacy work.

Hair's (2015) study provides one avenue for developing social justice competencies through clinical supervision. The existing scholarship on social justice and clinical supervision

remains largely conceptual and primarily suggests that clinical supervision is an ideal forum for clinicians to address social justice issues and develop related skills for their practice. However, there are a few studies that explore social justice in clinical supervision. Hair conducted a mixed-methods study with 636 registered social workers from Ontario, Canada. She found that the majority of participants agreed that the purpose of supervision was to help social workers promote social justice and change. According to Hair, that one-quarter of participants disagreed or were unsure may be because they were hampered by the lack of clarity around the term *social justice* and/or lack of a clear way that social justice can be operationalized in practice. Hair maintained that clinical supervisors need to assist social workers to promote social justice by engaging in antiracist and anti-oppressive practice, recognizing and respecting cultural diversity, challenging unjust policies and practices, and engaging in advocacy. She also maintained that conversations in clinical supervision need to focus on making the connection between social issues and individual problems that could privilege some service users and oppress others, and that clinical supervision would assist in finding ways to balance issues about care and control in individual practice.

Hair (2015) maintained that many participants, particularly social workers in hospitals, child welfare, and mental health organizations, do not have a social justice focus in their work. Given the responses by participants in the study, she made the case that conversations about social justice need to be included in clinical supervision experiences. While, it is important to understand and establish forums to develop social justice skills, Hair did not address the constraints of clinical supervision, particularly potential power differentials within a supervisor-and-supervisee relationship in agency work. Neither did she elaborate on the significance of the

clinical supervisor's perspectives and orientation to social justice and the impact on the conversations about social justice in everyday practices.

Some studies in the last 12 years have explored how the conceptual understanding of social justice is operationalized in clinical work (A.M. McLaughlin, 2011). During this same period, there has been more emphasis on the understanding of social justice in studies in child welfare (A.M. McLaughlin et al., 2015, 2017) and in private practice (Slater, 2020). In one Canadian study, clinical supervision is also studied as a forum where participants explore social justice skills (Hair, 2015).

The research compiled in the last 12 years speaks to the importance of unpacking the diverse understandings of the term *social justice* and how the lack of conceptual clarity can have implications for the practice of social justice by social work practitioners. While the contributions of the literature described in this section move toward conceptualizing, enacting, and supporting processes of social justice in social work, they are limiting because they do not discuss the impact of the historical, geopolitical, and social contexts in which the studies are situated and how social work practitioners' lived and professional experiences are situated in particular structural contexts. There is also a major risk in discussing social justice without questioning the underlying political assumptions of social justice, especially concerning the perspectives (Duarte, 2017) and/or practice theories that are used in social work. This lack of questioning maintains the vague conception that is social justice in social work scholarship.

The research in the last 12 years on how social justice is conceptualized and practised in different sectors in the field and the processes that are available to support its better understanding and practice furthers the value of understanding and practice in social work. However, the difficulty that practitioners had in defining social justice means that it is important

to look at the assumptions that are made when social workers discuss practising from a social justice perspective. Social work is seen as a “value-based profession” (Reisch & Jani, 2012), and if social justice is one of those values it needs to be grounded in some common assumptions. Otherwise we are left asking the question: What are the underlying values are we talking about when we talk about social justice?

As stated earlier, some of the research that discusses the conceptualization of social justice unpacks some elements of understanding social justice and sometimes references or uses the language of political theories to do so. However, I would suggest that it is important to unpack the underlying assumptions of social justice in social work. H. Lewis (2003) maintained that “no professional practice can be apolitical” (p. 143), and Baines (2011) stated that social work is “not a neutral, caring profession but an active political process” (p. 5). Unlike many of the research studies described in this section, I would suggest that, based on social work as a political practice, the exploration of social justice in social work practice should be grounded and interrogated from a political stance by underscoring its connection to both liberal and critical perspectives. I believe this provides a common ground for understanding what social work practitioners are talking about when they talk about social justice in their practice.

Without some common grounding, social justice is difficult to conceptualize and remains a rhetorical ethic without any foundation for actual practice. Discussion of social justice remains in the abstract and allows the profession to claim the principled use of social justice in social work as an asset without understanding how it is practised. Furthermore, the lack of common grounding begs the question about whether the multiple and murky conceptualizations and plethora of practice theories that state that they promote social justice actually further social

justice or immobilize practitioners from demonstrating its use in their practice contexts, thereby maintaining the status quo.

Chapter Summary

The connection of social justice to the profession of social work has been central to discussion and debate over the last 100 years in Canada. Situating social justice in a Canadian context is important for understanding the history and development of social justice in social work from a geopolitical perspective that is particular to Canada. Present-day tensions in the practice climate include the encroachment of neoliberalism and its impact on social justice and the practice of social work. Additionally, the literature contends that social justice work is more complex and challenging for social workers in a neoliberal practice context. Further to the historical arguments about social justice in social work and the tensions of working in a neoliberal climate, there is an intense contemporary debate over the significance of social justice as a foundational principle in the *CASW Code of Ethics (2005a)*.

Research in the last 12 years has also highlighted a gap in how social justice is understood and practised in social work. Politically grounding social justice provides opportunities to deconstruct and interrogate the original assumptions the profession has created around the notion of social justice. Further, Maschi et al. (2011) noted the dearth of literature representing the lived experiences of social work practitioners who practise social justice, and Morgaine (2014) pointed out the importance of understanding the lived experience of practitioners who practise social justice. I see these considerations as inextricably linked, as the lived experiences of practitioners who forward social justice in social work are connected to the theoretical underpinnings about how social justice is manifested in the everyday practices of

social work. The next chapter will explore the political perspectives that are used to ground the meaning of social justice in social work.

Chapter 3: Political Perspectives on Social Justice in Social Work

Divergent Social Justice Perspectives in Social Work Literature

This chapter situates social justice within the context of political philosophy, from mid-20th-century critical and liberal perspectives. The chapter starts with a synthesis of the scholarship on social justice in social work from various political perspectives. Each critical and modern liberal philosophical perspective (see “Liberal Perspectives,” below) is described, unpacked, and critiqued in terms of its application to social work.

The concept of social justice is embedded in social work values and is articulated as a central organizing principle in the CASW (2005a) *Code of Ethics*. However, the scholarship relating to social justice in social work was limited before the 1970s (Baines, 2011), and the literature continues to express divergent and even contradictory definitions across dimensions (micro to macro) of practice (A.M. McLaughlin, 2006). The cacophony of voices on the topic in the social work literature speaks not only to the competing definitions and scope of social justice, but also to its credibility and relevance to social work practice.

Some social work scholars maintain that social work fails to reflect its social justice roots (Lundy, 2011). On the one hand, social justice, steeped in conservative traditions, serves to maintain the status quo in society (Caputo, 2002); but it is still regarded as a progressive vision and value for the profession. On the other hand, multiple interpretations of social justice have created significant confusion in social work, rendering social justice practice ineffective in certain practice contexts (Finn & Jacobson, 2008; Lundy, 2011; Morgaine, 2014; Reisch, 2007). From a radical perspective, Turbett et al. (2014) maintained that it is beyond the scope of social work to look to the emancipation of society, as social work focuses on individuals and their problems. Postmodernists query whether there is even such a thing as social justice and, if so,

whether it is a realizable possibility (Witkin & Irving, 2014). These concerns arise from questioning whether individual self-determination and social justice are mutually exclusive practices or can exist as a dual focus in the profession (Abramovitz, 1998; Figueira-McDonough, 1993). While some scholars have proclaimed that the profession of social work is strongly committed to justice (Kam, 2014; Mullaly, 2007), others have contended that the practice of social justice in social work is on the decline (Chu et al., 2009; Ferguson, 2008; Kam, 2014; Solas, 2008; Specht & Courtney, 1994).

Some scholars maintain that the notion that justice will be served when social work connects social justice to human rights (Ife, 2012, Reichert, 2011, Witkin, 1998)—focusing on individual rights as opposed to individual needs—carries weight both domestically and internationally (Skegg, 2005). However, human rights can be seen as another manifestation of Western colonial domination that maintains an understanding of a global monoculture (Esteva & Prakash, 1998), which does not take into consideration the geopolitical and sociocultural contexts of nation-states (Bauer & Bell, 1999), and which can, by extension, maintain the status quo of liberal Western imperialism. According to this line of thought, it is important to recognize that dialogues about social justice in social work are based on numerous philosophical interpretations (Galambos, 2008). An intersectional approach to the topic provides a nuanced, ever-responsive understanding of social justice in the profession.

From a liberal standpoint, social work practice is connected with social justice through “self-determination, empowerment, and personal freedom” (Reisch & Garvin, 2015, p. 72). From a critical perspective, social justice’s goals go beyond the distribution of goods to social equality, so that individuals can develop to their full capacity and fully participate in social, political, and cultural life (Mullaly, 2007). For their part, radical egalitarians believe that the focus for social

justice should be on the institutions, processes, and arrangements that have an impact on people's life choices. For example, Hattersley (2006) asserted that injustice is maintained in the social order of institutional arrangements, and not by individuals. Solas (2008) claimed that radical egalitarianism is the only means to promote social justice because "anything less is bound to perpetuate injustice" (p. 124).

There is little doubt about the importance of social justice in social work (Caputo, 2002; Fook, 2014), but the many diverse and at times controversial interpretations of social justice make it difficult to consistently define and apply social justice in all dimensions of practice (Fook, 2014; Galambos, 2008; A.M, McLaughlin, 2006; Reisch, 2002; Wakefield, 1988a). The goal of clinical practice "is to achieve self-actualization" (Gil, 1973, p. 112), while the goal of policy practice "is to transform the prevailing social order into one conducive to the self-actualization of every human being" (Gil, 1973, p. 112). However, the division between the micro focus on the individual and the macro practice of working with larger-scale systems, which goes beyond individual adaptation and resilience, is the primary reason that social justice is disregarded by some scholars and practitioners in social work (Garrett, 2009; Kam, 2014). Therefore, there is a need to make clearer connections between individual problems and issues in society for social justice to be maintained as a foundational principle in social work.

If some of these tensions are addressed, social justice may unite the seemingly disparate dimensions of social work practice (Gil, 1973; Swenson, 1998). It will therefore be useful to deconstruct where on the political ideological spectrum the term *social justice* is located and explore how social justice is understood and practised in social work (Healy, 2001).

Political Perspectives on Social Justice in Social Work

Social work's commitment to social justice illustrates a complicated relationship encompassing the involvement of the welfare state, identity issues for marginalized and disenfranchised individuals and groups, and the distribution of resources (Reamer, 1993). Two primary worldviews are relevant in discussing aspects of social justice in Canadian social work: critical theory and liberalism. For critical theorists, connecting human emancipation to societal transformation is essential. Postmodern theorists' connection to critical theory provides a nuanced approach to social justice (Mullaly, 2007). From a liberal perspective, the promotion of social justice is central to the mission of social work, rooted in assumptions about inherent individual rights and self-determination (Pelton, 2001). Each of these two political worldviews is discussed in detail below, demonstrating how the underlying assumptions of the two are connected to social justice approaches used in social work practice.

Critical Theory

Critical theory is a social theory that focuses on critiquing and changing society. Critical theories unpack the assumptions that maintain social problems, and play a foundational role in determining the scope of social justice practice in the profession of social work. Current critical social work scholarship has argued that the individual and the social—the personal and the political—are interdependent spheres, each constituting the other (Reisch & Garvin, 2015; Vodde & Gallant, 2002). Critical approaches in social work assert the deep connection between social work and social justice (Askeland & Fook, 2009; Fook, 1999; Healy, 2001; Pease & Fook 1999) and encompass tenets of recognition, recognition-redistribution, and representation theories (Houston, 2010), as well as the “politics of difference” (Clifford, 2013). Critical, anti-oppression, and structural frameworks all contain tenets of critical theory and all claim to be

overarching approaches for one another (Allan, 2003; Baines, 2011; Burke & Harrison, 2002; Carniol, 2010; Ferguson & Woodward, 2009; Hick et al., 2005; Mullaly, 2007; Turbett et al., 2014).

In this study, critical theory is an umbrella theoretical perspective that encompasses critical, structural, radical, feminist, postcolonialist, and critical race theories. Exploring areas such as anti-oppression practice (AOP), new structuralism, and feminism allows the connection to postmodern theories to be included under the umbrella of critical theory. Even though each theoretical perspective approaches human and societal emancipation differently, they all share common elements in terms of political philosophy. One such commonality lies in a common understanding that society contains deep inequities, and various, sometimes intersecting oppressions that arise from them (Baines, 2011; Dalrymple & Burke, 2003; Hick, 2002; Turbett et al., 2014). In contemporary critical social work scholarship, the interdependence of the sociopolitical and the interpersonal levels in both theory and practice is central to developing a socially just world (Fook, 2002; Mullaly, 2007). Additional commonalities of these frameworks come from the basic tenets that underlie critical theory such as the critique of the status quo, interrogating power, and understanding the impact (and resistance) of structural and social arrangements on vulnerable and marginalized populations (Turbett et al., 2014)

However, the perspectives and practices underpinned by the critical umbrella have different worldviews (Dominelli, 2002; Fook, 2002; Healy, 2005; Mullaly, 2007). While they borrow tenets from one another, their epistemological understandings may be incongruent (Baines, 2011) and move in different directions (Turbett et al., 2014). The general consensus is that these frameworks emphasize the need for individual change and recognize societal impacts

on individuals and families, making the connection between micro and macro practice in social work vital and crucial (Baines, 2011; Payne, 2005).

Anti-oppression Practice (AOP)

The above points about the need for complexity in defining and categorizing each framework is particularly salient in AOP. AOP emerged in the 1980s out of a critique that social work mainly focused on poverty and ignored other intersecting oppressions such as racism and sexism (K. McLaughlin, 2006). It is based on Marxist (Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005) and liberal egalitarian principles and is influenced by radical and socialist ideologies (Burke & Harrison, 2002). AOP identifies social processes and confronts unjust social structures leading to oppression (based on ability, race, class, gender / gender identity, and sexual identity). It moves beyond analysis toward transformative practices that emphasize inclusivity (Vanderwoerd, 2015), validate diversity, and enhance solidarity (Dominelli, 2002, p. 39). Dominelli (2002) defined AOP as “challenging established truths about identity, [seeking] to subvert the stability of universalized biological representations of social division to both validate diversity and enhance solidarity based on celebrating difference amongst peoples” (p. 39). As such, AOP centres on difference and attends to unequal power relationships in its movement toward social justice (Baines, 2011). The values of equity, inclusion, empowerment, interdependence, and community as contributions to a vision of a just society (F. Turner & Turner, 2005, p. 5) are vital aspects of AOP.

However, AOP continues to use tenets of different worldviews in a framework that can be complex and at times contradictory, and can be understood as maintaining the status quo by seeing experiences as fixed and universal (C. G. Brown, 2012). This is salient for social work because the connection between individual identity formation and the sociopolitical realities of

people's lives requires social workers to understand the harm of societal, cultural, and material misrecognition on the intrapsychic world of individuals. This provides social workers in micro practice the means to connect the lived affective, painful experiences of injustice with a political understanding of marginalization and oppression (Rossiter, 2014). This deeper-level understanding then compels front-line social workers to enact the ethical principle of social justice in their practice.

In more recent years, postmodernism has also assisted in developing anti-oppression practice. Postmodernism's contribution to AOP lies in focusing on the self-reflexivity of the practitioner through an interrogation of the subjectivities, positionalities, and epistemologies of who has power and who creates knowledge (C. G. Brown, 2012; Curry-Stevens, 2016). This critical postmodern framework lends itself to a nuanced approach by viewing power reflexively as social and relational, not as a possession or essentialized as do some elements of AOP such as the tenets of liberalism within it. Postmodernism counteracts universalism by maintaining that systems of oppression are reproduced through ideology within the social context in which they emerged and understands that individuals have agency to participate in social change (Hick et al., 2005, p. 49).

However, social justice is not articulated from a critical perspective alone. In social work, social justice is also framed from liberal theories that are significant for social work practice.

Recognition Theory

Recognition theory is important in the work of Nancy Fraser and Axel Honneth (2003). It links social justice as broader issues to clinical and front-line social work as they discuss recognition as dealing with both interpersonal misrecognition to broader societal issues of group misrecognition. This theory focuses on the sociopolitical issues of relations of power,

recognition, and respect, and is concerned with minimizing inequality, exploitation, and subordination resulting from misrecognition and disrespect based on class, sex, race, sexuality, or other forms of identity (N. Fraser & Honneth, 2003). It asserts that the marginalization faced by certain individuals can result in injustices such as humiliation, disrespect, and nonrecognition (N. Fraser, 2004). Focusing on intersubjective, societal, and political relationships is critical to a just society. Recognition is therefore both an individual and social need. Honneth (2003) maintained that if recognition were given to everyone at interpersonal, societal, and political levels in society, it could then become the basis for addressing other inequalities such as the distribution of resources.

Instead of separating issues of distribution and recognition, Honneth (2003) asserted that they should be part of a unifying component, which he saw as recognition. In Rossiter's (2014) view, recognition depends on individuals developing a full sense of self through the development of self-esteem, self-respect, and self-actualization. Recognition theory maintains that we need to understand the person in their social context—through the lens of a person's intersubjective relations, their psychic pain—and actions that flow from it. According to the theory, a socially just society is one “in which self-realization is possible because of [the] acknowledgement of the vulnerability of identities in terms of recognition” (Rossiter, 2014, p. 99), particularly for those who are marginalized and oppressed. Recognition can be seen as less about the struggle for righting issues of inequity and marginalization and more about the creation of personal identities and relationships of mutual recognition (Turney, 2012). However, mutual recognition can be seen as a precursor to the civic dialogue that leads to social justice (N. Fraser, 2004).

Social work, in its clinical or micro capacity, employs recognition theory to move closer to greater involvement in social justice. Thus, the theory provides social work with a method of assessing and communicating individual experiences as struggles of justice, and has practical and strategic value in helping social workers to speak in real ways about the harm done to marginalized identities through misrecognition (Rossiter, 2014, pp. 103–104). The outcome of social work interventions should be based on how individuals feel about themselves on a day-to-day basis. According to Rossiter (2014), mutual recognition can be used as “an evaluative tool to explain how power creates unequal identities” (p. 100). Further, recognition theory is important for social work “to combat a one-sided individualism by equating self-realization with social-identity by seeing both as substantiated through encounters of positive recognition” (Houston, 2010, p. 855). Explicating recognition theory in social work practice contexts is not a linear process; Houston (2010) recommended applying the theory through common sense, practice wisdom, and artistry.

Social work practice that develops self-respect should incorporate rights-based, critical, and postmodern perspectives (Gray & Webb, 2013). Doing so, social workers connect an individual’s intrapsychic world with a cultural and political world where they are ensured equality and access to resources that promote material and psychic well-being. This approach requires an understanding of the unique needs of each individual in society. Houston (2010) extended Honneth’s thinking by directing social workers to understand the systems surrounding individuals—such as schools, workplaces, and community organizations—that provide opportunities for individuals to contribute to social life and to grow and develop (para. 8). Although social work can play an emancipatory social role, it also has a social-control function in a society, one that neither validates nor promotes self-confidence and recognition

for individuals (Baines, 2011; S. A. Webb, 2010). The resulting tension leaves the profession vulnerable to reproducing the very same issues of marginalization and domination that are maintained by the state (Parton, 2008).

Recognition theory as articulated by Axel Honneth does not connect the micro with the macro. For example, critiques of recognition theory refer to how it focuses on micro interventions and on human problems as individual cognitive and behavioural processes or the psychologization of human problems, without seeming to understand the imposing structures of the neoliberal state (N. Fraser, 2003; Garrett, 2008; Gray & Webb, 2013). Recognition theory ignores the operation of the market and therefore does not deal with social justice issues arising from capitalism (Houston, 2013, p. 70). According to Garrett (2008), Honneth's recognition theory also does not bridge the intrapsychic experience of injustice and the injustices experienced in society. There are further implications if recognition is conducted by those in dominant positions. Mistakenly taking up recognition theory in social work without attending to societal or cultural recognition perpetuates the modern state's tendency to reproduce inequalities of misrecognition (Garrett, 2008). For Gupta (2015), recognition tends to be understood ahistorically, without a connection to violence, cultural recognition, and colonization. Finally, those in positions of privilege or dominant status in society may also experience disrespect, loss of status, and diminished participation in civic life when recognition theory is used (S. A. Webb, 2010). Therefore, the act of recognition should be done in full view of society and open itself up to accountability by the state (Garrett, 2008, p. 102). These critiques mean that the issues around recognition theory require a nuanced understanding of its pitfalls for social work.

A fundamental launch point in incorporating inclusionary principles based on recognition in social justice work is described in Nancy Fraser's (2004) discussion in *Recognition*,

Redistribution, and Representation. In contrast to Honneth, N. Fraser (1995, 2003, 2008) has focused on issues of the distribution of economic and material goods, status and cultural recognition, and political justice. For her, these dimensions are not reducible to the others; rather, they have distinct and equally necessary roles for achieving social justice. Any issue of injustice, such as heterosexism, racism, or classism, has elements of both economic and recognition (status) issues. Since any form of injustice involves both material and status issues, correcting injustices requires paying attention to resolving economic inequalities and dealing with cultural/symbolic and status inequalities and “cultural domination, non-recognition, and disrespect” (N. Fraser, 1995, p. 71).

Nancy Fraser (2009), in her later writing in *Recognition, Redistribution, and Representation*, adds a third pillar to her theory of justice: namely, representation. Representation, as opposed to “political voicelessness,” is considered essential in a democratic and globalizing world. Representation and the correction of political voicelessness are evident when groups participate as full partners in society, in what she calls “participatory parity” (N. Fraser, 2009). For Blunder this approach assures that groups have a voice, and that those who have a voice have power and the means of communication (as cited in Gray & Webb, 2013, p. 95). N. Fraser (2009) maintained that all points of oppression are complex; the marginalized are not only exploited economically and materially, but are also not recognized in society. The remedy for injustices must include a tripartite intersection of recognition, redistribution, and representation. This focus does not allow for remedies that have unintended and negative consequences if only one area is developed in the name of justice. Although they differ in the positioning of recognition as intersubjective (Honneth, 1995) or as cultural (N. Fraser & Honneth, 2003), both recognition scholars share the position that social justice must focus on

identity—that is, the positioning of individuals in society, economics, and politics (Gray & Webb, 2013).

Fraser’s theory of recognition articulates how social workers can consider intersecting and exclusionary processes (Garrett, 2009) at the structural level, and their connection with maldistribution and misrecognition (Holscher, 2011) in community and policy social work. Fraser’s focus (N. Fraser & Honneth, 2003) is on the parity of participation as a principle, not an action; it is

a normative principle designed to alleviate the inequalities arising from class structure, which institutionalizes economic mechanisms that systematically deny some of its members the means and opportunities they need in order to participate on a par with others in social life. (p. 49)

This theory of recognition connects the issues of everyday injustices of disrespect and mal-identification with a potential evaluative framework for macro social work to determine where communities are not recognized and therefore left out of the democratic process. However, Thompson (2009) maintained that Fraser’s model does not help social workers overcome the injustices that are diagnosed in clinical practice and does not alleviate the individual distress experienced through injustice.

Radical Social Work Theory

Other critical scholars take different relational approaches to real-world examples of exclusion and injustice, focusing instead on unequal social relationships from a structural perspective. Marxism and feminism have contributed to a radical perspective in the 21st century, which takes different forms based on the politics of identity, colonialism, and racism (Turbett et al., 2014).

Radical theory was developed in Britain as a response to the changes taking place since the 19th century. In the 20th century, it was taken up in social work, concerning itself with the imposed, individual consequences (Leonard, 1975) of the rise of capitalism (Howe, 2009). Radical social work reflects the identities, politics, and perspectives of authors across the political spectrum (Turbett et al., 2014, p. 35). Ferguson and Woodward (2009) called radical social work “guerrilla warfare,” since it combats the bureaucracy and managerialism that comes with neoliberal policies. Taking an essentially Marxist view of social problems with a focus on class struggle (Turbett et al., 2014), radical social work has been unable to recognize the intersections of multiple identities in class struggles, thereby falling out of favour (Dominelli, 2002). However, Turbett et al. (2014) maintained that social issues are class-based, and that a Marxist analysis needs to be a basis of social justice in society (p. 33). Contemporarily in Canada, radical social work is better connected to structural social work, which sees individual problems as a symptomatic of the inequalities of a capitalist society (Turbett et al., 2014).

Structural Theory

Structural theory has its roots in a radical tradition that upholds the strengths of a Marxist approach. It is a response to neoliberalism and the rise of individualism (Carniol, 2010), maintaining that globalization and the free market undervalue social justice, state interventions, and citizen participation (Baines, 2011; Carniol, 2010; Mullaly, 2007; Turbett et al., 2014) and their effects complicate intervention around equity and resource redistribution (Fook, 2002). In the Canadian literature, structural theory extends a Marxist perspective by including the understanding that personal problems, oppressions, and structural inequalities are interconnected (Carniol, 2010; Fook, 2014; Lundy, 2011; Mullaly & West, 2018).

The first structural theorist, Maurice Moreau (Moreau & Leonard, 1989), used a Marxist-feminist approach to understand social problems and social relations. He did not give primacy to singular oppressions (class, gender, and race), and instead advanced the notion that all oppressions are equal in their impact. He urged social workers to respond to the intersection of oppressions, recognizing that social work must work at individual emancipation and societal change simultaneously. Moreau saw social workers as playing three roles: (a) exploring the sociopolitical and economic context of personal difficulties; (b) helping collectivize ordinary troubles; and (c) helping the profession facilitate critical thinking, consciousness-raising, and empowerment (Lundy, 2004, p. 89).

Gaps in early structural theory included a lack of consideration for the complexities in individual lives and a lack of understanding of individual agency in the change process (Mullaly, 1997). Social problems were thus seen as the result of so-called defective rules that pathologize those who are marginalized (Mullaly, 1997, p.120). Structural theory has also been critiqued for looking at structures and individuals as binary instead of looking at the interconnections between structures in society (M. Weinberg, 2008), thereby magnifying the gap between micro and macro practice (Fook, 2002; M. Weinberg, 2008). In addition, structural theory views power as repressive, which does not leave room for constructive views of power (M. Weinberg, 2008). M. Weinberg (2008) extended structural theory by noting class as a primary category of investigation and analysis, and therefore sufficient for outlining necessary goals for collective resistance. Structural theory is, however, less successful in defining ways to accomplish resistance. Although insufficient as a comprehensive approach, structural theory assists social work practitioners in developing an ethical compass for decision-making (M. Weinberg, 2008).

Structural theory can be seen as supporting feminist philosopher Iris Marion Young's (1990) ideas in *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Young used a critical relational approach to real-world examples of exclusion and injustice, focusing on unequal social relationships. Many philosophical theories of justice narrowly define what is a proper distribution of benefits and obligations among society's members (I. M. Young & Allen, 2011, p. 15). Young contended that there is a need to recognize groups, not just individual identities. Believing that redress for individual issues of injustice should not take precedence over group-based issues, she framed injustices as domination and oppression based on unjust structures (Mulally, 2007).

I. M. Young (1990) developed a concept of justice in which structural and institutional conditions are necessary for nourishing individual capacities and connecting communities. She posited the importance of understanding inequities as five faces of oppression: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence (p. 5). These faces act together to constrain social groups from exercising their full capacity in society. By recognizing their complexity and intersectionality, it becomes possible to see that these "faces" have structural components that can be harmful to individual lives; the fluidity of individual positionality becomes apparent (I. M. Young & Allen, 2011). Thus, she redirected the focus from the differences within groups and between individuals to how such differences are constructed in specific contexts and through particular social processes that privilege some and marginalize others.

I. M. Young (1990) is also the foundational theorist for what has become known as *identity politics*. This is a reaction to liberal notions of universal justice, which focus on colour-blind ideals (Hill-Collins, 2000) and ignore marginalized groups. In social work, identity politics has been the centre of much debate (S. A. Webb, 2010). What is tangible for social work is

Young's understanding that social justice is not just about what individuals own, but about what they do and are allowed to do (I. M. Young, 2002). Young brought a critical eye to institutional policies and processes that uphold domination and oppression and continue the inequitable distribution of material goods (Clifford & Burke, 2009). She judged the Marxist and Rawlsian notions of distributive justice as guilty of reducing the complexity of social relations to economic relations: "Social justice means the elimination of institutionalized domination and oppression and any aspect of social organization and practice relevant to domination and oppression is in principle subject to evaluation by ideals of justice" (I. M. Young, 1990, p. 15).

However, Nancy Fraser (2003), claiming that nobody claims "poor" as an identity, pointed out that identity politics ignores the real issue of unequal material distribution. Debate about the politics of difference continues, but the connections Young had drawn between the oppressive dominant structures that maintain some identities and marginalize others compel social workers to understand oppression, privilege, power, and liberation (Morgaine & Capous-Desyllus, 2015, p. 16) within their practice contexts. These connections can also be seen in feminist, postcolonial, and antiracist theories.

Feminist, postcolonial, and critical race or antiracist theories connect with I. M. Young's (1990) *Justice and the Politics of Difference* in how they all centre the experiences of people with racialized, gendered, and other marginalized bodies. The scholarship in these areas critically examines social inequities by looking at such experiences through an intersectional, structural lens. Advocates for feminist, antiracist, and postcolonial perspectives have recognized their overlapping and common issues (Baines, 2011; Mullaly, 2010). They can and do come together to develop a richer and overarching critical approach for social work that challenges the dynamic intersections of oppression based on identity (Hick et al., 2005).

Feminist Theories

Feminist theories have much in common with social work: both focus on the identity development of marginalized and oppressed populations (J. A. B. Lee, 2001; Mullaly, 2010). Some universal tenets of feminist theories are relevant to social work. These include changing society so that women are liberated to develop individual esteem and self-confidence to further their claim to power (Grosz, 2010, p. 2); and maintaining the equal importance of social justice as a process and goal. This means that people's full participation in society based on individual needs as a goal is critical to social justice, and articulating a vision of society that is equitable is imperative for furthering the process of social justice (Adams et al., 2007).

Feminist theories of social justice in social work reflect different epistemological assumptions, such as different understandings of how systems of oppression work to subjugate women. Social work maintains a plurality of feminist perspectives to fit into specific practice needs and the intersectionality of women's diverse experiences (Orme, 2003). Feminist theories provide a wide range of perspectives in all the spheres of social life—social, cultural, economic, and political. Of concern, however, is that feminist theories exist along a continuum that can be appropriated by a conservative agenda that reinforces the status quo. This complicates the tensions between feminist perspectives, because the perspective of one woman's experience of oppression does not unify all women, either between or within diverse feminist groups (Crenshaw, 1991). However, the connection with postmodernism provides more diverse perspectives that counter the essentialist universal positioning of feminism in general. I discuss this in section on postmodernism.

Postcolonialism

In terms of a theoretical underpinning, social work has paid little attention to postcolonialism (Morgaine & Capous-Desyllas, 2015). Postcolonialism foregrounds the history and consequences of colonization in current experiences of individuals, communities, and countries that have been affected by imperialist practices of Western countries. Western nation-states have historically and contemporarily held power and authority in the global political, social, economic, and physical spheres of life of subjugated countries and individuals.

Postcolonialism discusses experiences of slavery, migration, and subjugation and suppression of individuals and communities. It takes a postmodern turn where it intersects with issues of gender and caste (Spivak, 1988), culture (Bhabha, 2012; Said, 1978), and other areas of difference.

Postcolonial discussions also include resistance geopolitically, socially, and culturally to Western colonial ideologies (Quayson, 1998) and assumptions. The relevance for social work is in understanding how individual or community identities from the margins are constructed and reconstructed through the eyes of dominant structures as Other (Said, 1978).

Postcolonialism examines power, resistance, and punishment to illustrate how colonization used to operate, through culture, economics, politics, and the development of knowledge (Loomba, 2015). Because of its underlying Western assumptions, postcolonialism cannot be applied effectively in working with Indigenous populations, since it can perpetuate colonialism (Grande, 2004). To answer this concern, Indigenous scholar Gail Baikie (2009) has advocated “creatively drawing upon the knowledge from . . . the diversity of Indigenous cultures . . . or creating new Indigenous knowledge applicable to contemporary social challenges” (p. 56). In Canadian social work, understanding the issues created by settler colonialism has implications for social justice in social work (Tamburro, 2013), especially in creating less oppressive ways to

deliver services. However, this discussion is in its infancy. The profession of social work still needs to grapple with its own complicity with oppression of Indigenous communities. There is still a need to understand the history of colonization of Indigenous populations, ways in which cultures recover from being colonized by settlers that continue to claim land and sovereignty, and our own professional role in forwarding and maintaining these oppressive systems.

Postcolonial theory connects to critical race theory (CRT) because of their interconnected historical struggles around racial oppression. These two theories borrow heavily from each other.

Critical Race Theory

CRT developed out of issues of structural racism in the United States. It repositions the focus on identity, looking strongly at racial oppression. It recentres the conversation to consider the multiple positional identities of Black persons (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001) and people of colour (Austin, 2014), and their experiences in the contexts of slavery, colonialism, and imperialism (Mullaly, 2007). Conversely, while critical feminism focuses on gender relations and issues of power, it does not take into consideration the issues faced by Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPOC), antiracist social work presents a deficit-oriented view of the lived experiences of Black, Indigenous, and people of colour (BIPOC) and the adoption of white Euro-Western understandings of knowledge and practice (Graham, 2007). CRT and antiracism make visible the ways in which dominant discourses permeate social work and further oppress communities of colour, particularly Black communities. However, antiracism had fallen out of use in social work because of its singular focus on race, as it does not consider race's intersections with other oppressions (Baines, 2007; Fook, 2002; Wilson & Beresford, 2000). However, it is currently experiencing a resurgence due to a focus on structural racism (Ladhani & Sitter, 2020) embedded in institutions in Canada.

Over the last 20 years, the discourse on antiracism in social work, as in Canada as a whole, has shifted to a focus on diversity and difference (Dominelli, 2008) and currently explores the intersection of race and culture. Antiracist practices now look beyond Black and Brown people to include asylum seekers, Indigenous people, and biracial and multiracial people, all of whom experience inequality based on their visible categorization in society and social work service delivery (Turbett et al., 2014). The continuing critique of using CRT pertains to the struggle for social justice based on redistributive principles being complicated by a shift from the politics of redistribution to the politics of recognition (Reisch, 2014). However, in 21st-century Canada, anti-Black racism remains pervasive, so that antiracist social work remains relevant in social work. It is influenced by Black feminist thinking, CRT, and the intersectionality of gender, race, and class in the oppression of Black women (Athey, 1997).

Recognizing the complexity and intersections of oppression in the lived experiences of those who live with oppression has been extended by integrating postmodernism into many of the critical theories such as feminism, postcolonialism, and critical race theory.

Postmodernism

Postmodern social justice is difficult to pin down because of its changeability and relative nature; that is, from the postmodern point of view there is no one universal truth or understanding of social justice. Postmodernism is concerned with the plurality of competing life experiences and their interpretations, and is grounded in local knowledge. It is disillusioned with modernity (Lyotard, 1984), which contends that human progress is based on the grand narratives of the Enlightenment. For its part, postmodernism sees these narratives—such as socialism, capitalism, and liberalism—as totalizing. They have further embedded oppression in society, and therefore cannot be part of any transformative change (Healy, 2001).

Postmodern justice questions who has the power and privilege in deciding the nature and judgment of social justice because individuals interpret and make judgments on their experiences differently. The goal of justice based on postmodernism is to ensure that the lived experiences of individuals are recognized and valued. Capeheart and Milovanovic (2007) identified four characteristics of a postmodern theory of justice: (a) the questioning of justice as a natural state; (b) the belief that justice is dynamic and unstable and so is troublesome; (c) the belief that conceptualizations of social justice within the system are questionable, and that notions outside the system are more reliable; and (d) the concept that social justice should be active and practised through a sense of duty and responsibility to others (p. 13).

Lyotard (1984) saw no legitimate, overarching principle of social justice. For him, all forms of justice were context-specific. Social justice needed to be located in “petit narratives” instead of seemingly objective “grand narratives.” He stated,

Let us wage war on totality, let us be witness to the unrepresentable . . . Every one of us belongs to several minorities, and what is important, none of these prevails.

It is only then that we can say that society is just. (Lyotard, 1984, p. 46)

Lyotard did not believe that liberal democratic societies would enable a just world; he saw them as restrictive “disciplinary societies,” which amount to “terror” for the Other (Linn, 1996).

In *The Postmodern Condition*, Lyotard (1984) argued that language links knowledge and power through what he called “language games.” Language games have rules that are only understood by the players (i.e., particular members of society); even the smallest changes in the rules change the whole game, and every “utterance” is a move in the game. The rules in language games privilege some and marginalize others, because an individual needs to be a player (i.e., member of society) to understand the rules of the game. Lyotard believed that in this “game,”

individuals are always driven by the need for power, and that language is a dominating force, not a liberating one for those identified as Other (Linn, 1996). Lyotard (1988) asserted that traditional theories maintain the social status quo, and that critical theories are binary, oppositional, and not compatible with one another. He stated that critical and postmodern knowledge can be seen as legitimate depending on one's political view, but that any compromise between the two is impossible because the underlying worldview in each theory is incompatible with the other. Lyotard believed that this incompatibility extends to institutions; there are languages and interpretations that are appropriate in one institution but are not compatible with knowledge in others—for example, we pray in church, question in philosophy, and follow orders in the army (Woodward, 2016).

In *The Differend*, Lyotard (1988) contended that the laws of the legitimized discourse of social justice protect that discourse and cannot provide justice, because one form of knowledge becomes silenced, so that some people become “divested of the means to argue . . . and for that reason” (p. 9) are victims of mainstream discourse. Lyotard believed that the universal concept of social justice can be seen as totalitarian and that justice can be served by overcoming what he calls “critical pragmatic”—replacing universal singular metanarratives with local, contextual narratives that become legitimate when visible in the narratives. However, the extreme relative and local nature of Lyotard's conception of social justice can appear conservative and individualistic. The relative nature of his conception is only evaluated against itself, based on localized contextual knowledge, which can maintain the status quo and even further embed injustice.

Unlike Lyotard's local, contextual approach, Richard Rorty (1998) maintained an approach to social justice that is simultaneously contextual and pragmatic, based as it is on a

liberal paradigm. Although Rorty supported the idea of a “human rights culture,” he rejected the essentialist justification for human rights and what he considered the ahistorical concept of rationality on which contemporary ideas of social justice are based. He promoted an approach based on emotion rather than intellect, in which social justice reflects loyalty to groups that are “people like ourselves . . . the group or groups to which one cannot be disloyal and still like oneself” (Rorty, 1998, p. 141).

In *Trotsky and the Wild Orchids*, Rorty (1992), like Lyotard, maintained that a universal notion of social justice is a mistake. Instead, focusing on the action or practice of social justice, Rorty believed in pragmatic action (Capeheart & Milovanovic, 2007). His form of pragmatic postmodernism entwines a belief in Western liberalism with contextual experiences of people who are marginalized. For him, theory and universal truths cannot provide real perspectives; they are merely local, time-bound perspectives that mask a “real” that cannot be known (Rorty, 1992, p. 140). Thus, if there are no universal truths and no neutral language that can intervene in disputes of justice, theory cannot properly criticize, argue, evaluate, or even deconstruct, since there is no basis to make a “right”, “correct,” or “better than” claim (Best & Kellner, 1991, para. 1).

Rorty believed in the pragmatism of the reformist left. He used this term “to cover those Americans who, between 1900 and 1964, struggled within the framework of constitutional democracy to protect the weak from the strong” (Rorty, 1998), understanding that the responsibility of government was to ensure a distribution of wealth within the system. The reformist left “helped substitute a rhetoric of fraternity and national solidarity for the rhetoric of individual rights” (Rorty, 1998). He asserted that inequalities in American society could be “corrected by using the institutions of constitutional democracy” (Rorty, 1998). Although he

maintained that identity politics are necessary, he asserted that the concentration on cultural politics takes away from the concern about material and economic instability in marginalized communities that the focus on recognition was trying to improve.

Rorty (1997) questioned whether the notion of social justice would be sufficient if the Western world were called upon to make reforms in a more significant context, including the rest of the world. He asked whether justice is seen as loyalty in the context of a larger group, particularly in Western liberal nation-states (p. 24). For example, Rorty argued that humans tend to develop principles based on “we statements” (such as “we Canadians believe in inclusion”). It is then more comfortable to be cruel to those who can be defined as *them* or *Other*. Rorty (1998) suggested that we need to expand the definition of whom we let into our communities so that no one can be considered less than human. Urging non-Western countries to adopt Western notions of rights and justice because Western notions of justice are more so-called rational is akin to stating that the West is superior. Rather than assert the rightness of a liberal Western understanding of social justice, it is more important to look at social justice from ethnocultural perspectives as a way to develop trust and community-building between Western and non-Western nation-states (Rorty, 1997).

Over the last 20 years, postmodernism has informed the understanding of social justice in the social work profession (Chambon et al., 1999; Fook, 2003; Healy, 2005; Mullaly, 2007). The 1980s saw the rise of neoliberalism. At that time, social work scholars began to look beyond traditional social work practice and Marxist theory to where multiple oppressions intersected and were being perpetuated by social systems (Carniol, 2010). Elements of postmodernism used in social work challenge many things: assumptions about truth and reality (Witkin, 1995, p. 5), the dynamic nature of culture, the construction of power, and the multiple contexts and intersections

of oppression and social injustice (Chambon & Irving, 1994; Swenson, 1998). A postmodern perspective allows social workers to work with the complicated lives of individuals and put forward a social justice agenda (Fook, 2002). Social workers must understand the geographic, political, socioeconomic, cultural, and spiritual contexts of people's lives (Lundy, 2011; Reisch & Garvin, 2015). A postmodern approach allows social work practitioners to develop flexible practices so they can function in uncertainty and develop creative and deeper opportunities with service users (Fook, 2015).

The debate about whether social work is practised in a modern or postmodern world continues today (Mullaly, 2007). Pease et al. (2003) stated that "basic institutions and structures of society are still shaped by modernity" (pp. 9–10), although postmodernism has had a "significant impact on society in both the construction of knowledge and as a cultural and social phenomenon" (Pease et al., 2003, p. 4).

Lyotard asserted that there can be no connection between critical theory and postmodernism, but some scholars do discuss the similarities between postmodern thinking and a critical theory (Mullaly, 2007). For example, postmodern views of identity do not mean that social work must abandon addressing structural oppression (Healy, 2000). Fook (2002) asserted "the recognition [in social work theory and practice] of the connection between structural domination and personal self-limitations and the recognition of possibilities for personal and social change" (p. 17). Embracing a postmodern analysis provides a more nuanced and flexible understanding of the complexity in people's lives (Fook, 2002; Mullaly, 2007). Engagement with critical postmodern theories can connect all the dimensions of social work with social justice (Leonard, 1997; Mullaly & West, 2018; Pease & Fook, 1999).

Social justice at the macro level may be excessively predisposed to abstraction, while a micro perspective may be too contextual and therefore risk insufficient abstraction. This means that both maintain incomplete positions to move social justice forward. In social work, these perspectives are constructed as binary opposites (Best & Kellner, 1991, p. 21) that cannot cross the micro/macro divide (Vodde & Gallant, 2002). If social justice is to be effective in social work practice, micro and macro practice must be unified through incorporating a critical postmodern perspective within social work (Vodde & Gallant, 2002).

Postmodern Feminism

Postmodern feminism begins with the underlying assumption that conventional conceptualizations of feminism emphasize the differences between men and women while not taking into consideration the experiences and differences within each gender. Postmodern feminism, including intersectionality, maintain that systems of oppression are complex and contextual and reinforce one another (Crenshaw, 1991). Consideration of intersections in the diversity of experiences across time, geopolitical and social contexts, and identity are crucial to understanding social justice from a postmodern perspective (Crenshaw, 1991; Hill-Collins, 2000; hooks, 1984).

Postcolonial and antiracist feminism look at intersections of difference, patriarchy, and the oppression of women (Mehrotra, 2010). They generally focus on the intersecting web of oppressions by considering more extensive power relationships and moving away from a focus on individual change (S. G. Turner & Maschi, 2015) to one of societal change. Postmodern feminist social work integrates historicizing (how the social environment of women has been shaped by history) and contextualizing power relations in practice. Lundy (2004) posited,

The challenge for [feminist] social workers is to understand the broad political context and organization of society while responding directly to immediate concerns and needs of those who seek help. This type of analysis focuses on the socioeconomic or structural context of individual problems and the power arrangements and the economic forces in society that create and maintain social conditions that generate stress, deprivation, discrimination and other forms of individual problems. (p. 130)

Further, feminist social work practice and education focus on “women’s issues” without a critical analysis of the impact of structural issues on the lives of a diverse intersection of women.

New Structural Social Work

New structural social work is based on structural theory with roots in Marxism and a connection to postmodernism (Dalrymple & Burke, 2003; Mullaly, 2007). Social workers must keep both the material and symbolic understanding of reality in view to maintain a vision of social justice: “The goal of social equality is not only distribution of goods, but full participation in major institutions and access to social supports so that individuals can develop to their full capacity” (Mullaly, 2007, p. 283). Social workers using this approach can look at the intersection of multiple oppressions and societal structures, and the consequent implications for individual daily functioning.

There are several critiques of the new structural social work. Baines (1999) noted that its epistemology does not reflect feminism and gives only a cursory acknowledgement of social work as a female profession. If structural social work is regarded as an umbrella for other perspectives (anti-oppression, critical), then combining perspectives under one umbrella theory can essentialize identities and promote an understanding that oppressive conditions are the same

for every community and individual, leading to confusion and conflict for practitioners (Hick et al., 2005). The reminder here is that experiences of oppression are multiple, intersectional, and contextual, and require an examination of the underlying assumptions of each practice theory. Further, each social work practice theory requires different social work practice tools (Tester, 2003).

Liberal Perspectives

The last two centuries have seen social justice associated with classical liberalism in Europe and conservatism in North America. Reisch (2014) identified liberalism in the classical sense as based on a belief in the transformation of society while maintaining the social, economic, and political status quo. I use the term *modern liberalism* to describe social justice focused on individualism, equality, and freedom (Pole, as cited in Reisch, 2014) with a focus on citizens having both individual and collective responsibilities to the society (Heywood, 2012). Modern liberalism includes tenets from classical liberalism, producing ideological tensions, especially around the role of the state (Heywood, 2012, p. 49).

Modern liberalism in North America promotes rationality and guarantees that social justice is delivered by reasonable individuals, with a focus on individual well-being (Gaus, as cited in Lorenz, 2014). This understanding of social justice is embedded in the society's laws, values, customs, and institutions (Austin, 2014). Modern liberalism posits that individuals have obligations to the state, and the state has power over the lives of individuals, but citizens also have inalienable rights that must be distributed equally (Nagel, 2002). In modern liberal philosophies, equality can have a broad definition and include positive rights to access services that are essential for human development and self-

actualization. The meaning of equality is contentious, however; its meanings include wealth, social goods, opportunity, rights and duties to society, inherent value as a human being, and equality in the eyes of the law (Gosepath, 2011). Liberal notions of social justice struggle not only to determine conditions of a just society, but also what is being distributed and to whom it is being distributed.

Many liberal theories of justice are concerned with the distribution of resources. I.M. Young and Allen (2011) suggested that scholarship connect social justice and distribution. There are significant reasons for doing so. In a world with a significant disparity of resources and wealth, distributive justice is critical to issues of social justice. However, *what* should be distributed—rights, resources, primary goods, opportunities, capabilities or self-respect (Sen, 2009)—is in dispute.

This section explores and challenges some of the liberal theories of social justice that are predominantly used in social work in Canada. Liberal traditions of social justice in social work are based on the concept of a social contract (Reisch & Garvin, 2015), a contract between the individual and the society. From a liberal perspective, everyone is born equal and has equal fundamental rights as an individual. The role of government is to create an environment of equal opportunity so that everyone can benefit from their talents and willingness to work. An environment that creates equal opportunity includes the distribution of material and social goods to promote civic participation (Bonnycastle, 2011; Nussbaum, 2003).

Utilitarianism

The *intent* of utilitarian decision-making is what is “just” in this philosophy (Robison & Reeser, 2000), but not the *outcome* of those decisions. Thus, utilitarian theories emphasize the greatest good for as many people as possible. Utilitarian theorists believe that everyone is

equal and is concerned with what is good for society overall (Lorenz, 2014). This understanding of the common good means that it may require sacrifices by some for the good of others as long as everyone is partially taken into account. Welfare economics, which looks at what is the most efficient way to promote the overall well-being of society, is based on a utilitarian approach (Sen, 2009).

Utilitarianism promotes the market to distribute economic and social goods such as rights, opportunity, power, and self-respect (Schofield, 2006). However, Otto and Ziegler (2006) argued that utilitarianism is not a good measure of well-being or happiness of citizens. Some individuals require less, but it is not just to provide them with less; to ignore those who require more is to be indifferent to distributional inequalities and to marginalize further those who cannot function. Sen (1999) agreed—a utilitarian approach does not adequately measure the well-being of those who are marginalized and can be unfair to those who have adapted to their oppression because they do not expect to be treated any differently in society.

In social work, utilitarianism creates institutional rules for service delivery (Fook, 2014); these, in turn, justify decisions around client entitlements for and exclusions from service (McBeath & Webb, 2002; Reamer, 2006, p. 66). Utilitarianism allows social workers to be accountable not only to individuals but to the greater social good, however, some claim that it is not justice if some individuals in society are harmed, even if justification is sought in the greatest number of people in society having benefited (Rawls, 1971).

In *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls (1999) extended the notion of utilitarianism in justice as fairness. Justice as fairness is a contextually North American conceptualization of social justice (Banerjee, 2005, 2011; Garcia & Korazim-Körösy, 2013; Guttman, 2006; Mackie, 2007; Reisch

& Garvin, 2015; Swenson, 1998; Wakefield, 1988a), based on American liberalism. Distributive justice, for example, is a form of fairness where impartial individuals distribute goods. Rawls's concept of justice is premised on the commitment of citizens within a democratic nation-state to recognize one another as free and equal persons (Garrett, 2008). He blended elements of egalitarian, libertarian, and socialist principles (Garrett, 2008) with a focus on liberty and rights (Lacewing, 2016). In an abstract thought experiment, he put individuals in the "original position," behind a "veil of ignorance," deprived of all knowledge of their personalities, social statuses, moral characters, wealth, talents, and life plans.

Rawls (1971) maintained that social justice must be based on citizens having both individual and collective responsibilities in society, based on "the principles that free and rational persons concerned to further their interests would accept in an initial position of equality as defining the fundamental terms of their association" (p. 11). In this original position, they would then ask what theory of justice should govern society when the veil of ignorance is lifted (Rawls, 1971, p. 12). He believed that in the original position, impartial individuals would leave out those who are marginalized, because impartial individuals might risk being in that group themselves when the veil of ignorance is lifted. Rawls argued that this entails rejection of the greatest good for the greatest number at the sacrifice of those who are marginalized (Rawls, 1971).

The justice-as-fairness theory has two principles: primary goods and the principle of equal opportunity. In the first principle, there are two types of primary goods that Rawls describes as basic rights and freedoms: (a) the right to intelligence, imagination, speed, vigour, health; and (b) the right to freedom of thought, political liberties, speech, press, assembly,

liberty, movement. This right also includes occupation: the right to participate in democratic process, goods, income, power, self-respect, and so on (Rawls, 2001).

The second principle—equality of opportunity—guarantees fair access to education and work, based on equal ability and talent. Rawls (1971) contended that some inequality is acceptable, and if some people have more primary goods than others, this is a reward for the social positions they occupy. This so-called difference principle allows for social inequalities if the result benefits everyone and if giving some individuals positions of power, income, or status benefits the most marginalized in society (Rawls, 1971, p. 75). However, Lacewing (2016) argued that citizens must be equal for extensive liberty and rights. He argued that Rawls prioritizes liberty over distributive justice once a basic level of material well-being is attained (Lacewing, 2016).

In later scholarship, Rawls (2001) defined those he saw as least advantaged as those with less access to primary goods, such as the working poor. He disqualified some nonworking poor from entitlement to assistance: “surfers,” who are able but unwilling to work, and “hard cases,” who have health issues. Rawls (2001) did not support government assistance for surfers; they needed to support themselves (p. 179). His concept of justice only included those who are “within the normal range, so that questions of health care and mental capacity do not arise” (1999, pp. 83–84). Thus, he did not seem to discuss whether his theory of justice extends to people with health concerns.

Rawls (2001) did not believe that all people are equal and deserve equal rights and opportunities. His theory of justice only applies to those who are “normal” based on a social contract. His theory of justice also does not provide justice for everyone, but only the working

poor. The fair equality principle of opportunity addresses the concern about work and education, but it does not guarantee equal access, only fair access (Rawls, 2001, p. 14).

Justice as fairness does not consider barriers to education and work such as those experienced by individuals who face discrimination based on the intersection of different identities. Rawls maintained that society needs fair and equal distribution of resources, but what does fair and equal distribution entail? Who makes those decisions? And who are the recipients of distribution (Sen, 2009)? Sen (1992) and I. M. Young (1990) maintained that thinking social justice is about distribution begs the question: distribution of what? However, Rawls's theory of social justice has been foundational in social work in North America.

Rawls's position on minimal distributive justice is more well defined in scope (Wakefield, 1988a) which Wakefield proposed to be the foundational concept of social justice in social work. Rawls's perspective integrates micro and macro practice and has the "power to make sense of the social work profession and its disparate activities" (Wakefield, 1988a, p. 194) because whether the goods are defined as social, psychological, or economic, social workers' concern is helping to meet their clients' basic human needs (Wakefield, 1988a, p. 194). Basic human needs are "those goods every person requires . . . to pursue his or her life plan at some minimal level of effectiveness" (Wakefield, 1988a, p. 208).

Reisch (2007) maintained that Rawls's notion of "redress"—understood as compensation to balance historical inequality—should be the basis for social work, since it would "hold the most vulnerable populations harmless in the distribution of societal resources, particularly if those resources are finite. Unequal distribution of resources would be justified if it served to advance the least advantaged group in the community" (p. 20). Reisch and Garvin (2015) suggested that Rawls's notion of justice as fairness challenges basic concepts of justice in the

West (p. 44), but they found that justice as fairness is consistent with social work's mission, values and goals. A.M McLaughlin (2006) suggested that Rawls discussed many of the principles espoused in social work, in recognizing the inherent worth of every individual as the basis of developing self-respect and self-esteem. She said that developing self-respect, self-esteem, and self-confidence is part of the process and outcome of clinical social work (A. M. McLaughlin, 2006).

Although there is no agreement on the scope or meaning of social justice among social work scholars, for some social justice means better-than-minimal living conditions for people who are poor, vulnerable, oppressed, and marginalized. Wakefield (1988a) extended the view that individuals need better-than-minimal living conditions by suggesting that disadvantaged people need equal access to services and opportunities to meet their needs. Saleebey (1990), as justification for the use of a strengths perspective in social work, suggested that social justice requires redistribution of resources to help individual citizens develop their basic growth needs. Better living conditions and life circumstances require access to a distribution of food, clothes, housing, health care, education, and job opportunities (Beverly & McSweeney, 1987; Figueira-McDonough, 1993; Wakefield, 1988a).

Even though Rawls's concepts of distributive justice (Wakefield, 1988a) and principle of redress are essential to social work (Reisch, 2002, p. 346), there are problems with Rawls's conception of social justice for social work. Justice as fairness, in his perspective, leaves out all marginalized groups except the working poor (Banerjee, 2011; Rawls, 1971, 2001). Social work scholars' reliance on elements of justice as fairness loses its credibility when placed in context with his entire social justice framework (Banerjee, 2011; McGrath Morris, 2002). The concept is not entirely useful for social work. For example, it does not address issues of inequality for those

who experience the world through an intersection of identities, including those who have a disability. Rawls believed that individuals with disabilities should be looked after by the third sector—family, community, and local social services. The narrow focus of Rawls’s theory of justice on those who live in poverty does not make connections with other structural inequities that are faced by marginalized populations. From a social work perspective, social justice in all spheres of life is the most desirable form (Banerjee, 2011). Galambos (2008) challenged the profession to justify more clearly the use of Rawls’s theory of social justice. She argued that if it is not understood in its entirety, using selective fragments of justice as fairness would promote an inaccurate understanding of social justice theory that would weaken the foundation of social justice in social work.

The Capabilities Approach

Amaryta Sen’s (1992, 1999, 2009) capabilities approach is another liberal perspective that extends the concept of justice as fairness. This approach explores an understanding of how the freedom to make choices contributes to individual well-being. It embraces positive freedoms and promotes human agency in which people can make choices about their lives and have the potential to fulfill those choices (Reisch & Garvin, 2015). Thus it moves beyond providing a minimum of resources for surviving in a society based on “the actual living that people manage to achieve” (Sen, 1999, p. 73) so that people can live up to their full potential. The approach’s three core ideas are capabilities, agency, and functioning. Capabilities are opportunities that individuals should have so that they may develop their individual well-being. Sen (2009) asserted that those specific capabilities should not be determined by any outside force, since everyone has agency and agents choose how to function (p. 20).

The capabilities approach recognizes that individuals face barriers to realizing full functioning in society. These social, political, and economic barriers arise from structural inequalities faced by marginalized individuals and groups. Sen (2009) rejected a distributive, money-oriented concept of social justice; instead, he wanted one that would provide universal opportunities to exercise people's capabilities. He maintained that what people can do and be is based on their opportunities and capabilities, and asserted that political and economic institutions need to facilitate opportunities for people to develop.

A fully human life requires being able to exercise the essential functions of living. Sen (2009) expanded Rawls's desirable primary goods to include functioning and well-being. These determine an individual's health, safety, education, and participation in society, including some relation to goods and income. The approach also takes into consideration basic needs such as nourishment, education, clothing, and housing together with an understanding of well-being that allows individuals to participate in public without shame or stigma. In this way, well-being can range from meeting basic survival needs to being able to develop relationships and participate in art, culture, and society (Sen, 2009, p.10).

In *Sex and Social Justice*, Nussbaum (2003) extended Sen's conception of the capabilities approach by connecting Sen's liberal view with feminism. Nussbaum (2003) believed that, for women, the capabilities approach is instrumental in developing their full potential. She developed an inclusive list of capabilities highlighting women's issues, for example stating that people who cannot function can develop the requisite capabilities over time with appropriate social and political arrangements. She agreed with Sen that capabilities are interrelated and affect one another. The main difference between Sen's and Nussbaum's conceptualization of capabilities is that Nussbaum explicitly identified 10 individual and collective capabilities: life;

bodily health; bodily integrity; sense, imagination, and thought; emotion; practical reason; affiliation; other species; play; and control. Nussbaum (2000) argued that this list provides a necessary minimum threshold to determine whether every individual is thriving. Sen disagreed—listing attainable freedoms amounts to a violation of the human freedom to make choices (Sen, 1999). However, Nussbaum (2000) countered this argument by positing that without an evaluative framework, Sen’s conception of social justice is too broad to address social justice for anybody. For his part, Reisch (2014) felt that specific substantive freedoms should be determined by each society through a democratic process.

There are issues with the capabilities approach. Critics maintain that it is not the full theory of justice (Robeyns, 2009) that Sen argues it is. Its strengths are also criticized as weaknesses—for example, its openness to different societies is arguably too open and fluid and lacks a framework within which to understand progress (Robeyns, 2009). This lack of a framework leaves it open to interpretation and exploitation by those who enjoy privilege in society (D. Clark, 2005).

Few social work scholars have explored the use of capabilities approach in social work (Banerjee & Canda, 2012; McGrath Morris, 2002). However, one such scholar, Anna Gupta (2015) extended the capabilities approach in her research on child welfare and poverty in the U.K. She felt that social workers need to develop a socially just practice that assists in the development of individual well-being. For this purpose, Gupta described the intersection between individual concerns and broader social and economic structures, and looked to the future of those who are involved with the child welfare system.

Applying the capabilities approach in social work can help social work practitioners focus on a person’s potential or capabilities to make personally significant life choices (Sen,

1999). This requires social workers and systems to remove the scrutiny from clients' current situations and functioning (Sen, 1999) and focus instead on their future life choices or capabilities. Recognizing individuals' freedom to make choices appropriate to build what they want to achieve or be (Saito, 2003), the capabilities approach connects redistributive principles with social work's focus on dignity and self-determination (McGrath Morris, 2002).

The interrogation of power is significant in social work. Nussbaum (2003) believed that neither Sen nor Rawls adequately addressed unequal power relationships. Marginalized populations do not have access to power and cannot achieve their capabilities without the ability to represent themselves (Kim & Sherraden, 2014; Reisch & Garvin, 2015). Nussbaum's extension of Sen's capabilities approach would provide social workers with a potential evaluative framework, to better understand whose rights and capabilities should be considered for services and programs (Austin, 2014, p. 83; McGrath Morris, 2002). Nussbaum also defended the evaluative component because individuals may not understand that they have adapted to living in oppressive conditions and thus have lower expectations for their lives (Kim & Sherraden, 2014). The evaluative component could provide a measure for individual well-being.

Liberal theories of justice such as justice as fairness (Rawls, 1971, 1999), and the capabilities approach (Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 1999) can provide a framework for all dimensions of social work practice because they attend to issues of well-being and emphasize the intrinsic worth and dignity of the individual (A.M McLaughlin, 2006 p. 105). The belief that individuals are rational beings capable of making life decisions is interpreted in social work as a client's ability to self-determine. Wakefield (1988a) believed that a liberal understanding of social justice

connects to social work because it concurrently considers the individual and understands the significance of societal institutions and history (A.M, McLaughlin, 2006, p. 17).

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I have pointed toward political social justice philosophies, both liberal and critical, and how these philosophies inform social work. Unpacking their underlying political assumptions is a helpful tool for unravelling and conceptualizing social justice. Framing social justice on the basis of political philosophies helps place social justice on an ideological spectrum, providing clarity about social justice in social work across all dimensions of practice. Baines (2011) suggested that social justice should be front and centre in social work practice, because without it all dimensions of micro to macro practice can generate oppression in people's everyday lives (pp. 4–5).

The next chapter will explore the methodology and methods used in this study.

Chapter 4: Research Methodology

Utilizing a critical progressive postmodern lens (Lane, 1999) and constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014), this study aimed to examine how social work practitioners who identify a commitment to social justice understand and practice social justice. Specifically, I set out to address the overarching research question: “*What do social workers who aim to be working toward social justice have to say about their praxis and practices?*” I also pose secondary questions that connect to my overarching question, including:

1. How do social workers make meaning of the construct *social justice*?
2. What brought them to practise from what they understand is a social justice perspective?
3. How do they understand social justice to be manifested in their everyday practice?

These questions will provide an understanding of what type of social justice we are really talking about when we talk about it in social work practice and how it is manifested in the everyday practices of social workers. In other words, what kind of social justice work do practitioners think they are practising? (Solas, 2008). Given the exploratory nature of these questions, a qualitative study was conducted (Creswell, 2012).

Interviews conducted with social workers who see themselves as practising social justice enabled the in-depth exploration of the meaning they place on the term *social justice* and how they pursue social justice in their work. My focus on both meaning and practices enabled me to look beyond social workers’ definitions of social justice to explore the conceptualizations underlying their self-described social justice work. In this analysis, I examine the political, theoretical, and philosophical bases they draw on to inform their understanding and practice of social justice.

Below, I outline constructivist grounded theory and why I selected it as my qualitative methodology. Next, I discuss the sampling method and recruitment strategy, data collection, data analysis, and strategies used to promote study trustworthiness. I conclude the chapter by outlining how I upheld the principles of ethical research.

Constructivist Grounded Theory

Constructivist Grounded theory involves inductively creating theories or analytical understandings of the phenomenon of interest, social justice in this case, extracted based on real-world situations captured through the collected data (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 2012).

Constructivist Grounded theory allows for an understanding of the relationship between individuals' perceptions and their actions as a way to foster analytical understanding that is grounded in the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). While it has had multiple variations (Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007), grounded theory is rooted in participants' perspectives and experiences, and in social work it can be used to guide practice and is an effective at exploring "practice wisdom" (Oktay, 2012). Furthermore, it takes into account the subjectivity of the researchers' interpretations (Glaser, 1998).

Constructivist grounded theory recognizes that knowledge is socially constructed, and thus values participants' multiple realities (Charmaz, 2009; Creswell, 2012). It also embraces the co-construction of knowledge in the context of the interview, between the participant and researcher. As such, this methodology assumes that participants construct their realities, which are shaped by social interactions "situated in particular temporal, cultural and structural contexts" (Charmaz, 2000, p. 524). This approach to grounded theory is particularly applicable to my study given my interest in not only the meaning and practice of social justice practices but also whether practitioners' positionalities (lived experiences, identities, critical moments)

(Postan-Aizik et al., 2019) and the context and nature of their work interact and shape these practices. The data were mutually co-created by the participants and the researcher throughout the interview process, which became an interpretation of reality (Charmaz, 2006). This interpretation also allowed for the creation of a theory drawn from the data, which could be used as a premise for future research (Creswell, 2012; Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

Constructivist grounded theory fits well with my critical postmodern theoretical framework. Constructivist grounded theory provides opportunities to ask emergent critical questions that encourage interrogating the underlying assumptions in my analysis, and it allows me to take a more reflexive stance in analyzing the data (Charmaz, 2017).

By using constructivist grounded theory, I was able to explore participants' abstract understandings of social justice and the application of social justice in their daily practices, in some cases identifying disconnects between the two aspects. Furthermore, by drawing on philosophical frameworks and practice theories of social justice, I was able to interpret their meanings and practices of social justice within this literature, including critically exploring the underlying assumptions of their social justice practice.

Sample and Recruitment Strategy

The sample consisted of 20 participants, which is both appropriate and ideal for an exploratory qualitative study (Crouch & McKenzie, 2006). Crouch and McKenzie suggest that a sample size of fewer than 20 interviews is ideal for qualitative, interview-based research. Also, sample size is not particularly relevant in constructivist grounded theory studies (Charmaz, 2001). The sample was purposive and used maximum variation (Creswell, 2012).

The recruitment criteria were that participants should be practising social workers who defined themselves as having a commitment to social justice principles and practices in their

work, have 5 years or more post-MSW experience in Canada, and live/work in southwestern Ontario. The self-identified commitment to social justice was an inclusion criterion because it would mean that the individual would have consciously and purposefully thought about how social justice is part of their practice, hopefully with an understanding of the nuances of the issues and implications of injustice that those they work with face in their daily lives. I required participants to have at least 5 years practice experience, as “social justice is a complex value that may appear difficult to translate into practice for beginning social workers” (A.M. McLaughlin, 2006, p. 23). Southern Ontario was selected as the research site as approximately 36% of the Canadian population lives in this region with a mix of rural, suburban, and urban areas (Hillmer & Bothwell, 2021). Also, approximately 30% of Canadian schools and faculties of social work with MSW programs are located in southern Ontario (Canadian Association for Social Work Education [CASWE-ACFTS], 2018).

Following the principles of maximum variation sampling (Creswell, 2012), efforts were made to recruit a diverse sample in terms of geography, practice context and areas, and level and years of practice. Contextual factors such as geography, areas of practice (e.g., health care, schools, community-based services), and level of practice may shape the meaning and practice of social justice (Morgaine, 2014) and thus were part of my analysis. Recruiting practitioners from different geographic locations was planned as service users in various locales may face different issues, and this inclusion criterion can allow for the exploration of structural contexts related to community size that can shape the practice of social justice (J. M. Bradley et al., 2012; Feld, 1991). Furthermore, recruiting social workers from urban, suburban, and rural geographic areas assisted me in recruiting from a broad cross-section of practice sectors and practice contexts. Concerning level of practice, the CASW *Code of Ethics* (2005a) does not differentiate between

micro practice and macro practice in terms of the ethical principle of social justice, though I searched for differences in my analysis. Recruiting participants with experience beyond the required 5 years was important as increased experience assisted in meeting the goals in the study. Years of experience in practice may mean that practitioners are able to understand the everyday interconnections between the lived experiences of their clients and broader society and had opportunities, constraints, and barriers to social justice in their practice contexts. Belonging to a purposive sample, the participants were considered to be information-rich sources (Patton, 2002).

Recruitment Procedures

Participant recruitment occurred between February and April 2019. I recruited participants by sending out posters (see Appendix A) on LinkedIn and asking professional contacts to disseminate information to their networks. I also recruited participants through the Ontario Association of Social Workers (OASW); the recruitment poster was sent to all members in the 15 branches across southern Ontario. Finally, I approached schools of social work in southern Ontario, asking directors and field directors to share the recruitment poster with alumni and field placement organizations. I used LinkedIn and OASW social work membership as I believed it would be the most effective means to recruit social workers in southern Ontario, far and wide. I approached schools of social work hoping to increase the reach of my recruitment efforts; however, numerous barriers were encountered in that some schools required approval from their university's REB and/or raised concerns about setting a precedent of disseminating information on behalf of PhD students, and other schools did not respond to my request. As a result, this recruitment activity was not implemented. Individuals contacted me by email to indicate their interest in joining the study. Forty individuals expressed interest in participating in the study.

To have a diverse sample, as per maximum variation sampling, participant screening considered geography, sectors, areas, level, and years of practice. To capture an understanding of social justice in social work practice across southern Ontario, given the diversity of the profession, it was especially important to ensure that the sample represented rural and urban areas and both micro and macro practice across various practice fields. Initial screening occurred through a 15-minute screening telephone interview, with those selected for the study being invited to participate in a research interview held at a later time. Prior to the screening interview I provided a digital copy of the Screening Interview Consent Letter (see Appendix B), which prospective participants were asked to complete and return to me by email. In the screening interviews, after providing an overview of the study and ethical considerations, I confirmed the individual's eligibility to join the study, and among those who were eligible to continue I asked about salient identities and experiences that brought them to practise social justice. I asked about salient identities and experiences because practitioners practise social justice for many reasons that may be beyond my ability to identify as the researcher. Further, I wanted to make sure that participants had the opportunity to discuss any identities and/or experiences that they saw as significant so as not to stereotype them and use labels and identities they do not embrace (Weis & Fine, 2000).

Individuals who could not answer the experiences questions were excluded from the study because I believed they would not be able to engage in the level of reflection required for a meaningful research interview. Nineteen people were excluded for this reason. Twenty individuals were selected for a research interview. Each person was contacted by email to arrange a time and place of their choosing. Two participants who were selected for the interviews did not respond to this email. The interview consent letter (see Appendix C) was

emailed to each individual and was either returned in advance by mail or email or signed at the time of the interview. Signed consent forms were stored in a locked file cabinet until their destruction upon completion of the study.

Participant Incentive

Individuals who participated in the initial recruitment stage were invited to participate in a draw for a \$250 prepaid Visa card or a donation to a charity of their choice. The draw was held after data collection. Individuals who were selected to participate in the full interview did not receive an incentive draw or honorarium for the research interview.

Data Collection

I estimated that recruitment and data collection would take at least 6 months, but I received 40 expressions of interest to join the study over 2 to 3 weeks. I was concerned about individuals losing interest in the study as social work practitioners lead busy professional lives, and hence being responsive to participants' availability was crucial; the research interviews took place within a 6-week period between May 1 and June 17, 2019. Three of the interviews had to be rescheduled

Screening Interviews

These interviews were conducted via phone. In addition to questions related to the eligibility requirements, participants were asked to identify their gender, age range, income bracket, practice sector and level and years of practice. Participants were also asked to share any other salient identities and experiences that seemed relevant to them that brought them to practising what they understand as social justice. For the other salient identities question, participants had a choice to choose any identity and/or lived experience that they deemed

significant, or they could choose not to respond to this question. See Appendix D for the screening questionnaire.

In addition to describing the sample, demographic information was used to understand the positionality and context of the participants. Such information and the details about experiences that led them to engage in social justice provided an anchor for the analysis to understand patterns regarding the diversity of participants (e.g., sector, geography and level of practice, years of practice, experiences or critical moments or situations of justice or injustice, ability, age, ethnicity, culture, spirituality, faith/religious affiliation, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, work experience) and their commitment and practice of social justice.

Research Interviews

In-person, in-depth (Zhang & Wildemuth, n.d.), semi-structured interviews were held using an interview guide (see Appendix E), which I constructed to ensure that the key topic areas were covered in each interview, with the flexibility to explore important topics raised by the participant (Duffy et al., 2004). Each interview was recorded. Interviews began with the broad open-ended question, “Can you describe for me what the words *social justice* mean to you?” Such questions are productive methods of getting to know the participant (Benjamin, 1981). Interview questions tended to be open-ended, which gave participants “the space to show themselves as competent designers of their own lives” (Kraus, 2000, para. 10) and provided opportunities for them to create a self-reflexive biography.

Core questions focused on the participant’s construction of their meaning of social justice and how it is manifested in their everyday practices. Further, the challenges of using in-depth interviews are knowing how to direct the pace and direction of the conversation. If new topics

arise in the narratives of participants, it is challenging to know whether to follow the topic and risk losing the connection to the stories or not to follow the topic and miss potentially relevant information (Patton, 2002). I used prompts to follow up on what was not explicitly articulated, to clarify points, and to elicit elaboration of key points based on narratives in previous interview questions (Patton, 2002). Throughout the interviews, I focused on the details in each participant's story and the topics that were emphasized, and followed the clues provided by participants in each successive conversation. Following these clues provided me further depth and relevant information.

A vital consideration in an interview is the ability of the researcher to gain trust and establish rapport so that participants will share their experiences (Fontana & Frey, 2005). As the interviewer, I was prepared to listen and go where the participant went in telling their story, which helped to gain their confidence and build rapport. This flexibility respected the participant's story and ability to discuss various aspects of their experience (K. Rose, 1994).

Construction of the Interview Guide

Hatchell and Aveling (2008) suggested that stories uncover how individuals create meaning out of their experiences, while at the same time articulating common threads of understanding. Stories or narratives can also articulate an understanding and practice of social justice that abstract language cannot capture, particularly the complexity and nuances of experiences, feelings, and thoughts (Eisner, 2007). The interview questions (Appendix A) were adapted from a workshop activity titled "An Expansive Inquiry into the Spirit of Social Justice in our Work" (V. Reynolds, 2017). The interview questions asked participants to describe and reflect upon their experiences in a way that rarely occurs in everyday life. This allows for the generation of theory or, at the very least, uncovering new themes and concepts (Creswell, 2012).

Charmaz (2006) explains that interviews allow an interviewer to: (a) go beneath the surface of the described experience(s); (b) stop to explore a statement or topic; (c) request greater detail or explanation; (d) ask about the participant's thoughts, feelings, and actions; (e) keep the participant on the subject; (f) come back to an earlier point; (g) restate the participant's point to check for accuracy; (h) slow or quicken the pace; (i) shift the immediate topic; (j) validate the participant's humanity, perspective, or action; (k) use observational and social skills to further the discussion; and (l) respect the participant and express appreciation for participating (p. 26).

Charmaz suggests that participants hold the conversational prerogatives, which allows for storytelling and the emergence of a coherent frame. It also allows the participants to reflect upon earlier events, to be experts and to share significant experiences, and to teach the interviewer how to interpret these experiences (p. 27). The original questions were reformulated to be more accessible after the questions were piloted with three professional colleagues to discern flow and coherence and whether the items were getting to the substance needed for the research focus.

Each interview took on a life of its own, as practitioners told stories about their personal experiences and identities. They also told stories of professional encounters across a wide range of services in the field, which required the need for flexibility in requesting participants to expand, clarify, and tell stories in their particular personal and practice contexts. Additionally, I would sometimes engage in a dialogue with participants, which aligns with the co-constructed nature of data gathered using Charmaz's (2006) grounded theory. As an example, I could ask follow-up questions, clarify meanings, and explore terminology. These dialogues helped me to ensure that I had captured the meaning of what the participants were describing accurately.

Data Analysis

The interview transcriptions were completed by the transcription service rev.com. Transcribing was done verbatim, including all utterances such as "uh huh," "mmmm," "yeah," which I used to encourage the participants to continue with their stories and indicate that I was actively listening (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). Transcripts also noted where the interviewee sighed, laughed, or paused.

Field Notes and Memos

I kept field notes throughout the interview process. My notes captured both the verbal and nonverbal richness of the data, including participants' use of humour and the expression and intensity of their emotions. Field notes provided me with the opportunity to think about and analyze the social context of the research study in terms of an awareness of each participant's life story and identities and their geographic area of practice, sector, and level of practice as it was relevant to the study details.

After each interview, I engaged in memo-writing that prompted me to analyze the data and begin coding early in the research process as recommended in the literature regarding constructivist grounded theory (C. Webb & Kevern, 2008). This process enabled me to capture my initial post-interview thoughts and impressions and make tentative comparisons and connections, and assisted in revising interview questions and prompts used in subsequent interviews. I followed Richards and Morse's (2007) position that memos are used to ask questions about the data and Glaser's (1998) understanding that memos document the researcher's developing ideas about the codes and their interconnections. Memos are "the meaning and ideas for one's growing theory at the moment they occur" (p. 178). In this case, memos were used to document my thinking process and interpretations of the data, rather than simply a description of the social context (Montgomery & Bailey, 2007).

I also included reflexive field notes to capture what I believed the participant's story was telling me by reflecting on the words or phrases, recording my ideas of concepts or themes, and noting issues for further investigation (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Reflexive field notes made after the memo-writing allowed me to capture context (geographic areas, sector and dimensions of practice), my own experience and connections with my own positionality, and my opinions and reactions from these research interviews. Memoing and reflexivity helped me track my ideas as they emerged and shifted throughout the data analysis, including understanding how my positionality as the researcher influenced my interpretation of the participants' stories.

In conducting the study, I was particularly aware of issues of power, and how meanings were constructed through particular philosophies, context, and language. It was important for me to ask reflexive questions about my positioning as a researcher in my memo writing and journaling by being aware of the need to be open to the data. In doing so, I maintained a stance of "theoretical sensitivity" to explore the nuances of meaning within the data (Orland-Barak, 2002).

Coding the Data

Early in the coding process, I spent time immersing myself in the data by listening to the interviews and reading and rereading the transcripts from the interviews. I then organized interview data for analysis by inputting codes line by line into an Excel spreadsheet. I later further refined these codes and developed axial codes: axial coding involved organizing the data in categories and subcategories and making linkages between the coded data. Excel assisted me in organizing and making connections with earlier coding as I moved from open coding to axial coding and then categorizing the codes.

From the memos and transcripts, I created and defined codes and categories that emerged from the data (Charmaz, 2006). The constructivist elements of this methodology allowed me to create codes and categories rooted in the language and experiences of the participants rather than my interpretation of their narratives. The first level of analysis explored the meaning in the text, and generated potential codes (Richards & Morse, 2007). I used constructivist grounded theory by initially coding and analyzing the data multiple times. I completed the first level of analysis by coding the transcripts by individual questions—word for word, sentence by sentence, and paragraph by paragraph to create descriptive codes, such as:

Table 1

Descriptive Codes for Question 1

Can you describe for me what the words *social justice* mean to you?

| access | values | equity | power |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------|---------------|----------------------|
| barriers to access | equal access | humanity | reactionary |
| being seen and heard | equality | inequality | humanity |
| personhood | social work education | opportunity | relational practices |

During the second level of coding, I revised and refined codes and developed more focused codes. Focused coding involved organizing the data into categories and subcategories to identify recurrent patterns and multiple levels of meaning by delineating interconnections across subcategories. This led me to sometimes rethink a general category by regrouping codes and, at times, led to a reorientation of the category.

Table 2

Categories for Question 1

Can you describe for me what the words *social justice* mean to you?

| Connecting Values to Practices |
|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • social justice practices • relational practices • context • leveraging power • opportunity—individual • recognition |

This organization of data resulted in the identification of theoretical codes, which are higher-order relationships among the more concrete codes (Charmaz, 2006). The goal of this coding was to obtain “thick description” about participants’ experiences (Charmaz, 2006), as well as to compare the data consistency:

Comparing data with data means (1) comparing different people's situations, beliefs, behavior or accounts of the same type of event or issue, (2) comparing data from the same people at different times and (3) comparing properties found in the data with other properties. (Charmaz, 2006 p. 168)

The third level of coding captured the similarities and differences in the perspectives, experiences, and practices of social justice by the participants through emic or emergent themes from participants’ stories (Padgett, 1998). This third level of analysis also captured the concepts and underlying assumptions, and answered the queries in my memos, to illustrate and develop themes theoretically (Richards & Morse, 2007). This assisted me in understanding the underlying assumptions, meaning, and practice of social justice by social work practitioners. As seen above, coding emphasized participants’ words and experiences, and thus embraced an inductive approach to data analysis. At the same time, this process was deductive: The study's theoretical

framework, which arose from critical postmodernist concepts and my prior knowledge about the underlying theories of social justice, guided my focus on developing codes. Bryant and Charmaz (2007) see the necessity of reviewing the literature to “situate your work within a body of related literature” (p. 123). In addition, this helps to “set the stage for what you do in subsequent sections or chapters” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 166). I balanced the need to be both inductive and deductive by creating codes that emerged from the data while understanding that sometimes the codes also emerged out of a preconceived framework. In this research, I did not generate a new or overarching theory from the data, but instead used current literature to understand the findings. However, surprising anomalous data emerged which led to theorizing about teaching social justice and the enactment of social justice in everyday practice was relevant in my research.

In the final stage of analysis, I used constant comparative methods to establish analytic distinctions and make comparisons at each level of analysis (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) within and across questions among the interviews. After this process was completed, I engaged in member checking with participants by sending them a list of final themes and definitions to verify that my understanding of the themes presented in the research resonated with their understanding and enactment of social justice. I incorporated their feedback into the final stages of the analysis. In order to avoid jumping to theoretical conceptualizing early in the process of analysis Theoretical saturation was achieved through constant comparison at each level and between levels of analysis, reviewing codes that did not fit in specific categories for new conceptualizations, or reconceptualizations until no new codes were evident (Charmaz, 2014) and through member checking.

During the final stage of analysis, I spent several months conceptualizing and reconceptualizing my analysis and interpretations to accurately capture the complexity and nuances of the data. This process enabled me to move beyond descriptive themes to a theoretical discussion to assist me in explaining the findings. While theoretical discussions are not necessarily a component of constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006), theorizing moved the research beyond capturing narratives about social justice in social work toward a discussion of the many understandings of social justice and how they were integrated into professional practices.

I was particularly aware of issues of power, and how meanings were constructed through particular philosophies, context, and language. It was important for me to ask reflexive questions about my positioning as a researcher in my memo writing and journaling by being aware of the need to be open to the data. In doing so, I maintained a stance of “theoretical sensitivity” to explore the nuances of meaning within the data (Orland-Barak, 2002) by unpacking the underlying assumptions to uncover what is meaningful. I balanced the need to be both inductive and deductive by creating codes that emerged from the data while understanding that sometimes the codes also emerged out of a preconceived framework.

There are many ways to conduct theoretical sampling (Charmaz, 2014). While purposeful sampling is not “theoretical sampling” per se, it is an early element, since recruiting participants who can answer the research question in the study can be seen as the beginning of a theoretical exploration (Charmaz, 2014). I chose to review each transcript and use memoing and reflective journaling as tools to exploring emergent concepts after each interview. These concepts then informed further probing questions about the concept in subsequent interviews. This form of theoretical sampling assisted in the explorations of the data and allowed for the

development of insights about, or refined understandings of emergent concepts until conceptual saturation was reached (Conlin et al, 2020).

Trustworthiness

To ensure the rigour and trustworthiness of the study, I engaged in member checking as described above to reduce the risk of reactivity, researcher bias, and respondent bias (Charmaz, 2006). Further, I kept an audit trail within my coding spreadsheet as well as memos and journals to keep track of my methodological and analytical decisions to reduce the risk of researcher bias.

Ethical Principles

The study received Institutional Research Board approval in January 2019. As such, the study complies with the *Tri-Council Policy Statement* for the ethical conduct for research involving humans (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, & Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, 2018).

Participation in the research project was entirely voluntary and each participant consented before engaging in the study. All identifying participant information is treated as confidential through the use of pseudonyms and by not identifying specific workplaces. Interviews were conducted in private office spaces in the community or university in the participants' geographical area. All electronic consent forms, audio recordings, and transcripts containing participants' names were stored on the university password-protected encrypted cloud-based data management system until the completion of the study; some participants provided paper-based consent forms (signed prior to the start of the interview) which were stored in a locked cabinet. Some demographic information is used in the study. However, given the geographic scope of the

practitioner community and the diversity in the field which the study draws on, it was possible to include participants' demographic information in the report without violating confidentiality (Hennink et al., 2010).

As part of the consent form, participants gave permission to use quotations from their respective interviews. Additionally, any quotations used in the research report were sent to the individual participant for their approval. Audiotapes and written transcriptions of the data will be destroyed after 5 years (Hennink et al., 2010). Participants were informed of the benefits of the research to themselves, social work scholarship, and professional practice. The participants were advised of the dissemination processes of the findings.

Relational Ethical Principles

Beyond institutional research ethics, as a study on social justice demands, I employed social work ethical principles to address relevant issues of power and relationships with participants, which I recorded and reflected upon in my field journal. I recognize that I am located within global and local societal relations of power. I understand that I bring deeply ingrained experiences as a practitioner and educator into this research. That is, as a social worker who believes social justice is foundational to my practice and who teaches from a particular lens, to engage in ethical research I needed to be aware of not romanticizing the narratives of social justice. As well, I needed to be mindful of my ideological stance, which may criticize the perspectives and positions of those who do not reflect my understanding of social justice. To avoid marginalizing and silencing fellow social workers who hold different views than I do, throughout the study I adopted a critical reflexive stance. As a researcher, I aimed to be keenly conscious of what can happen when voices go unheard in research.

In carrying out the study, I saw the need to engage in critical reflection on my use of self, social location, and positionality, to minimize the effects of oppressive power relations. I understood that power was part of the interview dialogue with participants; thus, conducting ethical research required constant engagement in critical reflexivity and a continuous examination of my research practices throughout the research process. Further, I understood that I needed to be reflexively and continuously engaged in the research from selecting participants to writing, presenting, and publishing. Honouring my participants' stories, I intended to remain faithful to their language within my initial codes, my formulations, and the descriptions I authored. I understood that I needed to disseminate findings in ways that respect participants' perspectives and contribute to learning about the practices of social justice within the field of social work. Finally, respecting their agency, I engaged in member checking regarding final themes and asked participants to review and approve quotations prior to publication. To the best of my ability, I have followed ethical principles, not just in conducting research, but also in my professional conduct as a social work practitioner generally.

Chapter Summary

In this chapter, I outlined the rationale for using constructivist grounded theory as a methodology to explore social work practitioners' understanding of social justice and how they enact this foundational principle in social work in their everyday actions. Further, I provided a rationale for using semi-structured interviews as the method for data gathering. I also explored the nuances of the data and how the process of analyzing the data occurred during data collection. Lastly, I concluded with the ethical principles relevant to the study.

Chapter 5: Findings

This chapter focuses on the findings from the individual interviews. Participants were interviewed to solicit their thoughts, experiences, and practices of social justice. All interviews began with the question about what meaning the term *social justice* held for participants. I wondered if the meaning that participants ascribe to social justice significantly informs how they incorporate social justice into their practice.

The interviews ranged between 45 minutes and 2 hours in length. The length and depth of the conversations were driven by the participants and the interviews ended when the participants addressed the research questions to their satisfaction and stated they had nothing more to add to the interview. This accounts for the length and depth of the profiles outlined, analyzed, and presented for each participant. The chapter first describes the participants' demographics both collectively and as individual profiles. It then reports on the primary findings, which have been broken down into eight central thematic areas with a further section that reports on the exceptionalities in the data.

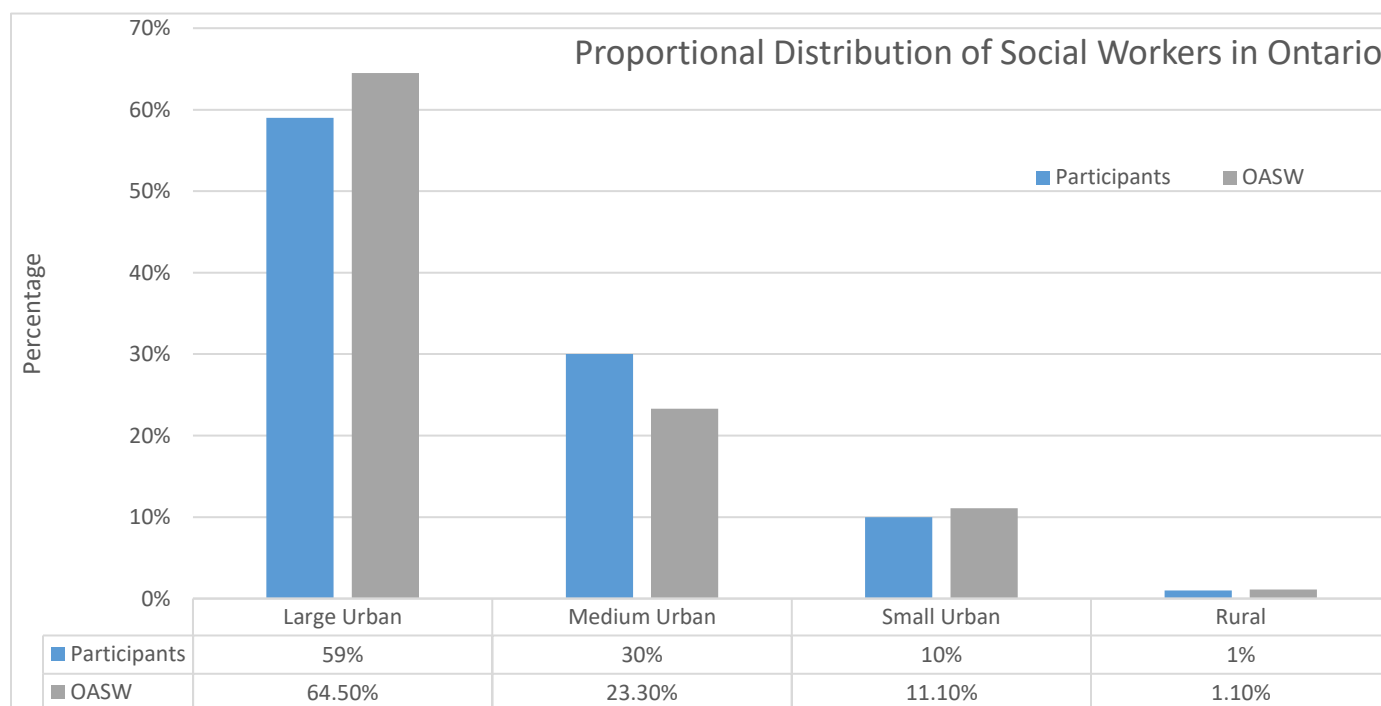
Sample Profile

This study had a total sample of 20 participants, all of whom were current practitioners at the time of recruitment and data collection. During the recruitment stage, potential participants were asked to complete a positionality information sheet (See Appendix D), which sought demographic information regarding participants' age range, income bracket, sector and level of practice, years in the field, and field of practice. Participants were also asked to share any other experiences or salient identities such as gender, sexual orientation, race, or ability, which seemed relevant to them and brought them to practising social justice. They had a choice to leave any question blank.

The participants in the study were representative of the proportional distribution of social work practitioners in the Province of Ontario (Ontario Association of Social Workers [OASW], 2017). Participants practised in a wide range of geographic areas in southern Ontario with 55% of participants practising in large urban centres, 30% practising in medium-size urban centres, 10% of participants practising in small urban centres, and 1% of participants practising in a rural area.

Figure 1

Proportional Distribution of Social Workers in Ontario



Years of professional experience in the field ranged between 6 and 42 years. Participants' ages ranged between 25 and 74 years of age, with 40% of participants in the 35–42 years age range while 60% of participants' ages ranged between 45 and 74 years. Five participants reported working part-time, and 15 worked full-time. For participants working full-time, three had more than one job. One participant had a part-time clinical supervision and clinical practice while

teaching full-time, one had a part-time clinical practice while teaching part-time, and one had a full-time clinical practice and taught part-time. One participant was semiretired and taught part-time. Sixteen or 80% of participants identified as female, of which one participant identified as gender-queer or nonbinary and used feminine pronouns, and four or 20% of participants identified as male. Participants in the study are generally representative of the gender demographic in the field more broadly which maintains that 87% of practitioners identify as female, 12.5% identify as male and 0.5% identifying as gender queer based on the 2017 report from OASW which provides a snapshot of social work in Ontario.

Salary ranges of participants ranged from under \$19,000 per annum for part-time employment to over \$120,000 per annum for one participant who taught in postsecondary education combined with multiple jobs in practice. Nine participants identified having a partner who also brought income into the home. However, after the first four participants declined to answer the question about partner income, I did not ask the question to further participants. Six participants identified as being the sole income provider, two identified other income sources beyond employment income such as OAS, CPP and a pension. Three participants indicated that they also worked additional social work jobs and three participants taught in postsecondary programs from college to graduate MSW programs in addition to their practices.

Participants identified working in a number of practice contexts previously in their careers, including mental health and addictions in agency based, private practice and postsecondary counselling departments, homelessness, rural outreach and advocacy with seniors, private practice, school social work, child protection, children's mental health, group work in the criminal justice system and with youth, clinical practice in hospitals, and community healthcare. Others identified working in administration and management in mental health organizations,

women's services, diversity and equity and program planning, advocacy and community organizing for homeless adults and youth, international development and teaching at the post-secondary level. Participants identified working in multiple practice contexts in previous social work employment and some identified multiple jobs at one time.

Participants were asked to provide any salient identities and/or experiences that they believed were important to their understanding and practice of social justice. Participants provided information on an intersection of salient identities and experiences such as gender, ability, sexual orientation, age, race, and experiences of privilege, growing up in poverty, experiences of bullying, sexual assault, mental illness, addictions, micro-aggressions, and trauma. One participant stated that a theoretical orientation to feminism was significant, another participant identified a relationship with a trans-identified partner, and yet another participant believed that his social justice work included early human rights work in Africa as significant to his social justice work.

This sample was homogeneous in some respects (e.g., education, broad geographic area in southern Ontario, commitment to social justice). The homogeneity can be partially attributed to the criteria for participation in the study which required participants to identify a commitment to social justice, that they had graduated with an MSW from a Canadian university and have been in practice for more than 5 years. The method of recruitment through LinkedIn and the Ontario Association of Social Work membership in South Western Ontario was another contributing factor to the homogeneity.

The sample was heterogeneous in other respects (e.g., religion, age, race, sexual orientation, ability, gender identity, sector of practice, geographic area of practice and years of experience in social work practice). However, it is noteworthy that seven or 35% of participants

in the study identified as queer (lesbian, gay, queer-identified), of which one participant identified as having intersecting identities as queer and racialized, and four identified as having a disability (including physical, neurodiversity, mental health issues). Further, four or 20% of participants identified as racialized.

An integrated collective profile of participants in the study suggests that participants are generally representative of social workers in Ontario in terms of geographic distribution and gender. Participants are homogeneous in their education and commitment to social work and the majority discuss a range of difficult experiences and marginalized identities that they expressed as salient to their commitment to social justice work in their practices. They are diverse across fields of practice, years of practice, age and have intersecting identities across the spectrum across the axis of privilege and oppression.

This section provided a collective profile summary of participants in the study. The following section will capture the individual profile of participants which precedes the section that captures findings from the study.

Individual Participant Profiles

The research study interviewed twenty participants from a wide variety of practice contexts, years of experience and geographic regions. The following profiles summarize the individual descriptions provided by each participant, the identities, experiences, and relationships that were salient to their social justice practice and the meaning they found in the term *social justice*. Pseudonyms have been used throughout this section to protect the identities of all participants. I also did ask participants to provide exact ages, income, but asked them to provide their age and income within a range. I also asked them to provide sectors of practice without naming specific workplaces to protect their anonymity.

Rose

Rose worked full-time as a policy and community organizing advocate to end chronic homelessness in a medium-size urban area. In her current role she earned a salary in the range of \$50,000–\$59,000 per year. She had been in social work practice for 25 years and graduated with her MSW in the early 1990s. She was between 45 and 54 years of age and identified as a white, middle-class, heterosexual woman.

I am not a person who has lived a lot of marginalization. I'm a white, middle-class, heterosexual woman. But I have really come to this work because I'm fascinated by people and their stories. And as I've gotten to know people, I am fascinated by the resilience and I'm fascinated by how we define success, and how so many people that I've met are successes in their ability to survive.

Margaret

Margaret worked full-time as a Senior administrator for a women and family housing and advocacy organization in a medium size metropolitan area. In her role she earned between \$110,000 and \$120,000 per year. She had been in social work practice for 18 years and graduated with her MSW in the early 1990s. Margaret was between 55 and 64 years of age and identified as a white, heterosexual woman who grew up in an upper-middle-class family but experienced family turmoil in her adolescent years.

I think that I came to social work for social justice, rather than coming to social justice after social work . . . My confidence in the expertise of people with lived experience has definitely changed

Cynthia

Cynthia worked part-time as a seniors and caregiver advocate in a small urban area. In her role she earned under \$19,000 a year. Cynthia supplements her income with the Canada Pension Plan and Old Age Security. She had been in social work practice for 37 years and graduated with her MSW in 1981. Cynthia was between 65 and 74 years of age and identified as a senior, white woman.

I believe people are entitled to information. They are entitled to good information, they are entitled to clear information in a useable, comprehensible format. So, I spend a lot of time trying to make that happen in my community. Listening to what people are confused about, and instead of giving a person information—well, I'll give them information—but also making it more accessible to everyone who might have those same questions . . . I'm pretty good at advocating and putting together information, and sourcing information and surely, I'm not meant to do that and just keep it to myself, you know, just for me

Peter

Peter worked part-time in consulting practice, and had a part-time private counselling practice in a large metropolitan area. He also taught courses at the college level. In his roles, Peter earned between \$20,000 and \$29,000 a year and supplemented his income with the Canada Pension Plan, Old Age Security and a pension. He had been in practice for 42 years and graduated with an MSW in 1975. Peter was between 65 and 74 years of age. He identified as a senior, white male, who worked in human rights work in Africa in the 1970s.

I want to see things more equal. And I think because the folks that I worked with in my mid-twenties, they were willing to die for equality. You know, yeah, there's always that balance between how do we survive, and how do we accomplish the things which will help 10 000 people rather than one family.

Megan

Megan worked full-time as a hospital social worker in a large metropolitan area. In her role, Megan earned between \$90,000 and \$99,000 per year. Megan had been in practice for 26 years. She was between 55 and 64 years of age. Megan identified as a white woman who grew up living in social housing.

At an individual level, the things we do in our everyday life have an impact on the world around us, and that we can contribute to a peaceful world, and existence for ourselves and others if we are thinking about fairness and equity and how we can naturally, you know, make life interesting and enjoyable for not just ourselves but for everybody.

Ellen

Ellen worked full-time in oncology in a hospital in a large metropolitan area. In her role, Ellen earned between \$70,000 and \$79,000 a year and had been in practice for 7 years. She was between 45 and 64 years of age. Ellen identified as a white female who was adopted and described having experienced depression.

Being an advocate and an ally to, the community at large and in particular here in the downtown xxxx in particularly the marginalized community. I work in a hospital, so it's a very patriarchal society, so often in my day to day work, it's, it's trying to make sure that patients get what they need within a system that is very, very rigid

Rebecca

Rebecca worked full-time as a clinical social worker with street involved adults with mental health challenges and substance use in a large metropolitan area. In her role, Rebecca earned \$70,000–\$79,000 per year and had been in practice for 6 years. She was between 35 and 44 years

of age and identified as a white, cisgender, queer-identified woman who is a former substance user.

I think approaching social work and approaching kind of how I practise and how I kind of interact, kind of, with folks in the community and . . . Oh God, in a way that brings kind of like equity and equality. And for me like an anti-oppressive trauma informed lens kind of into the work. But for me, social justice also speaks to advocacy. So not just like the actual kind of work that I'm doing with clients, but then how I also see the barriers to how folks are accessing systems or how I'm able to access systems and participate in that advocacy piece as well.

Alexa

Alexa worked part-time in private clinical practice in a rural community. In her role, Alexa earned between \$30,000 and \$35,000 per year and had been in practice for 31 years. She was between 65 and 74 years of age and identified as a white female who identifies as Dutch and comes from a Dutch Christian Reformed Church background.

For me it means equity and fairness so that every person can live to their full potential. It also means working always in partnership, so it's always a collaborative things, sort of like in a commitment kind of way, so that, you know, the person you're working with can, within their space find opportunity to fulfill themselves.

Esther

Esther worked full-time in policy and planning in municipal government doing citizenship engagement and equity, diversity and inclusion work in a small urban area. In her current role, Esther earned between \$50,000 and \$59,000 per year and had been in practice for 8 years. She

was between 35 and 44 years of age and identified as white, nonbinary and queer-identified who is neurodiverse with mobility limitations.

I think social justice is-- it requires social justice terms of using language that is inclusive, addressing bias and discrimination and harassment, addressing bias and discrimination and harassment . . . the ultimate goal of social justice is redistribution, so that once again, those resources of all kinds, that power is not concentrated in the hands of the few.

Nadine

Nadine worked full-time as a middle manager in a mental health and addictions organization in a large metropolitan area. In her role, Nadine earned between \$60,000 and \$65,000 a year and had been in practice for 8 years. She was between 35 and 44 years of age, identified as a white, woman, straight, and grew up with a single mother in social housing.

I was always felt like if we're not doing social justice, then what are we doing in social work? . . . If we're not talking about power, and if we're not talking about social justice, it's like the work of social work is to help better people's lives and, and communities as a whole.

Kelly

Kelly worked full-time as a clinical social worker in a community healthcare setting in a large metropolitan area. In her role, Kelly earned between \$60,000 and \$69,000 per year and had been in practice for 15 years. She was between 35 and 44 years of age and identified as a black woman, who experienced trauma and bullying in childhood.

That makes me think of fairness. And acceptance. And not basing everything on our judgment . . . Towards people and drawing conclusions about them before you even

know anything about them. And not giving them an opportunity to change, if they're willing to change.

Olivia

Olivia worked full-time as a community outreach worker with seniors in a community healthcare organization in a large metropolitan area. In her role, Olivia earned between \$50,000 and \$59,000 per year and had been in practice for 10 years. She was between 45 and 54 years of age and identified as a black woman who is a feminist.

. . . educated me on working with people from um different socioeconomic backgrounds, different cultures and their challenges . . . it's been a thread in terms of what I do and how we speak to people and how we try to educate people and how we work with them to empower themselves. And that's the important piece of social justice as you're working with them to empower themselves. You're not speaking for them cause you can't speak for them. Right. Then they should, their voice should be heard and they should, if they need assistance to help their voice be heard and that that's on their terms as well . . . And then socially, just on our scale of our society and our government, you know, and people's rights, individual people's rights, people's rights culturally.

Peggy

Peggy worked as a clinician in private practice and taught part-time at a postsecondary institutions in a medium size metropolitan area. In her role as a clinician in private practice, Peggy earned less than \$19,000 a year and has been in practice for 35 years. She was between 55 and 64 years of age and identified as a white cisgender woman.

I really come back to sort of the equity piece that there is sort of a big understanding that life is not equitable to everyone, and part of my commitment as a social worker and as a

person that walks the earth is to, kind of, name some of that and work towards a system that we believe

Phillip

Phillip worked as a clinician in private practice and taught part-time in an MSW program in a post-secondary institution, both in a large metropolitan area. In his roles as a private practitioner and instructor, Phillip earned \$70,000–\$79,000 per year and had been in practice for 12 years.

He was between 35 and 44 years of age and identified as a white, gay man.

social justice is about equity and equality and I think about concepts like balance. I think about social justice being both a perspective and a practice. And I see those two things as being connected, but distinct. Um, to me social justice can be embodied as an action, where it's something that somebody's doing in a way of trying to raise awareness about something or bring attention to an unequal portion of the population. People who struggle in a particular way or it can be a framework for understanding a person, a situation, a community. A way of thinking about something that's happening within that community. So for me I can see it as a framework and I also see it as an action. And framework I think also connects to the idea that it's a value.

Sarah

Sarah worked full-time as a community mental health case manager in a large metropolitan area. In her role, she earned between \$50,000 and \$59,000 per year and had been in practice for 6 years. She was between 35 and 44 years of age and identified as a white queer woman, who has a history of mental health challenges.

it's about sort of taking steps to support people to have equitable access to like opportunities whether it's money or rights or other ways of interacting with the world.

Yeah, making sure that people have equitable access to that and knowing also that people, depending on their social location, just unfortunately have a harder time accessing opportunities that a good chunk of the world just has because of what they look like when they're born or where they're born or under what conditions. Yeah, knowing that that's just laid out to be uneven. So how can we make sure access to things is more equitable?

Tess

Tess worked full-time as a clinician in a university counselling department in a medium size metropolitan area. In her role, Tess earned between \$80,000 and \$89,000 per year and had been in practice for 12 years. She was between 35 and 44 years of age and identified as a white cisgender woman who grew up with a mom who experienced abuse in her family of origin and the foster care system.

I think the term *social justice* is about infusing the work that I do with a lens that goes wider than the individual in that moment or the individual situation, to appreciate the larger meta-narratives, if we wanna call it that, you know, often bear down on people and influence their experiences significantly. And so social justice, to me, is about not blindly turning an eye to all of the factors that again, influence a person's experience on many levels.

Arjun

Arjun worked full-time as a college professor and had a part-time private practice doing clinical supervision and clinical practice in a medium metropolitan area. In his roles, Arjun earned between \$100,000 and \$129,000 a year. He was between 45 and 54 years of age, had been in practice for 25 years, and identified as a racialized man whose family lived on social assistance in a lower-income neighbourhood during his childhood.

equality for all people means equality of access to resources, to services to a life that's happy and healthy, or at least content. Social justice to me means that there's a fight for the underdog, room for people who are oppressed or marginalized to not just have a voice but to be, but to be afforded equal rights and an equal say, and sometimes more of a say than the dominant.

Aaron

Aaron worked full-time as a school social worker and had a private clinical practice in a large metropolitan area. In his roles, Aaron earned between \$60,000 and \$69,000 per year. He was between 25 and 34 years of age and identified as a gay man.

for me, the social justice framework is a lot about equity and then a lot about history, and then, really focusing on different systems of oppression which people's' different intersection identities show up for them to today.

Beth

Beth worked full-time as a clinician in private practice in a medium metropolitan area. In her role, Beth earned between \$40,000 and \$49,000 per year. She was between 35 and 44 years of age and identified as a lesbian woman, who had lived experiences of poverty and a disability.

social justice is really all about the idea of leaning into your humanity, you know, sort of that idea that we're (laughs) all in this together, and none of us are getting out of here alive, so we need to show up, right? and I think in terms of when you're a practitioner, you're having people come to you and see you. I think one of the most important ways that you can show up for people is to not replicate some of the things that sort of we see out there. And so certainly everyone who is a social worker should not be replicating oppression.

Daniella

Daniella worked full-time as a clinician in private practice in a large metropolitan area. In her role, Daniella earned between \$110,000 and \$119,000 per year. She was between 35 and 44 years of age and identified as black, queer-identified survivor of racialized post-traumatic stress disorder.

when we're approaching things from a social justice lens, they actually have the opportunity to have their voices heard and for their issues to be highlighted. So I think about folks who are, sort of oppressed or marginalized in our community. So folks who are defined as the other, so people who are not a part of the dominant culture or the dominant race, or the dominant institutions. So, those are the folks that I'm talking about.

Um, folks that are on the margins

As I progressed through the data analysis, I became increasingly aware of an intrigued by how participants responses to their understanding of social justice provided a snap shot of not only the identity of the participants but also how their understanding of social justice. It provided me an opportunity to think about the connection between their conceptualizations of social justice, identity and experiences which will be explored more fully in the findings section.

The next section provides an overview of the findings from the data collected from the participants. There are eight overall themes to draw from in the following discussion chapter.

Overview of Findings

Data analysis as described in the Methodology chapter, entailed the use of the constant comparison method, key in constructivist grounded theory analysis. A total of six themes with associated sub-themes were found. The explanations are an analytic synthesis of the data comprising each theme and are summarized in Table 3 below.

Table 3*Overview of Findings*

| Theme | Subthemes | Explanation |
|---|---|--|
| <i>The “What” of Social Justice</i> | | |
| Naming Values of Social Justice | Social Justice as a Professional Value in Social Work Heeding the Call to Equality and Equity. Prioritizing Access. Making Recognition Apparent An Ethical Imperative | Social justice is identified as an important foundational value for practice. The meaning of social justice shifts from the abstract notion of equality and equity to the need to provide equal and equitable access. The understanding of social justice also identifies the importance of Recognition—seeing and hearing the lived experiences ² of clients or service users. Lastly, social justice is seen as an ethical imperative or a having a calling to work from this foundational principle. From these values come guiding actions that shape the performance of social justice in social work. |
| Making Meaning of Early Experiences | Experiencing Adversity Experiencing Social Justice in Action | Personal and professional lived experiences of adversity such as bullying, stigma, exclusion and oppression, and experiencing social justice in action such as witnessing such as role models, being guided by mentors and having positive, protective relationships are indicated as reasons for a commitment to social justice in social work practice. |
| The Personal, the Political, and the Professional | Reflection in Action Living One’s Values Developing a Sense of Self Past, Present and Future | Integrating social justice with personal and professional values is significant to practising social justice in both micro and macro practice. This integration process is done through: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • reflection in action • living one’s values • developing the self • understanding one’s past, present and future motivations for doing social justice work. |

² I use the term *lived experience* to denote individuals and groups who have lived experiences of adversity because they felt powerless because they experienced stigmatization, discrimination, prejudice, marginalization or oppression.

| Theme | Subthemes | Explanation |
|---|--|--|
| <i>The “How” of Social Justice</i> | | |
| Theories and Practices that Promote Social Justice | Social Justice–Identified Practice Theories Social Justice Practices Relational Practices Leveraging Professional Power Social Work Skills that Promote Social Justice | There is a diversity of theories, frameworks and practice behaviours in the everyday practices of social justice. The theories and practice approaches include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • poststructural, • structural • ecological • strengths-based • trauma-informed • client-centred • narrative therapy. Practice behaviours include relational practices such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • connecting individual problems with societal issues, engaging service users or clients • working with community, decision-makers and allies; Leveraging professional power is an important practice behaviour utilized to advocate for individual service users or clients. Some social work skills were identified such as: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • engaging • listening for context • educating • cultural humility |
| The Challenging Realities of Social Justice in Social Work Practice | Everyday Tensions Structural Barriers Professional Constraints | In 21st-century Canada, social workers navigate challenging realities such as the juxtaposition of tensions and/or the dilemmas in social justice practice, the barrier of neoliberal practice climate, and the impact and implications of professional constraints. |
| Learning about Social Justice in Social Work Education. | A Critique of Social Work Education Social Work Education as Transformative Learning | Social work education is explored as either beneficial or unhelpful to the practice of social justice in social work. The gaps, disconnects, challenges are analyzed as well as opportunities for learning about social justice in social work education. |

The first three themes collectively identify the “what” of social justice praxis. These themes answer the questions: What do social workers understand as social justice? and What brought them to what they consider to be social justice practice? The findings of this study begin with the first theme, ‘naming the values of social justice’ where participants identify specific values that comprise their understanding of social justice. The second theme identifies the pathways that participants discuss why they are committed to social justice in their social work practice. The

third theme connects the personal, political and professional. In this theme, participants discuss the continuous process that they engage in to sustain socially just practice. The fourth theme identifies the “how “of social justice practice and answers the question of how they understand social justice to be manifested in their everyday practice. This theme distinguishes the theories, standard practices and skills that participants recognize as the daily actions of social justice in their work. Participants identify the tensions, constraints and barriers they face in the fifth theme. The sixth and final theme uncovers the impact, influence and implications of social justice education that participants identify as significant to their commitment to social justice.

Naming Values of Social Justice

To contextualize practice behaviours, I first wanted to explore how participants came to understand and perceive social justice. In the first theme, participants name the values *they* ascribe to their commitment to social justice. Fundamentally, values are essential beliefs people hold dear about what they believe to be important in life, which, in theory, then guide attitudes and actions. In the professional realm, social work values provide an overarching set of principles and goals that motivate a unified, purposeful action in professional practice. From values come guiding actions that shape how we interpret and perform professional principles. While the Canadian *Code of Ethics* for social workers (CASW, 2005a) outlines the pursuit of social justice as a core value, participants in this study elaborated this concept by noting the following subthemes: (a) social justice rooted in social work; (b) heeding the call to equality and equity; (c) prioritizing access; (d) the importance of making recognition apparent in their work, and; (e) social justice as an ethical imperative.

Social Justice as a Professional Value in Social Work

The first subtheme describes social justice as a professional value in social work and how participants connect social justice to their professional practice. Most notably, participants identify how social justice is foundational to their practice. Ellen acknowledges a foundational belief that the value of social justice is indeed core to the profession and practice of social work:

I don't know how you could actually be a social worker without actually believing that social justice is one of our values. (Ellen)

When participants delved deeper into the meaning of social justice, many participants describe the need to see an individual's personhood as unique and a requirement to treat individuals with respect. Additionally, a few connect this respect for the individual (their personhood) as the essence of being human:

. . . As opposed to the fact that you are a person, and you are entitled to certain things, and you don't have to be particularly likeable. And so, that's been really important to me is about really creating the personhood for so many people who are vulnerable and marginalized in so many ways in our community. (Rose)

Rose asserts that by being human, one is endowed with human rights. Here Rose states that these rights are inherent in being human and are not dependent on what kind of human one is.

Beth points out the importance of making connections with another person by "leaning into your humanity" or connecting with shared experiences of being human so that she does not replicate injustice.

I think, for me, social justice is really all about the idea of leaning into your humanity. Um, you know, sort of that idea that, you know, we're (laughs) all in this together, and none of us are getting out of here alive, so we need to show up, right? . . . I think for me that's probably one of the biggest pieces for me in my learning in social justice is to learn

what are my blind spots, where are the places where I may replicate that sense of obliviousness, and how can I do better, right?. (Beth)

These understandings establish that social work participants understand social justice as a professional principle that underpins their work. I would suggest that they particularly refer to the ethical principle of respecting the inherent worth and dignity of all people and uphold human rights (CASW, 2005a) with an understanding that to treat people with dignity requires a shared sense of humanity.

Heeding the Call to Equality and Equity

Participants named equality and equity as prominent themes that connect to social justice. While participants treated these themes as independent of one another, they also saw them as related. Eleven out of twenty participants connected social justice to fairness and equity.

. . . about fairness and equity and how we can naturally, you know, make life interesting and enjoyable for not just ourselves but for everybody. (Megan)

To me it means equity and fairness so that every person can live to their full potential . . . the person you're working with can, within their space, uh, find opportunity to fulfill themselves. (Alexa)

Connecting fairness with equity means that people get what they *need* based on what is appropriate to their particular context, as opposed to everyone getting the same resources. In other words, fairness means that opportunities are proportional based on need. Equitable opportunities mentioned by these participants include having the opportunity to lead interesting and enjoyable lives, having material resources, a few participants in macro work also extend these opportunities to include civic participation and interaction.

The increase in well-being and happiness can be impacted by having access to opportunities, resources, and relationships. The level of social justice instituted by nations contributes to happiness as a strong predictor of life satisfaction (Di Martino & Prilleltensky, 2020). Although these participants did not expand on these ideas, their responses of being fulfilled and living an interesting and enjoyable life may be interpreted as having elements of further happiness and well-being.

Conversely, two participants connected social justice to equality and particularly the distribution of income, power, wealth, and benefits in society.

Everybody's at the table. The Gini³ is at zero, or pretty close to it, instead of one, or pretty close to that. The parity purchasing power is pretty equal. You can buy a bunch of bananas at the local market in Mali, for about the same percentage of your income, or your total assets, as you can in Canada. So, to me, that's equality distribution of power and wealth. (Peter)

. . . ensuring that people are equally enjoying and receiving benefits of society.

(Margaret)

Peter and Margaret, both of whom are in macro practice, identified social justice as equal and universal distribution or redistribution of material and non-material resources. This means that these participants interpreted equality as a goal of social justice.

Participants identify equality and equity as a means to achieve social justice. In general, participants explained that both equality and equity focus on the fair distribution of material and

³ Gini Coefficient is a statistical measure that calculates inequality. It measures inequality by measuring the distribution of income across the country. Although the Gini coefficient measures wealth inequality, it doesn't measure or factor in overall wealth. The Gini coefficient, also known as the Gini Index, is widely used across the world.

non-material resources, opportunities to participate in society, and experiencing health and wellness. However, equality and equity diverge in both the process and outcomes in the name of social justice. While equality assumes that everyone starts from the same place and needs the same things to have the same outcome, equity does not. Equity aims to level the playing field as a means to further equality but involves a deeper understanding of the needs of people and communities in terms of material and non-material resources. Equality means that everyone starts from the same place and gets the same resources while equity means people get what they need based on their individual circumstances. While both equity and equality can claim social justice as their outcome, the process of getting to social justice takes different routes. If the goal is social justice, these two processes are based on either need (equity) or equal standing (equality). However, equity can also be seen as the process toward equality as a goal in society. While some participants connected social justice with either equity or equality, others suggest that social justice must include both. Esther stated that social justice was about both equality and equity, but the higher goal is equality.

The ultimate goal of social justice is redistribution, so that once again, those resources of all kinds . . . Where that's redistributed in an equitable fashion, and that's everything from (pause). When I say resources, I also mean relationships as well. So, it's a complex topic (laughs). Yeah, the ultimate goal of social justice is redistribution. (Esther)

Esther understands that equity is the process of attaining equality. In this assertion, equity is the distribution of resources, based on the needs of disadvantaged persons as a process to furthering equality—the outcome of even distribution of resources to all people.

Although many participants connect social justice to either equality, equity, or equity as the means to achieve equality, a few define social justice by the absence of equality in how they either observed or experienced injustice in society.

It's something that somebody's doing in a way of trying to raise awareness about something or bring attention to an unequal portion of the population. (Phillip)

And I absolutely know that we do not start-- all this bullshit about we have equal opportunity, is bullshit! We are unequal from before we are born, in terms of fetal health, maternal health, all kinds of things—we don't start out, and we certainly are not given equal opportunity. (Cynthia)

Phillip (indirectly) and Cynthia (assertively) states that there is a gap, a vacuum around equality and that naming its absence as a stark way to identify the need for social justice. They find that the lack of equality starts with awareness of the gaps in society. For Cynthia, the assertion of the implications from birth onward has real life implications for those who are marginalized.

Participants did not imply social justice to mean equity and equality exclusively. As will be discussed in the next subtheme, participants pinpoint access as a key requirement that moves equity and equality beyond the abstract to a more practical focus of social justice. Moving forward participants articulate a more nuanced understanding of social justice in social work.

Prioritizing Access

Inequitable access is the premise that people who are marginalized have diminished ability to participate fully in society and live full and healthy lives. Some people experience more disadvantage than others due to their inability to access to services, resources, or opportunities. It became clear that many participants spoke about the values of equity and equality, that they were

primarily focused on ensuring equal and/or equitable access to services, resources, or opportunities.

As noted by the participants below, for groups and individuals who are vulnerable to marginalization to obtain access, resources need to be more equitably distributed at all levels of society. Rebecca and Sarah associate identity and adverse lived experiences as having an effect on whether individuals have access to services.

Yeah, making sure that people have equitable access to that and knowing also that people, depending on their social location, just unfortunately have a harder time accessing opportunities that a good chunk of the world just has because of what they look like when they're born or where they're born or under what conditions. Yeah, knowing that that's just laid out to be uneven. So how can we make sure access to things is more equitable. (Sarah)

To me that's social justice, actually like reaching folks who aren't sitting on wait lists. Who aren't kind of waiting for services because the services actually just don't, don't get to them. So, how do we make services that kind of . . . develop services that fit folks? And you know, from a, you know, monetary perspective, usually that's a . . . those aren't the folks that we're developing services for. (Rebecca)

Rebecca and Sarah discuss the need for equitable access because those on the fringes of marginalized groups lack access to any type of resource.

In contrast to lack of resources for those on the fringes of marginalized groups who experience the lack of resources more profoundly, a few participants believed that people need equitable access to resources, services, and opportunities with the aim of equal access for everyone.

Equality for all people means equality of access to resources, to services to a life that's happy and healthy, or at least content . . . room for people who are oppressed or marginalized to not just have a voice but to be, but to be afforded equal rights and an equal say. (Arjun)

That there's a whole level of things that to which there should just be universal access based on the principle that you are a person - and in this country, a person and living in one of the wealthiest countries in the world, there really is no question. And so, we shouldn't have services for people who can afford it, and then services where poor people and other people who are disadvantaged in various ways, and vulnerable, need to go and ask "pretty please, can I have some money to live on? Can I have a place to live? Can I have a lawyer to help me with my legal issues?" And so, for me it's really about working to resolve some of those issues and to create the opportunities where people who are marginalized and vulnerable don't have to ask for access to things that people who have more money and more privilege can access simply because they have more money and more privilege. (Rose)

Both Arjun and Rose pinpoint access as a gateway to the goal of equality in society. While both discussed equal access to resources; they viewed access differently. Arjun saw access as a process while Rose identifies access as a goal where the system considers the individual's particular needs so that equality can be achieved.

Half of the participants who discussed equitable and equal access also discussed the barriers that their clients face accessing resources because social justice is meaningful in their work.

. . . not having access. And I'm not ok with that minimum standard being absolute homelessness . . . grant people certain privileges or certain-- bus tickets and this and that and other things. Everybody gets bus tickets! Which in our world is a whole big thing, right? (Rose)

Similarly, Rebecca discusses in her professional experiences in community healthcare, mental health supports and inpatient psychiatry, she continues to see significant barriers to accessing resources and services.

I also see the barriers to how folks are accessing systems or how I'm able to access systems was seeing some real barriers to folks being able to access inpatient mental health services. (Rebecca)

These participants understand that access to resources is an essential principle of social justice so that people do not face a continued cycle of disadvantage. In other words, access becomes a protective factor preventing further inequity. The barrier to access is particularly noted in rural communities as discussed by two participants who practise in this context:

Then you layer on that, that in a rural area . . . The resources are spread far apart. Man, if you don't have a driver's license, you have no control over where you go. There isn't public transit. Whoever organizes the money is more traditional, in that in a farm family, you might have a lot of wealth in the land, you don't have a lot of income. And just getting people to and from places, or reaching out to people—who do you see, where do you see them—trying to connect with people, it can be very difficult. So, all of those are - you know, we have no public transit. What happens if you lose your driver's license? What happens if you have vision problems, and you don't live in town? So, and those are the simple, most basic things. (Cynthia)

I think if you're gonna have social justice and equity, then it has to be economically viable for everybody equally. And so that's a problem because I live in a rural area. And, um, so some people can't afford the gas. They can't afford the fee . . . even though my fee is, by most standards, ridiculously low. (Alexa)

Cynthia and Alexis point out that living in a rural area makes access unequal and inequitable. Their discussion underscores the need for universal equal access to material resources and a nuanced equitable approach that takes into consideration individual circumstances. Beth extends the thinking about the barriers to access as the profound issue of invisibility or, in the terms used in the previous theme, a lack of recognition (which will be discussed in more depth in the next subtheme).

so not being seen . . . is a barrier to access . . . the issue of invisibility, how we interact with people and assumptions that we make in the things that we don't think of in terms of access, in terms of inclusivity, in terms of how to make people feel seen. And I think that causes, it causes us to have a real blind spot in terms of like replicating invisibility for people, right? And it's invisibility that causes people to shut down to say, this is not for me, to feel as though sort of the systems in place are not there for them, right?. (Beth)

Beth articulates the need to recognize people as a value of social justice, so they have a voice and an opportunity to participate in decisions about their individual lives and that of society. Beyond people's disengagement and lack of participation in the system, social work's 'blind spots' that perpetuate a lack of access. These blind spots include the barriers to accessing resources, the need for some resources to be universal, and the understanding that people need to be visible in society to participate in decision-making processes that are relevant to their lives.

In the next subtheme, participants build on the issue of Recognition and the implications for access to resources, services and opportunities. In essence, if practitioners do not understand (or dismiss) the sociopolitical context of individual lives, then they position individuals to not be seen and heard. This invisibility makes it difficult for clients to participate in the system.

Enacting Recognition

Recognition is the core component of social justice in Social Work in this section. A person is recognized as an individual whose needs and wishes are seen has having value by another (Honneth, 2003). The value of recognition denotes participant descriptions of the need for individuals with whom they work to be seen and heard, valued and respected. Participants regard being seen and heard as a first step to treat individuals with respect interpersonally and collectively in a larger society. This understanding of recognition is one of the subthemes that participants identified as a value of social justice work.

And also approach to my work is, um, what the person used to do is important to include in their life. So if this person was a teacher, um, maybe part of the activity we can do with them is numbers and words and, and, and tried to do activities to still stimulate their mind. That's their right. Um, and don't dismiss that. And so even though I work in this response to behavior, I'm still doing social justice in that educating the family, that the person that they have, that their loved one that has dementia still is a person and helping them see what they can do to help reduce the behaviours themselves by letting that person be that, a person. (Olivia)

Olivia balanced both the complex and the simple in seeing and hearing the people she served. 'Letting a person be a person' is simple in its 'removal of any evaluative assessment or treatment, and 'what a person used to do' embraces a person's complexity. Olivia's simultaneous

focus on the simple and the complex reflects the holistic and systems approach to seeing and hearing people in their individual historical, and current context.

More than half of the participants claim recognition—the importance of seeing and hearing clients—as a way to deepen the understanding of their clients’ lived experiences. This makes recognition part of the process of providing service that is respectful, humane, and socially just (Honneth, 2003). Another participant, Daniella, describe the need to be recognized as based on the need to hear and see individuals individually and within a larger societal context.

Where it’s just sort of like those people who, who, who don’t usually get an opportunity to have their voices heard or to have their issues raised . . . you know, when we’re approaching things from a social justice lens, they actually have the opportunity to have their voices heard and for their issues to be highlighted. (Daniella)

Recognition, in terms of being seen and heard, also makes visible the client’s context and compels the social worker to advocate for more equitable access to services in the effort toward social justice.

The theme of Recognition is also present in Rose’s discussion. She explains that decisions about service delivery should not be made without recognizing the context of a person’s lived experience of adversity and identity, so they are not rendered invisible.

the really exciting piece is when people with lived experience find their voice, and find that there’s space for them, and feel like there’s space for them around the table . . . they need to know that people have heard them. They need to know that what they said made a difference . . . And one of the other pieces that I do a lot of work around is involvement of people with lived experience. And that’s hard work and it’s been a hard piece to sort of

bring in. Because we all talk about it, but it's really different when you actually, really involve people with lived experience as co-creators in the work that you're doing. (Rose)

Could you tell me why is it difficult to do that?. (Sam)

Because people with lived experience don't function like highly educated social service professionals . . . "I can have nothing to contribute" then they're not actually part of the group and so the really exciting piece is when people with lived experience find their voice, and find that there's space for them, and feel like there's space for them around the table. (Rose)

How do you create that space when you work with people with lived experience?. (Sam)

It takes a lot of time. And it takes a lot of time outside of the meeting. And it takes creating time and space at the meeting and really trying to ensure people that they have something of value to contribute - that it's not the same thing I have to contribute, but you have something very different and something that we really need. And then when people find their voice then it's really important that we support that contribution . . .when somebody is finding their voice for the first time, they need to know that people have heard them.

They need to know that what they said made a difference . . . And so, it's really important to acknowledge that and to really figure out ways in which-- where people's interests are, where their skills are and to find ways to move that work forward. (Rose)

Rose's assertion outlines the elements of equitable and equal access. Rose believes that the inclusion of individuals' voices in service negotiation is important to providing programs that uphold the dignity and respect of clients, is meaningful, and meet their needs. Recognizing and respecting the experiences of clients are integral elements of forwarding social justice.

This subtheme of enacting recognition supports many claims by participants that social justice in social work practice involves moving beyond an abstract assertion of equity and equality to ways of promoting access that are equitable or equal. They also identify that social justice cannot happen until individuals are recognized—as both individual persons and collectively as part of humanity. This understanding of Recognition (being seen and heard, and respect) needs to be within the milieu of both clinical/front-line relationships and policy decision-making forums to determine the best course of action with/and for individuals and groups of people who are marginalized.

The next subtheme discusses social justice to be rooted in having calling, vocation or an ethical imperative to enact social justice in social work practice.

An Ethical Imperative

The term *ethics* in the context of social work normally implies deference and adherence to clear professional ethical principles found in CASW and professional regulatory bodies governed by legislative mandates. However, in the context of this study, the participants perceive an ethical imperative as a vocation and for some, a spiritual value. I have interpreted an ethical imperative to mean a strongly felt principle that compels a person to act with dedication (having a vocation) based on the understanding that everyone is connected as human beings and shares a common humanity.

More than half of the participants recognize social justice as an *ethical imperative*. However, they reveal a broad understanding of how to arrive at social justice as a commitment in their practice. Many participants' belief in spirituality, a faith tradition, or love for humanity compels them to hold deeply felt obligations to purposefully practise social justice.

Several participants consider spirituality as guiding their ethical decision-making that grounds their social justice work.

So, I do feel like I was called to this work, you know, and I, and I'm a very spiritual person. (Daniella)

Seeing my spirituality as tied up with social justice struggles, like, putting . . . like, putting those two together and not having them be separate. (Esther)

The notion of having a vocation for social justice work, exudes a heartfelt, sometimes spiritual draw to not just work in the profession but to serve people more generally. Social justice seems to be the anchor that ties how some participants find meaning in the term to its purposeful action.

Several participants connected a secular understanding of love for *humanity* as the reason for their social justice work. Mullaly and West (2018) suggest, "Love and justice are the same" (p. 353).

. . .love of a- the love of something around inclusion, the love of human beings, the love of inclusion . . . So that they feel safe. They feel like they are human beings. They feel like they matter. (Arjun)

compassion, language for, you know, feelings and that kind of thing . . . Like, so I, I look, I kind of define my work as, um, putting the social back in social work, putting the human back in the humanities, like that kind of thing. (Aaron)

It's love for each other, love for all of humankind which requires compassion. (Esther)

Social justice can also be seen as a relational humanistic imperative based on love and compassion for humanity. There appears to be a transcendental quality to social justice in this

subtheme. In other terms, a commitment to social justice can be seen as a vocation or calling, for some based on a connection to spirituality, and for others a deeper commitment to humanity.

In summary, the theme, naming the values of social justice, incorporate intersecting and complicated ideas about the importance of equity and equality, and more specifically the idea that social justice is about equitable and equal access to resources, opportunities, choices, and services. Equitable and equal access means to the participants in this study that individuals need to first be recognized—to be seen and heard with consideration given to both their individual and societal contexts. For many participants, these values were rooted in their understanding of common humanity which compelled them to value and act on their understanding of social justice.

This theme also identifies that social justice is complicated by how participants see social justice values based on the context of their practice. Interestingly, participants who primarily work in macro practice saw social justice as a broader societal goal; however, some clinicians understand social justice as part of the processes of their work with individual service users or clients. The reason for this disparity will be explored in more depth in theme five—the realities of social justice in practice.

Participants also do not define social justice as abstract, utopian concepts of equity and equality alone, but connect equity and equality to the requirement for access to resources and greater participation in society. Lastly, participants identify social justice as a vocation or calling—for some this had a spiritual basis. For others, they saw their practice of social justice as based relationally on a greater love of humanity.

The second theme moves the discussion from the articulation of the values that are rooted in participants' social justice practice to the reasons why they have a commitment to social justice in their practice.

Making Meaning of Early Experiences

The way in which we decipher our social world is impacted by the context of our lived experiences (Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019). This theme presents findings as a starting point to the praxis of social justice and will be continued in the next theme. More specifically, participants drew on lived experiences and identity to indicate why they are committed to social justice in their social work practice. The ways in which participants make meaning of these experiences inform their commitment to social justice work.

Experiencing Adversity

Social inequities, stigma and discrimination are adverse experiences that influence a person's outlook on life and the work that they do. Social workers who experience adversity can be seen as "wounded healers": i.e., those who have undergone some psychological pain in their past which may have influenced their professional choice (Samuels, 2000). Fifteen participants relate that the experiences of stigma based on their lived experiences created one of the elements that led them to integrate social justice into their social work practice.

I'm actually adopted, so, and I've known that all my life and I've worked, I, I've lived with that as a, in the . . . I grew up . . . I'm 50 nearly, so I, there's a lot of stigma around the time when I was born (Ellen)

So being queer, and neuro-diverse and disabled in a small town that was very conservative and very religious (Esther)

I have my own lived experience with, you know, substance use and, you know, with some mental health stuff (Rebecca)

These first-hand experiences of disapproval or discrimination based on some label, behaviour, or characteristic are one element that was identified as early encounters of othering. Many of the same participants also described their lived experiences with intersecting oppressions such as poverty, racism, gender, ability, and/or sexual orientation.

because this is my lived experience. So I identify as a Black, queer identified woman. Um, my partner is a Black transman. (Beth)

. . . little piece about my lived experience is that I grew up in [small town], Ontario as probably I was, I think I, I literally was the only Black child in my entire school. So that goes for staff members. Uh, every, I was the only Black person there and it's a, it was a very isolating, um, experience. And I think it's one that shaped my entire life . . . I think the, the story about being at grade three and grade four and five and growing up in [small town], Ontario and experiencing a lot of discrimination, like I was called the "n" word and actively excluded from friends and ate my lunch alone in the washroom, like all that stuff and all of that, all through that, it was a hundred percent clear to me that the only reason I was being othered and ostracized was because I was Black and it was very clear to me . . . I think when I got into high school I started to really feel passionate about doing a lot of volunteer work. And so I was doing a lot of volunteer work working around the, around issues of race, but then also working with deaf communities. I think that I, it just sort of, even though I had experienced so much discrimination up to that point in my young life, I think that in seeing other ways that other people were oppressed, right? Whether it be around ability or whether it be around poverty . . . those experiences at a

young age volunteering and hearing other people's stories and experiencing what other people went through really made me even more passionate about want, wanting to become a social worker and shape the kind of social worker that I was going to become. (Daniella).

So, those are things that I- that give me these experiences of being othered and being different. So, I try very hard not to other people. And to think about how that manifests, not only in my professional life, but also in my personal life. (Kelly)

In the above descriptions of stigma and oppression, participants' lived experiences of being marked 'different' or 'other' means that they experienced many of the same exclusions and injustices as their clients. They appear to have a more nuanced, felt sense of empathy and intuitive understanding of their clients' experiences of marginalization.

However, Peggy and Rose did not identify any adverse lived experiences that brought them to a commitment to social justice, but they had a family with a particularly inclusive lens about how to treat people—which will be discussed in more depth in a later subsection.

I didn't grow up in a left-wing, union based, socially just family, and yet, it was brought up by parents who I would describe as being very feminist. Like, we have these advantages, we don't leave anybody behind, like sort of those early messages I think were important. (Peggy)

Additionally, Rose also related that her commitment to doing social justice work was motivated by witnessing the injustices faced by the clients who were marginalized.

I am not a person who has lived a lot of marginalization. I'm a white, middle-class, heterosexual woman. But I have really come to this work because I'm fascinated by people and their stories. . . . And generally, they're people for whom we feel like we

didn't succeed. And we wish we could have done more. And one of mine is a young guy who was removed from his home. (Rose)

The experiences of adversity focus on individual experiences of powerlessness, exclusion, and othering and although adversity alone does not determine whether these experiences can be a motivator to practise social justice, it is one element of many that contribute to social justice praxis.

In the next subthemes, participants also identify other factors instrumental in their commitment to social justice work. The next subtheme identifies participants' experiences of social justice. These moments provided opportunities to see and experience social justice in action.

Experiences of Social Justice in Action

Relational experiences of social justice provide practitioners with the opportunity to understand that each person has something to offer in making a difference in both individual lives and society. These experiences include witnessing role models and working with mentors; recognizing protective and/or positive relationships with family members or other significant individuals and community and empowering experiences of social justice actions.

Half of the participants describe witnessing role models who demonstrated micro-level actions of social justice.

We immigrated here. So, I think immigration and dealing with poverty, I think that had a real impact on me. And interestingly, not so much because of our own family, but other people in our neighborhood. And then my father, even though we didn't have a lot, I can remember my father, who was a [tradesperson], but was trained in Holland . . . He did plumbing and electricity. I think it's electricity and plumbing together. So we would go to

different immigrant- very, very new immigrant families in really bad apartments, and he would fix up the apartments (Alexa)

I grew up very poor, and with a single mom. So, she always worked in community work with women, uh, around domestic violence and newcomers and employment stuff.

(Nadine)

Um, you know, I watched my family do work for their small community here in Toronto and the type of work they did through the church, the various churches. (Olivia)

As indicated by some participants, modelling behaviour is not just about adopting the behaviours of those in authority, such as parents or parental figures. Those individuals and groups who were role models for social justice were also individuals whom participants admired and trusted and were integrated into their everyday lives. These role models demonstrated how to build relationships with individuals, groups, and communities that experienced injustice and marginalization. These participants were attuned to seeing social justice through a benevolent, charitable approach to doing social justice at the individual and community level.

Two participants discuss moving beyond witnessing the behaviour of role models to experiencing a mentoring relationship. These mentors provided a long-term vision beyond the individual moments of social justice, as well as direct practical encouragement and support. Peter describes the experience working in social movements in Africa with activists working for equality and liberation.

So, I think what drives me to there are some ghosts . . . You know—so, of that meeting I was talking about for fundraising—I'm the only person left alive. I was the only white person in the room. Everyone else died young. Samora Machel was assassinated.

Agostinho Neto, I think just worked himself to death. He died very young at 55. I'm just

trying to think—is there anybody? Edward Ndlovu who was imprisoned, first by Ian Smith and then by Robert Mugabe. Slowly his kidneys, he died of a kidney transplant that didn't work. So, all of these folks were prepared to die for what they believed in, and they knew that there was a strong possibility that they would die. And I thought—well, I was young at the time, you know, mid-twenties—if these people are willing to die for this, then I should be willing to die for this. They didn't have a family, or a house, or a car, or a refrigerator. But that stuck with me. And it also stuck with me, that these folks who had relatively nothing—they had only a dream of freedom, and that they were equal, and that they should be-- they were born equal, they should be treated equal, and they should have equal access. So, those ghosts, sort of stick with me. And I try to honour them. And sometimes I imagine them when I get really, you know, pissed off and down, and I just sit. Edward Ndlovu was a very kind man. so, he was the deputy national secretary of the Zimbabwe African People's Union. He was their negotiator. He was their smooth guy. And he would be very kind. I would say something stupid, and immediately, he would laugh. [laughter] So, what Edward was—sort of the smiling encourager. So, you know, I could just see him pictured there, smiling and just saying, “keep going. Just keep at it, Bill. Just keep at it” [laughter]. (Peter)

And the man that runs that bible study, uh, has been going into the jails for at least 10, 12 years. Uh, because his son was a drug addict and had been in jail many times. So he wanted to involve himself with, with men who are in, and women now, who are in jail. And mostly its rooted in their addictions. So, in 2014, he roped me into (laughs) volunteering (laughs) at; Toronto East Detention. And from there I got to, I got to really know the inmates (Kelly)

For Peter, mentorship meant having great admiration for the activist he worked with. He trusted their guidance and practical support that allowed him to continue to in his work. Kelly, conversely, discussed a professional mentor who actively encouraged her to work with individuals who used substances and who had been incarcerated. These two participants provide opportunities to see social justice along a continuum from promoting individual change and well-being to a human rights activist stance.

In these stories, participants discuss how they witness social justice promoting behaviours from significant individuals in their personal and/or professional lives. Both indirectly and directly, these role models and mentors played a significant part in passing on the commitment, values, experiences, and skills to enact social justice along a continuum that moves from individual change and transformation, reforminst, charitable change at both the individual and community level to a human rights activist stance.

Six participants also discuss that their commitment to social justice as having foundations in the protective familial relationships that mitigated the effects of the stigma and exclusion.

. . . Poverty. But certainly being on social assistance when I was a kid. It would have been that whole shame of being, being on welfare, also being a child of immigrants. It would have been additional comp- you know, more complex embarrassment and shame, family be ashamed . . . one part of the privilege is coming from a particularly stable family, despite having some povertystuff and relative poverty. There was always a part of stability in the family. (Arjun)

I think like I'd go way back, like growing up we were always like my family was always sort of taught, we were taught as kids that you have to respect people no matter what, no matter where in life they were at and we were certainly not privileged by any means like

at all. And some people like in Ontario might even think that we were marginalized. But we didn't, I didn't think that, I thought well I was so lucky because had-- I don't know-- you know my grandmother owned her own home, and it's like I didn't really realize that most people do, but to me-- but my mother had her own teeth. I remember like thinking I was so fortunate because my mother has her own teeth. And I always felt lucky, like privileged in that way. (Megan)

You know, so, I mean that was a gift. And people will say, "oh you poor kid. You grew up in a house with only a single mom, divorcing parents, and there was war between two sides of the family." But I was lucky, and my mom never involved me, never triangulated me in those processes. And I was raised largely by my mom's side of the family, which was relatively poor side of the family—but you had love, food, and shelter. So, you know, my dad's side of the family—"oh, you poor kid. You know, you should be living with us—we have big houses."—it was never important [laughter]. (Peter)

These participants describe how family relationships created a sense of belonging and safety that allowed them to thrive beyond experiences of stigma and oppression based on intersecting experiences of adversity.

A few participants who describe experiences of stigma and discrimination also explained that they were emboldened to speak up about issues of discrimination or injustice.

one episode I did say something, like, "That's my mother you're talking about." And then there's silence. And in other situations, . . . probably in the same in the same hospital, there would have been another situation where I didn't say anything. And I would have been probably 7- 16, 17 at the time. (Arjun)

Anyways, so we said our piece to the councillors, to the committee, um had a chance to respond to things and I left being like, “ what is this?” Like, “What have I just . . .” I . . . Like, and I think I was really naïve. I didn’t know what I walked into. Anyway, the result was very positive, because it turned out a week later, whatever it was, they had . . . they had voted it down. So, council had decided to vote it down, in the article in the paper, the mayor had said something like, “We had a young person come to the meeting, and tell us about their experience and why they felt this was bad, and I think we have to listen to . . . The youth are the future, and blah blah blah, and so, you know, so I had been listening to that story. I decided not to vote in favour.” So that story has always kind of stuck with me, because first of all, it was a demonstration that, oh, maybe I can turn this around, and I do have power that I can leverage. (Esther)

These early experiences describe moments of agency—the ability to speak up against injustice that provided these participants empowering experiences about the role that they can play in working for social justice.

This theme points to the participants’ experiences of adversity as well as micro experiences of social justice as pivotal elements that can be seen as a genesis of the commitment to social justice. This dialectic journey of adverse experiences, interconnected with perceptions of belonging, learning to have agency, engagement and learning from role models and mentors becomes foundational to participants’ social justice praxis. The next theme starts to move the discussion beyond reflecting on an understanding of what participants conceive as social justice, to how this understanding is manifested in their social justice practice.

The Personal, the Political, and the Professional

If the personal is political, it is also professional (Dudziak & Profitt, 2012). In other words, the lens through which we see and interact with the world informs how social justice is enacted in everyday actions and interactions both personally and professionally and seems to contribute to how participants understand and act in a just manner.

Social justice work needs to infuse reflection in action, an element of praxis (Freire, 1968/1973) that can include a number of intersecting and inseparable components. These components are reflected in the four subthemes: reflection in action, living one's values, self-work, and looking at the past, present and future.

Reflection in Action

Reflection in Action positions the practitioner to develop a cycle of intentional, reflective actions that take into consideration theory, values, actions and geo-political, socio-historic contexts in their social work practice. This cycle of reflection and action is an impetus for understanding social justice as a principle and practice. Reflection in Action is foundational to Praxis.

In the interviews, I tried to get a sense of how these practitioners integrated the values, principles and perspectives of social justice into the application in their social work practice. I interpreted many of the participants' responses as indicating that their values and perspectives of social justice are informed by an understanding of their identity, their personal experiences of injustice, and further, the injustices they saw in their communities and society.

but I think when you grow up marked as different in some way, particularly when the difference is not invisible on the surface, for just some people, like myself, that prompts reflection. So being queer, and neuro-diverse and disabled in a small town that was very conservative and very religious, and- and reflecting on my different experience from

those and my peers, um, the way I experienced violence as a result of those identities, and uh, embodiment, um, prompted for me a lot of reflection on the nature of injustice, and the un- unfairness. (Esther)

Esther's reflection of her personal experience as being "marked" or stigmatized underscores her understanding that the "personal is political"; in other words she is well aware that her identity and experience living in an unjust society have shaped her social justice orientation to social work. Like many of the participants, Esther's understanding and reflection on her practice validate Marx's assertion that positionality and an ideological or political understanding of the reality of society influences perceptions about human nature (Felluga, 2002).

Other participants like Rebecca and Daniella reflect on not just their experiences of oppression but also their privilege. For Rebecca, it means that she is reflective about her privilege of being able to "pass" as not having visible mental health and substance use challenges.

the ways in which I'm marginalized, like as, like kind of a queer woman, and someone with kind of who's had mental health and substance use challenges. Like those aren't necessarily kind of read on me at face value. Um, so just like understanding the privilege I get to kind of be in the world and being an articulate person as well. (Rebecca)

Daniella is reflective of her experiences of injustice and the juxtaposition of how her attitudes and behaviour have also perpetuated the same experiences of injustice with others.

I think realizing the internalized homophobia and transphobia, the heterosexist attitudes that I had, I'd received and just letting that hit me and being like, you actually have done this to people, you know, the same thing that in some ways has hurt you so much with regards to the racism you've experienced, you've actually done it to other people. That

was a major thing for me . . . another key moment was the understanding privilege, and recognizing that although I have and continue to be oppressed in all sorts of different ways that I am also an oppressor. (Daniella)

A few other participants reflect on their past experiences and the implications for their current practices. Tess, who works with post-secondary students, discuss her own discriminatory experiences in education and her understanding of the experiences of students.

And I think that often enough, students talk about, and I had some experiences myself within my own education, of feeling like I was treated much differently than that idea of a fully capable, functioning adult. (Tess)

However, one participant discussed her privilege upbringing and noted that her motivation to do social justice work was based on experiences in the field with individuals who experienced adversity, and were further oppressed in the system. I would assert that she saw her clients as teachers about how experiences of adversity, vulnerability and marginalization were factors in their involvement in the system.

These quotes illustrate how many of the participants were reflective about their lived experience, identity and/or areas of privilege in society as they look back on their individual histories and identities and for some, their present professional identities. In other words, reflection in action shows the complex relationship between individuals and the society in which they live, in terms of the nuances of how participants made meaning of their positionality (identity and lived experiences). Also, some identify reflection in action in their stories about experiences of oppression and privilege and the back and forth (dialectic) thinking they balanced in their practice. The next subtheme further connects the personal to the political through participants' discussion of living their values.

Living One's Values

Living one's values can act as a compass or guide to purposeful social justice actions in professional roles. Participants discuss social justice as both purposeful daily professional and personal practices. In this subtheme, participants connect living their values, living consciously, and the relationship between being and doing. Half of the participants discuss the importance of living their values in both their personal and professional lives.

You know what, social justice is a way of being, it's not just a professional standard and so if in fact you really value everyone, then you look for ways in which that just flows into your life. So, who are your friends, what are the relationships that are important to you? Is the fact that I do this kind of work only important when I'm here in the office, or is it important when I'm passing somebody on the street who's asking me for money. Or is it important when I see somebody not being treated very well at a store or a business . . . I spent a year volunteering in El Salvador, and I can't go to all-inclusive resorts because I can't sit there and eat food and water and swim in swimming pools when the vast majority of the population of that country doesn't have access to any of those things . . . So, it really is who you are. It's certainly who I am and, but I see it in other people too. It's not just me. (Rose)

So, in other aspects of my life I'm a little bit more aware of the kind of jokes that I tell or that I don't tell. The kinds of television programming that I watch or don't watch, um, the way that I might stand up for somebody if I can hear them being mistreated or the way that I might volunteer my time or donate to a cause, um, the things that I read, the people I follow on social media, the journalists that I subscribe to, the literature that I purchase. Like, it influences all kinds of things. (Phillip)

Participants articulate social justice as an individual responsibility that is also relational, collective and conscious.

While not explicit in the above quote by Rose, the connection between the personal and the political start to become apparent. Four other participants were more politically explicit in that they see their mindful, conscious living as a link to the personal and political in their social justice practice.

I take the TTC rather than drive. I'm not interested in furthering oil prices and oil companies. I'm lucky to live in Toronto, where there is a system that you have to keep fighting for all the time. I'm scared in terms of what the Ontario government is going to do to the Toronto transit system. I have this feeling that they're pro car, and they're not going to say it . . . So, those wars are still going on, and they have to be fought. Taking the public transit and supporting that, rather than using a lot of gas. Buying a second-hand car rather than a first car. To what extent can I have less paper? And what's the energy cost? So, I have my computer on all of the time. What's the energy cost? You know, and what's the environmental footprint? ...So, you know, that kind of conscious living. Yeah. (Peter)

. . . having conversations with friends and family about that, um, and that can- that can be, um, approaches to homelessness and mental health as well as, as I was mentioning, even with transportation and cycling and things like that. So that's important to me.

(Tess)

Tess identifies that her perspective is that the personal is political, and that the lens she sees her work is about being aware of her positionality in her work.

I think the lens is the- again, the personal is political. It's a personal lens that I wear, but it's also a- a political lens. It's a professional lens, too, in how I work with people. If I'm going to be of a social justice orientation, then I need to be really addressing anti-oppressive practice and always be reflecting on how I'm interacting for me, a place of white, you know, middle class privilege as, uh, you know, the position that I hold that way and how that also interacts with- with the work. (Tess)

Some of the above participants, as well as an additional few, identified that they do not necessarily see the difference between the work they do and who they are personally. Rebecca discusses an incongruence between her professional work and her authentic self.

There's not like a, a work Rebecca and a home Rebecca. They're both kind of the same . . . I just bring me, I bring me, I bring my personality, I bring who I am, and you know, acknowledge that not everyone is going to dig who I am, and that's totally okay. (Rebecca)

Daniella extends Rebecca's discussion of congruence with an authentic self by connecting social justice work to fulfilling a spiritual imperative.

I think for me personally, um, I don't know if I had a choice Samantha, I really (laughs) don't know if I had a choice . . . So I do feel like I was called to this work, you know, and I, and I'm a very spiritual person and I feel over the years, um, part of the ways I've been able to be resilient. (Daniella)

The above quotes reveal that in addition to their positionality and lived experience in their thinking about social justice, participants are also critically conscious about the individual responsibility they have to think relationally and to assess the impact of their actions on society.

A commitment to social justice in social work practice is based on the ability of practitioners to reflect in action. They ask purposeful and critical questions of themselves about their lived experiences and identity and the relationship to their values and actions to develop a political stance in their professional work. The next subtheme discusses the process of “how” social justice became conscious and purposeful in their lives and work.

Developing a Sense of Self

Some participants articulated the need to develop their sense of self. The development of ‘self’ can be seen as fostering a strong sense of purpose and self-awareness, cultivating compassion, learning, growing, and having a sense of fulfillment. The process of developing the self is different for everyone. Sarah finds that social justice practice is personally fulfilling.

It’s like self-actualization stuff that I feel like is connected with that. And like sort of needs like higher level needs inside me. (Sarah)

Esther captures the need to embrace her authentic self and accept her difference and identity:

Like just embracing some of those parts of myself . . . seeing my spirituality as tied up with social justice struggles, like, putting . . . like, putting those two together and not having them be separate. So a couple of things, so I think some of that transformative work also begins with ourselves . . . like embracing being queer and neuro-diverse and disabled. (Esther).

Aaron articulates the need to develop one’s emotional strength to do social justice work.

I think at the core you do have to have the emotional strength to do it, you know.

Otherwise you don’t speak up or otherwise you don’t look for the opportunities, right?.

(Aaron)

Additionally, a few participants are motivated by the need to feel good about themselves as the reason for their commitment to social justice work: “it makes me feel like I’m a good person.” (Kelly). These participants capture some of the elements they believe are congruent to developing a strong sense of self, which in turn, allows them to practise social justice.

Cultivating compassion is another characteristic of developing the self. It shows a concern for others and the participant themselves and, was identified by some as a requirement for social justice work. Peggy recognizes that “compassion, which for me, is a part of social justice” (Peggy). Both Esther and Nadine made the connection that compassion for others and for ourselves, were critical and relational for not just those with whom they work, but also all of humanity.

So, I think having self-compassion is a really important part, and then the compassion to each other, to the folks that we are working alongside to create this transformation.

Having compassion for each other, call . . . Like, I like that idea of calling people in, rather than people calling people out. Um, realizing that this . . . like, this work is about . . . It’s about love. It’s not about anything other than that, right? It’s love for each other, love for all of humankind, which requires compassion. (Esther)

Nadine extends this understanding by emphasizing that self-compassion is not an individual endeavour, but one that needs to be collective and mutual. She also maintained that compassion for self and others promotes a sense of connectedness that deepens and broadens social justice work.

I think it opens up space for more compassion and empathy . . . I just find, like, it ignites that spirit for people, right? Like I feel like when people engage in social justice work, you can see them light up and they feel like that they’re making a difference and they’re

making those connections, and they're like, "Oh, yeah that makes so much sense." . . . I like to think that it is, it helps around my own sense of self care, and self compassion. I think I struggle with some of those terms, because again, we've take, we've somehow made self care this weird individual thing that people just have to go and do by themselves. And so, when social justice is alive in my work, it gets me thinking about how the collective trauma we're experiencing in this work, requires a collective response and how we're gonna take care of each other. And so, it gets me thinking more about, the, the connectedness of how we support each other, in what is really difficult work.

(Nadine)

These participants maintained that cultivating compassion for self and others is critical to social justice work. They identified that compassion is relational, connects them to others, and provides opportunities to embrace a common humanity.

Developing the self can also be seen as the desire for purpose, and to understand the need to connect to a common humanity through cultivating compassion but also to continue to grow and change. Almost half of the participants discuss a need to do their own self work so that they can continue to work with purpose. In this case, participants discussed using therapy or doing their self-work to maintain their social justice practice. Nadine discussed the need to go to therapy because she felt silenced in her position as a middle manager trying to do social justice work. She discussed the need to be more congruent with the values that are meaningful in her work.

Going to therapy I feel like when people, um, feel silenced or get silence, like I don't think you even have necessarily an acknowledgement that that's happened . . . To be more with your own values and, and what's important to you. (Nadine)

However, Beth identified that the couples therapy spills over into her professional work which required her to be reflective of and confront issues about herself that can do harm professionally.

Yeah, going to a couples therapist with my partner, thinking about my attachment stuff as you know, gets bumped into sometimes in the work that I do. And I feel like that is what all social workers should be able to do. I know it's difficult to access that stuff all the time, but like ideally that's what everyone could do, but I do think that's also a part of social justice work. I also think that it requires a ton of reflection and self-work. I think that it requires you to be willing to acknowledge the parts of you that have been harmful, that could be harmful to others. It requires a lot more of yourself. And I think, um, to some degree that requires that you be brave and being able to sort of confront your own shadow, you know?. (Beth)

This subtheme identifies participants' understanding that to do social justice work, there is a recognition and/or a need to continue to do self-work and cultivate compassion so that who they are is congruent with their social justice actions. Participants differ in their focus on these elements of developing themselves, they articulated the need to continue to work on fulfilling a commitment to the practice of social justice. Some identify the need to have emotional strength, and acceptance of their authentic self, or look to cultivating compassion and/or to work on these elements to become more purposeful in their professional practice. Others were specific about the self-work they have done in their personal and professional selves so that they can fulfill their commitment to social justice in both their lives and professional roles. However, participants identified how they develop their "self" in practice, it is another dimension to praxis as the "ethical self-aware, responsible accountable action that involves knowing, doing and being" (J. White, 2007, p. 226).

In the next subtheme, participants looked back to their past, identify reasons in their present contexts, and look to the future to identify how they have grown and what sustains them in their commitment to social justice in their practice.

Understanding the Importance of Past, Present, and Future Contexts

As I continued to explore how participants have developed professionally and the difference they think they make in their social justice work, I note a past-present-future continuum that provided an anchor to their professional practice. As such, participants looked back to honouring the past, contextualizing their current actions, and envisioning the future.

A few participants discussed the need to look back to their history or roots. Danielle continues to recognize an intentional spiritual calling to the work by acknowledging her social justice work is a way of honouring her ancestors.

I feel like I'm doing what my ancestors want me to be doing. I often say this, I often say that I feel there's a reason why I got a master's degree and I, there's a reason why I was afforded that opportunity. And it's because I was intended to take my act to that skillset and to go back into the communities that I, that I'm connected to and to be a healer there. And so when I'm doing the work from this lens, I literally feel like I'm honoring my ancestors and I'm doing what they want me to be doing in this world. (Daniella)

While Olivia discusses her roots as well, she focused on the work she did in her early career at a particular organization as being significant to her social justice practice.

addressing something from my past in my roots because it's always there . . . Um, that's where I sort of cut my teeth at that working with youth, newcomer youth, settlement youth in an organization that was a multi organization, but also connected with other organizations. (Olivia)

Peter's practice is sustained by remembering those who worked for social justice and sacrificed for their beliefs.

I think what drives me to there are some ghosts . . . I'm the only person left alive. I was the only white person in the room. Everyone else died young. Samora Machel was assassinated. Agostinho Neto, I think just worked himself to death. He died very young at 55. I'm just trying to think—is there anybody? Edward Ndlovu who was imprisoned, first by Ian Smith and then by Robert Mugabe. Slowly his kidneys, he died of a kidney transplant that didn't work. So, all of these folks were prepared to die for what they believed in, and they knew that there was a strong possibility that they would die. (Peter)

Additionally, Aaron, even while is early in his career, states that it is not just his years of professional practice that are relevant to informing his social justice practice but his lived experience starting from an early age.

the context of experience . . . I am quite young. Like I have going on 6 years in the field and part of. You know, it's interesting, and I, do, I don't want to use like, you know, the fact that I've had 5 complete years of experience as like a, now that I, now, now I suddenly hold knowledge. And I think that I've always had knowledge and a lot of my lived experiences have really informed that and just a lot of my friendships and relationships and a lot of my really deep connections that have always just fostered with people and, and with organizations in, in my outside activist work or in my you know, like attending a protest at like really early ages. Like, I think that those are the types of experiences really do inform the work. (Aaron)

Participants find meaning in their work by looking back to their personal or professional histories such as relationships with ancestors, mentors or organizations that have helped them either grow or sustain their social justice praxis.

Three participants who had been in practice for more than 15 years discussed their current practice. They maintained that at this point in their career, they had nothing to lose by continuing to practise social justice in their current roles.

So, I feel like as a social worker I have a voice to raise because I have that-- I have been here long enough and sat at the tables long enough that I can say it. And if they wanna deny it, then I have enough experience and background and knowledge to be able to argue with the best of them. And I am 56 years old and I-- you know, I'm sort of at that point in life when, what are you gonna do? What are you gonna do? You know? You fire me, I could have a nice little pension. You know what I mean? So, you get to the point where you go, ok, I'm approaching sort of the latter stages of my career, and so I feel in some ways that now's my time to really speak up and be a voice for change. And I feel I have privilege of having those years under my belt and knowing that I'm approaching retirement. So, you know, people who are young and just getting in and worried about, you know, their reputation (Megan)

Kelly, however, identifies that she is more confident in her social work practice and chooses not to be intimidated by clients.

I'm way more confident now. After working with criminals and working in child welfare, nothing scares me. Nothing surprises me. I'm not shocked by anything anymore. I feel like I can't be bullied. I worked with a lot of abusive men- who tried to bully me. But I like that, in the end, they were afraid of me (laughs). They would try to avoid me because

I wasn't going to put up with any of their bullshit. I wasn't the meek woman that they had roped into some horrible relationship. And they were, like, destroying her life and thinking that they could be like that with me. No. (Kelly)

Kelly's understanding of social justice speaks more to establishing boundaries that fall in line with a conventional understanding of setting limits to protect herself while working with mandated clients. In this sense, setting boundaries can be seen as developing an awareness of individual justice for herself, so that she does not feel powerless in her encounters with men who have been involved in domestic violence.

One additional participant, Rebecca, who had been in practice for over 6 years and just received admission to a PhD program, identified that she was reflective of her privilege and options when she gets terminated from a position because of the incongruence between her approach to the work and that of her employer.

And I get to fall back on academia, and I get to fall back on, you know, well, if I, you know . . . I lost a job recently and was fired from a job because, um, they didn't agree with my approach to the work. Um, and, and I said, ethically, I cannot do the work in the way you want me to do the work and this is why . . . There was something that happened and they used that as a means to terminate me. Um, and that was a privileged place to be able . . . for me to be in, toto do that, and know that like, well, I will find another job. And not everyone has that privilege. And I'm, I'm very reflective of that (Rebecca)

In their current practice contexts, these participants are confident in their professional abilities and/or personal circumstances to be more confident in their social justice practice while not being as fearful of constraints from oppressive structures or bureaucracy. However, one

participant looks at their current practice as liberation from individuals who she experiences as having power over her.

Five participants states that they sustain their current practice by looking ahead to the contributions they can make to the future. Megan looks to both her current practice of being close to retirement and feeling now is the time to speak up and be the voice of change, while also envisioning the future and the need to create a better world for her children.

I do like that sort of big picture of a making a better world for my kids, you know, it's like up there. (Megan)

Megan recognizes that her social justice work is connected to looking forward to the future, about leaving the legacy of a better life for her children. Ellen identifies that looking forward to the future, where she wants to instill hope that the work she does is going to make a change. She uses the vision of this change as a metric to identify her continued social justice practice.

. . . hope I guess. You have to hope that things are gonna change, 'cause if I didn't think things could change for people, then I would give up. Or I would do something else.

(Ellen)

While their reasons may be different, both Megan and Ellen's hope for the future is motivation for their current social justice practice. Megan's motivation is about leaving a legacy for her children, and Ellen's hope provided inspiration for her continued practice.

Cynthia and Peter, who have been in practice for 37 and 42 years respectively, both semi-retired, identify both a hope for the future and a sense of despair as they reflect on their past and/or present practice in their discussion of the future of social justice work. Cynthia looks to the future and a vision for what is possible, but she also wonders about the negative possibilities as well.

It allows me to continue to believe that we have a system with possibilities. Although, I despair of that, at times. (Cynthia)

Peter articulates the fluctuation between integrity and despair in his life stage. He identifies that social justice work is a moving target and aligning looking back to his past practice and to the future to identify his reasons for continuing to doing social justice work in the present.

So, as I get into Erikson's last stage of life, right? The battle between integrity and despair. I look back and it's helpful for me to see some of the struggle and some of the successes, but also to see the struggle and that the struggle continues, and it is going to continue—it will continue after I'm dead. And that you keep at it. So that's the integrity part of it. The despair is also there. Like oh, my god, how long have we been at this—and I was thinking we've been at this 10,000 years. Probably 50,000. You know, so the rich are getting richer and the poor are getting poorer. Money goes up. Money goes down. The Gini coefficient in Canada, in the last ten years, has gone from 0.23 to 0.32, so it's getting worse. So, you know, I used to think that integrity and despair were a oneness, they were aligned, you know. You could say oh, you know 10% despair today, 90% integrity if it was Friday [laughter] you know, versus 90% despair and 10% integrity if it was Monday. But it's a knot. To me it's an already aligned knot. You know, you can't have integrity without despair. You have to have both. So, that just sort of keeps me going, and saying "ok, you know—let's just keep going." (Peter)

These quotes highlighted Cynthia's and Peter's longevity in the field and reflects their experiencing both successes and challenges in their social justice practice. Both fluctuated between the hope in the possibilities for the future and the internal struggle that there will not be any gains for those who are marginalized or oppressed.

This third theme connects the personal, political and professional. This theme articulates a relationship between social justice work as lived experience and a professional commitment. This theme looks at the process participants maintained that supported and grew their professional practices as reflection in action—the connection with everyday political practices such as living their values, conscious living and a growth mindset and connecting to their historical subjectivities and looking toward the future. These elements work together allowing these participants to maintain a commitment in their present personal and professional lives enabling them to sustain social justice in their work and personal world.

While there are nuances in articulating of values, commitment and what social justice means to participants, there are several common articulations in the first three themes. The first three themes connect the “what” of social justice praxis. These themes connect the values foundational to the personal and professional contexts of participants’ lived experiences and identities. The second theme considers participants ‘common and diverse experiences that create opportunities to look back on their early experiences that guide them to a commitment to social justice. Participants identify adverse lived experiences and identity, and mitigating factors that provided them opportunities to understand components of social justice. The third theme—the personal, political and professional—describes the processes and elements that participants identify as the intersection of the self and the values that uphold their commitment to social justice as a praxis.

The following three themes articulate the “how” of social justice work in social work practice. Participants identify how they used theories and social work actions in their everyday work. Theme five discusses how participants recognized the tensions, systemic barriers and

professional constraints in their social justice work. Lastly, theme six identifies whether and how social work education is implicated in their social justice work.

Theories and Practices that Promote Social Justice

Theme four articulates a reflection on practice by identifying the specific practice theories and frameworks participants utilized in their social justice practice. This theme will also discuss participants practice behaviours and actions to promote social justice. While there is much diversity in how participants utilized practice approaches and identified practice behaviours, they brought insights into the actions or the “how” social justice is practised every day in their roles. This theme crosses several interview questions, from what nurtures and sustains their practice, to an understanding that they bring to whether they see their practice as political.

Social Justice–Identified Practice Theories

This subtheme identifies several practice theories participants employed, which nurtures and sustains their social justice practices. Some, who were in clinical practice, identify the theoretical frameworks or approaches that underpinned their social justice practice.

Phillip made specific connections between “high-level” theories and perspectives such as the ecological model, the strengths-based perspective, and a poststructural framework (Coady & Lehmann, 2016).

The thought that I have is it is (laughs) hard to think about. Bronfenbrenner and the ecological model . . . But in order to fully understand the micro level, I had to do some thinking about the interplay between meso, macro, and broader levels of space and time. And thinking about how you can’t really extrapolate an individual out of the social context that they- that their lives are embedded in and the sociological context that their

lives are embedded in . . . I also think I take a really poststructuralist framework in the work that I do. I'm in an area of therapists as a- as beginning point. That was my first set of trainings. So all of the ideas that are in that postmodern, poststructuralist way of thinking, influence my practice and the types of questions. Um, such as understanding that we are holistic. That people not only have deficits, but they also have strengths. That people are really able to facilitate change. I also believe that what we pay attention to is where our energy follows. So, if people pay attention to their pathologies and their difficulties and their struggles, that's where their energy goes. That's what they experience. If they pay attention to the potentials, the possibilities, the next steps, what is working well already, thinking about why some of the struggles are in place in the first place then that opens up a very different conversation. And if that's what people pay attention to, that's where their energy goes. And then they can . . . Perhaps I'm talking about resilience, but they can tap into their own resilience, rather than being dependent on an external force for help. (Phillip)

Phillip discusses how his use of a post-structural and ecological frameworks emphasized how he understood individuals in their contexts. His strengths-based practice helps him to see the resilience in those he worked with. He articulates a belief in people's ability to have the capabilities and skills to determine their future and make individual changes. Phillip identifies his focus is to assist clients in being resilient and self-sufficient so that they do not need to rely on outside assistance.

Some participants in clinical practice discuss a trauma-informed perspective—a 'midlevel' social work practice approach that nurtures their social justice work.

I work from a trauma-informed lens, Because I think that what it does is it acknowledges, um, a couple of different things. One, you know, we- we always talk about the shift from what's wrong with someone, to what's happened to them. (Peggy)

Peggy, similar to other participants, identifies working from a trauma-informed approach as a clinician, where she highlights the importance of understanding the context of an individual's struggles as a way to respond to the experiences of someone as opposed to pathologizing their experiences.

However, Daniella's practice with racialized and queer individuals did not lend itself to any one approach. Still, she uses social justice as a framework in her eclectic approach to her practice.

I mean my approach is really eclectic in itself. I'm a big believer in just taking, say for example, something like CBT and basically chopping it up and reassembling it so that it makes sense when on a social justice lens. So, I just put sort of social justice on everything, I mean, I don't resist anything. I just lean right into it and just change it . . . you know, when we're approaching things from a social justice lens, they actually have the opportunity to have their voices heard and for their issues to be highlighted. So I think about folks who are, sort of oppressed or marginalized in our community. So folks who are defined as the other, so people who are not a part of the, the dominant culture or the dominant race or the dominant institutions. So, those are the folks that I'm talking about, folks that are on the margins. (Daniella)

Daniella's social justice lens meant that working from an eclectic approach, she is able to acknowledge the oppression faced by those she works with and work with particular individual issues in her clinical practice.

Last, two participants name the client-centred approach as key to their respective practices. Tess, a clinician, states that her use of narrative therapy is based on a person-centred approach that has postmodern feminist underpinnings (C. Brown, 2007).

Narrative in particular-And not because it's about, um, sort of boiling that down to just being about stories, 'cause, I mean, with narrative therapy it's so much- it's so much more than that. To me, the- the post-modern feminist underpinnings of narrative therapy are what are key for me the kind of decentering of the therapist . . . Um, so that decentering that honors the fact that, yes, the- you know, the helper, the therapist, the counselor, whoever it is, does have something to offer and has, you know, experience and education or whatnot, but that doesn't supersede what the other person brings to the table.

It's kind of like going back to Rogerian, you know, person-centred, really. (Tess)

Additionally, Rose, who works with street-involved individuals, discusses her practice as underpinned by a client-centred approach

. . . whole idea of client-centred practice. And that clients can and do determine their own future. And so, if clients don't want service then—or don't particularly respond to service in the way in which it is offered, then we say “well see, they aren't really ready for service, or they didn't want it or they're resistant to service” and the reality is that we didn't offer a service in a way that somebody wanted it. The piece is us, it's not an individual failure, it's looking at the context and how people make choices within that context. (Rose)

Conversely, while Rose uses a person-centred approach, she also articulates a connection to structural practice in her work.

the whole push of individualism is you know, a lot of-- the vast majority of social work practitioners work directly with clients and there's a lot fewer of us who are thinking about things at systems and structural levels. (Rose)

These participant discussions reflect a pattern in the findings that show that practitioners who are committed to social justice use relational theories, perspectives, and practice theories that connect the individual to the structural.

However, some other macro-practice participants implicitly identify a more structural perspective to their work while also critiquing the need to look at structural or systemic issues when working with individuals.

the problems within individuals were all intertwined with problems outside of individuals. And I started to feel that it was really wrong to be trying to address individuals' issues as if they were independent of society. And then I sort of evolved beyond that, and started thinking that it was wrong to blame individuals for their personal problems that they might be having that were really, in my opinion, fundamentally social problems. They were victims of social problems. They weren't creators of their own problems. (Margaret)

It's a problem that I have with psychotherapy, that it's seems to be devoid of a political and social context. Our lives are lived in a political and social context. (Cynthia)

I'm part of the OASW Trauma Group, and they tend to be very good around referring folks to each other. Somebody's moving from Brampton to North Bay, something like that. So, the clinical traumatologists tend to be very good at stuff like that. But when we talk about social policy and the creation of stress, and the creation of trauma, they're largely silent on that. (Peter)

While many of the participants in macro practice did not explicitly name a structural perspective, they certainly use it in their work, which will be discussed later. However, macro participants identify the absence of a structural framework in direct social work practice.

The process (the how) points to social justice practice on a continuum from individualism to a combination of a postmodern-structural approaches, that considers both the individual's needs and the impact and implications of the structures in society. This process shows an understanding that people's problems are unique to the individual, nuanced and also structural.

The above discussions reveal that many participants have a critical consciousness that attunes them to understanding of oppression and injustice, structural approaches, and social justice. While many social workers are told throughout their social work education and early practice that theory and practice are inextricably linked, it does not always mean that theories, particularly critical theories that promote social justice extends to the everyday actions or practices of social justice. In this theme, participants identify specific viewpoints and practise approaches they find rooted in social justice. This next subtheme focuses on the everyday purposeful and deliberate actions that participants discussed as social justice practices in their work.

Social Justice Practices

This subtheme discusses the everyday social justice practices of social justice. These everyday actions have a specific goal or purpose, and focus on transformational change at the individual and/or the societal level. Participants tell stories of practice behaviours that they understand characterizes social justice; the diversity of some of those behaviours are contingent upon their particular micro or macro contexts of practice. These everyday practices or actions are relational and strategic, identify how practitioners use and leverage their relational and

professional power in their professional roles, support individuals' strengths and capacities and sometimes connect to the use of specific skills. The first subtheme identifies relational practices that promote social justice in participants' everyday work.

Relational Practices

Relational practices include making connections between individual problems and more significant societal issues, recognizing that individual problems do not develop within the individual alone. Understanding individuals' lived experiences within a geo-historical, socio-political, and cultural context is critical. Relational practices also included an intersection of participants' actions; adapting boundaries based on the situation and the individual context of clients or service users, developing therapeutic relationships, working in community to develop strategic relationships to promote organizational change and maintaining relationships with decision-makers. Relational practice is also about the purposeful leveraging of professional power to support individuals' strength and capacity. Many participants discuss an intersection of all or some of the relational practices outlined; however, they see their relational approach as intersecting their work both laterally (across sectors of practice and with other allied professions) and vertically (building relationships individually and with a larger societal context). Lastly, some specific skills promote social justice in everyday practice.

Individual problems can be structural and systemic, such as issues of oppression, marginalization, and exclusion (Mullaly & West, 2018) that takes place at the personal, cultural and societal level. The interplay of the sociopolitical contexts of a person's lived experiences can be inextricably linked to the problems faced by individuals. Traditionally, in a neoliberal climate, individual life problems are connected to internal issues such as physical and mental illness and/or personality traits and disorders. However, in social work, understanding both the internal

and external factors are significant to social justice practice. Many participants connected an individual's lived experience and the socio-political context of their lives. Phillip explores the difficulty of extrapolating the experiences of the individuals he works with from their socio-political context in his clinical practice.

And thinking about how you can't really extrapolate an individual out of the social context that they- that their lives are embedded in and the sociological context that their lives are embedded in. I've become more clear in understanding it because it's becoming harder and harder and harder for me to extrapolate the individual from the context. And that shows up in, like, I don't primarily work with children and adolescents anymore, because one hour of psychotherapy is going to do nothing for that child if we- they go back out into their world for the rest of the week with nothing in that system changing. So, being able to make linkages between the micro world and this kid's family and maybe their school life and maybe their extra-curriculars and helping their family understand the political climate in terms of service and resources. All of those things become important when you're thinking about treatment for an individual. (Phillip)

Phillips has recognized that his professional experience as a clinician who practised social justice means that he needs to look at individual issues within a larger societal context. Many other participants, regardless of practice context, told stories that situated individual problems within a larger historic socio-political context.

To me, that's social justice, to bring to the attention of bigger systems that people are getting left behind. (Peggy)

look at sort of the larger systems that are going on and how that is being replicated on the individual level. (Beth)

Situating individual issues that people face within a larger context means that participants move away from a mentality of individualism and blaming the victim toward a call to recognizing the inequities and oppression that cause people to be marginalized. Contextualizing individual struggles takes into consideration the relationship between the sociopolitical, economic, and situational contexts that can impact behaviour and life decisions.

Participants also told stories about how they develop and maintain relational practices with the aim of making change both individually and in a broader context. Many participants articulate the centrality of building relationships with various people, networks, communities, and organizations.

Half of the participants adapt their relational boundaries with clients. These relational boundaries go beyond the codification of the boundaries as articulated in the *CASW Guidelines for Ethical Practice* (2005b).

It's fairly non-traditional, like doctors and nurses are allowed . . . you know, volunteer their time in communities with their skills, but we don't necessarily see kind of acute mental health support in the same way. I was doing things like, instead of um . . . So, he was escalated on the unit, and I didn't want him to be chemically or mechanically restrained. So we sat and we watched a Pokemon episode and that calmed him down. But apparently that was concerning, 'cause that was too familial to the folks on the inpatient unit. Or you know, he had had difficulty shaving his head, getting in the back of his head shaved. So, I shaved the rest of the back of the head for . . . his head for him. So, things that like I think are really great at developing therapeutic relationships and having real . . . Like I love having conversations about boundaries with clients and what

that looks like. And I have this kind of whole approach around kind of adaptive boundaries and what that looks like. (Rebecca)

But then the day his girlfriend left, I got a call from one of the workers related to Ontario Works or whatever that, "Got this kid, this young man. He's so suicidal. We don't know what to do with him," you know, "I think I'll call the police," and yada, yada, yada. So I said, "Put him on the phone." And I told him, I said, uh . . . Anyway, I kept in touch with him about every couple hours to see how he was doing, and just said to him, "You need to remember that there's some level of choice here, but you need to be safe. Like if you really need to I'll take you to Newmarket." (laughs). And I think there would be a better unit there." Um, anyway, then what happened? About 11 o'clock at night I get this call from him, and he was a mess. So I went and picked him up. I have never done that. (laughs) And I said, you know, "Here's the choice. We're going to Newmarket right now, or you need to . . ." And he just could not deal with that. He says, "I'll jump out of the car." We were in the parking . . . Like he was very honest. He said, "I'm not going to do that." So I said, "Okay." I said, "I'm gonna take you home," 'cause I have a spare room and bathroom that's quite almost separate from the house. I said, "You can stay the night," and then by morning we gotta figure this out. (Alexa)

Participants situated the ethical requirements of setting boundaries with clients as contextual and centred in the daily needs of those they served. Further, Rebecca and Alexa, acknowledge that they were vulnerable to being reported to the college when adapting their boundaries to meet the needs of their clients. Rebecca said she was reported by a colleague and Alexa reflected on the possibility that she could be asked to leave the profession. This professional vulnerability will be discussed further in theme 5.

. . . but so instead my approach to working with this client got me reported to the college. To which speaking with the college for half an hour got the report was immediately thrown out. (Rebecca)

I mean basically, you know, I'd be out of the college for this, but and if it did, it's worth the kid's life. (Alexa)

Some participants discuss that building relationships was about allying with clients or service users to get what they need when in unequal power relationships.

. . . just coming from a client. We had a conversation about how to approach a psychiatrist who is prescribing A, B, and C, and my client saying that doesn't feel right for me. So to me, social justice is saying, "I support you. How can we ally to shift that person's views?" So I would say, "My clients." I would certainly say my colleagues. Um, would, um, know that I would be someone who would challenge the status quo. (Peggy)

I was working with a woman, who had experienced childhood trauma, and she had two daughters. Um, and one was missing school a lot, so CAS was called. And, so she somehow got connected. Like, she just used to pop into our drop in sometimes. So then they were like, "Hey, can you start seeing this woman?" Um, and, so her big goal was just like, "I just don't want to see CAS coming to my house anymore. Like, I just don't want them in my life. So again, that's where I see my role as kind of being that bridge, or trying to figure out, like, how can we, how can I do this strategically? So there's this culmination, I would say to her, like, "I've got your back. I'm on your side." And I'm gonna need to figure out, like, how to communicate with this woman, so that she eventually leaves. Like, what does she need to hear? . . . So, then it was researching

alternative schools and alternative programs. Going to the interview . . . I just felt like it, just, like, you become, it's that relationship building piece. (Nadine)

Both Peggy and Nadine ally with clients so that their needs get met, and their voices get heard when dealing with professionals or systems where there is an unequal power relation.

Kelly recognizes that building relationships or developing therapeutic alliances in her clinical work was significant to the changes one of her clients made in his life. She equates her building a relationship with her client with care and compassion.

And there was one young man that was on my caseload who was basically seen as a very dangerous offender. And I was able to build a really strong therapeutic alliance with him. And the, what's so interesting about, particularly working with young offenders. So, it's the child and the youth workers that are, like, the CO's for them. So they're, they're with them day-to-day, 24 hours a day. This is where basically the kid's at their worst.

Whereas, when they come into my office and sit with me, that's a safe space for them where they can actually be themselves. They can cry in front of me. I can ask them questions that might be uncomfortable but they're able to answer them. And we can really talk and I can really get to know them. And this young man, I really got to know him, and his story was so sad. Um, that lead him (laughs) to where he was. And, so anytime we would have our team meetings and I would talk about how well he was doing, I'd, there'd be smirks (laughs) and people, like, whatever, rolling their eyes. And, in the end, he ended up getting early release. I was so proud of him because I felt, I felt like I gave him a chance, I believed in him, I know he's a good kid, deep down. Yes, he's involved in gangs and he doesn't have a lot of people in his life who he can trust. But, he just needed to know that somebody cared. (Kelly)

Building relationships with service users or clients is key to developing mutual trust between the client and worker. This foundational relationship becomes a cornerstone for opportunities where clients learn new self-advocacy strategies. The worker provides an avenue to support the client's strengths and capacities (which will be explored further as supporting strengths and capacities in a later subtheme in this theme).

More than half of the participants also discuss that they built strategic relationships laterally and vertically to shift attitudes with allied professionals and create organizational change.

It didn't begin and end with the individual client . . . worked at the hospital, a sexual assault and domestic violence treatment centre . . . and sometimes, from social justice perspective, women's experiences were not maybe valued or women themselves were not valued in the systems that came to play. Primarily, I think about with the police. So, one of the great examples, in terms of working towards social justice, was me in my own practice and then we took it on as a team, was instead of us writing letters of complaint to every time there was a negative experience with the police, we shifted our lens and we wrote letters of support to the chief. So, if Officer Bob did something that was marginally helpful to our client, um, and some may say, you know, just doing your job, it didn't matter what we would do, as we would send a letter to the chief, appreciating . . . showing appreciation for this until it shifted. To me, that was one of the most simple ways to shift a culture, is to shine on what more you want and so guess what? Officers would come in, especially because I work in a higher organization, officers would come in wanting their letter. Right? (laughs) Trying to be "letter to the chief" worthy and it shifted a culture because what it did from a social justice perspective, is it leveled the

playing field. And it also gave us, it was I think, I covered like it gave us opportunities to have conversation. So, when something didn't go well, I could call on Officer Bob to help understand what happened here, which to me, was big piece of the advocacy and the social justice on . . . for the individual. I would also attend meetings as an advocate, like sort of position myself as the . . . as an advocate, individually, but because of social work and my commitment to social justice, it didn't begin and end with the individual client. It was also the capacity to make some more systemic changes. (Peggy)

Peggy describes how the domestic violence team in which she worked built strategic relationships to bring about a shift in the thinking and behaviour of police officers with the hope that it will also shift culture within the police services.

A few participants discuss using strategies such as writing letters of affirmation of behaviours that can lead to open conversations about concerns or issues, and tools to build relationships with decision-makers. Like Peggy, Megan talks about building strategic relationships. However, Megan uses technology and digital media to build relationships, influence decision-makers and create organizational change.

I, as a front-line person, have learned how to use the same things that those people at the top always had in their toolkit, and I've learned how to use them . . . So, I created a Twitter profile—I'm on Twitter—and I started to follow them. So, I followed the CEO, I followed the head of Health Quality Ontario, I follow big professors, Dr. Ken Rockwood, I follow them. I followed the Minister of Health, but not only do I follow them, I'll comment on them. So, I'll "like" them and I'll comment, and I always keep it positive-- and so I intentionally, have embraced that as a way of having a voice, finding a voice as a front-line person. So then, like the Minister of Health, Taylor, she would say, "Oh the

new Canada food guide's out." And I would comment, "Thank you, it looks great, I really like the social aspect of eating, good job." The CEO will say, "Oh I'm here at a meeting with Health Quality Ontario. And like "Oh that's great, oh, you know, good job." So like I started to compliment if-- like only if I believe it. I'm not a suck at-- I'm not a kiss-ass, or anything like that, but if I truly believed it then I would comment. And what that did is that let them know that I'm-- we're watching you, we're here. If you want a public persona, then we as front-line people can-- you're not talking just to the people at the top when you put out a Twitter message. You're talking to the public, and you're talking to me too. So yeah so I started to kind of like-- and then they started to kind of invite me to things. Like, would you like to you know, be part of-- well I was invited to the Health Quality Ontario stuff, and like the Ontario Health Team, like "what do you think about this?" So then I had people from the top asking me "what do you think about this," and I'd just give them my opinion. "Well I think it's really important that we look at healthcare transformation and I think that we need to involve our community partners, and these are the people." So you start then to use your network to help them at the top make it into the community. (Megan)

Megan uses technology to connect with those in decision-making positions, with whom she would usually not have access to in her daily work. She is strategic in her communication and uses her knowledge and position to inform and build relationships with those who have influence and decision-making power and who she can in turn inspire to make changes.

Other participants in macro practice also identify that working relationally can be strategic and create something bigger together for a greater good in society.

So I think, and again, coming back to the idea of relationality, sometimes compassion for the folks that are not extending compassion to you can actually be not only a strategic way to reach them, um, but it also kind of grounds yourself in that re . . . this is not about . . . this is really about what everybody . . . It's about humankind, so we're transforming things for everybody. (Esther)

Esther, who works in an organizational development capacity, understands her social justice work as extending compassion to everyone whether they agree with you. Esther moves the focus from transforming the individual to focuses of transforming society for humankind.

Rose builds relationships with service users and decision-makers in her capacity as an outreach worker for people experiencing homelessness. Relationship building facilitates the discovery of ways to determine the programs and resources are relevant to client needs. Rose articulates the importance of supporting individual strengths and capacity to be heard at decision-making tables.

And that clients can and do determine their own future. And so, if clients don't want service then—or don't particularly respond to service in the way in which it is offered, then we say “well see, they aren't really ready for service, or they didn't want it or they're resistant to service” and the reality is that we didn't offer a service in a way that somebody wanted it. It takes a lot of time. And it takes a lot of time outside of the meeting . . . And it takes creating time and space at the meeting and really trying to ensure people that they have something of value to contribute—that it's not the same thing I have to contribute, but you have something very different and something that we really need. And then when people find their voice then it's really important that we support that contribution. When I say something around a table, I don't need somebody to

agree with me right away, but when somebody is finding their voice for the first time, they need to know that people have heard them. They need to know that what they said made a difference . . . As you meet people in your practice you realize that they're not so different. There's not an us and them, there is a collective . . . I think the passion for social justice has really come that it's not an us and a them and it's not doing for. It's creating together. (Rose)

Rose also worked from the top down to develop relationships with decision makers in her advocacy role.

I work relationally, I ask, I do my homework. So, I ask people for things that are achievable and reasonable for them. And so, if you ask a politician, they'll all meet with me, they all like me, we'll all have good discussions. (Rose)

Participants like Rose, who worked with both decision-makers and service users, work simultaneously vertically—from the top down and the bottom up—to build purposeful relationships that promote social justice in workers' everyday practices.

Participants saw relational practices as building blocks to their social justice practice. Participants articulated the significance of building individual relationships with clients or service users to build individual strengths and capacity to change their circumstances, so they feel empowered to use their voices and become part of a decision-making process. Developing professional relationships is also rooted in the ability to promote social justice in the profession by working with, and in collaboration with other community organizations. As identified above, some participants such as Megan and Peggy told stories of relational strategies and tools they used to bring about change in their organizations. Megan also told a story of her practice about the need to understand the context of people's lives when making professional judgements.

I had a lady who she was very frail, very very frail, like I thought she was very frail, caring for her husband who had responsive behaviours, aggressive responsive behaviours. The team didn't want to discharge him to her care, because she seemed very frail. They had no children, just the two of them. And I remember saying to her, "we're really concerned that you're not strong enough to take care of your husband." And she looked at me and she goes, "I am strong." And she said, "I'll tell you how strong I am." She said, "I survived concentration camp." She said, "when the Nazis came," when they were liberated, she said, "The Nazis they drove us all into a barn." And she said, "I was so tiny I had lost all weight, I was on death's doorstep." They drove them all into a barn. And she said, "and then they lit the barn on fire." And she said, "We thought we were going to die, and I reached back and I slid the door and we all escaped into the field." And she said, "So if I can survive that, I can take care of my husband." Like, OK. [laughs] So to find some space for those stories, and to bring those stories a back to our team and say OK. You know, like we need to consider this before you judge what you think somebody can do or can't do. (Megan)

Participants identify the centrality of building relationships laterally with service users and colleagues (both inside and outside the profession). They also articulate that after they nurture and sustain relationships vertically both from the top down and the bottom up to create systemic change. Collaboration is thus essential to promoting social justice in social work. Professionally, many practitioners connected with a plethora of other services and organizations since the needs of the individuals or communities they served, have a complexity of needs.

Collaborative practices focus on the needs and want of service users holistically and look to individual service users, communities, and agencies to provide expertise and resources to

support both individual and organizational change. Regardless of practice contexts, some participants identify how they work collaboratively with individuals, other agencies, and community partners in their social justice work. Many clinical practice participants find that working relationally and collaboratively with clients or service users was critical to their work, whether in private or agency practice.

And I really believe that the relational piece is pretty much everything, right? I mean there's, there's . . . you know, theories are helpful, but it real- healing is relational. It is absolutely relational. Um, building a relationship. Uh, just having some awareness of stuff and creating space for awareness, and collaboration, and kind of models of co-design, and those sorts of pieces. (Phillip)

. . . means working always in partnership with clients, so it's always a collaborative thing.
(Ellen)

The few participants who do outreach or community work as part of their roles discussed how they collaborate with community service users and/or community members as part of their social justice work. Working collaboratively with a church to provide access, Sarah is purposeful in making sure that no other injustice would be perpetuated in this relationship.

I feel like I'm doing social justice work, yeah, so that's- the- the succinct way to put that is, building relationships with others, supports in order to better support the clients is social justice . . . Well, I started a garden group with my- with the organization I work for. We've partnered with a church, actually, that has a community garden. Like, land is expensive and lots of the folks that we work with live in apartment buildings like you know, and just don't have that and many people as it turns out who have decided to participate in this group grew up in other parts of Canada or other countries where they

actually grew up on farms or in rural spaces, partnered with a church, actually, that has a community garden. (Sarah)

Sarah is specific about the lack of access to land to grow food in an urban centre and she is purposeful and deliberate to collaborate with a church by building a relationship that will not perpetuate any harm to her clients.

Further, Rose and Cynthia, both of whom worked in a community capacity stress that building community is about developing relationships with members as collaborators to make positive, meaningful change.

It is about creating a community. Because we all talk about it, but it's really different when you actually, really involve people with lived experience as collaborators or co-creators in the work that you're doing. (Rose).

It meant, in a very simple way-- it means that if I am going to do something, if we're doing an information session, if I'm doing a community focus group, if I say I want to hear from the community, I do everything I can think of and that others can recommend that I do to make sure that they know they're welcome, they know that they can get there. So, I provide transportation. I provide food when they get there. I provide seating that works for everyone. I make sure there's a sound system so that everybody can hear. I go to where people are, rather than making people come to me. I go to the community. If I want to hear from the community, I go to the community. I go to where they are.

(Cynthia)

Interestingly, a few front-line and clinical social workers continue their work at the macro level by finding creative and strategic ways to influence decision-makers. Megan, a front-line

health social worker also discuss the importance of collaborating with community partners so that she can network with decision-makers for healthcare transformation.

Well, I think it's really important that we look at health care transformation and I think that we need to involve our community partners, and these are the people. So you start then to use your network to help them at the top make it into the community. (Megan)

While Rose and Cynthia discuss the importance of collaborating with community members as collaborators in social justice work. Megan recognizes that as a front-line worker she needs to be strategic in how she makes the connections with community partner organizations so that she can leverage these relationships to connect with policy decision-makers.

Finding opportunities to work with both community organizations and communities of service users is central to making progressive change. These participants recognize that collaboration is significant to creating relationships that provide access to meaningful resources to meet the needs of service users and/or to create transformational change in systems.

Some participants also recognize the importance of developing relationships with allies—those individuals who align with others and provide support and encouragement when working for social justice.

. . . finding allies. Allies is huge . . . and so I've got this like kind of group of like community allies who we've now all become like really good friends, who we know are doing the good work. Um, that we, if we're able to kind of, not share clients, but like get support around like folks are, they ha- . . . we happen to like refer them to other service like other people, it makes the whole job so much easier and it makes things so much easier 'cause we know we have someone who has the same kind of perspective, and that we can rely on. But we can also like bounce ideas back and forth off each other, and have

like real honest conversations of like this is how I wanted to do this today. What do you think about that? Like do you think this is okay?. (Rebecca)

In his international work, Peter recounted that his clients did not have to think the same way as he did, as long as his work was done for the common good.

We had very different philosophical understandings of the work and yet, here we all are working towards a common good. (Peter)

Beth, who identifies as queer and racialized, describes opportunities to connect with people with different identities and perspectives as a means to purposefully furthering her social justice practice outside her professional role.

So I think about, for example, my sister . . . I have a good sister. She is very much not the same kind of person as I am at all. She is a soccer mom. She (laughs) has 2.5 kids and lives in a little tiny town . . . and she has access to people who would never even get in a room with me. And she's a really awesome kind of gung-ho ally. And she will challenge people on homophobia and transphobia, because she has come to have an experience with me and other people in my life who are also queer . . . that really has helped change her understanding of who that is, right? And so in her community, she has access to people who would never even get in a room with me, right. So I think that part is really, really important. And I also think that making those personal connections is huge. It is everything because you kind of hear a lot of generalizations out there in life. And we will pair it that without knowing any better when we're young. And if we never have any challenges on it, we simply will. It's a very human thing to do. Once we make a personal connection, it's really, really hard to maintain those beliefs because now you're talking about a person, and the person who I know and I like, right? So I think those personal

connections are everything. I think we need to move towards being intercultural towards being . . . sort of intercommunity, , interactions because I can't hold my ignorance about you if we're friends or if I know you, right?. (Beth)

Beth identifies that for her social justice is not just a professional practice but a personal commitment that she consciously enacts in her personal life and relationships.

Another central component of social justice work is building relationships both laterally and vertically. Participants articulate different ways they build relationships both laterally (with colleagues, allies, and community) and vertically (with both decision-makers and service users). They extended these relationships not only in their individual professional roles but in their personal lives. They see these relational practices as important to improving social relations, which in turn provides opportunities to promote social justice in their work and their life.

The next subtheme discusses how participants use their professional power to promote their commitment to social justice in their daily practices.

Leveraging Professional Power

Leveraging professional power is integral to social work (Tew, 2006). Bar-On (2002) urges the social work profession to “master the discourse of power and use it effectively” (p. 998). In this subtheme, participants articulate a clear relationship, but with significant variations about how they leverage their power to promote social justice as advocacy in their everyday work and roles.

I have to be using my privilege and power to work to change the systems to make them more equitable. (Rose)

then there's times where we're working with people where we have more power and they have less. And so for me, I think that again, social justice is trying to even that dynamic a bit. (Nadine)

Rose uses her power and privilege as a proxy to make systems more equitable.

Equalizing the power dynamics in relationships with service users is seen as a direct example of promoting social justice by Nadine.

Other participants describe how they leverage their professional power within, and beyond their professional roles to advocate for changes in organizational structures or processes. More specifically, they explain how they use purposeful actions to resist the status quo in their organizations or private practices. Ellen talks about leveraging the power that she has within her role in the hospital as a social worker:

We had a patient last year who's palliative . . . who's First Nations. He had been in and out of prison all his life. He didn't have much connection with his family. He did have a son... he knew where this one son was, and his son was actually in XXX correctional facility. And, one of his last dying wishes and one of the things he wanted to sort of close before he died was to see his son again. That's really hard when someone's incarcerated. And that took a lot of phone calls, advocacy, you name it, it. And it happened. They, he, they did eventually . . . And writing letters saying this man is at the end of his life. It's, you know doing all the, the letters and, and the advocacy for him. And they actually did bring him. He came with two guards in handcuffs, and then . . . But he did come and they were able . . . And then when they actually were here, I was at . . . I actually spoke to one of the guards, 'cause they wanted to stay in the room with him. And I said, "Look, what's gonna happen, really? He's in a single room, you can

stand outside. We're on the second floor, he's not gonna jump out the window. Can they just have some time alone?" And they did allow it . . . and I think that the nursing staff all saw that but, and they felt that was pretty remarkable that they, we were able to do that. (Ellen)

In this case, Ellen uses “relational power” to get a rigid system and players by appealing to their sense of humanity to allow a visit for this individual who was palliative.

Peggy uses the letter-writing campaign to the Chief of Police about the positive conduct of police officers to strengthen relationships (as stated in an earlier subtheme) and to leverage that relationship to advocate for clients. “I could call on Officer Bob to help understand what happened here, which to me, was big piece of the advocacy” (Peggy). The positive affirmation that Peggy uses to build relationships and change organization culture had the added benefit of having candid conversations to understand decisions and advocate for clients.

Many other participants discuss that they leverage power in their professional roles to advocate for individuals access to resources, or to mitigate harm from unjust organizational processes.

I do a lot of advocacy with folks around lifting service restrictions in spaces, and navigating what that looks like for folks. Um, and I see that as social justice, because I see that not only as like advocating kind of with clients, so like having these kind of restorative justice meetings. So, I don't think we do restorative justice well, but, having these kind of restorative justice meetings in spaces. I mean, helping clients get back into spaces but also, creating tools for agencies themselves to be able to like incorporate folks into spaces. So, like one example on this is years ago, but I had a client that I knew in like various capacities in multiple spaces. I've known him for years, who was service

restricted from the space that I was working in. but there were a lot of practical supports that were offered within that space, including a food bank, you know. So, I said like, "Well how do we . . . how do we adapt like our service restriction policy, you know, to make sure he's still actually able to access services? Like so what does that look like?" So we, you know, developed kind of this plan where he was able to like, you know, um, come up, wave to somebody saying like, "Hey, this is what I need." He would go down and meet folks outside, and still be able to like access the things that he needed. And it changed the culture of the agency of like how folks were service restricted from services. Understanding that just because someone has had kind of a difficult time within that space doesn't mean they actually don't need the services that are provided within that space. (Rebecca)

Rebecca works with decision-makers by bringing particular examples of those who fall through the gaps when service delivery is set up to work for only those who fit into behavioural norms. Her ability to build relationships with service users allowed decision-makers to see how their reactions to those who do not fit into their services easily can be further marginalized. This awareness offers opportunities to develop ways to respond to the needs of these individuals.

Some other participants discuss understanding how to be strategic in leveraging power when working with decision-makers.

I learned how to-- and this is from working in surgery and with doctors who want it all in two and a half seconds, I learned if you want to get something from that doctor, if I want to delay the discharge for my patient, always give him two solutions: one that you can live with, and-- both of them you have to be able to live with, one that you want and one that you think he might be acceptable to, because at the end of the day he needs to think

that he came up with the plan, and he needs to be the one that says—So I learned that from her. So when you're in a difficult situation, and when you're really gonna go to bat, try to figure out what your opponent wants, what your opponent can live with, and never back them into a corner. You don't have the power that they have, so don't back them in the corner, give them an honourable way out and let them—make them think they came up with the solution. So thinking about my career, like, the trajectory, I learned how to use that. How to use that to the advantage. But my advantage I always had to remind myself was why are you, why is this so important to you? And it was important to me because it's important to the patient and to the family. (Megan)

While Megan identifies that she does not necessarily have power in an organization with a top-down hierarchical structure. She uses her professional relationships strategically to get what she needs for her clients.

it's important to understand your profession, understand your role, understand the legislation and know how to balance that in a very top down, or like high organization-- like a hospital. (Megan)

Both Rebecca and Megan used their relational strategies to get what they needed for their clients by understanding the structure that they work within to leverage the power in their professional roles.

Some of these same participants describe actions that they use to challenge the status quo to support the strengths and capacity of their clients. Ellen directly questions the taken-for-granted assumptions in her role as a social worker in a hospital. She also identifies that sometimes she challenges the policies and process by circumventing the system by: “finding the loopholes in the system. I can sort of scoot under the radar with things” (Ellen). She notes that

asking critical questions about how care and discharge are maintained in hospital social work is part of her social justice work.

Unless we talk about it and discuss the different problems and the different issues, and I think that's part of my role to raise those questions and like in rounds, if someone, like my manager or whoever's saying that we need . . ."Why is this person here? They, they're not acutely sick. We need to get them out." Sure, but doesn't mean that they, that they're ready to go out. We need to do something. But then it becomes about the money again . . . I push back, I try and, I'll talk to the patients sometimes and say, "Is there a reason why . . . Give me something so I can get, let you stay, you know to get you to stay for the weekend. I think it's just finding the loopholes in the system. (Ellen)

As can be seen in this subtheme, participants witness the bureaucratic and organizational injustices that place barriers on access for individuals and communities. Participants discuss how they strategically leveraged their relational power when working with individuals, organizations, and communities by challenging the normative understandings and assumptions about individuals to promote social justice. They also challenge the status quo within the context of their roles both within and outside agencies and organizations.

Some participants discuss the importance of naming unjust systemic power relations, structures and dynamics with clients in their clinical practice. This naming provides opportunities for service users to understand that there is a dynamic interplay between their individual problems and the issues they face in society.

I think challenging the status quo in a micro level might mean about just doing something different. Breaking out of a personal pattern. I think it also could be about getting connected into the community a little bit more. I have a client whose son died of

a fentanyl overdose. He was an addict and had struggled with lots of substances and behavioral disorders and attachment issues. And now in part of the grief process for his mother has been to be part of the Opioid Steering committee in Hamilton filled with nurses and physicians and social workers and researchers primarily and a couple of people with lived experience, which is the chair that she's sort of sitting on and so for me there's, you know, there's challenge about what it means, the status quo of maybe the stereotype of an addict or someone who dies of physician suicide. Um, you know, it's- there's politics in talking to people about physician assisted suicide, abortion, domestic violence, challenging gender roles, and stereotypes. (Phillip)

While earlier Phillip discussed the need to build resilience and self-sufficiency with his clients, here, Phillip leverages his power in his clinical work to move beyond focusing on individual responsibility and the isolation of maintaining the status quo. He uses an understanding that individual issues presented in a clinical session can be about upholding systems of power and are inherently political. He couples this structural understanding with his clinical knowledge to question the normative individual understandings about what individuals need.

Both Danielle and Beth name unjust power as an everyday action in their clinical practice.

And it's why I focus my practice on people who are coming from more vulnerable populations, right? Because I think we're harmed all the fucking time . . . So it is that a lot of those fathers have not been involved in their life. And so what I, what I'm noticing is that I'm providing space for them to be able to at once heal around that relationship with their father. But I'm also recognizing that because their only connection to their racialized side of themselves was that father, what I'm seeing clients doing is just like

cutting off that whole side and just being like, "No, I'm not Trinidadian." Like I had a client recently say to me that like that their, that their mother's European and their father is Trinidadian but they're a, they're 100% Canadian they're 100% European. There are none of what their father is. I said, "Well that's interesting." Right? That's interesting because the thing is, is that what happens for a lot of folks is that it's difficult for them to claim their racialized identity if their racialized identity is tied up with somebody that they so hate. And so, I think, you know, my approach is like helping people to understand, who are you? Who are your ancestors? And actually, that doesn't matter who it is. I work with white clients and I'm just like, "Who are your ancestors?" Like, because people don't know who they are anymore. People don't even know their strength. They don't know that if your ancestors were Scottish and Irish, you're one tough sucker, you got some DNA in there that's doing some stuff for you that you don't even recognize. So, that whole sort of like, who am I, what are . . . What's my identity? How can my identity give me the strength to fight, I think comes from a social justice lens. Yeah. That's, that's one of the stories I'll share. (Daniella)

Um, but one of the things that I think is really crucial when you are doing this kind of work is, um, a willingness to go there. So, I think it's really crucial that you'd be willing to talk about racism in, in the clinical room here. Um, a lot of the folks who I see end up coming and talking about their experience. Um, for example, I have, um, one client, she's a black woman who has, um, mixed race background and talked a lot about trauma with her dad. And along the trauma surrounds the fact that her sister looks lighter, looks . . . has, you know straighter hair. And so certainly, we work on, you know, sort of those attachment pieces and the harm in terms of that father-daughter relationship. But you

can't talk about that without talking about colonialism. You can't talk about that without talking about internalized racism. Right? And so I think not being afraid of that conversation is crucial. Right? I think, to begin with, naming it and bringing it into the room, right? I think acknowledging it is huge. (Beth)

Daniella and Beth discuss the nuances of unequal power relations for all individuals who are marginalized. They articulate how those who are marginalized, internalize their oppression as shame and emotional distress (Speight, 2007). This dynamic process can keep those who are marginalized from making positive changes in their lives (Jones, 2000). Both Beth and Daniella recognize that developing individual strength and capacity is significant to healing from socio-political. Naming oppression in clinical situations is an important finding given the early yet growing literature in this area (T. Mitchell, 2017).

Megan expands this discussion through her many stories about the importance of understanding both patients lived experiences and the socio-political context within which these experiences are framed.

So like one story about a woman that I worked with in ICU and she came in and she was, she had a very serious brain injury, and the family had waited probably 5 days before bringing her into the hospital. English wasn't her first language, and the-- but English was the first language of the children. So the doctor wanted me involved because they were concerned about abuse and neglect. They wondered how in the world would they—the woman had had a like a brain injury—how in the world would a family let her lay in a bed and not call an ambulance until she was really needed to be intubated and was unconscious. And so they thought it was—they wondered if there was abuse issues going on. So I met with the family or the children at the bedside and I could see that they were

really devastated by their mother's condition. So I started to talk to them a little bit about their mother, who is your mother, and you know—and I did have to bring it up, like we are concerned that your mom—it looks like you mom would have been at home for a while before you called 911. Can you help me to understand that? What they said was “my mother always said that if she was going to die, she wanted to die at home. So we thought that she was dying, and so we thought that she would die at home’. And then they started to tell me that when they were young, they had escaped the killing fields in Cambodia. And their mother-- so when they were leaving the big cities and they were moving into the rural areas in Cambodia, they had I think 8 children, and the mother—they lost their father their mother had the 8 children, they said-- if you can imagine hundreds, like more, thousands and thousands of people leaving the cities, and their mother stayed up all night because they knew if they lost one child, they would never be found. Never be found. So they said, “my mother kept us together, my mother stayed up all night and made sure that she never lost one of us”. And so, they felt this strong commitment to their mother that-- we will do anything you want to keep you with us, and honour who you are and what you did. So when it got to treatment decisions, they wanted everything done. They wanted feeding tubes. They wanted her on ventilators. They wanted all of this stuff, but the hospital, but the healthcare team couldn't understand. Well last week you kept her for five days at home and she—if you brought her in five days ago then maybe her outcome would be better, not you want us to make her better. So it was this sort of disconnect, and so I had to bring that story back to our healthcare team and say, this is what's motivating the-- this is what's underneath them wanting these

kinds of treatment decisions. So once they understood, then they could reframe their conversations (Megan)

In the hospital, she reports that understanding the individual within the context of their lives provides her opportunities to support the strengths and capacities of her clients by understanding their needs in both an individual and historical, socio-political context.

As an Executive Director of a housing organization, Margaret talks about assisting staff to develop their strengths and capacities by focusing on the talents and gifts they bring to their position.

Everybody has different gifts, and everybody has different weaknesses, liabilities and I'm just not going to worry about those weaknesses and liabilities. [laughter] I'm just going to focus on the gifts and, you know, making the most out of those. So, when we have employees, or we have students, I don't really-- whether they're my direct reports or someone else, I don't spend a lot of time fretting about the fact that you know what, you are not really strong on financial management. [laughter] And so I'm not going to make you feel terrible about the fact that your budgets don't make a lot of sense. I'm going to find you some other work arounds for that, and we're going to focus on the fact that you're absolutely amazing in your community development and engaging the community. And I think that we've, you know, we end up with people-- I hope that we end up where people aren't spending too much time fretting about things that they aren't getting anything out of themselves and are able to blossom in the areas that they have natural talents, and that they find their joy. What I see often is that positions here really can kind of evolve into the person that's in them, rather than the person needing to solve

into the position. Because we can do things a million different ways. Let's do them in a way where you're gifted and where you excel, and let's build on that. (Margaret)

Additionally, Rose asserts that her practice with individuals who are street-involved includes creating time and space to support the strengths and capacities of the service users so that their voices can be heard and validated at decision-making forums.

And then when people find their voice then it's really important that we support that contribution...when somebody is finding their voice for the first time, they need to know that people have heard them. They need to know that what they said made a difference. And so, it's really important to acknowledge that and to really figure out ways in which-- where people's interests are, where their skills are and to find ways to move that work forward. (Rose)

Megan, Margaret, and Rose explore the importance of reducing the inequities in the power relations that are inherent in the professional relationships with clients and service users. They utilize many strategies such as listening for and understanding the lived experiences, and capacities of individuals.

In contrast, Esther discusses the imperialism of language used by professionals, particularly when working in a community setting.

That I see social justice practice playing out is really limited to this one group of people that think they know that is, think they know how to talk about it, are really mad at you because you're not using the right language to talk about it- I don't see it as effective. Like, I just, I don't see yelling at someone, "The word is . . ." Pick something. What is the one, recently? What is the one called . . . call me? "Oh, so you're a transgender?" And I was like, "No, no, no. I'm nonbinary. That's the wrong thing." What's the point of

saying, "You asshole, you didn't say the right word"? Asshole did not go to school for 7 years to learn all of the language around anti-oppression. It's not that you can't call somebody out for doing something incorrect, right? But I think the language really gets in the way. People don't understand . . . People don't know what I'm talking about. You know, if I come into a meeting and start talking about decolonization in this context, they have no fucking idea what I'm talking about. (Esther)

Esther makes the point that the use of language about how social justice can set up a hierarchy regarding those who have access to language and that do not. She identifies that this imperialistic use of language can be oppressive which sets up inequitable power relationships that produce the very same injustices in the community that need to be dismantled.

Many of the participants describe how to use an intersection of the following as social justice practice: understanding the sociopolitical context of people's lives, building relationships at the individual and systemic level so that they can advocate for change, and supporting the strengths and capacities of those they work with (these elements will be discussed in more depth in the next section). Phillip brings the identified elements together in his narrative about his advocacy practice.

Oh, the one example that comes to mind was from my days as a protection worker. So, there was this family who were Somalian. They were refugees. There was a maternal grandmother, a mother, and then the child who was an infant. The mother abandoned her infant daughter and fled the province. Um, the mother was known to be transient and homeless. She dealt with addiction issues. Um, she had also realistically been part of some civil wars and some other issues. She was in, uh, refugee camps for many years growing up and just has been exposed to innumerable violences, lack of secure housing,

lack of clean water, lack of food, lack of basic human rights. So, here they come to Canada. For one reason or another this mother was too overwhelmed so she abandoned her daughter. Children's Aid Society got involved. They apprehended the child. The grandmother wanted the child, but the society wouldn't give the child to the grandmother, because the grandmother didn't speak English. And they couldn't verify whether the grandmother knew the significant concerns about her granddaughter. Primarily that she wasn't meeting her developmental milestones. So, we got a translator. There was a community health care that had been involved, health center. The community itself had kind of rallied behind this woman and they really did a lot of advocacy work. I came in to the file just as all this was beginning. So, I was part of a family group conference that really didn't do anything that it was supposed to do. And I remember sitting back saying like why haven't we give this woman a chance? I'd been in her home. There were no concerns about the home. There were no concerns about anybody in the home. Um, and I said we just really have to take a chance here. And we- I got my supervisor to agree to an extended home visit that lasted two weeks. I had to check in every other day on this woman to see how they were doing. And there were issues there. A: her faith. She was a widow. And a devout Muslim. And because of that she could never be alone with me and she always had to be fully covered. Which was another issue for the society, because they had a problem with the fact that they could only see her eyes. Which completely ignored this woman's faith, this woman's culture, and this woman's history. Which to me is completely counterintuitive to the value of social justice. Yes, there are risks, but I can talk to somebody who's fully covered without that being a problem. So, this woman also took the risk to have me be her

worker and allow me into her home always with another person so there was supervision, um, between her and I. So, what occurred in those two weeks was remarkable. This child started speaking. This child started walking. This child gained weight. All of the things that we were concerned about it literally evaporated because she was with her people. She was with her family. She was around her language. She was around her culture and, you know, we left the child there and stayed involved for I think another six or eight weeks and then closed up the file. Hand, like, be well. Go forward. So, if I didn't advocate for that. If I wasn't always on about the strengths and the possibilities and the potentials and the hope that was there, nobody would have done anything. The system would have continued. The system would have kept the child in care. Um, and God only knows what would have happened after that. But so, when I think about that, I became part of the community advocacy against the very people that I worked for in that point. Because I was trying to say to them, you sit in an office and read reports and make decisions. I'm in the home. I'm doing this work. This is what I see. (Phillip)

Phillip outlines how he leveraged the power in his role, articulating a clear assessment of the intersections of all the above factors to advocate for this family by resisting the dominant discourse of how this family is constructed in child protection.

In previous subthemes, social justice practitioners take into consideration the dynamic relationship between the problems individuals face and the impact and implications of the larger social structures that can be oppressive. Many of the discussions clearly point to the need for more equitable access as the fundamental reason that practitioners engage in advocacy as social justice work. They see effective advocacy work as being able to develop and maintain various

levels of relationships to leverage their professional power. They tell stories of the diverse ways that they apply relational practices and leverage power to advocate for change on behalf of those with whom they work.

The next subtheme identifies the core skills that practitioners utilize on a daily basis that they see as promoting social justice in their daily practice with clients.

Social Work Skills That Promote Social Justice

There are a several core interpersonal skills that social workers use in their everyday social justice practice such as listening and engaging with individuals, problem-solving, practising cultural humility and educating others. Some participants discuss specific social work skills and abilities they believe anchor social justice in their everyday practices in the next subtheme. Megan names foundational clinical skills and abilities that manifest in her work.

So those qualities are like your very basic stuff like your basic social work skills about listening and being interested in listening, and start where the person is at, like those kinds of things. But also the qualities I bring-- a curious sense of how-- what else can we do? So I'm always curious about different modalities of practice, different tools that we can use. I'm interested in how people's different experiences of life impact the decisions they make, like around trauma, or just cultural values, norms, beliefs, like how does that impact our engagement and the kinds of decisions that you make. Like people would often say, well—especially if you're in crisis, you just want an answer, like just tell me what to do. What would you do, if this was your mother, what would you do. And I think I've always said, it's not my mother, if it was my mother I'd tell you what I'd do. But it's not my mother. You didn't live my life, your mother didn't live my life. So let's talk about your mother and your experiences. (Megan)

Some participants, similar to Megan, list some or a combination of the skills such as: listening for context, engagement, critical thinking and problem-solving. They also identify the ability to be authentic, transparent, and have an innate curiosity about people.

Some participants reflect on their ability to listen with humility. Peter, discussing his work in Africa, makes the point that there is a process of demonstrating the skill of listening to those who have lived experience and using the wisdom he hears, is foundational to his social justice practice.

Agostinho Neto said, you're not getting it Bill, you know, we're not interested in events here or there. We want a long-range funding strategy, which will build year, after year, after year, after year. And have a commitment from North America to say "we are interested in the liberation of Africa, we are interested in the liberation of peoples, we see equality, we see equal human rights and it's not just because the communists are pouring money in, so we've got to pour in an equal amount of money, or we're all going to go to the communist world. So, basically, he said, "you know, are you capable of doing that, because that will require that you listen." [laughter] And of course, I was this hot shot fire-raiser, you know? So, very politely he said to me "can you shut up and follow instructions?" So, power had shifted in the room. You know, it was like, whoa, these people have something important to say, let's listen. [laughter] So, time after time, those kind of things happened. Out of all of that came the experience to me that the wisdom's in the doing that has some kind of power attached to it, the place to start is to listen. And then you facilitate, and you bring out the wisdom that's already there, rather than spouting off whatever you think you already know. [laughter]. (Peter)

In this case, Peter goes further in saying that the skill of listening is a practice of humility that can actually equalize the power in relationships.

Additionally, more than half of the participants state that educating others about their rights and injustices is a skill to promote social justice.

When I say to a group of people, “you know what, I think you’re feeling uncomfortable. Am I getting it right? Or are you feeling uncomfortable about asking the government for money in this program because you think you’re asking other people to give you money?” “Well yeah, I don’t really like to ask” “but this isn’t other people’s money, we all contribute. Every day you pay tax.” “No, I don’t have to pay income tax,” they say. I say “No, no, no, no. Every time you buy gas for your car, you pay taxes. Every time you buy something, other than most food, you pay tax. When you pay your taxes on your property you pay tax, when you pay rent, you’re paying taxes. You’re paying taxes every single day and you’ve been doing this for all the adult years you’ve been alive. This isn’t somebody else’s money, this is our money that we’ve all put in and we all take out in different ways. So, it’s your money. It’s not somebody else giving you a gift. You’ve contributed. (Cynthia)

Cynthia highlights that educating people to bring awareness about their right to access resources as benefits is a large part of how she uses her skills to promote social justice in her everyday work. A few participants identify the need to be aware of how they educate others, understand who their audience is, and approach them with information to elicit positive results.

A few participants discuss that educating their colleagues and organizations can be significant to their social justice work, however there are pros and cons to doing this in their workplaces. Sarah reflected on the benefits and drawbacks of educating colleagues.

You know, like doing the work of sort of talking about sort of like the little bit of education piece that can happen with colleagues like that. It can either be really invigorating if you know that person is on board with you or it can be like really tenuous and uncomfortable because you're in a position of trying to offer new information which you know, you can't guarantee but you're hoping might shift a colleague's perspective.

(Sarah)

According to Sarah, educating her colleagues was one of the skills she utilized to provide information to shift perspectives in a hospital setting. She identifies there is no guarantee that the information will be well received. This tension will be further explored in the theme about the challenging realities of social justice in social work practice.

In this subtheme, participants identify using foundational relational social work skills in their social justice work to engage clients to resolve challenges. This ability to engage with clients is an essential base to build trust and respect. These skills assist in building a base with individuals that allow social workers to build. The use of these skills provides opportunities to “think of engagement as an intentional [political] process of coming together with others to create an [interactive] space of respect and hope in which we can learn about one another” (Finn, 2016, p. 189).

Concurrently, participants also engage in problem-solving and educating clients, colleagues, and their workplaces to bring about organizational structural change. The use of these skills forward social justice as relational, interpersonal and structural.

As can be seen in earlier subthemes in this section, participants use their relational practices to leverage their professional power to advocate and support the strengths and capacities of those they serve. Engaging clients are foundational to social justice work.

Participants employ these skills as they pay close attention to the context of individuals' lives so that they can be recognized and build respectful relationships.

The above four themes together articulate the following: (a) what social justice means to participants, (b) why they come to practise social justice, (c) the connection with the meaning they make of social justice as the commitment to their praxis; and (d) how this commitment is manifested in their daily practices. Practising social justice is not without its challenges, and theme five below outlines the tensions, barriers, and constraints participants face when enacting social justice in their practice.

The Challenging Realities of Social Justice in Social Work Practice

Social justice continues to be a fundamental principle in social work. Nonetheless, in 21st-century Canada, social workers navigate tensions, barriers, challenges, and constraints in their roles that make practising social justice fraught with many pitfalls and dilemmas. Throughout the interviews, participants reflected on three prominent subthemes as the tensions, barriers, and constraints they face in their social justice work. More specifically, they discussed the juxtaposition of the tensions and/or the dilemmas in their social justice practice, the barriers they face in the neoliberal practice climate of the profession, and the impact and implications on their professional work and personal lives.

Everyday tensions outline many of issues that participants name as the dilemmas they must navigate to maintain a commitment to social justice.

Everyday Tensions

Practitioners often face tensions in reconciling their ability to make small changes versus systemic or social change in their daily everyday social justice practices. Many participants found “small changes” as what they want to achieve but with varying degrees of optimism and

hope. Some discuss an ‘and/both’ dynamic, wondering if the impact of their actions of making small changes can lead to more significant change in society. Some participants, like Ellen, had less hope that they can make any systemic change and has come to understand that social justice work is localized and within a small circle of influence. She recognizes that whatever change is made will be achieved incrementally.

I’m less idealistic, I know I can’t change the world. I can only change the little circle around me and even then, it, it was not always gonna work. And that change come slowly. (Ellen)

While Ellen was less idealistic about making more considerable systemic changes in the world, she states that the small changes she sees in her clients sustains her social justice work.

But it’s when you know somebody has got something that they really needed. It’s the little moments. And I always said that in community, you never get the big sort of, like someone hasn’t had heart surgery and, and got well and their life is back on track, and it’s very obvious. With mental health, it’s the little, the little things, and I have to take my victories in those. (Ellen)

Further, both Esther and Margaret understood the limitations of social justice work in their roles in organizational development and administration.

I don’t necessarily believe the transformation, the vision is gonna happen in my lifetime. I can’t contribute to everything. I can’t do everything. It’s not all gonna happen, but what are the small pieces I can work on now? Um, because I do see on a smaller scale, change happening, right. (Esther)

So, sometimes you can make a difference with little incremental improvements in society, maybe move things along slightly . . . maybe I can help make their poverty less painful. (Margaret)

These participants believe their work can make “small changes” with individual and/or in their communities but did not necessarily extend their social justice work to larger systemic or societal change. Esther believes that her contribution can only make small-scale changes because a larger vision for society is not possible. At the same time, Margaret thinks that incremental change is possible with small or minor reforms.

A few clinicians however, like Arjun, acknowledge a connections to particular larger social causes and is aware that social justice work is confined to working directly with clients in micro practice.

I am loyal to causes. Probably more at the micro level. So, I don't think I've been making big changes at a policy level or a macro level. (Arjun)

Other participants who practise in community settings, have hope for more considerable systemic changes in the future if everyone works on making small changes in their respective social justice practices.

I'm going to work on the little piece of the universe that I have the privilege of being a part of and lots of other people are working on the little part of the universe that they have a part of and eventually we will hit a place where we have a sense of social justice. (Rose)

We have to think bigger and that we have to think more, the power of everybody together, that and even small things can make a difference for people. (Alexa)

It helps me believe that we could have a more just society when we make those little changes. (Cynthia)

The tensions participants experience around “small changes” in their work lie in whether they think their small changes, combined with others making small changes can have a more significant impact. Participants also wonder whether the small changes they can make are all they have the capacity and power to do in their professional roles.

Some participants also recognized the tensions of doing social justice practice when others see social problems in different and sometimes polarizing ways.

also tension in that because yes, OK, not every-- because social justice is really rooted in a social problem, and not everyone’s going to see the social problem in the same way that you see it. (Megan)

My fear is that we’re in such a polarizing, us and them, world right now that that have and the have nots, but the haves are so holding on to it, but like that it’s really hard to own up. (Peggy)

They identify that this diversity of thought adds to the tension in social justice work in the current socio-political context. Megan identifies that there are different ways to see social problems which can be challenging to navigate. Peggy added to Megan’s concern by pointing out the polarization of how people think about social injustices.

Other participants who work in an agency or organization also identified tensions between their individual values and their roles in their respective organizations. Megan reflected that going into hospital-based social work felt like she was not staying true to her values because she needed to look after her financial needs.

When I went into practice, I realized that really you could have a better life, like a career life with a pension and all that, by going into health care, so I kind of like sold out [laughs] and went into the hospital. (Megan)

Nadine reflects on her position as a manager and the challenges she experiences in being able to practise social justice in her role.

trying to hold onto myself in a work culture where in an organization where social justice isn't always prompted . . . I was a supervisor at a housing site. And upper management in the organization, the government, all this stuff, like I just feel like nobody cares about these people. it's all people who've experienced chronic homelessness, active substance use, the building was like to- is totally dilapidated. No one's taking care of it. They just want to tear it down and people are dying all the time. And I was like, felt like I was like screaming, like, "We need to be doing better." And it just didn't happen. So I left that role, although stayed in the organization. So part of it was like recognizing that that even happened. Um, a part of it, I had to realize like, "Oh, I didn't feel emotionally safe or, or trusting of people to even share those things that it mattered." And then part of it, and then the biggest thing, a-ha moment for me was like, I wasn't doing it for them necessarily. And I didn't even necessarily need to do it for change, but I had to do it for myself, to like, feel like an okay person. Right? To align with your own values and, and what's important to you. And so I just started doing that again, like in, in management meetings. And I think that's been part of it, is that I've been in social work for almost 10 years now and I'm in sort of middle management and that's a huge shift. Is I just like, really struggle to figure out my place in all of that (Nadine)

Megan and Nadine both talk about the incongruence they feel at times working in organizations that do not fit with their perspective on social justice. Megan provided many examples of how social justice is enacted in her work, however, she feels like working for large bureaucratic organizations like a hospital meant that she compromised her values. Nadine felt the tension in her enacting social justice in her work with the requirements of her role as a middle manager where she felt that administering the directives of her organization had negative impacts on the everyday work of social workers and clients

Rebecca attempted to reconcile her social justice practice in the profession as being seen as radical.

I think questioning policy in like various settings. Let me see. You know, I sit on boards, I'm involved in kind of those things on like a higher level. But I think just like every day questioning kind of the policies that we put in place. Questioning government policies, questioning . . . You know, and whether it's like in conversation with folks or like within spaces like advocating for clients, you know around housing, around you know, access to services. Um, because government funds so much of kind of what we do, and that informs policy and it informs like how we kind of do the work. So, if we don't push back on some of the . . . in some of the spaces that, um, policies are actually restricting how we're able to support folks then there's no way we're making any social change. If we're just like, well this is how it is. And kind of, that's all there is. Yeah, and I struggle with the kind of the . . . I would never . . . You know, I don't want to identify myself as a radical social worker 'cause I think I'm just like being a good human. Like I don't see it as being radical, though sometimes when I step back away from the work and kind of

look at the broader picture of like how other people are doing work, I'm like, "Oh God, I guess this is being radical" (Rebecca)

In the context of the conventional approaches in social work, Rebecca struggles with finding her place as a professional social worker practising social justice and identifying and being identified as "radical" or practising outside the conventional standards of practice.

Further, both Sarah and Esther stated that in administration in a large organization, their respective roles toward social justice are not always compatible with the organization's requirements. Sarah wanted to see more unity in her organization in practising from a social justice trauma-informed approach but finds that is not the current practice; she was hopeful that in the future, there would be better congruency between her values and the organization's values.

I see social justice work, like trauma-informed organizations as being part of social justice work and my organization is not there yet. So I have hope that that can change.

(Sarah)

Esther recognizes that in her current role, her work ensures that citizen constituents are heard and represented in the democratic decision-making process of municipal government.

In my work it's a lot around inclusion and less about transformation You and I have spent our lives thinking about this. Like, if I can get to people with inclusion, that can start to open up doors, right? . . . for some people they start to feel seen and heard and feel a certain entitlement to be present and to be seen. And then, for others, it's like, "Oh, yeah, maybe this is . . . maybe I need to think about this differently. Maybe they need to do things a little bit differently." But is not really getting them towards social justice just yet. But that may be the nature of my organization, too, right?. (Esther)

In this case, Esther recognizes how inclusion can be a step in the direction of social justice. However, she questioned if inclusion can be a realistic goal given that transformative social justice is not the focus of her role or organization.

Social workers practise in a complex socio-political climate, they continue to experience the incongruence between the values of social justice in their practice, their workplaces and the larger neoliberal sociopolitical climate. This means that social workers, particularly those in organizational practice, work on multiple fronts to develop and maintain social justice in their work in an environment that is not necessarily welcoming and can also become punitive, as will be identified in a later section. However, tensions are not just isolated to agency practice. Some participants in private practice explore the tensions between having a fee for service and providing services that are accessible for those who need them, irrespective of ability to pay.

Right? And I think about that when I sort of interact with things around the tension of charging for service, right? I'm in private practice. And for me as a business owner, there's a financial piece that I have a lot of uncomfortability with, you know, in terms of how, how do I make this accessible for people because the other piece for me is I don't just do sort of . . . I don't have a generic practice. I'm a trauma practitioner, right? Most of the folks who I see who, who need sort of higher level trauma skills in a clinician are coming from poverty. They're coming from, um, you know, like really a lot of significant barriers, a lot of significant financial barriers as well. So how can I create more justice in terms of my own practice, in terms of who gets seen and who doesn't, right? Like, that's a really tough tension, especially, for me being, um, fairly . . . This is a fairly new practice. I've been doing this for about 2 years. (Beth)

Beth also described how she was able to mitigate financial access to her services by setting up a GoFundMe donation site.

So. I'm currently sort of working with a couple of other, um, professionals in terms of putting together, um, a charitable organization. Um, a GoFundMe like a donation piece for people to be able to . . . who have means to be able to sort of funnel into that, so that there can be more accessible service for folks who can't afford to pay, but who absolutely need things like EMDR or, like sort of higher-level trauma skills and trauma therapy that you're not going to get by going to a nonprofit. Yeah (Beth)

Alexa, a private practitioner in a rural area, discussed that while she would have preferred to stay in agency practice, the work and agency became untenable for her to continue. In her private practice, she was free to provide services that were accessible based on the needs of her clients.

I would've preferred to continue to work in an agency, 'cause I think the most dispossessed people who are at a certain point in their lives and don't have the resources need experienced people in agencies. I think if you're gonna have social justice and equity, then it has to be economically viable for everybody equally. And so that's a problem because I live in a rural area. And so some people can't afford the gas. They can't afford the fee even though my fee is, by most standards, ridiculously low. Yeah. So that bothers me. Yeah. I did in making the switch, but it was untenable where I was . . . For some people I'm more intermittently available on the phone, not too many. Just once in a while you'll get somebody who's caught in something really bad. And then I don't monetize it. (Alexa)

Some participants in private practice struggled with the connection between providing a fee for service and the need for clients to have the financial resources to access their services.

They recognize that they can be more innovative and flexible and can creatively mitigate the revenue generation component of their practice by providing sliding scales or other creative means for those needing their services (Slater, 2020).

Some participants explain the tension still present between those who work in micro practice and those who work in macro practice. Front-line and/or clinical practitioners critique policy makers for not taking into consideration the individual contexts in the policy decisions that affect their clients.

I wish politicians . . . I always say, I say this all the time, it's like a catchphrase now, they don't really, they don't understand what we do. They don't understand the kids that we work with. They don't understand the people that we work with. They make all of these policies and these decisions and they take things away and make all these cuts. But they have no idea what we have to do. And they give us, like, in child welfare there's all these policies that we have to work by and we're mandated to follow. Fine. (laughs). In, in some regards, yes, a lot of it revolves around safety. But at the same time, like I said, do you know you're dealing with people? (laughs). You're dealing with human beings. Everybody is different. The same shoe doesn't fit everybody. Sometimes things have to look different. And you don't even know who these people are. You don't engage with them. They're not in your social circle. You'll never know who these people are. (Kelly)

Whereas I was always doing the clinical side of it. So I've always come through more the clinical piece. And, uh, so I started this action network and we had, for instance, uh, panel discussion at a local high school to try to let everybody know what was coming down the tubes with Harris, and also especially around Ontario Works was starting at that time, and how important it was for us as a county to do it in a respectful way and blah, blah, blah.

So I had these academics come in and they were wonderful sharing their time, and- and then we did write-ups in the paper and everything. And then we finally did a, um, presentation to the county council. Yeah. And I did that presentation. (laughs) As soon as I finished, this one mayor from a little town called xxxx, near us, stood up and said, "This lady doesn't know what the hell she's talking about," right. He was terrible. Anyway, fortunately one of the staff people stood up right away and said, "No, no, no, no. Uh, she knows what she's talking about, and as you are aware, we had a panel discussion here, and here is the information, and so," blah, blah, blah. So he shut up. And they did, to their credit, for a short while at least, try to think of how can we make this meaningful for people and how can we do it with dignity and respect. So that was our goal, right. (Alexa)

Rebecca discusses the need to connect individuals with those who are on the periphery of vulnerable groups.

How do we kind of change policy? How do we change things kind of on the front line? Like, I think there needs to be more people who want to kind of navigate kind of between front-line and kind of policy. Um, and they're not necessarily jobs for that or systems for that kind of setup in place. You know, we have focus groups and we do research and what not. But I think, you know, when we do focus groups and things like that, we still only get like the sort of folks who want to participate in focus groups and the sort of folks who want to do that work. And I remember I had a meeting at the city a little while ago and they talked about, you know, we're doing focus groups to look at that. You know, look at kind of respites and how they're working and stuff And so I was saying, "Well, like I think about the clients that I work with who are kind of, you know, the 10% of folks who are kicked out of spaces constantly. No one's going to those folks to ask them

what their pain is. And they're having the hardest they're having the most barriers to like accessing the system." So, I think to me, social justice is kind of crossing through all of those spaces. (Rebecca)

Rebecca states that those on the periphery are underrepresented in research and, therefore, not included in both the decision-making process and policy implementation.

A few other participants in community and policy practice juxtaposed the argument made by the above front-line and clinical participants by claiming that those in clinical work do not understand the socio-political context of their practices with individuals.

I think there's an orientation in social work, which says that the problem is vested in the individual and we have to change the individual to make him or her fit better. I see that as the dominant way of thinking. It's a problem that I have with psychotherapy, that it's seems to be devoid of a political and social context. Our lives are lived in a political and social context. Our lives are lived in today. Our choices, our chances, our opportunities today are not what they were 20 years ago, nor will they be, what they will be in 10 years, for instance. So, the psychotherapeutic orientation seems to me to be devoid of that (Cynthia)

the whole push of individualism is you know, a lot of-- the vast majority of social work practitioners work directly with clients and there's a lot fewer of us who are thinking about things at systems and structural levels (Rose)

Peter also identifies that even with those working in social service organizations' the issues of trauma and self-care also have a structural component that needs to be considered beyond the monetization of the resources for staff.

So, one of the agencies that I work with would be XXX organization. So, this is pathways to education—working with kids to, you know, help them be able to be in a position where they could go to college. So, they have had-- first time I started working with them—about 2009 probably—they had had three murders of students within 5 years. And they weren't looking at that. They were not doing anything about it—they were just carrying on. The program director came to me and said “things are going sideways. The stress is coming out, and people are snarky with each other and we're not looking at this stuff and we need to put it on the table.” So, I had a workshop process for six hours where I could begin to look at this stuff. What are the stressors that you feel? How did they manifest themselves? These are the typical stressors that social service workers, youth workers have—do any of these apply to you? These are the typical ways in which people express the stress. Are these things happening to you? So, it's on the table and it's not something that you have to hide and say “oh, this is only happening to me, there's something wrong with me.” This is the stress of the environment, the stress of the situation. So, we did that, and folks were able to develop individual self-care plans which helped for about 20 of the staff there. Hardest part—convincing that this stuff should go upward into agency policy and practice, you know. (Peter)

The discussion by participants points to the continued dichotomy between micro and macro practice and the lack of perceived common ground between these two dimensions of practice. Participants point out the need for enhanced awareness and capacity to practise across the micro and macro domains of social work practice.

In the earlier theme about the everyday practices of social justice, participants discussed working collaboratively and building relationships. However, while some describe a positive

impact on relationships with colleagues, others describe the tensions and difficulties that speaking up or educating others in their agency have on their professional relationships.

I mean, I think on the one hand it can be invigorating but on the other hand, it's more difficult. And- Can come at some cost. You know, like doing the work of sort of talking about sort of like the little bit of education piece that can happen with colleagues like that. It can either be really invigorating if you know that person is on board with you or it can be like really tenuous and uncomfortable because you're in a position of trying to offer new information which you know, you can't guarantee but you're hoping might shift a colleague's perspective. And in a small agency, all of our relationships really matter. So while on the one hand, there's like a lot of trust that's built up there over the years of you've all been working there for quite some time, on the other hand it can feel riskier to like add something to a conversation that challenges someone's perspective because it especially if- it can get really personal like when we're talking about like whiteness and like lot- because a lot of the- but not all, many of the folks I work with, like me, are white people. So it gets really personal and sticky really fast. Yeah, especially around race.

(Sarah)

Sarah explains that relationships can be fragile when speaking up about issues of social justice because of the diversity of perspectives and positionalities, which can potentially have a negative impact on relationships in the workplace.

Beth adds to Sarah's discussion by noting a time when she was told that she was having a detrimental effect on her colleagues.

opportunity to look at the ways in which they may have blind spots or things that they hadn't thought of. I think in that way, it's really helpful for some folks. I think other folks

I work with, it makes them horribly uncomfortable. And I think for that reason, um, you're either really drawn to me or really like want to keep your distance. But I do think that a lot of my colleagues would avoid it like the plague. Within a social work context. Not only did it make people horribly uncomfortable, there was so much avoidance. And in one case, I was actually chastised for, um, impacting morale (Beth)

Both Sarah and Beth illuminate the importance of relationships with colleagues to sustain their social justice work, and they also recognized that while these relationships can be inclusive and affirming there can also be tensions with colleagues and contentions with the organization when speaking up about injustice, especially if they do not receive any support from their workplaces.

Regardless of practice context, some participants identify that a commitment to social justice work is positive for their personal relationships.

Opened up my world. I just think that I don't stay so tightly in my lane as—I'm talking about my lane of class, or race, or gender, or whatever. I think that I have more room to move . . . So I can have friends from all-- all sorts of different friends, and different ages. (Margaret)

It influences my parenting . . . with my closest friends . . . much more grounded for them when I am grounded within my sense of social justice. (Tess)

Peter describes the positive impact it has had on the conversations he has with his adult son, also recognized how his social justice perspective can impact on his relationship with his partner.

My dear life partner of 43 years says “when are you going to retire? Let's go live someplace nice.” Something is still in there. I've got to keep going. You know, and then when we go someplace nice—“What's the structure of poverty here?” Tricia, you know, my life partner here. She puts up with an awful lot, you know. But she puts up with it.

You know. And she-- there's no divorce proceedings you know, on line here. She will put up with it. And, you know, I have great love for her because she'll put up with all these things for all these years. (Peter)

Sarah also acknowledges that conversations with siblings are supportive, however, engagement with others in her family could be awkward if they did not share the same perspective.

It means I have really nurturing conversations with my siblings who have similar interests, my two brothers. It means all of us have sometimes super awkward conversations at family dinners, you know, my family lives far away, so it doesn't happen very often. But like where we're challenging other generation's perspectives. Yeah, but sometimes it weirds me out that like other people don't go to work and they think about this stuff like, you know, a distant family member, you know, she might go to work and think about like whatever's happening in Ottawa with Infrastructure Canada. And I know that she has work stresses and this is no way trying to like diminish other people's work, but it's bizarre to me that other people don't get to go to work and think about this stuff which as much as I've talked about the challenges, it's really like- gives me a lot of meaning in my life, right?. (Sarah)

As participants reflect on the liberating experiences they encounter in their personal lives from developing a wider range of friendships and having more connected relationships with family members, they have a heightened awareness that discussing issues of social injustice can potentially have a deleterious impact on some of the same relationships in often subtle and unexpected ways.

Participants who practise in organizations describe the affirming and positive relationship building that can occur as well as the challenges and tensions raising issues of social justice can

have on their relationships with colleagues and supervisors. Participants also note that consciously living social justice in their personal lives could potentially make interactions with families and friends challenging while simultaneously having transformative effects on other relationships.

In this subtheme, participants recognize the precarity they experience in their social justice work, both personally and professionally. They identify the challenges to their ability to make changes in society, the ideological tensions they face in the field of social services, the profession, sectors and individual practice contexts. They also recognize the difficulties and challenges that they navigate in their relationships with organizations, colleagues and personal relationships. The next subtheme accounts for the barriers that participants face in enacting social justice due to the neoliberal practice environment.

Structural Barriers

The neoliberal climate is embedded in nuanced ways across geopolitical social contexts with negative implications for those who are marginalized and oppressed. It also has implications for those who work to address issues of oppression and promote social justice in their work. Participants identify that they face many structural barriers in their work, many of which are beyond the scope of their role, such as working in a neoliberal service environment, bureaucratization, and the rise of rigid managerial processes. Combined with expert-driven, decision-making processes, participants' ability to practise social justice is inhibited at both the structural and individual levels.

Many participants face barriers to their social justice work that are based on a lack of financial resources or fear of funding cuts from donors or government organizations.

think in non-profits, there's all this fear that the funding will disappear. The funding is disappearing even though you were nice and sucked up. (Cynthia)

upper management in the organization, the government, all this stuff, like I just feel like nobody cares about these people. We need more money, you're not feeding the clients, don't shut down the drop in . . . Like, fighting all of that and then I couldn't do that anymore. (Nadine)

Working in a hospital, um, it is very patriarchal. I find very difficult is the corporate concept of working in a hospital, because it is down to pounds, um, the dollars . . .

Dollars and cents. And that I find, it's hard to get my head around, 'cause my manager's always saying, "Gotta get them out. Costing money. The bed, we need the bed" (Ellen)

Lack of resources and fear of funding cuts have been identified as barriers based on the attack on an under-resourced social service infrastructure that many participants work within. The lack of material and non-material resources sometimes has them doing more with less and creates a barrier to doing social justice work.

While participants have previously discussed the myriad ways that they are creative and strategic in their social work practices, they are conscious of the barriers they face based on a control exerted by a hierarchical management style.

But in terms of roles and more recently, the top-down kind of management styles. And the way that I resist it is to name it. So, for example, I will say to- to management, if I disagree with a decision, I'll say, "I'll do as you say because you know, you're management. But I need you to order me to do it". (Arjun)

that whole top-down management approach is something that I've had to resist. So, resisting that sort of traditional approach to management, to care delivery is, yeah. But it's a tight line in healthcare. (Megan)

These participants reflect on the neoliberal regime in social work that incorporates a lack of financial resources with rigid hierarchical management styles. Practitioners experience this combination as a barrier to their ability to practise social justice in their everyday work.

Additionally, the neoliberal climate also maintains barriers that impede service users' ability to get access to services.

Irrespective of practice context, many participants discuss that one of the main issues they face in their social justice work is the barriers to accessing services and resources for those they work with.

see the barriers to how folks are accessing systems. it's trying to make sure that patients get what they need within a system that is very, very rigid. (Ellen)

it's about people. And it's about people not having access to basic things in life that I think everybody is entitled to worldwide, but specifically in this country where there is access to so many things. (Rose)

Participants spend much of their time trying to overcome barriers to accessing resources that are in place to maintain a system of inequitable access to resources and services for those who are vulnerable and marginalized.

Half of the participants discuss that they saw expert-driven practice as a barrier to enacting social justice in their practice.

The professionalism of social work, I find extremely unhelpful sort of profession ourselves as the expert in the room. (Esther)

It is a very expert-driven, talking head at the front of the room and if you don't prescribe, then you're non-compliant and therefore you can only blame yourself for your poor outcome. (Megan)

Community practitioners recognize that expert-driven processes and decisions can have little to do with the needs of those they serve.

But it infuriated me that this woman and her five children would have been evicted because, essentially because she didn't understand the difference between a green form, a blue form and a yellow form. She thought she did, but she didn't . . . it annoyed me that because she had a situation that caused somebody who's making 80,000 or more dollars a year, to have to fill out more paperwork and that was a reason why this woman with a very low income should be evicted, was because she was inconveniencing her very well paid service provider? Like, that to me was completely unacceptable!. (Rose)

I don't want to keep sitting around tables, circles, where there are people making 40 and 50 and 60, and more thousand dollars a year speaking on behalf of those experiencing the problem right now. I want that to change so I hear from the women, I mean, the first time I did a program at XXX organization– or, I'd been doing groups for bereaved parents. I didn't want to hear from professionals who talked about grieving the death of a child.

(Cynthia)

Rose and Cynthia's narratives point out that these expert-driven practices situated the power with the professionals and not the service user. Centring the expert in service delivery omits service user agency and leaves them to the will of the professionals. The problem with this expert-driven role is that the professionals do not necessarily understand the implications and impact of expert

knowledge, bureaucratic processes, and decision-making on the lived experience of those they serve.

Rebecca provided further context to the negative implications of the process of rigid expert-driven practice. While she clearly understands that individuals get restricted from shelter spaces because of the harm that they can and do to others, she maintains that she received resistance from colleagues when she works with these individuals to find alternative ways that they can access services. She describes interactions with other social workers and bureaucratic processes that make those on the fringes of marginalization more vulnerable when they are restricted from shelter spaces and do not have access to services.

I call them corporate America social workers. The folks that like you to do your work and you go home at the end of they, and that is, you know . . . I need to respect that. I need to not put my own judgments onto how other people approach this work and how they do this work. It's when I see it working against clients, or working against folks accessing the systems. I also see the barriers to how folks are accessing systems or how I'm able to access systems and participate in that advocacy piece. They think that I show favoritism to certain clients to which I've always pushed back and said, "If I'm showing favoritism to folks who are restricted from everywhere, who no one else will want to work with . . . if other folks do choose to only work with like kind of easier clients, like is that not favouritism." (Rebecca)

The barriers social workers face are based on the intricacies of neoliberalism that are complex and intersecting. The impact of working within a neoliberal environment in 21st-century social work practice in Canada is apparent in the discussion about structural barriers.

Participants clearly identify the fear of funding cuts to services, and the difficulty

working in a highly bureaucratic and rigid top-down management environment had deleterious effects on their social justice practice. The following subsection adds to the complexity of practising social justice due to the professional constraints encountered in social work. This web of neoliberal barriers and professional constraints then further complicate practitioners' ability to practise social justice.

Professional Constraints

This subtheme focuses on the underlying conventional social work practice assumptions and practice approaches that participants discuss that they have to manage. These professional constraints act as an impediment to overcome when doing social justice work in everyday professional practice. As explored earlier, some participants identified being professionally vulnerable when they stepped outside of conventional standards of practices, such as adapting their boundaries based on the situated needs of clients and service users.

In this subtheme, participants disclose being questioned by colleagues, criticized by allied professionals, censured by supervisors, and being reported to the regulatory body. Additionally, they discuss the use of pathologizing professional language and labelling individuals under the biomedical model as undermining social justice in social work practice. Specific, clinical practice approaches based on evidence-based practice were identified as areas that participants reportedly need to overcome to keep social justice in their work.

Some participants, across different practice contexts experience professionally vulnerability with their colleagues and the organizations for which they worked when practising social justice in their everyday work. Some participants describe situations where colleagues questioned their professionalism and reputation and in some cases, were criticized by other professionals.

You know somebody said to me once, and it's kind of funny, "aren't you afraid you're going to tarnish your reputation by speaking up?". (Megan)

I've already been accused by her therapist that I'm a shitty therapist, because I didn't diagnose him. (Phillip)

A colleague indirectly cautioned Megan about identifying issues of injustice at work and another allied professional criticized Phillip in conversation with a client because he did not follow conventional diagnostic services in his work with a client.

Some also identified that they are cautioned, ostracized, and even censured by their organization or OCSWSSW when their work stepped out of conventional ways of social work practice.

like a hospital so it kinda has that early lesson learned that I wasn't gonna throw myself under the bus because they would throw me-- I knew they would throw me under the bus quick, because they're looking for a scapegoat. (Megan)

Megan experience both cautions from a colleague about speaking up for injustice and also realized that she could be in a tenuous position in her organization when bringing issues to the decision-making tables. Rebecca recounts a time she was fired from a job and another time when a colleague reported her to the Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Service Workers (OCSWSSW).

I lost a job recently and was fired from a job because, um, they didn't agree with my approach to the work, there was something that happened and they used that as a means to terminate me . . . So, I guess like for, for example, like I was reported to the college in February by a hospital social worker who never approached me with concerns about my practice. (Rebecca)

Both Megan and Rebecca experience the burden of being blamed for stepping outside what is considered best practices in social work. In Megan's case, she understands that she can potentially be censured by the organization and maybe have bigger negative repercussions to her career. In Rebecca's case, she did experience job loss and was reported to the professional regulatory body. In the discussions by Phillip, Rebecca and Megan, there is a mentality in the profession that promotes only one way to be 'professional,' and to step outside of those conventional professional roles means that you become professionally vulnerable.

The adherence to conventional practices in social work constrains the work of practitioners who practise social justice because they are seen as stepping outside the scope of their respective roles and beyond conventional social work practice. These participants risk their reputations, relationships with colleagues, positions in the organizations for which they worked, censure and possible exclusion from the profession rendering them professionally vulnerable.

Far less professionally impactful, yet with implications to service users or clients, half of all participants discuss the importance of resisting the biomedical model of conventional social work practice, which includes pathologizing and medicalizing individual experiences.

. . . pathologize people—not getting stuck in a medical model. You know aside from my sort of resistance to the medical model. It's not necessarily that it's a symptom of an illness. It's like no, this is my experience as a human . . . So, my resistance of that is A: critique of the fact that people are doing it wrong. But, B: it's about there is- there is a different way of knowing that isn't just about statistics or diagnostic language. And when you view the person holistically, sometimes anxiety and depressions are symptoms of oppression or symptoms of marginalization or are symptoms of other problems. Our medical field wants to treat the symptom as the problem and I resist that. (Phillip)

I think that's sort of the . . . the, uh, ways in which people become and people's experiences become pathologized. Right now my work, honestly, with adolescents and young people, where we are pathologizing and medicating human emotion is really . . . I am really pushing back. And I've lost some clients for that because (laughs) I just recently had some parents who told that they thought it might be better if their daughter saw a psychologist because insane and you know what? Spoiler alert: anxiety is a thing. Like yeah you're anxious because you're trying to choose where to go to university. It should be. Right? So I think that there is this sort of medicalization which then quite quickly becomes pathologizing a few many emotion, I push back strongly against that movement or that . . . yeah, that pathologizing kind of language. (Peggy)

Both Phillip and Peggy discuss that medicalizing normal reactions to human emotions mean that individuals then become seen as abnormal and further identified with pathologizing labels. This then gets to be a way of seeing individuals as humans with normal human emotions and identifying issues that are outside the individual.

Further, many clinical participants discuss that some individual psychological clinical theories, Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) in particular, applied as a primary model of practice can constrain their social justice work.

I do avoid CBT like the plague (laughs) I think that it can be used to acclimatize people to oppression by changing their thinking about what they're experiencing, right. (Beth)

CBT is like, you know it's not my thing . . . So I resist the pressure, if you wanna call it that, to, you know, be on top of being 100% trained, you know, up to date on that theory and using that as a primary modality. No, it's not a fit with my social justice practice. So that's not what I've chosen to do. (Tess)

Beth was emphatic about avoiding CBT when working with people because she believed that as a primary modality it acclimatized people to their oppression. Tess was equally emphatic but did not identify why it did not fit in the context of her social justice practice.

However, one participant, Daniella, stated that she does not use a primary model in her practice but uses an eclectic approach with a social justice lens.

I mean my approach is really eclectic in itself. I'm a big believer in just taking, say for example, something like CBT and basically chopping it up and reassembling it so that it makes sense when on a social justice lens. So, I just put sort of social justice on everything, I mean, I don't resist anything. I just lean right into it and just change it.

(Daniella)

Clinical therapies as primary modalities that tend to psychologize a person's lived experiences without the connection to systemic issues can acclimate individuals to injustice in their lives. These therapeutic interventions emphasize the modality as the focus and invalidate the individual's lived experiences. Daniella points out the use of an eclectic approach to social justice centres the individual's specific needs. The resistance to the use of any one model thus releases her from the constraints of using evidence-based clinical practices that would constrain her ability to practise social justice when working with clients.

Some participants note that focusing on the individual without engaging in systemic change can negatively affect the individuals with whom they work. Aaron recognizes that the constraints to his social justice work are embedded in his clinical practice which offers a band-aid to their circumstances but does nothing to change the systemic injustices they may face.

I also recognize . . . I've always known but now I have the words for it . . . is that those clinical practices are actually . . . they do nothing to change systems. They help people cope. (Aaron)

Additionally, Rose and Megan discuss that the primary constraint to their social justice work was the focus on the individual alone, without understanding the context and processes of how services are delivered.

And so, if clients don't want service then—or don't particularly respond to service in the way in which it is offered, then we say “well see, they aren't really ready for service, or they didn't want it or they're resistant to service” and the reality is that we didn't offer a service in a way that somebody wanted it. The piece is us, it's not an individual failure, it's looking at the context and how people make choices within that context and that it's so easy to slip into-- even when you don't mean to, it's so easy to slip into the blaming of an individual. Right? . . . we blame the people with the least power and the most vulnerabilities. (Rose)

It's common in our profession that people start to see the patient as the problem. And I think it's because the culture of health care has really-- the culture of health care and the burden of practising the way we practise that is a disconnect towards what people need. So we offer people a lot of options around things that they don't necessarily benefit from, but we offer it to them because those are the tools in our tool chest. You can't have 3 hours of PSW because the system can't afford it, but you can have a \$50,000 transaortic valve insertion. Well, they would rather have a bath and a meal and a roof over their head, but that's not in our toolkit. So we're working in a system that really gives people things-- makes it easier for them to access things that don't, they don't value, or they

don't find them as meaningful because they are struggling with their basic needs.

(Megan)

Both Megan and Rose maintain that the focus on the individual means that they are required to conform to the system that is monolithic and not malleable. Since the system does not change to meet the needs of the individual, people are therefore required to adjust to the resources that the system will provide. As such, vulnerable persons are systemically positioned to be in a double bind to either surrender to the services provided or be seen as the problem. Participants resist this victim-blaming particularly if the services provided do not have value to the individual's well-being by having a broader understanding of the systemic inequities in their work.

One participant discussed that the constraints to her practice early in her career was finding individuals who had the practice wisdom to work with racialized people in clinical practice.

what I recognize is when I gone into the field is so few people had any information or knowledge or wisdom \or ideas around how to approach work with marginalized or racialized communities differently. when I became a supervisor, and I started to train other social work students. Um, and then recognizing how important it was for me to be able to instill in them a social justice lens, how little information and knowledge they were receiving from their social work education around how to incorporate social justice into the work they were doing. Especially clinical work. It was almost like, "Okay, hold this lens if you're doing policy work or if you're doing, you know, something theoretical." But like no one was talking about how does this look when you're sitting across the office from a client. So I feel like it even hammered at home a little bit more when I became a supervisor of how important this was. And I had to seek out that

information around how to teach other people how to incorporate social justice into their clinical practice, which in turn improve the way I incorporated it into my clinical practice. (Daniella)

Daniella outlined the lack of knowledge she encounters by practitioners about issues of injustice experienced by those who are marginalized, in this case, racialized clients. Daniella saw this as a constraint to her practice, and which has roots the gaps in social work education (which will be discussed in a later section). She used this knowledge as the impetus to be purposeful about teaching students that she mentored. She acknowledged the need to improve how she incorporated issues of social justice in her clinical practice.

This theme highlights the myriad of tensions, barriers, challenges, and constraints that a practitioners find a challenge to circumnavigate. They need to manage an intersection of complex tensions about whether social justice work is localized or societal, navigate organizational processes and policies, and personal and professional relationships. Participants also face barriers to their social justice practice that are based on the interplay of dynamics beyond their control that maintain a neoliberal climate in social work. Lastly, participants identify that they are constrained but not contained by a number of professional and organizational factors that can make it difficult but not impossible to navigate in their everyday social justice practices. The complexity of these challenges positions social work practitioners who promote and practise social justice professionally vulnerable with little recourse both within the profession and in their organizations.

Theme six expands on the above discussion with Daniella about how social work education has had implications and influence on participants' social justice practice.

Learning about Social Justice in Social Work Education

Social work education was not queried in the interviews with participants. However, throughout the interviews, participants reflected on their experiences of learning about social justice in their respective MSW programs. They recognized the implications of two major subthemes, gaps, disconnects and challenges they faced in learning about social justice and the transformative learning experiences they received that helped further their social justice practice.

A Critique of Social Work Education

Many participants identify the gaps, disconnects, and challenges they faced in their social work education. They reflect on the limits of social justice as a value in social work education, the disconnect between micro and macro practice, and the lack of operationalizing social justice in everyday practice. A few participants acknowledge that while social work education introduced social justice as a value in the profession, information and discussions about social justice did not extend beyond that information.

well, I think the way that social work education has inculcated me to think about the values of our profession and often a lot of rhetoric that I've heard was about the value of social justice. And it's something that we're committed. Sadly, I think a lot of the discussions didn't extend further than you should know what this is. It's one of our values and you should be committed to it. Often times it got left there. Um, but that's where I sort of see the value. It's part of our professional code of ethics. It's part of our value statement. (Phillip)

While Phillip asserts a commitment to social justice as part of profession's ethics, he also notes a lack of further conversation about how to enact this core principle in everyday practices.

Regardless of where they attained their social work education in Canada, many participants reflected on the disconnect they experienced between micro and macro practice in their social work education.

I think that I came to Social Work for social justice, rather than coming to social justice after Social Work. When I started off my undergrad degree, it was in psychology and I was thinking of the clinical work, and various experiences I had—even with placements that I had, really lead me to conclude that the problems within individuals were all intertwined with problems outside of individuals. And I started to feel that it was really wrong to be trying to address individuals' issues as if they were independent of society. And then I sort of evolved beyond that, and started thinking that it was wrong to blame individuals for their personal problems that they might be having that were really, in my opinion, fundamentally social problems. They were victims of social problems. They weren't creators of their own problems. I went into Social Work and I actually went to a school that didn't have a clinical stream. Their assumption was that Social Justice was a policy and administrative work rather than clinical work, because I wanted to be doing that kind of Social Work. (Margaret)

So I had that sense of what is unequal about the world. The analysis of who's on top, who's on the bottom? How are the folks on top perpetuating their own privilege? What is the structure and process for the perpetuation of poverty wherever you are? So, in terms of social work, our interest is poverty and the reduction of poverty, what's the structure behind it? So, that tends to be what I'm looking at, wherever I go, and whatever I'm doing. When I came back, I did an MSW at XXX university, . . . back in 1975. and it

was a fairly clinical school. You really had to struggle to look at community development and social policy (Peter)

Both Margaret and Peter articulate that doing social justice work is seen as part of macro practice in Social Work and the only opening for them to practise social justice in social work. This lack of integration in social work education courses across both dimensions of practice did not provide opportunities to understand how social justice can be enacted in micro practice.

In her clinical practice, Daniella reflects on her experience supervising students. She observed that students received little education about enacting social justice in their social work practice.

When I became a supervisor, and I started to train other social work students. Um, and then recognizing how important it was for me to instill in them a social justice lens, how little information and knowledge they were receiving from their social work education around how to incorporate social justice into the work they were doing. (Daniella)

Daniella looks to the future of social work education and was concerned about psychotherapy for the future of social justice in social work.

And you know, a worry that like education is moving into this very like kind of clinical field. You know, the number of social workers that I know right now who want to be psychotherapists as opposed to social workers. And I'm just like, you know, scratching my head. You know, okay, go to school for like for clinical psychology then. I worry that we're going to lose kind of some of that kind of that social justice piece within kind of the field of social work. (Daniella)

Esther also asserts that her social work education did not transfer well to her work with community members because the language is not necessarily accessible or practical outside of social work education.

I think what they teach you in social work school doesn't translate very well. At least in my experience, doing solely macro social work, it doesn't translate well to the macro social work context at all. Don't rely on my social work education—language really gets in the way, the theoretical language doesn't land in a practical sense for people. (Esther)

Both Daniella and Esther discuss how their perceived gaps in social work education had implications for how they practised social justice in their respective practice contexts. Daniella experiences the disconnect when starting in the profession (as she stated earlier) and her experience supervising students. Esther also identifies that the language is inaccessible and impractical when working in organizations and community work.

Interestingly, Peggy is not only reflective of the need to teach social work students to be more politically involved, but she also critiques the shame-based approach to teaching about both social injustice and justice.

I think we have a real, just a gap in social work. Why aren't we in more . . . why don't we teach about being politically involved? . . . I think we do a lot of damage by shaming people who are at different, um, places in their own understanding of social injustice and what comes to my mind is, in our social work schools, especially in the 2-year program, we ask people, we have an expectation that people have evolved in their thinking in October about concepts that they didn't even know were concepts on Labor Day weekend. (Peggy)

Peggy questions a fear-based, shaming approach to teaching social justice. Peggy identifies that if not done with purpose and compassion, the pedagogy of discomfort can inhibit the ability to develop critical consciousness. This skill is critical to social justice work.

Aaron maintained that there were drawbacks to having to choose between a clinical stream and a social justice stream in his MSW education.

Central core piece of the education that I was receiving, and I was quite frustrated that I had to choose between children and families' mental health and health or social justice education . . . I did my Master's in Social Justice and Diversity Studies at the YYY University, , and that was not only really transformative for me just like as a learner and someone who just loves to learn new things, but also just really offered me just more perspective just on the world. (Aaron)

Aaron identifies the dichotomy between micro and macro practice that continues to be perpetuated in social work education however, he also identified that choosing the social justice stream in his MSW provided transformative learning opportunities. .

A few participants described that even in social work education marginalized people were disparaged by a professor and other students. Cynthia discusses her social work education in the 1980s and a situation with a professor who denigrated those who worked with disadvantaged populations.

I was in a one-year accelerated program. My thesis advisor called, I was in the social work with the disadvantaged, and he said, ““That's for all you ravers and crazies.””

(Cynthia)

Nadine experienced students belittling those who were marginalized when she was a student in the 1990s.

I feel frustrated that there's, um . . . I remember in my master's and people are getting their placements, and there were a group of young women standing in the hallway being like, "Ugh, I don't want that placement. I'm not going in that place. I'm not gonna work in a shelter. I'm not gonna work with crazy guys." You know, I've had students who've come through, who, turn up their nose to the people we work with, and don't want to do it. And, um . . . So, I feel emotional about this. The fact that, there's people who are doing the work, right? Like, that, there's people who care about it and are, And I feel sad that there are other people who are social workers who aren't. (Nadine)

I would assert that social work educators play an integral role in educating social work students about critical, structural and anti-oppressive practice (Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005). In both these discussions, it is clear that faculty attitudes and perspectives can and do negatively frame both whether and how practice with marginalized and oppressed individuals and groups get implemented in social work. The long-term implications of the negative ways that marginalized service users are framed can play an essential role in whether future social work practitioners promote social justice in their practice. It can also further embed conventional practices that continues to uphold the status quo by blaming the individual for their individual circumstances.

While there are nuances to the critique of social justice education MSW programs, participants identified a historical trend in social work education in Canada to teach social justice as only relevant in macro practice. They also identify that the disconnect between micro and macro practice means that social workers who have contact with individuals and communities must practice outside of conventional social work to enact social justice in their respective social work practices. Lastly, there is a need for social work educators to role model and articulate an inclusive and accepting attitude toward those who are marginalized and oppressed and those that

work with these individuals and groups. However, while many participants have particular criticisms of their social justice experiences in social work education, the next subtheme describes how some participants believed that their social work education provided opportunities for transformative learning, which furthered their social justice practice.

Social Work Education as Transformative Learning

As discussed above, participants note the problematic realities they experienced in their MSW programs of study. A few other participants discussed the areas of their social work education that was transformative. Olivia recognized the importance of developing her skills and the ability to engage with individuals so that they can become empowered to build their strengths and capacities.

And I knew, I realized through education that I don't have all the answers, that I'm not, my advice is not good. (laughs) You know? But people hold those things within themselves. And how can I help foster that? How can I help encourage that come out for themselves? So that's what I, that's what I worked upon, honing my skill on and the part of that is great listening skills. (Olivia)

Alternatively, Tess discusses her journey in understanding her feminist orientation in her undergraduate degree majoring in English. Her graduate degree in social work provided her with an opportunity to understand the layers and implications of how issues of power show up in the experiences or stories of marginalized populations.

Thanks to starting out, actually, in an English undergrad before doing social work, because the kind of literature that, some of the professors were, addressing in the classes that I was taking, particularly women writers, course that I was taking by a strong, feminist professor, really gave context to who holds the power of the pen. And that was

an interesting precursor, then, to social work because it showed, again, most of the layers of, power and privilege that impact how history and her-story have been told, how, you know, literature has even- what literature has been deemed good literature and what has not . . . all of the untold stories of so many people. I mean, whether, you know, identifying as indigenous, LGBT2Q community certainly gender-wise in terms of women, all of those untold stories. (Tess)

Both Olivia and Tess maintain that their respective MSW programs provided an opportunity to develop their social justice practice. For Olivia, learning specific skills such as the ability to listen to the needs of those she works with so that they can develop their individual capabilities. For Tess, it meant furthering a feminist perspective in her practice. However, Phillip and Aaron both identified both limits and possibilities in their social work education. For Phillip, the introduction to the core value of social work was significant in his practice. For Aaron, his MSW helped broaden his perspective on the social world and social inequities.

Participants looked back on their social work education to discuss the challenges and opportunities their MSW programs provided in providing the perspective and tools to enact social justice in their work. While many participants had nuanced critiques of their social work education including a need to see social justice role modelled in social work education and a more inclusive means to deliver courses, the main theme was the lack of integration between micro and macro practice. However, a few discuss both the transformative elements of their learning such as the ability to identify perspectives, language, and the perceived shortcomings identified in their social work education.

Chapter Summary

The beginning of this chapter highlights the multiple and nuanced ways that participants understand the term *social justice*. Initially, participants identified that an abstract definition of equity and equality was the basis of their understanding of social justice. Yet, upon further discussion, they articulated that social justice is about equal or equitable access to well-being, opportunities, resources, and services by making sure that individuals they work with are being recognized in clinical and front-line relationships. The participants who worked in macro practice identified the importance of understanding the societal impact on the lived experiences and identities of groups who are marginalized to move social justice as recognition from the interpersonal realm to advocating for service users and clients to have a voice in decision-making processes. Participants also identified that their commitment to social justice is based on having a calling or vocation to practise social justice in their work and everyday lives.

The commitment to the values of social justice in their professional roles is precipitated by the experiences of adversity and also the access to role models who showed them how to enact social justice in their everyday lives. A few participants had mentors whom they emulated and who encouraged them to promote social justice in their professional work. These participants were also able to reflect on their lived experiences to discuss how they use this personal commitment to social justice in their everyday lives to develop a political stance in their professional work. They provided rich discussions about how they live their values, and further their growth and development in their personal and professional lives. Participants also provided a historicized context for their commitment to social justice by looking back on experiences and people significant to their work and possibilities of the future as sustenance to their social justice practice.

Discussions moved from why they practise and what social justice means to them to how social justice is practised in their professional roles. Participants identified some perspectives and theories to promote social justice in their professional roles. While there is no overarching pattern to understand the theoretical perspectives of social justice, participants in clinical or front-line practice identified practice approaches or midlevel practice theories more readily than those who worked in macro practice.

Additionally, participants enact social justice in nuanced and strategic ways dependent on how they understand the connection between individual troubles and societal problems. For many, their social justice work aims to advocate for those they worked with. They told practice stories of how they are able to be strategic in developing and sustaining relationships both laterally with colleagues, other allied professionals, and community agencies and vertically with decision-makers and those they worked with as clients or service users in their advocacy work. Participants described how they leverage their professional power within the context of their agencies or in private practice to assist with individual and organizational change. Some participants also recognized certain social work skills that allowed them to develop relationships and leverage power.

Participants also told difficult stories of the tensions they feel about whether the small changes they made could have greater opportunity to have a larger impact in society. They discussed the tensions that they experienced between their commitment to social justice and conventional social work practices. Private practitioners also recognized the push and pull between charging fees for services and providing accessibility for those who need their services. Finally, participants described their perceptions of the gap between micro and macro practice.

The negative impact of working within a neoliberal environment in 21st-century social work practice in Canada is apparent. Structural barriers such as the fear of funding cuts for services, enacting social justice beyond conventional views of practice, and working in a highly bureaucratic and rigid top-down management environment are evident barriers to enacting social justice. Further, neoliberalism also constrains social workers practising social justice by making them professionally vulnerable to censure by colleagues, supervisors, and professional regulatory bodies.

Lastly, there are nuanced critiques of social work education; an overriding theme is the lack of integration between micro and macro practice in MSW courses. This gap between learning and integration into practice is seen as a disservice to their commitment to social justice in their everyday work. Some foundational elements of social work education are transformative such as the opportunity to apply theory and concepts to the inequities experienced by participants and the ability to view the world and social work through a social justice lens that they were not privy to before their education.

The next chapter will focus on the discussion of the amalgam of these findings followed by the implications and recommendations for social justice practice.

Chapter 6: Discussion

This study focuses on the praxis and everyday practices of social justice in social work. Specifically, I sought to understand how social work practitioners who identify as having a commitment to social justice in their practice make meaning of the term *social justice* and how their understanding of social justice is enacted in their everyday work. In this chapter, I examine and interpret my findings in the context of the theories, the neoliberal climate, and the profession in which social work is practised. Using a constructivist grounded methodology, one-on-one interviews revealed a number of key themes. I identify that relationality connects the theoretical understanding and practice of social justice. I unpack the praxis and underlying theoretical concepts that suggest that recognition theory constitutes a theoretical bridge between how social workers conceptualize social justice as relational and how relational skills and practices are explicit in the everyday work of social justice. In other words, the connection between the praxis and everyday practices of social justice means that recognition theory provides guideposts for social workers to contextualize the meaning they find through their experiences, values, and theories to enact social justice in their everyday practices.

Subsequently, the connection between recognition and redistribution shows up as advocating for the need to be seen and heard while working toward access to material and nonmaterial resources. This means that identifying the everyday work helping clients access resources (relationships, opportunities, and material resources) becomes a “touch point” in terms of how social justice is practised as first recognition and then redistribution. This chapter also identifies the systemic constraint social workers in the study face when working in a neoliberal practice climate within both the practice environment and the profession. As identified in earlier chapters, the study asked the overarching question:

“What do social workers who aim to be working toward social justice have to say about their praxis and practices?”

The subquestions guiding the analysis were:

1. How do social workers make meaning of the construct *social justice*?
2. What brought them to practise from what they understand is a social justice perspective?
3. How does their understanding of social justice manifest in their everyday practice?

Making Meaning of Social Justice

This study shows that social justice praxis is not as simple as defining the term and embedding the definition in practice: the process of making meaning involves more than just identifying and defining an understanding of the term. The concept of *meaning* can be defined within a social work context as “the significance of something” and “how people make sense of the world” (Finn & Jacobson, 2003, p. 23) and act in it. I would suggest that practitioners in this study make meaning of social justice as a process that traverses between their positionalities, their subjectivities, their values, and their call to social justice work. Moreover, this meaning-making is contingent on the political ideologies, practices, cultural narratives, and social identifications specific to the geopolitical and social time and space which participants occupy (Leander, 2004). This means that the understanding and practice of social justice can be an ever-moving target that is dependent on the geopolitical and historical context and contingent on the everyday politics of the time in which social work is practised.

Social Justice as Embodied Praxis

Praxis refers to the connection between theory and practice which is defined differently in different fields. In this study, praxis has been positioned as the process of how knowledge is produced between the knower and the production of knowledge (Freire, 1999, hooks, 1994;

Shor, 1993). The findings identify that praxis is about establishing relationships and experiencing the self as part of belonging to others, and others as part of self; in this way knowledge is inextricably linked to how identity, experiences, and values in the world are developed relationally (Martin & Mirraoopa, 2003, p. 210). This creation of knowledge is rooted in a cycle of experience and reflection on and in action (Fook, 2012a). For participants in the study, this cycle creates knowledge about the self and action in the world and is the basis of social justice as embodied praxis.

While the scholarship about the importance of praxis is abundant in the literature (Belkin-Martinez & Fleck-Henderson, 2014; Mullaly & West, 2018), the same abundance representing the lived experiences of social work practitioners who practise social justice is lacking (Maschi et al., 2011; Morgaine, 2014). Social justice needs to be understood in terms of the positionality and experiences that underlie the values that social workers bring to their understanding of this ethical requirement in the profession. The findings point to social justice being “felt” or “experienced” when participants ponder their everyday work in the contexts of their positionalities and lived experiences that called them to act toward social justice. To this point, participants identify that social justice work is “not just what they do ‘9 to 5’” but work they live in their everyday lives and “work they are called to do.” This embodied understanding of social justice is multifaceted and dynamic. For example, while the term *positionality* can be reduced to binary conceptions of social identity (or social location) such as “race, gender, gender expression/identity, class, sexual orientation, ableness” (Taylor et al., 2000, para. 1), as used by participants in its postmodern feminist context (Alcoff, 1988; Hill-Collins, 1986) positionality is fluid and based on power relations. The findings point to multiple identities as fluid,

intersectional (Hill-Collins, 1986), dialogical, and contextual (Alcoff, 1988) and dependent on personal and professional experiences, sectors of practice, and practice roles.

Ultimately, examining the connection between positionality and epistemology as embodied is a fundamental part of social justice's praxis (Takacs, 2003, p. 33). The findings suggest embodied knowledge upholds the values and actions of participants' commitment to social justice (Vera & Speight, 2003). Embodied knowledge is a product of the connections between values, beliefs (Perlman, 1976), histories, social identities, personal attributes, lived experiences, and the narratives participants tell themselves. This understanding of social justice moves the discussion from an abstract definition of social justice to a living discussion of social justice as contextual and fluid across the professional lifespan. Therefore, the deeply intertwined view of praxis as political is combined with an ethical commitment to action then connects the ontology, epistemology, and methodological choices (Duarte, 2017) of social justice in social work. Everyday practices of social justice will be discussed in a later section.

While embodied knowledge incorporates values in praxis, social justice as a value has less attention paid to it in the profession. Specifically, the political orientations of these values are not made explicit because political values and ideologies are not only achieved theoretically or abstractly but also acquired through the experiences of unequal power relations—the experiences of powerlessness and othering—and learned from those who have power through role-modelling and mentoring. I posit that participants identify unequal power relations, political orientations to the work as based on experiences of adversity, othering, and powerlessness. They identified that these experiences as an impetus to their commitment to social justice work. Further, some relationships and interactions were powerful and empowering through the

witnessing of behaviour of role models who modelled ways of helping and, for a few, the influence of mentors who guided their social justice practice.

A common connection for participants was the opportunity to witness role models doing charity work within their communities. Certainly, witnessing charity work falls short of questioning structural injustices and working toward structural change; however, witnessing charity work provides opportunities to help individuals or communities and see the impact and implications of injustice. This, therefore, equates to everyday politics in action (Silver, 2018), where social justice is conducted from the grassroots by individuals who make positive changes at the individual and community levels.

In addition to role models, witnessing the acts of everyday work of social justice extends to social workers who have mentors in their early careers. In the findings, two participants identified having mentors. These two exceptions bound the findings between understanding social justice as having the power to make individual change on one end of the political continuum and structural change at the other. This political continuum, at one end, examines social justice as individual freedom and self-determination, and at the other, portrays a broader context that locates social justice as societal transformation and human rights.

At the “individualistic” end of the continuum, social justice in social work is focused on the individual as unique, capable of change, and able to flourish in society. However, a focus on individual justice alone is limiting because of an absence of the connection to collective principles that expose the implications of social structures for individuals and communities (Belkin-Martinez & Fleck-Anderson, 2014; Finn, 2016; Gray & Webb, 2013; Houston, 2016; Lundy, 2011; Mullaly, 2007). The focus on the individual alone also pathologizes such lived experiences, which in turn blames the victim (Finn, 2016).

At the “collective” end of the continuum, a structural human rights approach fits more clearly with the literature about social justice in social work (Ife, 2012; Lundy, 2011). Social justice connects individual circumstances with social issues that are more global in nature and based on universal human rights (Ife, 2012). Although more closely aligned with broader social justice, this approach also essentializes and decontextualizes the unique experiences of individuals, communities, and societies (Finn, 2016), thereby painting more people with the same brush.

While these two participants on opposite ends of the continuum bound the study between an understanding of individual and human rights, they can lose sight of the interconnections and parallels between individuals and society. However, these two findings provide a scope of the breadth of understanding of social justice in the profession. The aforementioned distinct circumstances that led social workers to an embodied praxis of social justice delineate pathways that traverse exposures to adversity and relational legacies of learning about micro-experiences of social justice. While lived experiences and identity make up one element of finding meaning in the term *social justice*, how social workers understand the conceptualizations of the term is relevant to applying theory to practice. Within the context of the literature that identifies the multiple ways that social justice is conceptualized, the next section discusses the underlying conceptualizations, assumptions, and complexity that underlie participants’ praxis of social justice.

Conceptualizing Social Justice

The plethora of literature regarding social justice values makes discussions complicated and complex. The literature spans a continuum from furthering injustice to maintaining the status quo to promoting positive social change for vulnerable and oppressed people (Bonnycastle,

2011; Morgaine, 2014; Thyer, 2010). As a result, social work practice avoids the “absence of conceptual, historical clarity or agreement” on the definition of social justice (Reisch, 2002, p. 349), and indemnifies itself from doing social justice work in a clearer and comprehensive way. No one definition of social justice fully applies to social work as a profession because of the varied contextual geopolitical contexts in which social work is practised and the varying and competing requirements in various sectors of the field. Based on the multitude of levels and practice contexts of participants, instead of discovering one unifying definition of social justice, it is more relevant to understand the myriad of values that underpin social justice. As discussed in Chapter 2, many scholars describe the many conceptualizations of social justice (A. McLaughlin, 2009; A. McLaughlin et al., 2015, 2017; Morgaine, 2014; O’Brien, 2011; Swenson, 1998) that both converge and diverge around understanding and practising social justice across different geopolitical and practice contexts. However, many stop short of exploring the underlying political assumptions of social justice. For instance, while *equity* and *equality* have multiple meanings, understanding the concepts of *personhood* and *humanity* assists in developing conceptual clarity about social justice as a relational construct that is both interpersonal and sociopolitical. Arendt (2005) maintains the need to engage in everyday political action or praxis, where the action is viewed as human togetherness or belonging, ultimately situating individuals in the larger society.

Developing conceptual clarity about social justice is significant to understanding it within the profession of social work (Solas, 2008). Throughout the study, participants certainly name and describe their understanding of the concepts of equity and equality. However, their underlying assumptions about these concepts were unexplored. The findings, however, point to

the use of different conceptualizations of equity and equality, each with different processes and goals toward a “just” world.

For example, the terms *fairness* and *equity* were prominent concepts that underpinned participants’ enactment of justice in their work. The conceptualization of fairness and equity align with Rawls’s (1971) liberal understanding of social justice work that frames equity as “leveling the playing field,” particularly for those who are excluded from society. The fairness of equal resource distribution was another concept in the findings. On the surface, equal distribution connects to liberal notions of the capabilities approach, seeing individuals and groups being entitled to resources based on their relative need (Sen, 2009). These liberal understandings of social justice provide a pathway to equitable opportunities, but do not translate to guaranteed just outcomes such as the realization of capabilities, rights, and opportunities (Finn, 2016). However, some liberal notions of justice, such as the work of John Rawls in *Justice as Fairness* (2001) which is widely used in social work, do not take into consideration structural issues but only individuals’ ability to further themselves in society (I.M. Young, 2011).

Intriguingly, there are a few notable exceptions to understanding equity and equality in the findings. One is a both/and approach to conceptualizing social justice in terms of the need for both equality and equity. While distinct concepts, these two understandings together as proportional equality (Reisch, 2002) do not necessarily constitute a way that social justice is understood in social work in Canada. I would suggest that equity and equality are bound together as “proportional equality” or equity as a process to further the goal of equality for everyone.

In the findings, some participants in rural practice identify social justice as both a process and an outcome (Leonard, 1997; Reisch, 2002). This joint conceptualization includes top-down and bottom-up methods to develop universal and locally based access. This connection accounts

for the need to be seen or visible at both the grassroots or micro level and the societal structural or macro level for social justice to be realized for all and each individual in society. While the many conceptualizations of equity and equality by participants can be identified as liberal or critical theories, recognition theory connects more clearly as the theoretical bridge that is underpinned by the value placed on having personhood and a connection to a collective humanity.

The concepts of *personhood* and *humanity* provide the beginnings of conceptual clarity where recognition theory (Honneth, 1995) is the theoretical bridge to understanding social justice in social work. Personhood connects with recognition in two ways: to be respected and valued as a person means that you are accepted and valued by others (in society), and being recognized is significant for developing positive relations to the self and others (Honneth, 1995). In this understanding, personhood can be an existential or relational construct (F. J. White, 2013), where the individual is seen as a person through relations in society. A relational understanding of personhood emphasizes societal obligations for individuals to be seen as having publicly conferred rights (F. J. White, 2013) to enable access to essential goods, services, and relationships.

The interaction between the individual and collective constitutes social justice as a relational construct (F. J. White, 2013). The interpersonal (relational) constructs of personhood and humanity are certainly based on understanding how we value lives in society. “Othering,” or seeing individuals as not human, is also a relational construct that determines the value of some lives over others. This comes from seeing others as subordinate or inferior (Freire, 1968/1973; Mullaly & West, 2018). As such, I would suggest that participants identify the mitigation of social injustice must also be seen as a relational construct that identifies recognition as the

theoretical bridge that recognizes the importance an individual's personhood and the social relations to a collective humanity.

The findings demonstrate that these notions underpin how participants consider people both as having individual personhood and as being part of collective humanity. For these social work participants, this recognition starts with the service user or client⁴ having fundamental rights to heal, be heard, and participate in society. This understanding puts individuals "in solidarity with" another person to move beyond a "them vs. us" mentality to an orientation that embraces the "we" and "ours." Reisch (2002) points out that "the creation of greater solidarity (collective humanity) implied in the goals of social justice, requires the reassertion of ideas of collective responsibility, a community of need and public virtue" (p. 347).

In the findings, this association between personhood and humanity promotes a relational responsibility to do social justice work (van der Meiden et al., 2017), which combines respect for the dignity and agency of individuals with the recognition that individuals are part of a collective humanity. As such, individuals are not indivisible from their relations to society (Ejeh, 2017). This set of constructs is significant to recognition theory as a foundation for understanding the interpersonal-relational construction of social justice in which there is no "other." In practice, recognition of personhood and humanity requires social work practitioners to amplify the voices and agency of the people they serve, rather than just advocating on their behalf, an issue to be discussed later.

Consistent with this relational perspective of personhood and humanity, the findings point to justice and rights needing care and compassion to be understood as a relational approach

⁴ In social work we use various terms like *service users*, *clients*, *consumers*, *guests*, *residents*, *survivors*. And for the purpose of this thesis, I use the word *client* as an all-encompassing term.

based on a shared human experience (Tanner, 2020). This reflects the foundational principles in the *Code of Ethics* about respecting the inherent dignity and individual worth of all persons (CASW, 2005a, p. 4) based on seeing people's personhood (van der Meiden et al., 2017) and the principle of service to humanity (CASW, 2005a, p. 4). The connection between understanding personhood, humanity, and compassion parallels participants' beliefs that social justice work is enacted through the respect for the individual, acts of compassion, and adherence to social work values (Morgaine, 2014), which all have elements of a relational understanding of social justice. While Indigenous perspectives have not been highlighted in this dissertation, this notion of relational social justice can also be a key in Indigenous epistemology through the notions of respect, relationship, reciprocity and responsibility (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 2001). Intersectional feminism is another way that personhood and humanity can be seen as a way to better understand one another and further the goals of justice for all people (UN Women, 2020). Further, some of the findings point to the beginnings of a human rights perspective of social justice; however, while this understanding may be present in theory, as identified as a single exception in the findings, social workers may not assertively practise this human rights perspective. The next sections discuss the theoretical bridge that connects the conceptualizations of social justice to relational actions of social justice.

Identifying Recognition as Key to Social Justice in Social Work

As I have identified in earlier sections, the understanding of how to make meaning of the term *social justice* and the conceptual underpinnings are relational in nature. I think it is important to identify how the earlier key findings and conceptualizations lead to identifying recognition theory, which then becomes the bridge to social justice in social work. While conceptual clarity can be elusive, the concepts of personhood and humanity support recognition

theory as key to understanding and enacting social justice in social work. Gilyard (1996) writes, “The theories that we hold implicitly are the ones that generally guide us most powerfully” (p. 17). The findings suggest that relational values are core to a commitment to social justice practice (Coady & Lehmann, 2016).

Recognition theory rejects the liberal conception of human beings as only independent and self-determining, arguing instead that individuals are dependent on others for identity formation. Rossiter (2014) introduces recognition theory and its role in social work. She identifies that social recognition of individuals (Rossiter, 2014) is an endeavour for social justice to be realized in social work. As identified earlier, recognition (N. Fraser & Honneth, 2003) challenges the discourse about social justice by moving away from the central liberal paradigm’s promise of individual equality (Beitz, 2009; Rawls, 1999; Risse, 2012). Liberal understandings of social justice generally ignore disadvantaged members of historically marginalized and disadvantaged groups (M. F. D. Young, 2008). These liberal discourses do not take into consideration the need for individual healing from injustice, and also structural justice in terms of redress for historical harms and the elimination of barriers. This is particularly relevant in social work because whatever the professional specialization, social work practitioners generally work with people at the margins of society who are stigmatized and “othered” and need justice to be enacted at both the individual and structural levels.

Recognition connects social justice beyond the psychologically important interpersonal relationships in direct social work practice. Ingram (2018) points out that a “lack of recognition does not imply injustice, but perhaps injustice implies lack of recognition. To begin with, it seems that anyone who suffers injustice also experiences disrespect or lack of proper recognition” (Ingram, 2018, p. 74). Recognition extends an individual's relationship with society

to a relationship where society treats individuals as having worth, a voice, dignity and respect (Rossiter, 2014). Recognition theory helps us to make meaning of the findings that participants identify as the importance of social workers developing and maintaining interpersonal encounters and relationships with clients (Dotolo et al., 2018) to restore and enhance autonomy and agency (Rossiter, 2014). It is also applicable to advocacy practice on behalf of clients, which will be discussed in the next subsection. The significance of clients being seen, heard, and validated in both individual interactions and by society is noted in the findings. The helping process assists develop client self-respect and self-esteem (Honneth, 1995) for those who experience disrespect. This means that recognizing individuals as having value and deserving respect is the first step for individuals to be seen and respected in society.

Recognition theory underscores the importance of being recognized by systems and structures, which then makes apparent and visible the connection between individual rights and distribution of material resources (Honneth, 1995; A. McLaughlin, 2011) which requires the needs of individuals to be respected by the state (Honneth, 1995). Relationship building provides opportunities to explore more deeply the social conditions that form or impede identity (Rossiter, 2014) and the maldistribution of resources (Honneth, 1995). It is important to note that while Rossiter identifies a role for recognition theory in social work and the importance of social recognition, I would suggest that the findings show how recognition materializes in how social workers make meaning of the term *social justice* and how it works in everyday social justice work.

As will be identified in the next section, the connection between recognition and redistribution is significant to identifying the connection to access and the redistribution of resources.

Connecting Recognition and Redistribution

Recognizing another means seeing and hearing individuals in their many contexts (including their sociopolitical context), demonstrating respect for both individual identity and lived experiences, and acting on the impacts of misrecognition, in this case, the mal-distribution of resources (Honneth, 2003). There are two central social justice ideals in current social work conceptualizations, as identified in Chapter 2. One emphasizes liberatory ideals of distributive justice—i.e., the fair allocation of resources (Barusch, 2009)—and the other is the recognition of cultural differences (Fook, 2003; N. Fraser, 2000) whereby all persons and communities are entitled to social justice based on differing (Fook, 2003; N. Fraser, 2000) and universal needs.

While theoretically recognition and redistributive notions of how to remedy injustice may differ, Honneth (1995) suggests that for redistribution to remedy injustice, individuals, and communities must be recognized and respected as individuals by the state. Participants seem to believe that at the core of social justice work, individuals and groups needs to be recognized before distributive elements of social justice can be realized (Honneth, 1995).

Interestingly, two social workers in the study who work in rural practice contexts were explicit about the need for an equal and equitable approach to distribution. Consistent with recognition theory, the invisibility of people's needs in rural areas means they are denied equitable access. The needs of those in rural areas are invisible to decision-makers because of the lack of power that they have to participate and influence decisions. Recognition is important to making visible the vulnerability of those living in rural contexts and understands their unique needs so that resources are made available to individuals and small communities. This means that individuals and communities need to be seen and heard as having unique needs first or recognized. This is important to so that both an equal and equitable approach to redistribution of

material and nonmaterial resources can be implemented to meet the needs of whole communities. Participants who work in rural communities identify that recognition and redistribution are connected and need what I am calling a consolidatory approach to capture the normative and contextual needs of those who live in specific geo-political contexts such as rural or remote areas. I would suggest that these two elements present as dimensions of recognition and redistribution. This approach to both equitable and equal response underscores the need for marginalized and oppressed persons to be recognized by society so that they can fully participate in decision-making processes. Thus, recognition is the first step through which equity can be achieved as a human right (Gray & Webb, 2013).

Consistent with recognition theory, social workers in the study work with clients to develop their self-esteem, self-advocacy, and problem-solving skills, which enhances their capacity to participate in decision-making about the redistribution of resources that impact their lives (Honneth, 2003). Additionally, regardless of practice context, participants understood that clients' contributions to society were predicated on having the self-confidence to speak and to be heard at the tables where decisions are made about the (re)distribution of resources. This exemplifies the legal context where social care and resource distribution take place (Honneth, 1995) or where healing becomes political. Some participants intend their advocacy work to promote the self-esteem of service users to be seen and heard by those in power while concurrently working within their institutional framework to minimize power relations. While such efforts are oriented toward equitable access to resources, within most Western societies real participation is reserved for only a few (Bartels, 2016). This understanding was particularly salient for participants in community practices who believe that social justice is to be realized, a starting point must involve granting all members opportunities to participate in society (Honneth,

1995). For this to happen, society must remove barriers to participation for marginalized and oppressed peoples. This leads social workers to better advocate for full participation to engage in social justice work. In these instances, relational understandings of social justice engage with both the micro practice of social justice to promote self-esteem, agency and advocacy by and behalf of clients and engaging macro practice by advocating for understanding the lived experiences of those who are marginalized in community and policy decision-making. Further, this relational understanding connects the healing from injustice to individuals, who can then having the agency to participate and promote social justice.

As seen so far the meaning making and theoretical conceptualization of social justice is the lens that participants use to develop the everyday relational practices of social justice. This embodied political praxis requires a bridge from theory to practice. As will be seen in the next section, participants are conscious, intentional, and reflexive of their practice of social justice in their everyday work.

Everyday Relational Practices of Social Justice

The underlying focus on thinking or theorizing about social justice without the connection to action means that society has missed much of the relevance of philosophy in everyday life (Arendt, 1963). As identified earlier, consistent connections between the values and worldviews of participants embeds a commitment to social justice however, the ability to apply theory to practice means understanding how social justice is practised in the everyday work of social workers. Essentially, the connection between values and everyday practices positions social justice from the ground up or “theorizing in practice” (Sullivan, 2005, p. 75).

Understanding Social Justice in the Context of Neoliberalism

Understanding the current political climate is vital to identifying how social workers in the study practise social justice in their everyday work. The impacts of neoliberalism on social work practice are now well documented (Ferguson & Lavalette, 2006; F. Gardner, 2014; Madhu, 2011; Rogowski, 2010; Wehbi & Turcotte, 2007). Neoliberalism's emphasis on procedures, regulations, outcomes, and white Western rationality presents an overarching challenge to social workers who practise social justice (Krumer-Nevo, 2022). Consistent with the research by A. McLaughlin (2011), participants experience institutional barriers in either previous and/or current agency practice. Participants note systemic strains that imposed gaps and barriers on their social justice work. The daily managerial practices and neoliberal process continue to be barriers to promoting social justice as a broader systemic change (Garrett, 2017; Hanesworth, 2017; Rogowski, 2018) and included a complex web of neoliberal policies and processes. Participants worried about funding cuts if they pushed back against inequitable decisions in their organizations. They were frustrated by funding bodies that limited the quality and type of social justice work that they knew they could actually do. This speaks to the ongoing research about the implications of regulations, policies, and procedures that enact rigid control in social service systems (Strier & Bershtling, 2016; Timor-Shlevin & Benjamin, 2022) While greater regulation and more control could be seen as extracting more value for the money and promoting efficiency, it also means that the access to, and care of service users are compromised (H. Fraser & Seymour, 2017; Hendrix et al., 2021). Participants in agency practice are frustrated by the austerity measures, increasing managerialism and hierarchical decision-making (Baines, 2017; Lavalette, 2011), which only served to further marginalize service users. These frustrations were consistent with the literature about the barriers to making changes to broader structures and systems in society due to social workers being hindered by the neoliberal climate (Baines, 2022;

G. Bradley et. al., 2010; Ferguson, 2008; Morley & O'Bree, 2021; Mullaly, 2007; Rossiter & Heron, 2011; Schram & Silverman, 2012). However, the findings also identified that participants felt a sceptical, albeit hopeful, possibility for change if everyone worked toward social justice in their respective roles. They identified that regardless of practice area, all participants work within the context of communities and organizations affected by the larger social environment and social policies (Soska et al., 2016).

Some participants were hopeful that small changes would lead to bigger impacts. Others saw “small changes” as realizable goals instead of broader, structural change. However, I would suggest that the transformative work essential to achieving societal-level social justice is often secondary to objective, evidenced-based outcomes, which are easier to measure (Dominelli, 2010). Alternatively, Zinn (2007) states, “We don’t have to engage in grand, heroic actions to participate in the process of change. Small acts, when multiplied by millions of people, can quietly become a power that can transform the world” (p. 270). I suggest that these are tangible tensions regarding the daily enactment of social justice based on the restrictive neoliberal practice climate.

I think that given the neoliberal practice climate social workers still see these small changes as a way to promote and engage justice in everyday practice. These actions were creative, overt, and covert acts of resistance (Timor-Shlevin et al., 2022; A. Weinberg, 2016) or being “professionally resistant” (Strier & Bershtling, 2016). The literature on forms of micro-politics of social justice is theoretically obscure and limited in social work practice (Strier & Bershtling, 2016). In the findings, however, participants performed acts of professional resistance, sometimes deviant, as “small scale acts of resistance, subterfuge, deception or even sabotage that are typically hidden yet scattered throughout parts of the social work labour

process” (Carey & Foster, 2011, p. 576). Such acts are the everyday subversions of regulations and managerialist policies, procedures (Krimer-Nevo, 2022; Mandell & Yu, 2015), and conventional approaches to practice. These small acts of resistance will be discussed in more detail in the everyday strategic practices of social justice.

Finally, contrary to Lord and Iudice (2012), whose research finds that social workers in private practice do not identify their work as social justice-oriented, private practitioners in the study clearly name their resistance to the neoliberal environment in agency practice as a form of social justice. The untenable rigidity, focus on efficiency, and increased regulation in agencies (Banks, 2011) drive social workers to the flexibility of private practice, where they seek the autonomy and options to advocate, expand treatment options to clients, and promote social justice without fear of reprisal and censure (Slater, 2020).

There are some common threads in the discussion that social workers in both micro and macro practice enact in their daily work. One such commonality is advocacy practice as a primary way social workers in the study enact social justice.

Promoting Social Justice through Advocacy Practice

Unequal access to support health and well-being plagues many societies, with deleterious impacts on the most vulnerable individuals and communities. Advocacy is central to achieving social justice in social work (Dalrymple & Boylan, 2013; Gehart & Lucas, 2007; Hoefler, 2019). Social workers in this study advocate for access to both recognition and the redistribution of resources regardless of their role and practice context. This reflects the scholarship on social justice enacted in different social service sectors such as child welfare, mental health (A.M. McLaughlin et al, 2015), and even private practice (Slater, 2020). More specifically, both case and cause advocacy are central to social justice work (Kiselica & Robinson, 2001; A.M.

McLaughlin, 2009; J. Mitchell & Lynch, 2003; Van Voorhis & Hostetter, 2006). However, while case advocacy is prominent in the findings, because of the constraints placed on social workers in the practice climate, social workers engage in cause advocacy primarily at the local, institutional level of practice. Participants in both micro and macro practice context have difficulty being able to see past the injustices experienced by clients in their individual lives and in the inequitable processes and policies in their institutions to be able to see beyond social justice work as structural change at the societal level. I would suggest that this inability to do cause advocacy work is due to dynamic and complex ways that neoliberalism takes shapes in communities, organizations and individual lives and the professional practice of participants.

However, social workers employ fluid (nonstatic) strategies to promote social justice in the neoliberal practice climate. Such a dynamic approach to doing advocacy work is a response to the political landscape of social work, which is dependent on the geopolitical context (Reisch & Garvin, 2015) both federally and provincially. In the study, social workers in both micro (A. McLaughlin et al., 2015) and macro practice do case advocacy work with and on behalf of clients to secure resources. Case advocacy is focused on the individual and local levels of practice. Cause advocacy aims to work with individuals, groups, and communities to change existing social structures, policies, and practices to promote social justice (Toporek et al., 2009).

Clinicians and front-line workers in community settings begin advocacy work by assisting clients to be more empowered. They do this by developing positive relationships, modelling empowering behaviours, and teaching clients how to access services (Toporek et al., 2006). As a result, they support clients in increasing self-esteem and self-respect (Honneth, 2003), so they can advocate for themselves and, therefore, exercise autonomy and agency to confront oppressive structural processes and policies (Tew, 2006).

The need to heal from oppression is the first step toward social justice in clinical practice so that clients can self-advocate. This means starting where the client is so they can make changes for which they have the capacity (Reisch & Garvin, 2015) with an emphasis on contextualizing, politicizing, and offering non-pathologizing counter-narratives of their experiences (C. Brown et al., 2020). To this end, participants in frontline and clinical practice connect with what Hoefer (2019) calls a “unified model of policy practice,” a clinical approach that combines generalist and policy practice. This includes: (a) providing opportunities for clients to become agents of change to advocate for themselves, (b) a way to address broader issues of inequity to create social change in clinical encounters, and (c) a forum for addressing individual clinical issues (Slater, 2020). This three-pronged approach can be multifaceted, simultaneous, or sequential depending on the needs of clients and the context and role in social work practice.

Regardless of the roles social workers play, the findings are consistent with Canadian literature around social justice work being responsive to the need for individuals and communities to access material and non-material resources (A. McLaughlin, 2011). Further, advocacy work also incorporates assisting clients to find opportunities for empowerment and belonging through participation in their local community (H. Lewis, 2003; J. Lewis & Bradley, 2000) or society (H. McLaughlin, 2009). Advocacy work promotes social justice in social work; however, the scope of advocacy work needs to work toward broader societal justice.

Beyond the assertion that social justice in Canada takes the form of advocacy work (A. McLaughlin, 2009), “how” social workers strategically practise advocacy work in this neoliberal climate is a contextual and situational moving target. However, an unexpected finding in the study is that agency-based workers in the study who practise both case and cause advocacy work

at the local community and institutional level, develop, and sustain collaborative relationships with decision-makers. This was a surprise because while they had the ear of decision-makers in higher levels of government, their advocacy practice was narrow in scope and remained focused on the individual and localized community needs alone without advocating for broader systemic change.

While for many, advocacy is not an official part of their work, the lack of access to services in both private and agency practice compelled participants to spend much time advocating for basic resources and quality care for their clients. As a result, social workers cannot do broader social justice work at the societal level (Morley & McFarlane, 2014). Given the constraints of the practice environment, social workers in both micro and macro practice employ relational non-confrontational knowledge, skills, and strategies to work within systems. As such, the participants suggested through their examples that they considered neoliberalism a significant factor in their work. Despite the challenges they faced, participants are intentional in connecting social justice to advocacy practice. This intentionality extends to the use of strategic and relational power and acts of resistance.

As will be discussed in the next sections, the enactment of social justice is based on the strategic use of relational knowledge and skills. This expands social justice from conceptually relational to a relational enactment in their everyday social work.

Using Professional Power and Wisdom

The understanding and use of power is endemic to social justice work. Social workers use their professional power to make and influence decisions within their organizations, with clients and depending on practice within the community. I would suggest that the use of professional wisdom is the enactment of professional power through advanced knowledge and enactment of

their social (justice) work. There are some common threads in how participants practise social justice, but the specifics of how they enact it is dependent on context, role, and confidence in professional practice. Clearly, participants leverage their positional power through enacting their professional wisdom, which enables them to strategically resist unjust methods in their practice contexts. Power exists not only at the structural level (Fook, 2012b) but also at the micro level, and power can also influence change (Asakura et al., 2019) at all levels of practice. These views of power as a resource are relational, multidimensional, and situational.

In this study, the term *positional power* denotes the use of both power and professional privilege to create change for social justice. While power is vital for change to happen, the use of power as “the ability to realize one’s values in the world” (Homan, 2016, p. 202) is particularly appropriate for this study. Therefore, “doing social justice work” is dependent on the ability of participants to feel confident about using their relational power within their organizations. However, as identified earlier, some participants exercise their power by opting out of agency practice, while others resist, and all disrupt institutional inequities by using their positional power.

In addition to positional power, participants used *relational power* in their work. While positional power is a top-down approach in which power is operated based on professional roles, entitlements, and competencies to elicit change, relational power is lateral and based on the trust generated in respective roles through collaborative relationships with allied professionals and colleagues (Tew, 2006). Social workers use these two forms of power simultaneously to advocate with clients and for clients. Social workers moved between using these two forms of power to navigate the multitude of contexts in their work when advocating for clients. Interestingly, participants claimed their use of positional power to influence and elicit change

within systems (Schram, 2015) as opposed to outside of systems of power as one strategy to get access to material and nonmaterial resources for their clients. As identified earlier in the discussion about “small changes,” participants do not move beyond the systems they work within to elicit broader change.

The findings from this study revealed two components that social workers use to enact social justice in everyday practice: (a) using professional wisdom to discern between the opportunities, limitations, scope, and legal parameters of their professional roles, and (b) having the confidence to engage advanced social work knowledge, theory, and skill to support client empowerment and sociopolitical change at the local level. Social work participants can leverage their power by using their professional wisdom to critically analyze social situations and transform social relations (D’Cruz et al., 2007).

There is something profound about combining the use of positional power with the use of practice wisdom. The constant interaction between power and wisdom provides opportunities for social work participants to exercise discretionary judgement based on expertise and professional values (Banks & Gallagher, 2009; Dunne, 2011; Kinsella & Pitman, 2012). Advanced knowledge and skill is exemplified by a participant who talked about how she uses her professional and relational power to advocate for clients while at the same time influencing organizational change in a way that maintains relationships and networks. Knowing how relationships are constructed and practised in social work is important. This relational approach helps mitigate the shifting dynamic in power relations by developing and maintaining respectful and trusting relationships and interactions to influence positive social change. While leveraging power can be used for many reasons in social work practice, the purposeful use of power that embeds and centres relationships is the key motivation to enact social justice (Banks, 2017).

Social justice is, for the most part, practised by degrees at both the micro and macro levels. However, the practices used to promote social justice vary widely, and are based on professional wisdom and the ability of social workers to navigate the neoliberal social service practice climate. Direct practitioners maintain integrity by resisting conventional social work practice in an environment they experience as antithetical to their daily work, reflecting the importance for social workers to “find the courage and resilience to stand out and often against the tide or risk being swept away with it” (Robson, 2014, p. 91). Participants are aware of the potential implications that their social justice work had on their careers, yet they continue to practise their commitment to social justice against the odds. As will be discussed in later sections, regardless of the practice environment, it is encouraging to see that most micro practitioners in the study are purposeful and intentional in their social justice work. This is noteworthy because micro-level practitioners have not “abandoned their commitment” (O’Brien, 2011, p. 185) to social justice in their daily work (Morgaine, 2014). Social workers instead use professional wisdom, discretion, creativity, intentionality, and agency to navigate the barriers and constraints, thereby sustaining a commitment to social justice. This analysis is consistent with the research by Lipsky (2010), who identified that front-line workers were street-level bureaucrats who navigate unjust systems by interpreting policies and procedures. Participants in the study are thus also street-level bureaucrats, resisting neoliberal and managerialist practices of surveillance, increasing caseloads, and inadequate resources (A. Weinberg, 2016). This set of skills makes social justice a challenging yet hopeful and passionate possibility in their work.

While power, wisdom, and relationship are common threads in the findings regardless of practice context, there is diversity in the enactment of social justice between micro and macro practice. Such commonalities and variances demonstrate how social justice practice is both

salient in the profession and at times, depending on the context of practice, paradoxical. The next section will discuss the commonalities, differences, and paradoxes in enacting social justice in everyday practice.

Everyday Actions of Social Justice Work

The everyday tasks in social work and social justice are not the same but are closely related based on a number of factors. Social justice in micro practice has focussed on change from the bottom up with a focus on individual coping and change so that individuals can develop their self-esteem and self-respect leading to self-advocacy. Macro practice has traditionally embodied the commitment to social justice that goes beyond individual coping to systemic and structural change. Given the limited number of social workers in macro practice, this section offers some tentative commonalities and paradoxes between micro- and macro-level workers as they practise social justice.

In Canada, in some contexts micro-level social work revolves around supporting medical model approaches based on the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* (Morley, 2003). I would suggest that implicitly the use of the medical model permeates social work in terms of the pathologizing and individualized language used to identify, assess, and work with individuals. However, participants indicate that social justice means moving beyond the medical model to approaches that centre social justice (Johnstone, 2021; A. McLaughlin, 2011) and include tenets of anti-oppression, structural, and critical social work. Many micro-level practitioners in the study are drawn to an eclectic combination of models and approaches that reflect anti-oppression, postmodernism, critical, and social constructionist theories (Swenson, 1998).

The findings suggest that social workers in the study use practice models (e.g. feminist therapy, narrative approaches, strengths perspective, empowerment practice, and trauma-

informed models) that align with “social justice” (Finn & Jacobson, 2003; M. Gardner & Toope, 2011; Morley, 2003; Parker, 2003; Swenson, 1998; Waldegrave et al., 2003; M. White & Epston, 1989). These approaches include diverse understandings of human development and how to enact social justice and shape the nature of interactions and relationships in social work (Reisch & Jani, 2012). For example, for participants who use empowerment, strength-based, and trauma-informed approaches, their claims to social justice practice call for a further exploration of the underlying assumptions in these approaches. Each of these practice approaches, individually and in tandem, can be conceptualized from conservative, liberal, and critical perspectives, which then determines whether they reinforce inequities, maintain the status quo, or promote social justice (Gray, 2011). None of the participants offered the theoretical assumptions behind the practice approaches they use in the service of social justice except to reinforce that social workers use an overarching social justice lens regardless of specific practice approach.

Nevertheless, there are differences between these approaches to social justice, both theoretically and in practice. Critical and liberal approaches are similar in identifying how the health and well-being of individuals are impacted by the debilitating intrapsychic role played by structural inequalities and unequal power relations in society (Aldarondo, 2007; Mullaly 2010; Nussbaum, 2000). The findings emphasize the importance social workers in micro practice place on understanding how social issues “undermine personal resiliency and coping” (Johnstone, 2021, p. 436). However, I would suggest that it is important to note that participants’ assessments of individuals they work with include understanding individual distress or life circumstances through the lens of the social determinants of health (C. Brown et al., 2020; Lundy, 2011), which is more attuned to a critical or structural approach to social justice.

Conversely, while macro-level participants in the study did not identify specific models or approaches used in their everyday practice, they generally discussed social justice from a critical and structural perspective with links to the social determinants of health. I would suggest that there is a gap, therefore, in macro practice participants' abilities to connect with social work theories that promote social justice in the same ways as their micro colleagues. Although I would assert that macro-level social workers appear to use theoretical understandings outside social work's structural and critical realm (such as social determinants of health, macro-economics, understanding democratic participation, etc.), I wonder if this orientation to use understandings beyond social work is because these notions are not explicitly developed in social work theory and practice.

There are a number of skills and techniques used by both micro and macro practitioners in the study. Relational skills such as listening for context and engaging relationally—authentically, genuinely, and with humility (Kennedy-Kish et al., 2017)—are vital for the everyday practice of social justice (Finn, 2016). Participants use these relational skills when working with clients to assist in problem-solving, provide education about rights, develop self-esteem, and foster self-respect. While these skills are embedded in social work practice, the focus for participants is on mitigating alienation, promoting belonging and normalizing individual struggles (Finn, 2016; Lundy, 2011). These are all forms of connecting individual struggles with broader sociopolitical issues.

As identified earlier, for many in micro-level practice, healing from oppression was a central focus for individuals to move toward self-advocacy against structural oppression. Healing from oppression was thus tied to individual experiences of structural issues, which ultimately formulated what should encapsulate social justice in social work (Heinonen & Spearman, 2006).

Normalizing individual struggles means utilizing relational skills that centre the client, move away from medicalizing and pathologizing individuals, and include a structural understanding of individual concerns (Ortiz & Jani, 2010). This both-and approach was very clearly understood by those in micro and macro practice. However, as will be discussed in the section on paradoxes and tensions, participants identify ambivalence between micro- and macro-level practice, particularly in identifying the level of practice that should take precedence in promoting social justice work.

All but one social worker identified that certain approaches that pathologize individuals (with a specific focus on the medical model) are counterintuitive to their social justice practice (Ferguson, 2008). Brookfield (2009) argues that we must uncover and challenge ideologies that are hegemonic in their nature. More specifically, most participants were explicit in their resistance to Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), as they assess this approach as antithetical to social justice practice. CBT has a relational, collaborative foundation and claims compatibility with social justice (Gonzalez-Prendes & Brisebois, 2012). Yet it remains a psychotherapeutic intervention that emphasizes the individual's intrapsychic process as the primary determinant of how they think and behave in the world (Beck, 1976) and how they actively shape their lives (Dobson & Dobson, 2009). Similar conventional evidence-based approaches that centre individual responsibility without articulating shared responsibility and systemic vulnerability (Bauman, 2002, p. 68) meet with resistance from research participants. This aversion to problem-based practices translates to social workers actively avoiding the pathological objectification of their clients (M. White, 1988/9, p. 6) to resist the hegemonic neoliberal discourse in social work.

The experiences of two participants in the findings determined the scope of social justice work along a political continuum. These two exceptions in the findings embed conservative ideals on one end to libera -progressive global change on the other end. One participant in micro

practice claimed an orientation to psychodynamic theories—an individual, introspective, clinical approach which does not consider the sociopolitical context of an individual's experiences. This contemporary conservative reconfigured perspective was a departure from early European psychodynamic theories. Its entry into North America meant that this theory became deterministic and individual in nature, more akin to the positivistic stance that took place in the 1920s and 1930s in the United States (Hale, 1995). This individualistic view of psychoanalysis was not the aim of Sigmund Freud, who recognized the challenges posed by the sociopolitical context of individuals' lives and advocated for access to mental health services (Danto, 2005). However, the individualized view remains a central part of psychodynamic theory today in North America and is indicative of the understanding of justice as starting and ending at individual change.

The other participants in macro practice implicitly identify that their everyday practices involved identifying and working toward social justice and human rights. They identify the need to connect micro and macro practices to people and events beyond national borders. However, this understanding of social justice as human rights is anomalous in the findings, as social work does not explicitly incorporate human rights in policies and practices (Lundy, 2011). This is a significant misstep in social work, particularly when we work with individuals and groups traumatized by militarism, environmental crisis (Lundy, 2011), colonialism, and neoliberalism within and beyond our national borders. However, while human rights and social justice can be interrelated, they are not synonymous. Social justice can require considerations of interpersonal relationship (Honneth, 1995), while human rights allows for greater inequity because it is based on the principle of the greater good for a greater number of people (United Nations, n.d)

As per the section on praxis, these two exceptions not only bind the findings along a continuum of the praxis of social workers, but they also bind the findings by identifying how social justice is practised along a parallel continuum that stretched from individual to societal/global change. In this regard, social work needs to query the underlying assumptions of social justice to better contextualize the process (everyday work) and the goal (vision) in practice. Further, given the broad uses and complex understandings of social justice, unpacking these assumptions uncovers whether the process will further the goal of progressive social change or maintain the status quo. To deepen this discussion further, the next section delves into the messy and paradoxical issues of social justice practices.

The Paradoxes and Tensions of Social Justice Practice in Social Work

Many paradoxes and tensions persist in enacting social justice in social work from its historical beginnings (Jennissen & Lundy, 2011). These paradoxes and tensions in the challenging neoliberal environment are exacerbated by the differing values, understandings of social justice and the varied discourses social workers take up in their practices (A. Weinberg, 2016).

The Continued Micro/Macro Divide

Effective social justice work depends on social workers' understanding of complex social issues and the expressions of concern for injustice (N. Fraser, 2004) at both the micro and macro levels of practice. Consistent with N. Fraser's (2004) assertion, when participants use a structural lens regardless of their practice context, they invoke the complexity and connection between societal structures and their clients who live within (and outside) these contexts. Most participants repeatedly return to connecting sociopolitical contexts and people's struggle to participate in society, especially marginalized people and communities (Hossain & Ali, 2014;

Lundy, 2004; Mullaly & West, 2018; Payne, 2005). This connection between individuals and their society furthers the belief that “private troubles” and “public issues” are interconnected (Finn, 2016; Lundy, 2011; Mullaly & West, 2018; Spolander et al., 2016).

However, one of the confounding findings suggests that social workers practise social justice based on an interesting juxtaposition of thinking structurally and acting locally or individually. This is further complicated by the disconnect in understanding how each made connections to the other. For example, participants in micro practice are ambivalent about their colleagues in policy development for failing to consider individual lived experiences when developing policy. Those in macro practice are ambivalent about their micro-level practice peers for not understanding the implications of system-level issues in the lives of those with whom they work. Such dichotomous thinking between micro and macro social workers means that the connections between local and broader social issues do not get realized (Kania et al., 2022; Mosley, 2017). It also perpetuates a competitive environment that pits micro and macro social workers against each other, thus making collaborative practice difficult. It is with this understanding that broad structural social justice becomes an unclear and even distant reality for social workers.

This gap in understanding maintains injustices, continues the status quo, and feeds the neoliberal agenda of social and economic stratification (Vodde & Gallant, 2002). Canadian social work, therefore, needs an integrative response to connect micro and macro practice (Austin et al., 2018; Lombard & Viviers, 2020). Such an integrative response challenges injustice and promotes social justice (Baines, 2017; Lundy, 2011; Mullaly & West, 2018; M. Weinberg, 2008). While true for many social workers, for private practitioners in the study the paradoxes of doing social justice in the neoliberal practice environment is a tightrope that they

walk in both their direct work with clients and the edifice of capitalism that underpins their type of work.

Doing Social Justice in For-Profit Practice Environments

Despite the dearth of scholarship about private practice, the implications of neoliberalism, and social justice, the trend for clinicians to focus more on individual work continues (Abramovitz, 2005). This focus continues to shift away from liberatory advocacy practice (Slater, 2020; Specht & Courtney, 1994). Private practitioners, in their desire for autonomy and flexibility to continue to “do” social justice work, opt out of agency practice. However, there are paradoxes for private practitioners, as they are perceived to maintain the same neoliberal regime they loathed in agency practice. The three principles of individualism, privatization, and decentralization (McGregor, 2001) are at the crux of the paradox for private practitioners in the study. Making a living meant that practitioners feel the tensions of charging for services for those they wanted greater autonomy to assist in their move away from agency practice. This market-driven practice through the privatization of clinical practice is a tenuous balancing act as private practitioners try to provide alternatives such as lowering fees.

Some private practitioners find creative ways of mitigating the financial burden of fees for service such as developing GoFundMe sites to pay for their services. Still, sometimes, these innovative and fresh ideas can maintain the neoliberal agenda (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2001) by continuing to use individual or individualized solutions instead of advocating for access to better mental health services such as coverage through government benefits. Further, while participants in private practice eschew the issues of neoliberal practices in agency clinical work, their for-profit orientation also shifts the focus from government funding human services to a private market-driven economy where those who can afford mental health services have easier access to

services. Therefore, when people cannot access the services of private-practice social workers due to financial constraints, individuals who are already marginalized in society are further left to the injustices (identified earlier) of the systems and processes of agency clinical practice (Eliason, 2015).

Private practitioners in the study navigate a fine line between doing social justice and further embedding a capitalist neoliberal agenda based on individualism which redirects the focus on larger structural issues and remedies. This tightrope means that private practitioners consistently make intentional decisions in their practices that take into consideration the needs of the clients while participating in a market-driven area of social work practice. While they are conscious of this tension, they are seemingly unaware of the impact of ultimately participating in capitalism and maintaining a neoliberal agenda.

Neoliberalism also has implications for working in relationship with colleagues and allied professionals. Participants underscore the tensions of needing to work relationally and collectively for social justice and yet having to mitigate the tenuousness of those same relationships. Participants have to navigate a continuum of values from conservative to progressive in organizations and with colleagues. They identify that while social justice is rewarding, it is also a deeply divisive topic that elicits criticism from colleagues (and administrators) (Kinselica & Robinson, 2001), particularly those who are gatekeepers for conventional social work practice. Navigating the tenuousness of these relationships means that some participants do social justice isolation in their respective workplaces for fear of losing a sense of belonging in their teams and workplaces. This finding was consistent with the scholarship that suggests that social workers often practise in environments that penalize those who take part in supposedly disruptive behaviours (Badwall, 2015; Baines, 2010; A.

McLaughlin, 2009). Further, like their agency counterparts, the competitive setup of private practice translates to potential isolation in doing social justice work for fear of the implications to their reputation and loss of clients which can give rise to subsequent misgivings around collaboration. These tensions seem to arise more frequently with clinicians given the individualistic nature of practice and the focus on revenue generation in a neoliberal practice climate.

As seen in this section, social justice work is complex and fraught with paradoxes and tensions in this neoliberal social service environment. It involves social workers navigating several issues that, while presented above as dichotomous tensions, are in essence a complex web of intertwined issues with which social workers must contend with as they practise social justice.

These tensions and implications are further explored in the next section about the ongoing implications of the *Code of Ethics* and social work education on the practice of social justice in social work.

Implications of Social Work Education and Ethics for Social Justice Practice

Social work is both an academic discipline and a legitimized public profession where the thinking about social justice work in social work practice actually starts with learning in postsecondary education (L. Watts & Hodgson, 2019). The code has a two-pronged aim—to provide a value base for the profession grounded in the foundational principle of social justice, while at the same time identifying standards of conduct that make the professional accountable to the public. Learning about social work and social justice as a foundational principle in the profession presumably starts in social work education. However, the next section discusses the areas that social justice is both promoted and hindered in social work education.

Socializing for or Against Social Justice in Social Work Education

Social work education programs at the graduate level provide opportunities for students to deepen their understanding of the ways in which systemic inequalities contribute to privilege, oppression, marginalization, and powerlessness (and vice versa). These programs also equip students with the knowledge and skill to practise social justice (Finn, 2016; Reisch & Garvin, 2015). However, social work education directly impacts whether the social justice values espoused by the profession are developed into professional practice. While social work education was not an area that participants were directly asked about, all participants discussed social work education, an area that compelled examination.

The findings suggest that elements of social work education both helped and hindered social workers' efforts toward social justice. Participants identified some areas that assisted them in their social justice practice, such as developing theoretical foundations and the opportunities to understand the context of their lived experiences and identity (Bozalek et al., 2013), understanding taken-for-granted values, beliefs, and assumptions, and locating themselves and their clients on a matrix of privilege and oppression (Morley et al., 2017). The connection of these understandings provides opportunities for social work participants to develop a self-reflexive stance and understand the elements underlying their praxis of social justice (Morley et al., 2017).

While social work education provides the foundations for (a) understanding the self and (b) connecting theory to practice, there are several critiques. The findings suggest that teaching micro and macro courses as separate entities without integration mirrors the gap between micro and macro practice as identified earlier. This was made particularly clear in the lack of a shared frame of reference (Lagay, 1982) between micro and macro practitioners in the study. This

critique from participants was as relevant for students in the 1970s as it was in 2015. The findings confirm what the literature has shown since the 1970s, that social work education is complicit in maintaining this gap by claiming to be generalist practice programs while maintaining areas of “specialization” that accentuate the gap between direct and indirect practice. Social work specializations are based not only on the micro-macro divide but also on service user groups such as children, families, adults, and older adults, or issues such as homelessness, mental health, and addictions. I would suggest that while in social work there is a dichotomy between micro and macro practice, macro practice is not “indirect practice” (Reisch, 2017), because all “direct practice” is done within a macro context (Harriman & Bailey, 2015). All social workers, regardless of practice context, work with clients within communities and organizations, which impose limitations to access and societal barriers (Soska et al., 2016).

Certainly, these specializations allow social workers to identify as “experts” in various fields of practice, which in turn makes them highly employable with the ability to compete with other helping professions. I would suggest that the downside to specialization is that practitioners may lose sight of the foundational principle of promoting social justice as they narrow their theoretical understandings and specific practice tasks. This unrelenting challenge of bridging the gap between micro and macro practice is particularly troubling given that, allegedly, social workers are trained (and then ethically compelled) to foster change at all levels of practice (Burghardt, 2014; Reisch, 2017).

The critical educationalist Henry Giroux (2014) argues that neoliberalism is “almost pathological in its disdain for community, social responsibility, public values and the public good . . . [thriving] on a kind of social amnesia that erases critical thought, historical analysis and any understanding of broader systemic relations” (p. 2). This is precisely what we must protect in social

work curricula. Giroux further elaborates that neoliberalism is intent on “eliminating those public spheres where people learn to translate private troubles into public issues” (p. 2), highlighting the fundamental importance of retaining and enhancing our curricula along critical lines if we wish to equip social work graduates to challenge a status quo that reproduces profound inequalities and injustices.

Further while as identified earlier about the disconnect between micro and macro practice, this also becomes significant in courses in social work programs which also furthers a neoliberal agenda while espousing social justice values. This paradox can result in social workers minimizing or even passively dismissing their ethical duty to practise social justice.

While classroom instruction can teach social justice in both micro and macro practice courses, an essential element of social work is field education (Battle & Hill, 2016). Social work field education can also prepare students to connect theory to practice by fostering an understanding of the context and skills needed to promote social justice (Finn, 2016; Reisch & Garvin, 2015). Given the experiential nature of the field practicum, field education programs can help students to identify as social work professionals who practise social justice in their everyday work. During the field practicum, students gain first-hand experience in applying a social justice lens to their practice of social work through mentorship from field instructors. However, while research over the last 20 years has emphasized the significance of addressing the complexity of integrating social justice in field education placements (Dominelli, 1996; P. George et al., 2013; Havig, 2013), the findings suggest that the integration of social justice and mentoring to promote social justice was somewhat missing by both instructors and in field education. Field education can run the risk of training social workers to maintain the status quo rather than advancing social

justice (Dominelli, 1996; Preston et al., 2014) if social justice is not a strong component of field education.

The findings indicate fostering commitment to social justice is not a strong component in field education. Without an explicit and integrative understanding and promotion of social justice that is critical, theory-informed, and connected to real-world situations, this foundational principle risks becoming an unrealizable goal in social work practice. Social work education requires a more intentional and integrated way to embed social justice in its education, mission, pedagogy, and placement. The profession also has disparate and dichotomous issues in the *Code of Ethics* that make social justice a challenge for social workers.

The Tensions between Principles of Social Justice and Standards of Practice

Social justice is foundational to social work as a value and practice in a way that is unique among all the helping professions (Chechak, 2015; Stewart, 2013). However, as asserted earlier, doing social justice work can be fraught with professional pitfalls embedded within the professional neoliberal environment. These pitfalls are also endemic to the profession of social work and rooted in the divergent requirements between the foundational values of social justice and standards of practice and conduct.

Generally, social work codes of ethics translate values into standards of professional practice. Johnson and Yanca (2007) assert, “Codes of ethics are values in action” (p. 48). An additional function of codes of ethics is to create and maintain professional identity and guidance to regulate the profession (Banks, 2003). Due to the numerous ways that professional codes are established, many professions link their codes of ethics to standards of practice (Banks, 2004; CASW, 2005a, 2005b). This linkage is problematic in that the multiple and divergent functions can be oppositional, one is to provide a value base for the profession, and the other is to function

as a regulating mechanism to maintain standards, legitimacy, and protection of the public. In Canada, the social work *Code of Ethics* (CASW, 2005a) is identified as canonical (M. Weinberg & Campbell, 2014); in other words, the code is a legalistic/formal approach (Mullaly & West, 2018). This approach requires its members to follow its directives as one would the letter of the law or to “go by the book and never break any of its standards of practice” (Mullaly & West, 2018, p. 253; M. Weinberg & Campbell, 2014).

As identified in Chapter 2, there is an ongoing critique of the profession’s assumptions about itself (Fook, 2002; Margolin, 1997; Pease & Fook, 1999; Reichert, 2011), its social justice mission (Bonnycastle, 2011; Mullaly & West, 2018; L. Watts & Hodgson, 2019; Witkin, 1995) and its ethical practices (M. Weinberg, 2010), with a particular critique about the move away from emancipatory forms of social justice practice (Lundy, 2011; Mullaly, 2007, p. 55). For some scholars, the requirement to follow social justice as an organizing principle and adhere to standards of professional conduct can be counterproductive (Mullaly, 2007; M. Weinberg, 2002) because of their individual and divergent functions in the profession.

While the Ontario College of Social Work and Social Service Workers (OCSWSSW) plays an important role in protecting the public from harm, the disparity between the OCSWSSW and the values in the profession can have deleterious effects on the practice of social justice in social work. I would suggest that the standards of practice in the *Code of Ethics* are based on individual responsibility, are risk-averse, and are conventional methods of intervention that are identified as evidence-based so that standards of conduct can be deemed pertinent to social workers in all areas of practice (M. Weinberg, 2010, 2018). However, as identified in the findings, without a standard of practice that operationalizes the value of social justice, the ability

to make social justice a realizable goal can have negative implications for those practitioners who do social justice work.

Situational ethics that focus on the clients' best interest "rather than acting out of concern for some abstract rule" (Mullaly & West, 2018, p. 353) promoted the need for social worker participants to adapt certain standards of practice to meet the needs of their clients. While participants identify using the standards of practice as a guide, as discussed in an earlier section, these experienced social workers understand the complexity of human relationships as they adapt their boundaries to meet their obligations to their clients. Their actions forward a commitment to a humane response to working with individuals that is client-centred and moves beyond being risk-averse. The findings identified that the use of professional wisdom assisted participants in appropriately adapting their boundaries to meet the needs that are in the best interest of their clients while assessing potential harm (Lundy, 2011). However, this act moves social work participants outside the aim of the standards of practice and beyond strict adherence to such standards. This was particularly salient when participants adapted their boundaries to meet the situated needs of clients which then made them professionally vulnerable.

The values of social justice and clients' needs are pre-empted by liability issues and the avoidance of risk (S. A. Webb, 2006; M. Weinberg, 2010). The findings reveal a continued underlying and ongoing concern about complaints to the OCSWSSW and then the fear of condemnation for being unethical and unprofessional (Mullaly & West, 2018), and thus a liability to the profession. This concern is partly because participants follow the "spirit" of the standards of practice as opposed to the "letter of the law" as required. The interpretation of the standards of practice meant that social workers placed themselves at the margins of the profession and, therefore, subject to discipline. The ability to use the OCSWSSW to discipline

social workers who practise social justice means that the standards of practice are used as a method of weaponizing the complaint procedures to the OCSWSSW. In this situation, participants become professionally vulnerable because of the competing goals of social justice as an organizing principle and the need to maintain the profession's credibility and legitimacy. The concern that the Standards of Practice will be used as a tool to penalize and discipline social work participants and potentially remove them from the profession is a way to intimidate and silence social workers who practise social justice. This reflects a neoliberal climate where control, fear, and management of persons are fomented.

Chapter Summary

A trifecta of pitfalls within the profession makes social justice work difficult in everyday practice: (a) The vague and conceptual muddle of the term *social justice* (Hong & Hodge, 2009) in the *Code of Ethics*, (b) the lack of operational connections between the foundational values of social justice and standards of practice, and (c) the ability to weaponize the standards of practice through complaints to OCSWSSW because social justice is not operationalized in the standards of practice. These three issues make social work participants professionally vulnerable in a profession whose social justice values are foundational yet whose practices undermine its values in the everyday work of social workers. Although participants are professionally vulnerable, this did not stop them from “doing” social justice work as they understood it. Their concern about not adhering to the literal mandate of the standards of practice was a continued underlying issue they consistently navigated by using their professional judgement based on their advanced social work knowledge and skills.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

This final chapter summarizes my dissertation about how social workers come to understand and practise social justice. I examined the praxis and everyday social justice work of social workers who maintain their commitment to social justice in their work. The conceptualization of social justice in social work has consisted of much theorizing from a broad range of perspectives. Yet there are few studies that examine both how social workers find meaning in the term *social justice* and how this understanding is operationalized in their everyday work. In this chapter, I focus on the implications and recommendations based on the discussion of my research, future directions, and the limitations of the research. To conclude this chapter, I will briefly direct my focus to doing social justice research in the current sociopolitical climate.

I used a comprehensive, constructivist grounded theory approach to understanding both the praxis and daily social justice work. A critical postmodern lens was employed to remember that social justice in the field needs an understanding both of how social workers come to understand social justice as praxis and of the values that underlie their practice. A constructivist grounded theory approach extends thinking about the real-world social justice issues facing social workers while bridging theory to practice and making explicit the interconnections between embodied knowledge and action as praxis. In the findings, this allowed me to look at connecting the context of practitioners' identity and lived experiences, the meaning they make of their commitment to social justice, and its manifestation in their everyday work

I used a critical postmodern lens for three multifaceted purposes. First, as discussed in Chapter 1, my understanding of the world is made up of the more than material deprivations I experienced and having identities that are marginalized. My worldview at this point in my life is

composed of the geopolitical historic and cultural times in which I live and practise. Second, this lens aligns with my own belief that understanding knowledge creation is not a linear process. A critical postmodern lens recognizes that knowledge goes beyond theoretical knowledge taught in schools of social work to incorporate a messy, complicated intersection of identities, lived experiences, and values. The deeply intertwined view of praxis as political, combined with an ethical commitment to action then connects the ontology, epistemology, and methodological choices (Duarte, 2017) of social justice in social work, was identified in the discussion,. This embodied political praxis requires a bridge from theory to practice. The notion of connecting theory to practice for social justice identifies the “distinction between purposeful action and productive activity” (Melaney, 2006, p. 466) for social justice. As discussed in the study, I contend that recognition theory is that relational bridge to everyday social justice work.

I argue that we in social work, as individual professionals and as a profession, need to understand not only the principles that underlie social justice practice but also the competing and complex perspectives. This is particularly important to understanding how these perspectives underlie both theory and practice and can either mitigate injustice through both an individual and collective response (V. Reynolds, 2019; Rogowski, 2018) or maintain the everyday work of social work that is becoming more predominantly individually focused.

Implications and Recommendations: Social Work Practice

The study demonstrates that a commitment to social justice is not an easy endeavour and understanding the meaning and practice of social justice can be nuanced and context-specific. The difficulties facing social workers who are committed to social justice are not new as evidenced by the abundance of literature as cited in Chapters 2 and 3. This study adds to the discussion about the meaning, relevance, and practice of social justice. The challenge for social

workers is to understand what version of social justice we are referring to (Solas, 2008). Some scholars maintain that making sense of social justice lies in the very term itself. Hayek states that “whole books and treatises have been written about social justice without even offering a definition of it. It is allowed to float in the air as if everyone will recognize an instance when it appears” (Novak, 2000, p. 1). Other scholars assert that a unifying definition (Rizvi, 1998) is important for the practice of social justice in social work (Bonnycastle, 2011; Reisch, 2002). The meaning construction process is made richer through sharing of stories (Bell, 2019). I contend that it is thus vital to include and understand the worth of the stories practitioners tell about their commitment to social justice, while also capturing the underlying assumptions that underpin this commitment.

The lack of a theoretical bridge to practice means that social workers can be influenced into thinking that they are doing “justice work” primarily by the superficial iteration of the term. Also, understanding the political climate in which social justice work is performed is significant to the practice of social justice. This study suggests it is vital to understand the interconnections between what brings social workers to social justice, how they find meaning in its conceptualization, and how they practise it in their everyday work. I assert that social work needs to better understand how individuals make meaning of value-laden concepts by using a relational framework from which to conceptualize social justice.

As members of a profession with a stated commitment to the pursuit of social justice (CASW, 2005a), there needs to be clarity in the definition and also an understanding of how social workers make meaning of the term *social justice*. However, while this connection is significant, it is complicated by the neoliberal practice context that is focused on evidence-based, time-limited, and goal-directed practice (Finn, 2021). Social justice in the everyday work of

social workers becomes difficult to practise because of organizational pressures that include time-limited interventions and concrete goal development for both individual and policy practice that have measureable outcomes (Finn, 2021). Further, neoliberalism can also determine whether, how, and to what degree social justice is supported by the code of ethics.

Added to the requirements in the *Code of Ethics*, complications arise when we consider the range of occupations where social workers find employment. The CASW (2005) specifies that social workers provide services on a one-on-one basis and as members of multidisciplinary teams. Social workers are employed by child welfare agencies, school boards, general and psychiatric hospitals, health and community services, correctional facilities, private practice, governments and agencies that provide policy analysis, and policy development, social planning, research, and teaching institutions. Each area brings various institutional and procedural expectations that may not align with social work's stated commitment to social justice. I would argue that social work therefore needs to continue to explore social justice as contextual, relational, and collective (V. Reynolds, 2019) in all its dimensions and sectors based on particular geopolitical, historical, and social contexts. As seen in Chapter 2, "Situating Social Justice in Social Work in Canada," social justice is a moving target, contingent upon understanding its historical, sociopolitical context. This awareness is relevant to understanding the complicated conditions under which social justice is practised in social work.

Micro Social Justice Practice

There is ample literature on how clinical work contributes to social justice (C. Brown et al., 2020; Hair, 2015; A.M McLaughlin, 2009; Slater, 2020); however, there is scant literature on how social workers are mentored to embed social justice in their clinical practice through clinical supervision (Hair, 2015; Slater, 2020). Clinical supervision may be mandatory for some, but it is

not a mandatory requirement for many in social work. In developing knowledge and skill for clinicians in both private and agency practice, clinical supervision is another way to identify and embed social justice in social work clinical practice (Bogo & McKnight, 2006, p. 52; Slater, 2020). This would require those in supervisory roles to understand justice issues beyond clinical social work theory and practice. Supervisors would also need to navigate the narrow and conventional requirements in the standards of practice (as will be discussed later) to be of assistance to social workers they mentor.

Connecting Micro to Macro Social Justice Practice

Despite a clear promotion of social justice in macro social work, there continues to be an imbalance of its significance in micro practice (Rothman & Mizrahi, 2014). This imbalance has been present since the profession's inception with continued discussions of the relationship and tensions in contemporary social work practice (Austin et al., 2018; Jennissen & Lundy, 2011; Vodde & Gallant, 2002). While social workers in agency practice need to engage with unjust organizational policies, Slater (2020) points out the need for those in private practice to have more training in how to embed social justice in their practice. I would contend that private practitioners also need to explore how they navigate the capitalist frameworks inherent in running a for-profit business in a helping profession, particularly if they profess an underlying commitment to social justice.

Macro practice is seen to connect social justice to social work through the promotion of structural remedies to systemic oppression that go beyond individual coping and adjustment. Although this understanding must move to operationalization, "a new focus is needed on the crossover skills in order to promote macro-informed micro practice and micro-informed macro practice" (Austin et al., 2018, p. 275). In other words the connection between individual

problems and systemic issues needs to be front and centre in social workers' daily practice if social justice is to be realized. However, operationalizing social justice work in both micro and macro practice means that we need to integrate both structural theories and micro relational skills and interventions to engage with both clients and decision-makers to ignite change that is systemic. Further, the focus on typical targeted community interventions alone can divert attention from the structural root causes of issues clients face. Social workers in macro practice need to work beyond the organizational and community levels to create consequential and progressive social change. This means that social workers in both micro and macro levels of social work must use their relational skills to strategically engage decision-makers at all levels of society from community to federal policy development. This is salient for social work practice in a neoliberal practice climate because it may challenge the finding of a myopic vision of social justice as community practice that can be seen to centralize interventions and maintain a localized neoliberal approach. This then may instead connect community to broader progressive changes to promote social justice.

Implications and Recommendations for the Profession

Among human service professions, social work continues to be compared to nursing, education, psychology, and other helping professions; however, the delineating element that separates social work from other helping professions is the principle of social justice in the social work code of ethics. Reamer (1995) refers to a code of ethics for social workers as a "moral compass," but also asserts that that the code does not provide concrete guidance when professional duties conflict (pp. 46–47). I would contend that this is a critical issue in contemporary practice in light of the conflict between the ethical values of social justice and the strict adherence to the standards of practice.

Codes of ethics are not intended to serve as the highest expression of moral integrity (Bersoff & Koeppl, 1993) and given the indistinct understanding of social justice in the code of ethics, the usefulness of the profession's ethical foundation becomes limited in the field. This is because ethical dilemmas result from conflicting moral principles (Beauchamp & Childress, 1994) and standards of conduct. However, ethical problems can also result from institutional mandates and organizational constraints which impede one's ability to do what is ethically required to fulfill a commitment to social justice. Social workers employed within an organization work as part of the bureaucracy, and so their services express the principles or ideology of that institution within the scope of their daily practice.

Organizational ideology refers to the way power relations are maintained through the neoliberal bureaucratic management of clients and the provision of services. Such orientations often emphasize the need to carry out organizational policies and protocols that focus on efficiency and revenue generation, and in so doing, can relegate the promotion of social justice to an unimportant position in everyday social work. As identified in the findings, many social workers therefore assume roles that support the dominant conventions of power and authority in any organizational practice. De Montigny (1995) argued that when social workers work on behalf of an organization using the discourse of "a professional reality, they necessarily work ideologically" (p. 33). If this ideological work maintains a neoliberal agenda, relationships and the practice environment become difficult to navigate for those who are committed to social justice.

The maintenance of conventional hierarchical power relations in the profession's ethical guidelines makes enacting social justice difficult to navigate. The *CASW Code of Ethics* (2005a) states that it

provides a consistent set of values, principles and standards of conduct for all social workers across Canada. It gives social workers the guidance and confidence to handle the uncertainties and challenges that come up while providing services. Social workers can use the Code of Ethics to make informed and appropriate decisions in the complex situations they encounter in the line of work.

However, while the ideal is that the use of the code provides support to work through complex situations, if there is no cohesive integration between the foundational principles of social justice and the operational requirements in the standard of practice, this gap between the ethical requirements and the adherence to the standards of practice adds to the complexity and dilemmas in practice situations for those who are committed to social justice. This lack of connection maintains a system that makes those who practise social justice professionally vulnerable. This lack of practice criteria for social justice in the standards of practice limits the professional standards to individual clinical tendencies that do not take into account the situated needs of clients. This was significant to social workers who discussed the rigidity of the expectations about maintaining boundaries in the standards of practice. The need for flexibility in adapting boundaries that meet the needs of clients without feeling professionally vulnerable to complaints to the Ontario College of Social Work and Social Service Workers (OCSWSSW) is an important consideration.

It is through the narrow use of the OCSWSSW mandate to protect the public that the standards of practice can be weaponized by organizations, colleagues, and allied professionals against social workers who profess a commitment to social justice ideals in their work. This means that social workers who practise social justice do so in isolation with the ominous spectre of the OCSWSSW complaint system to discourage their social justice work. I would suggest a

situational approach to ethics (as identified in the discussion) where social workers use their practice wisdom to discern “contemporary [progressive] norms, moral standards and other contextual considerations” (Reamer, 1995, p. 48) to interpret the standards of practice which may make it more difficult to use OCSWSSW to penalize and silence those who practise social justice.

Statements regarding social justice by regulatory bodies and professional associations speak to social justice as an ethical principle in the profession. However, although there are planned revisions to the *Code of Ethics* developed in 2005, the next iteration of the code requires clarity about what types of social justice are encompassed in our professional principles (Solas, 2008). Given the critique of social justice in the Canadian *Code of Ethics* identified in Chapter 2 as encompassing various notions of justice as “fairness”, “equity,” and “basic human needs”—which haveng assumptions that identify divergent worldviews—and the scope of social justice from individual justice to global human rights identified in the findings, it is important to qualify a framework or a consistent ideological direction of social justice in the *Code of Ethics*. Additionally, as participants identified in the findings about being professionally vulnerable because of the disparity between the ethical requirements of social justice and standards of practice, I would suggest this highlights the importance of identifying a framework or ideological direction before developing standards of practice that connect to the professional principle of social justice.

The research also highlights the barriers that social workers face in the neoliberal conditions that shape what social workers do. If these barriers and constraints are not acknowledged and attended to in the profession, they will continue to erode the profession’s commitment to social justice, thereby rendering it rhetorical window dressing. I would suggest

that organizations that employ social workers need to assist them by providing the opportunity for accessible ethical consultation and support around ways to navigate the principle of social justice within their practice context. For organizations and those who have professional requirements for clinical supervision, it would mean that training clinical supervisors to embed a social justice framework in supervision is a need. It would also be incumbent on organizations to move beyond the requirements from funders and corporate neoliberal practices to understand not only the standards of practice requirements of social work but also the ethical requirements of social justice.

Social workers who practise social justice need to be provided with supports and nurturing through professional associations and mentorships that incorporate social justice so that practitioners have the ability to share resources and strategies and to be recognized and legitimized in the profession instead of feeling professionally vulnerable. Professional development of advanced skills (e.g., developing relational skills for social justice practice, critical reflexivity, and the understanding of social justice approaches and modalities) that are necessary in social justice practice is required, and would need review and understanding of the historical, socio-geopolitical context in which social work is practised.

As identified by one participant in the study, I would like to imagine that support and training could encourage social workers to move beyond individualized and localized social justice activities to participate in societal and global justice work. Such work, when conducted as a collective response, provides social workers with the imaginative capabilities to envision a more just society, and enact social justice through a collective voice and coordinated action toward progressive change.

Implications and Recommendations for Social Work Education

Social justice education was not a focus in this research; yet there were insights to be gleaned about whether social work education at the MSW level is complicit in maintaining conventional discourses about practice or promoting social justice within schools/departments/faculties of social work. The research identified that participants thought that there needs to be an overall focus on embedding social justice in education and in pedagogical practices (Archer-Kuhn, 2020; E. Lee & Johnstone, 2023; L. Watts & Hodgson, 2019). This was significant for participants as they identified the implications for practice, because of the connections between the profession and social work education.

A finding from this study identified that social workers who are committed social justice practitioners have developed a positive social justice stance long before they enter the profession and even social work education. A number of complex factors such as identity, lived experiences, mentorship, and role-modelling determine a social justice stance. However, social work education can be pivotal in helping students to find meaning and develop skills to enhance a practice stance that includes social justice, while maintaining their initial social justice commitment. Individual identity and personal experience when connected to theory have a certain language and power that when linked is both social and political. Teaching and mentoring students to engage reflexively throughout the social work curriculum provides opportunities to make sense of the interconnections between everyday political processes and theories taught in courses. This step to bridging theory and practice works toward social justice praxis that essentially unites critical thought, personal experiences, and professional values to promote ethical social justice actions or practice (Shaikh et al., 2022). This then would assist students in connecting their praxis to the core learning objectives about social justice in their social work education.

The CASWE (2021) Accreditation standards identify core learning objectives for social work education by stating:

Social work students have opportunities to . . . adopt a value perspective of the social work profession...develop professional identities as practitioners whose goal is to advance social justice and facilitate the collective welfare and wellbeing of all people . . . understand the role of social work in combating racism and advancing equitable and just policies, services, and practices. (pp. 13–14)

Social work education must continue to provide opportunities for students to be able to be critically reflexive about the issues of injustice and the positionality they bring to practice as components of promoting social justice. Developing skills that promote critical reflection can determine what students regard as important in practice, how they spend their time honing their skills, and the ways they articulate their professional identity development (G. A. Brown et al., 2013). While this awareness can have implications for the practice of social justice, social justice remains seen as predominantly community and policy practice, and thus separate from clinical work. This is alarming as it maintains the dichotomy between micro and macro practice (Bhuyan et al., 2017) and can steer practitioners away from understanding and practising social justice at all levels of social work practice.

Despite an explicit endorsement of social justice values in the profession, there are limited opportunities to apply social justice theories in field education (Bhuyan et al., 2017). Continued practices that support the technical processes for developing and enhancing social justice practice including clinical supervision (Hair, 2015) remain necessary, and should start in field education. Field education provides opportunities for students to apply theory to practice while also providing guidance from role models who can help students learn skills on how to

strategically navigate unjust policies and practices and develop social justice skills and capacities. That this lack of connection in social work education furthers a neoliberal agenda that maintains social work as a loose set of primarily technical, conventional practices that maintains coping, individualism, efficiency, and task-focused goals while relegating the appearance of social justice to the status of an idealized ethic in the profession. This gap keeps social justice as a rhetorical ethical principle without advancing any operational capabilities. In this regard, social justice taught as noble rhetoric without operational properties maintains social work education's investment in its (elitist) professional status rather than furthering its social justice principles (Jennissen & Lundy, 2011).

Clearer conceptualizations of social justice in social work education (Scanlon & Longres, 2001) helps students develop a more tangible and nuanced understanding of the meaning of social justice that they can then develop in their practice. The research highlights that given the multiple underlying assumptions about the term *social justice*, it is essential to understand the meaning of social justice in social work education before teaching the content and practice of social justice. In this regard, a relational perspective such as Axel Honneth's recognition theory, provides a good foundational relational understanding of social justice compatible with social work.

Limitations of this Research

The sample size was relatively small and the findings reflect subjective self-reports. As such, the analysis is based on participants' memories and subjective interpretations and perceptions of their experiences and current practices of social justice. This makes it difficult to provide a complete assessment of the understandings and skills they use to operationalize social justice in their daily practices. Participants' use of different epistemologies, axiology, and actions

makes it difficult to come to a conclusive definition of social justice. There is also no theoretical understanding of social justice work. At times, participants conflated the conceptualizations of social justice with concepts that are part of the understanding of social justice such as equity, equality, fairness, etc. As stated earlier, focusing on social workers who profess a commitment to social justice does not adequately capture particular practice contexts; and so, more specific research based on roles and practice contexts would develop more specific themes vis-à-vis everyday practices of social justice. The research is also situated within a specific historical, geopolitical, social, and cultural context. This means that the research needs to be updated and explored in different contexts to find broader similarities and differences and more nuanced themes. Lastly, while not the focus of the research study, there was no exploration of social work education both in the classroom and field education beyond discussion by the participants.

Despite the limitations in the study, the deeper understanding is that meaning is not created in the realm of the abstract to understand the praxis of social justice. As identified in the findings, social justice needs to be understood in terms of the positionality and experiences that underlie the values that social workers bring to their understanding of this ethical requirement in the profession. The findings also illustrate that, given the constraints inherent in the practice climate, social justice is advanced practice that utilizes relational perspectives, tools, and skills. However, social justice needs to be supported by the professional organizations and developed more purposefully in social work education.

Recommendations for Future Research

My own study has highlighted the relational understanding and practice of social justice by experienced social workers across a wide range of practice contexts and social work roles. Given the exploratory nature of this study, in-depth research by sector and dimensions of

practice should be part of a program of research focused on the education and practice of social justice in social work. This study has illuminated that a research focus should also explore how social justice is supported in the profession. The final research focus should attend to how social work education prepares students to understand the underlying assumptions and everyday practices of social justice in the neoliberal environment in the classroom and field education.

Based on the learning from participants, there is clearly a serious need for more professional and contextual research on social justice in all dimensions of micro and macro practice, sector-specific professional practice, and the particular roles within various sectors of practice. For example, a limitation in this study was that it did not explore the experiences of newer social workers and focused only on a small geographic area of study while identifying a participant population that was wide and varied in terms of role and practice context. This future research focus would provide a depth of understanding about practice in specific sectors: clinical, administration-organizational, community, and policy practice would be further research areas. Specific areas of practice such as street outreach, health care, or private practice would be other areas to explore to understand how social workers committed to social justice navigate the neoliberal environment and the contextual and nuanced everyday work of social justice. Understanding these multiple contexts is important for understanding the breadth and depth of social justice in social work practice.

It is also important to explore private practitioners' perspectives and application of social justice in Canada as it pertains to both their daily work with clients and beyond their clinical work. This research area needs a robust research agenda to understand how private practitioners committed to social justice navigate capitalist for-profit practice and a progressive social justice agenda.

Examining how social justice is understood by social work membership organizations and governing bodies is significant for understanding the support provided and/or needed for social workers to do social justice in their everyday work. This involves research about the quantity and quality of complaints that OCSWSSW receives that can be contra-indicated for promoting social justice. As identified in an earlier section, there is also a need to do research to understand how the complicated and murky conceptualizations in the *Code of Ethics*, as identified in Chapter 2, were created in previous iterations, so that the profession can look forward to embedding a clearer understanding of social justice relevant to the current sociopolitical climate. As previously discussed in this chapter, another important direction for future research is the exploration of how social workers navigate the dictates of social justice as an ethical principle particularly given that the OCSWSSW is in the process of conducting consultations with practitioners about updating the standards of practice without any connection to professional ethical principles.

The final component of a comprehensive research agenda that would support an understanding of the conceptualization and practice of social justice is the promotion and teaching of social justice in social work education. There needs to be further research to deepen an understanding of what students understand social justice to mean and to look at the distinctions between meaning made by those who identify a commitment to social justice and those who do not. Research about how field education supports both theoretical understandings and operationalization of social justice needs to be identified. This research agenda would focus on identifying and exploring how learning practitioners are supported in field placements and field education departments to integrate social justice into their practice. This would include a research study of how field instructors understand, practise, and model social justice and/or what

they make of current social justice and how field education departments integrate social justice in field integration courses.

Concluding Reflection

I write this last section of my dissertation after working on my PhD over the last 9 years, which have had moments of joy and connection as well as moments of despair and disillusionment. When I began this journey, I set out to identify and explore something that was significant to both my personal and professional identity and practice. Throughout the process, I was constantly surprised by the complexity of thought and the complications in practice that social justice presented.

I have also found that social justice work is never complete, but is a continuing and strategic struggle. Freire (1968/1973) contends that the “unfinished character of human beings and the transformational character of reality necessitate that education is an ongoing activity and we are always unfinished in an unfinished reality” (p. 84). The changes experienced over the last few years (2020–2023)—visible examples of racial injustice, decolonizing efforts in Canada and further uncovering of historic atrocities experienced by Indigenous communities, COVID, the resistance to vaccine mandates, vaccine and health inequity—have provided a time of transformation in the world. The question throughout my analysis over the last few years has been to wonder whether this transformation will be progressive or regressive.

This thinking has at times complicated my own journey through the PhD and its significance to social justice practice and research in general and my own work more specifically. I have had to grapple with the never-ending and isolating work in both the PhD and in teaching social justice and the twists and turns of my thinking about the two. This has meant that the geopolitical and cultural strife has challenged my embodied understanding of the world

and my place in promoting social justice. This, at times, has put me at odds with my own values and principles as I have had to unpack my own assumptions about the meaning and practice of social justice, as well as my own complicity with neoliberalism in teaching social justice in social work.

I tend to be in tune with the sceptical side of human nature, which makes me wonder about the underlying intent, implications, and motivations for actions which make a critical postmodern framework quite to my liking. This lens helped me to unpack and look deeper and broader, and compelled me to listen to those disconcerting places that troubled me throughout my dissertation. Two such troublesome issues included wondering whether identifying a way of understanding social justice can be co-opted by neoliberal ways of thinking about social justice practice, and whether a specific contextual understanding codifies too relativist an approach to understanding social justice. This last point was present after interviewing one social worker who identifies coping alone in individual clinical practice as social justice practice. However, there were also times where I needed to step back and step away from the dissertation to look beyond the certainties of my own positionality. One such example reared its head in unpacking my ambivalence about the language and meaning of terms such as *love*, *hope*, and *faith*.

I knew that dismissing this language as sentimental meant that I would be doing a disservice to my participants and the research. I knew that I needed to delve deeper to find ways that I could articulate social justice in terms of love, hope, and faith. After much introspection and many sleepless nights, I remembered that Freire (1998) said that love is an act of courage, commitment to others, and solidarity to a cause. Through this, I came to understand that having a vision for the future meant that ultimately finding meaning and understanding and acting relationally were all about “love”, “hope,” and “faith”. I came to understand that uncovering the

relational connection of love, hope, and faith meant understanding these words as actions with conscious and purposeful effort that supported social justice work in light of what can seem like overwhelming odds in difficult work in challenging times.

While I saw similarities and differences between social workers in the study and my own work, I was in awe of the creative and courageous ways that participants took on their commitment to social justice in their work. While I did not see what I thought I would see in terms of an articulated focus on larger structural change, I have a new reverence for those who “do” the work every day. I also came to understand and feel for the challenging environment and vulnerability experienced by participants in our profession. I continue to feel ambivalent about the lack of operational support for a principle the profession purports to hold as a compass in social work. However, I am thankful for the ways that practitioners of social justice find the tenacity and creativity to navigate injustice. Lastly, with the continual changing realities in the 21st century, I am left with the thought that there needs to be a continual update of this study as it only captures the understanding and practice of social justice in one moment in time in an ever-changing, unfinished reality.

Appendix A: Research Study Advertisement

Would you describe yourself as having a commitment to Social Justice?

Do you have an MSW from a Canadian University?

Do you have 5 or more years' experience in Social Work practice?

Can you tell stories about how social justice is manifested in your everyday practices?

IF SO

Social Work practitioners needed for research about

What social justice practices look like in the context of contemporary social work?

Potential participants will be asked to contact the researcher to complete a prescreening telephone interview of 15 minutes to determine eligibility to participate based on the inclusion criteria.

If selected

Participation would involve *one interview*,
of approximately *60 minutes* at a location and time of your choice.

In appreciation for contacting the researcher to inform about participation in the study, you will be invited to participate in a draw for a \$250 prepaid Visa card or a donation to a charity of your choice, which will be randomly drawn upon when all interviews are conducted.

For more information about this study, or to volunteer for this study,
please contact:

Samantha Clarke, MSW, PhD (c)

at

sclarke@wlu.ca

**This study has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance
through the Wilfrid Laurier University Research Ethics Committee.**

Appendix B: WLU Prescreening Informed Consent Contract

Telling Stories of Everyday Practice(s) of Social Justice in Social Work.

Researcher: Samantha Clarke, PhD Candidate

I am aiming to recruit 20 people who represent diverse identities, areas of Southern Ontario, and areas of practice and sectors for the above qualitative research study. Some may not be invited to participate in the study based on the pre-screening telephone interview. This is not a judgement on the social justice work you are doing but the requirements of the research. Selection of participants is based on selecting a specific number of participants in different geographic regions and sectors of practice. Practitioners who apply to participate in the study will be notified whether or not they have been selected to participate in the study by email within a month of conducting the pre-screening interview. If you are selected to participate in the study, I will contact you to set up an interview at a time and location that is mutually convenient for both of us.

To determine your eligibility for a qualitative research study, we need to collect information about you. By signing this consent form, you are permitting us to collect this information. Signing this consent form does not commit you to participate in a study. Neither does it guarantee that you will participate. Before you participate in a study, we will give you a consent form with information about that study.

SCREENING ACTIVITIES

The pre-screening interview will ask you some general questions about your commitment to social justice, and then explore some demographic information about you and your work.

BENEFITS

This research may benefit potential participants by providing opportunities to reflect on their own learning and understanding of social justice, thereby enhancing their professional practice.

RISKS

Some people may feel uncomfortable answering these questions with a person they do not know. You can choose not to answer the questions and to withdraw at any point.

CONFIDENTIALITY

All names and identifying information about practitioners who are selected for the study will remain confidential and will not be included in the dissertation, other reports, and presentations. Any information used in the report and presentations will not include names or any identifying data to ensure confidentiality.

All demographic forms will be kept in a locked file that is only accessed by me and made available to my dissertation chairs, if necessary. All data will be kept for five years after I submit my dissertation. All pre-screening paper data collected will be disposed of through shredding and recycled using the university secure shredding service.

For those who are not selected for the study, all names and identifying information will be destroyed within 24 hours after contact about non-selection in the study unless you elected to participate in the random draw. If you elected to participate in the voluntary draw then your contact information will be held in a locked file that is only accessed by me and made available to my dissertation chairs, if

necessary, until the draw takes place on June 30, 2019. After winner is contacted and then all names and identifying information who participated in the draw but were not selected as participants in the draw will be disposed of through shredding and recycled using the university secure shredding service.

COMPENSATION

A voluntary draw will be conducted at the end of the data collection period for a \$250.00 prepaid visa card or donation to a charity of your choice for all potential participants who participate in the pre-screening interview whether or not selected to participate in the study . The odds of winning will be 1/30. Winners will be determined by a random draw and the winners will be notified by June 30, 2019 by either email or telephone. This prize is offered as a thank you for your participation in this study. Only the winner will be contacted.

CONTACTS

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact the researcher, Samantha Clarke at sclarke@wlu.ca or Dr. Michael Woodford at mwoodford@wlu.ca or Dr. Deena Mandell at dmandell@wlu.ca. This project has been reviewed and approved by the University Research Ethics Board (REB # 5949) . If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact Jayne Kalmar, PhD, Chair, University Research Ethics Board, Wilfrid Laurier University, (519) 884-1970, extension 3131or REBChair@wlu.ca.

VOLUNTARY PARTICIPATION/WITHDRAWAL

Your participation in this screening is voluntary. At any time, you may change your mind and choose not to participate, without penalty or loss of ability to participate to the voluntary draw. You may withdraw from the screening at any time and request to have your data removed and destroyed.

CONSENT

I have read this entire consent form. I have had a chance to ask questions, and my questions have all been answered to my satisfaction.

By signing this consent form, I agree to participate in the pre-screening. I give permission to use the resulting information to determine my eligibility for the research study. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study.

Participant's signature _____ Date _____

Researcher's signature _____ Date _____

Appendix C: WLU Informed Consent Contract

Telling Stories of Everyday Practice(s) of Social Justice in Social Work.

Researcher: Samantha Clarke, PhD Candidate

You are invited to participate in a research study to explore your commitment to social justice and how this commitment is manifested in your everyday practices as a social worker. The research is conducted in the context of a doctoral dissertation at the Faculty of Social Work, Wilfrid Laurier University supervised by Dr. Deena Mandell and Dr. Michael Woodford of the Faculty of Social Work at Wilfrid Laurier University

INFORMATION

To inform social work theory, practice, and education, this research will explore the stories social work practitioners tell about what brings them to be committed to social justice in their practice and how this commitment is manifested in their everyday practices. To participate, participants will self-identify as being committed to social justice, hold a MSW degree from a Canadian MSW program, have more than 5 years post-MSW experience, and practice in Southern Ontario.

Efforts will be made to interview a diverse group of participants in terms of identities, geography, and practice areas and sectors. Twenty participants will be invited to a 60 minute interview at a mutually convenient location and time.

This study's central question is: What does social justice praxis and practices look like in the context of contemporary social work? This question will be explored through an unstructured interview in which the researcher will ask you questions about how you come to be committed to social justice and how it is manifested in your everyday practices as a social worker. With your consent, the conversation will be digitally recorded and later transcribed. Interviews will be transcribed by an individual other than the researcher; this individual will be sign a confidentiality agreement.

You will be emailed a copy of the transcript of your interview and my analysis to ensure I have captured salient points and meaning units (e.g., themes). You will have the opportunity to correct any inconsistencies and clarify any information. Quotations identified from your interview for possible inclusion in written reports and presentations will be presented for your review, revision, and approval.

RISKS

There is a risk that participants may feel exposed through the interview, particularly if you disclose personal information or details about your workplace as you describe your commitment to and engagement with social justice. There is a possibility of discomfort or emotional upset during the interview when describing efforts to engage in social justice in your work. Participants have the right to not answer any questions, take a break, or to withdraw from the study. Confidentiality is of utmost importance and will be maintained at the highest level.

As a social work practitioner, educator, and researcher, we may have come into contact with

each other in other contexts. If you feel uncomfortable about a possible prior connection, you might wish not to participate in the study.

I will also make myself available after the interview should you have any concerns, or additional information to share.

This potential risk will be ameliorated by permitting participants to review their transcripts.

Participant's initial

BENEFITS

The study will explore practitioners' understanding of and commitment to social justice in their everyday practices. I hope to better understand the reasons underpinning social workers' commitment to social justice, and to contribute to literature about the practice of social justice in social work. The results will inform social work theory, practice, and education, including how social justice topics are taught to social work students.

This research may benefit participants by providing opportunities to reflect on their own learning and understanding of social justice, thereby enhancing their professional practice. Participation may lead to feelings of empowerment, affirmation and increased self-esteem by making concrete links between participants' learning and their practice. Some participants may also feel a sense of pride knowing they are contributing to the profession's understanding and practice of social justice.

CONFIDENTIALITY

All names and identifying information about you and other participants will remain confidential and will not be included in the dissertation, other reports, and presentations. Any quotations used in the report and presentations will not include names or any identifying data to ensure confidentiality

Given the use of personal interviews, I will know the names of each participant. Each participant will be assigned a code, which will be used for the digital recordings, transcripts, and demographic forms.

All transcripts and demographic forms will be kept in a locked file that is only accessed by me and made available to my dissertation chairs, if necessary. Another individual, who will sign a confidentiality agreement, will transcribe the interviews.

All data will be kept for five years after I submit my dissertation.

COMPENSATION

A voluntary draw will be conducted at the end of the data collection period for a \$250.00 prepaid visa card or donation to a charity of your choice. The odds of winning will be 1/30. Winners will be determined by a random draw and the winners will be notified by June 30, 2010 by either email or telephone. This prize is offered as a thank you for your participation in this study. Only the winner will be contacted.

CONTACT

If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, you may contact the researcher, Samantha Clarke at sclarke@wlu.ca or Dr. Michael Woodford at mwoodford@wlu.ca or Dr. Deena Mandell at dmandell@wlu.ca. This project has been reviewed and approved by the University Research Ethics Board (REB # 5949). If you feel you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form, or your rights as a participant in research have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact Jayne Kalmar, PhD, Chair, University Research Ethics Board, Wilfrid Laurier University, (519) 884-1970, extension 3131 or REBChair@wlu.ca.

PARTICIPATION

Your participation in this study is voluntary; you may decline to participate without penalty. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty while the data collection process is occurring. If you withdraw from the study, every attempt will be made to remove your data from the study, and have it destroyed. You have the right to omit the answers to any questions you choose. You may also take a break at any point.

_____ Participant's initials

FEEDBACK AND PUBLICATION

Findings of the study will be disseminated through the publication of the dissertation and academic journals, as well as through academic conferences and community workshops. If you wish, you will be provided with an executive summary of the findings by email at the completion of the study. Results should be available by or before June 2020. Publication will occur after the successful defense of this dissertation study.

CONSENT

I have read and understand the above information. I understand the digital recordings, transcripts, and other data will not be used for any additional purposes without my additional permission. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study.

Participant's signature _____ Date _____

Researcher's signature _____ Date _____

CONSENT TO USE QUOTATIONS

I consent to the researcher including my quotes in the final report, other reports, and presentation, after I have had the opportunity to review and approve the transcript of our conversation, and the quotations the researcher identifies for possible inclusion in the final report.

Participant's signature _____ Date _____

Researcher's signature _____ Date _____

FEEDBACK

I am interested in receiving a copy of the executive summary

Yes, please provide your email: _____

No

Appendix D: Information About Positionality

Note: Participants will be informed they do not have to answer these questions and may select “prefer not to answer” as an option to any of these questions. These responses will also be kept confidential.

Name:

Address:

Email address:

Telephone Number:

Graduating MSW school:

Year graduated:

Years of practice:

Level of practice:

Sector of Practice:

Full time or Part time

Yearly Salary Range:

| | |
|------------------------|------------------------|
| \$ 0 to \$ 19,000 | \$ 70,000 to \$ 79,999 |
| \$ 20,000 to \$ 29,999 | \$ 80,000 to \$ 89,999 |
| \$ 30,000 to \$ 39,999 | \$ 90,000 to \$ 99,999 |
| \$ 40,000 to \$ 49,999 | \$100,000 to \$109,999 |
| \$ 50,000 to \$ 59,999 | \$110,000 to \$119,999 |
| \$ 60,000 to \$ 69,999 | \$120,000 + |

Income support from other sources (investments, partner/spouse, Government assistance, etc): Please provide a range: _____

Age group:

| | |
|---------------|---------------|
| 20 – 24 years | 45 – 54 years |
| 25 – 34 years | 55 – 64 years |
| 35 – 44 years | 65 – 74 years |
| 35 – 44 years | 75 + years |

Other salient identities:

Appendix E: Interview Guide

“Our interview today is part of a study explore the narratives social work practitioners tell about why they are committed to social justice and how it is manifested in their everyday practice. I would like to gain an understanding of how you come to a commitment to social justice. I’ll also be asking you to tell me some stories or examples of how social justice is manifested in your everyday practices.”

1. Can you describe for me what the words "Social Justice" hold for you?
2. What, if any are aspects of your identity, roles, experiences or relationships significant to your commitment to social justice?
3. Can you **tell me some stories or give me examples of experiences** from your life that have prepared you to engage with Social Justice in your work?
4. how has your social justice practice grown or changed as you have become more experienced in the social work field or has it\?
5. What qualities and ways of being do you honour in yourself as a qualification for this difficult work?
6. What is your hope and intention in connecting Social Justice with your work?
7. Can you tell **me a story or some stories that you or others will recognize** as social justice in your everyday practices?
8. Can you explain to me what theories, practices, and ‘professional’ ways of being have you had **to resist in order to nurture** Social Justice in your work?
9. What sustains Social Justice in your work?
10. When Social Justice is alive in your work, what difference does it make for:
 - The people you work alongside (clients/students – if supervise students)?
 - Your co-workers?
 - Other aspects of your life?

Such as:

 - Family life
 - relationships
 - Community
11. Do you see your social justice work as political work? if so. please explain how?

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