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SURVEYING CRITICAL AND SOCIAL JUSTICE-EMPHATIC ACADEMIC SOCIAL WORK IN CANADA

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See table of contents

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Article abstract

In this paper I raise two questions for greater collective disciplinary attention: What are the conditions of existence and the conditions of possibility of critical and justice-emphatic academic social work in the Canadian university system these days? And moreover, how might we—the "we" who read critical social theory and share a discipline—attempt to be accountable to these shifting conditions? I engage these questions with the help of critical literatures as well as an exploratory survey in which educators teaching in schools of social work in Canada were asked to identify texts and bodies of knowledge that they consider pivotal to understanding social work and social justice. Discussing educators' responses, I identify a few nodes of thinking that would benefit from greater disciplinary attention, and I suggest one way we might focus on these shared problematics.

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Abstract: In this paper I raise two questions for greater collective disciplinary attention: What are the conditions of existence and the conditions of possibility of critical and justice-emphatic academic social work in the Canadian university system these days? And moreover, how might we—the "we" who read critical social theory and share a discipline—attempt to be accountable to these shifting conditions? I engage these questions with the help of critical literatures as well as an exploratory survey in which educators teaching in schools of social work in Canada were asked to identify texts and bodies of knowledge that they consider pivotal to understanding social work and social justice. Discussing educators' responses, I identify a few nodes of thinking that would benefit from greater disciplinary attention, and I suggest one way we might focus on these shared problematics.

Keywords: academic social work, social justice, critical social work, social work education

Abrégé : Dans cet article, je soulève deux questions qui méritent une plus grande attention collective de la part de notre discipline : Quelles sont les conditions d'existence (ce qui est) et les conditions de possibilité (ce qui pourrait être) actuelles du travail social universitaire critique et axé sur la justice sociale dans le système universitaire canadien? De plus, comment pouvons-nous - le "nous" impliquant ceux et celles qui lisent la théorie sociale critique et ont une discipline en commun - tenter de rendre compte de ces conditions changeantes? J'aborde ces questions à l'aide d'écrits critiques et d'une enquête exploratoire dans laquelle on a demandé à des formateurs(rices) dans les écoles de travail social au Canada d'identifier des textes et des corpus de connaissances

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qu'ils considèrent comme essentiels pour comprendre le travail social et la justice sociale. En discutant les réponses des formateurs(rices), j'identifie quelques éléments qui bénéficieraient d'une plus grande attention disciplinaire, et je suggère une façon de nous concentrer sur ces problématiques communes.

Mots-clés : travail social universitaire, justice sociale, travail social critique, formation en travail social

WHAT ARE THE CONDITIONS OF EXISTENCE and the conditions of possibility of critical and justice-emphatic academic social work in the Canadian state context these days? Moreover, how might we—the "we" who read critical social theory and share a discipline—attempt to be accountable to these conditions? Academic or disciplinary social work's imaginations are multiple, developed through particular times and places, intellectual traditions and political affiliations, and sub-fields of practice. This multiplicity is structured and, in some cases, made more stable by the university—its reward systems, its genres of knowledge and claims-making—and by the embodied and generational nature of turnover amongst faculty. These evolving institutional and relational dynamics play out in the intra- and inter-generational production and reproduction of the discipline over time, and as such, form some of the conditions of existence (what is) and possibility (what might be) for critical academic social work.

My aims in this paper are thus threefold: to acknowledge ways in which the university influences the knowledge work of the discipline, to reflect on the multiple justice imaginaries shaping the discipline these days, and to advocate for greater collective attention to how our various attempts to change the world appear to be working out over time. To do so, I report on and discuss responses to an exploratory survey in which educators teaching in schools of social work in Canada were asked to identify texts and bodies of knowledge that they consider pivotal to understanding social work and social justice. This survey and conceptual work will be of particular interest to social work graduate students and early career faculty finding their way within the discipline they inherit, to faculty and course instructors involved in curriculum design and mapping, to researchers considering further research into disciplinary social work in Canada, and to scholars working in the history and philosophy of social work.

Context

A number of schools of social work in Canada explicitly affiliate with ideas of progressive, social justice, structural, or critical social work. Contributions to these sub-branches of the discipline have included developing structural (Moreau, 1979) and critical (Carniol, 1979; Rossiter,

1997) social work, and reading continental philosophy (Chambon & Irving, 1994; Leonard, 1997) and Foucault into the profession (Chambon et al., 1999). Regrouping around critical (Leonard, 2001) and anti-oppressive (Campbell, 2003) social work has also been advocated. In turn, scholars are also intentionally revisiting now-established ideas and practices for their unintended effects. This includes the governmentality of community-based participatory research (Janes, 2016), the implications for practitioners of generalist best-practices founded in an assumption of a universal White social worker subject (Badwall, 2016), and the need to engage more fluid metaphors when considering distributions of vulnerability and advantage in specific times and places (Joseph, 2015). The ease with which critical and anti-racist claims are made within academic social work (Sinclair & Albert, 2008; Yee & Wagner, 2013), and the ways in which these claims articulate together with liberal and professional identity work (Jeffery, 2007; Zhang, 2018), have also been problematized. Read together, this literature illustrates that disciplinary understandings of social justice are neither uniform nor stable, and moreover, that the world we imagine and enact is in fact responsive to our work—although not always in the ways that we might hope or intend.

The present paper is drawn from a larger project exploring the conditions of existence (what is) and possibility (what might be) of critical academic social work in Canada these days, and further, the question of what it might mean as a newcomer to the academy to attempt to be accountable to these conditions. In many respects these are worker questions: what is going on in this new-to-me site of employment, and how might I therefore negotiate this place? They are also utopian questions: how might I attempt to change the world, if only a little, given the conditions of this location?

As a relative newcomer to academic social work, I have been struck in particular by the intense individualism of the hierarchical university and by the consequent difficulty of raising challenging questions of progress and change for collective disciplinary consideration. The conventions of the academy—the privileging of language and writing, debate-style talks and the they say/I say structure of claims-making, bounded forms of intelligibility, and perhaps especially, the centrality of the remarkably articulate academic "I" that somehow always has an answer and is always on the right side of history—are much different from what I am used to, and because of this, stand out for the ways in which they influence relationships and knowledge work in the university.

The recent literature supports my newcomers' sense that the university is not a comfortable location for many of us. For example, investigations into the influence of changes in post-secondary education on progressive schools of social work in Canada paint a disheartening picture. Recent changes to these work environments include intensifying institutional surveillance, dwindling full-time faculty positions, expanding

workloads, an increasingly competitive and anxious work environment, and a loss of relational space for thinking with colleagues about the state of our shared project (Moffatt et al., 2018). Friction has also been noted between, on the one hand, students and faculty favoring oppositional styles of social justice work, and, on the other, those faculty who take a more collaborative approach in their work with the university (Barnoff et al., 2017). In turn, departments are these days required to sell their relevance in terms that are desirable to the larger market-focused university—emphasizing diversity, innovative education, and community engagement—and there is a real risk that we believe our own hype (Todd et al., 2015). This exaggerated promotional culture suppresses everyday facts of failure and uncertainty (Moffatt et al., 2018), and of particular concern to my work here, this suppression, along with the pervasive individualism of the university, no doubt also impedes the ongoing and relational work of collective disciplinary attention to how things are working out—intended and otherwise—over time and place.

Along with the evolving justice imaginations noted above, these institutional and relational dynamics are also part of the conditions of existence and possibility of critical academic social work these days. My broad questions are thus: what might accountability to these conditions look like? And, further, how might we push at them so that they become a little more open and a little less individualizing? Elsewhere I have considered how university and discipline stabilize situated (Haraway, 1988) perceptions of the possible and the desirable, and some of the ways in which this stabilization of perception plays out in the production and reproduction of the discipline from one generation to the next (Wilson, 2017). I have also advocated that we better locate social work engagements with critical social theory within a broader history and philosophy of social science, including what is now increasingly understood as a heterogeneous and expanding "third generation" in critical social theories (Wilson, 2021). Relatedly, I have suggested that, given facts of too much knowledge, incommensurable knowledges, and conflicting knowledges in our geopolitically entangled world, academic social work might develop an intentionally less dualistic—a less right/wrong—approach to knowledge claims in general and to disagreement in particular (Wilson, 2020).

With the present paper, I turn to the Canadian university system to consider questions of canonization and change in critical academic social work. Written work is a central way in which knowledge is developed and ideas are stabilized and communicated within and between academic generations. *Canonical* knowledge is in turn foundational or common knowledge shared by members of a discipline. In critical academic traditions, the term "canon" has typically been used to identify dominant worldviews that diminish and deny other ways of knowing, being, and doing. The moral inflection that accompanies these critiques has, over

the decades, made it more challenging to engage with the ways in which everyone in the university participates in processes that stabilize and amplify some knowledges over others. Canons elide, and they also allow us to talk to each other about loosely shared disciplinary concerns. Exploring some of the most-read texts of those who reproduce the discipline is thus a means to reflect in a less individualizing and morally inflected fashion on stability and change in social work imaginaries at a given moment in time. In turn, my aim in reporting on this work is to invite additional reflections on the conditions of critical academic social work these days, of ways we might be accountable to these conditions, and of where we might go from here.

Method

Survey Development

The electronic survey reported on here was drafted and revised through an iterative process with my dissertation committee, with colleagues in my school, and with a number of social work scholars known for their knowledge of social work education in Canada. The survey was then pilot tested by colleagues for clarity, length, and technical usability, after which I made a last round of revisions. The final McMaster University Research Ethics Board–approved survey invited social work educators teaching at the university level—whether retired, tenured, not tenured, contract, or sessional—who organize their work around concepts of "justice" or "equity" or "critical […]," all broadly defined, to complete a qualitative survey in which they identified written scholarship pivotal to their understanding of society, social justice, and critical or justice-oriented social work. The survey was organized into three sections, and the majority of questions were open-ended. The first section asked about educators' own education and teaching history, and included an open-ended question on their self-identified social identities. The second asked educators to populate three reading lists: "Formative Readings" influential to their own thinking, "Today's Readings" for their current influences, and last, "Readings for Students." In the final section of the survey, educators were asked to comment on what was missing in the discipline when they were a student, and what they would like to see more of today.

Sample

Survey participants were recruited through invitations distributed by the Canadian Association for Social Work Education-l'Association canadienne pour la formation en travail social (CASWE-ACFTS) to 38 schools of social work with 297 members. Although it is not possible to know the number of people who actually opened the recruitment email, the opening rate for

the CASWE-ACFTS newsletter is 45%. In turn, although the recruitment email was sent to the general membership, the invitation itself requested the participation of only those educators who self-identified as organizing their work around concepts of social justice. Recruitment began in the fall of 2014 and closed at the end of January 2015. Four recruitment emails were sent out in total, and data were collected over a period of four months. The email and accompanying letter of information outlined my interest in how social work educators have worked with and shifted the disciplinary knowledge-base over time. To be included in the final data set reported on here, educators had to answer at least two of the three reading list questions, resulting in 24 participants.

These 24 participants taught in 11 different universities in six different provinces, including two Francophone universities. For reference, 12 schools in Canada include French language instruction, and 28 express an explicit commitment to social justice in their current mission or program description (CASWE-ACFTS, n.d.). Of these 28 schools, five are emphatically "justice-first" in their approach. For example, one program explicitly states that it understands "social work as social justice work" (York U, n.d.) (for more on progressive or social justice-emphatic schools in Canada, see Barnoff, et al., 2017; Wilson, 2017).

Analysis

Responses were reviewed for major themes, and the topic of each identified work was categorized using title keywords. The disciplinary influence of non-social work authored scholarship was determined through an internet search for the first author's current departmental affiliation. I mapped this thematic work onto a temporal arc comprising respondent age and entry into social work as a means to consider stability and change in disciplinary imaginations. I presented my initial analysis to a group of colleagues at my university, and we engaged in lively conversation about my analysis, and about what the data were and were not able to speak to. I then returned to the survey responses, explored questions arising from this initial discussion, fine-tuned the thematic coding, and re-ran frequency calculations.

Findings

Respondents

Close to half of the 24 participants identified as belonging to a racialized group, a few as Francophone, and about a third as gay, lesbian, or bisexual. A few respondents identified as psychiatric survivors or mad, as genderfluid or nonconforming, or as transgender. All educators also mentioned axes of privilege. Table 1 includes an overview of participant age, education, and employment characteristics.

Table 1. *Participant Characteristics (n = 24)*

Characteristics	Frequency
Decade of birth	
1940s	3
1950s	8
1960s	3
1970s	9
1980s	1
Current academic position	
Professor	4
Associate professor	10
Assistant professor	4
Course instructor	6
Discipline of highest degree	
Social work	14
Sociology	3
Education	2
Health	1
Interdiscplinary	1
Social welfare	1
Women's studies	1
Not specified	1
Country where received highest degree	
Canada	13
USA	5
UK	2
Not specified	4
Started teaching in social work	
1970s	1
1980s	6
1990s	3
2000s	11
2010s	1
Not specified	2

Pivotal Readings and Authors/Editors

There was not much overlap in the works identified by educators. Of the 556 readings identified as pivotal to understanding social work and social justice, 384 were identified by only one respondent. Work that was identified by more than one person was most often endorsed by only two people. Table 2 includes the 12 works that received three or more nominations across the different reading lists: "Formative Readings" (n = 224), "Today's Readings" (n = 190), and "Readings for Students" (n = 142). The identified works are for the most part undergraduate textbooks (Mullaly, 1993, 1997, 2002, 2007, 2010; Fook, 2002, 2012;

Baines, 2007, 2011), followed by canonical activist work (Alinsky, 1971; Bishop, 1994, 2002; Freire, 1968, 1970; Macintosh, 1998), and one graduate level work (Chambon et al., 1999).

Table 2. *Twelve Works Identified by Three or More Educators*

Frequency of Nomination	Formative Readings (n = 224)	Today's Readings (n = 190)	Readings for Students (n = 142)
6	…	…	Baines, D. (Ed) (2007/2011). Doing anti-oppressive practice.
4	Baines, D. (Ed) (2007/2011). Doing anti-oppressive practice. Fook, J. (2002/2012). Social work: a critical approach to practice. Mullaly, R. (1993/1997/2007). The new structural social work: Ideology, theory, practice. Alinsky, S. (1971). Rules for radicals.	… … … …	…
3	Bishop, A. (1994/2002). Becoming an ally. Chambon, A. S., et al. (Eds.) (1999). Reading Foucault for social work. Freire, P. (1968/1970). Pedagogy of the oppressed. McIntosh, P. (1998). White privilege: Unpacking the invisible knapsack.	Baines, D. (Ed) (2007/2011). Doing anti-oppressive practice. Mullaly, R. (1993/1997/2007). The new structural social work. Mullaly, R. (2002/2010). Challenging oppression and confronting privilege. …	… … … …

To provide a slightly different picture of the range of influences, I also examined the number of nominations each first author received across their various nominated works. Table 3 lists the 22 authors and editors who received three or more nominations across the three reading lists. In addition to the specific canonical texts and authors identified in Table 2,

here we see influential scholars like bell hooks (critical race, feminisms); Nancy Fraser and Michael Lipsky (political economy, social policy); Judith Butler and Michel Foucault (philosophy); Amy Rossiter (critical theory and continental philosophy for social work); Andrea Smith and Cyndy Baskin (Indigenous knowledges and activism); Barbara Heron, Gordon Pon, and Sherene Razack (racism, whiteness, and Canadian nationalism in helping work); Sarah Ahmed (queer and anti-racist criticism); Steven Hicks (queer theory for social work); Aihwa Ong (geopolitics, citizenship); and Steven Hick (undergraduate textbooks).

Table 3. *Twenty Two Most Frequently Identified Authors and Editors*

Frequency of Nomination	Formative Readings (n = 224)	Today's Readings (n = 190)	Readings for Students (n = 142)
6	Mullaly, Robert	Mullaly, Robert	Baines, Donna
5	Baines, Donna Fook, Jan Foucault, Michel hooks, bell	…	…
4	Chambon, Adrienne Fraser, Nancy Freire, Paulo Rossiter, Amy	Baines, Donna	hooks, bell Mullaly, Robert

Disciplinary Influence

Of the 384 unique works identified, 62% (237) were authored by non-social workers. Nine percent (35) were written by non-academics, typically activist-journalists or professional counsellors. As illustrated in Table 4, among the non–social work authored academic scholarship, social science disciplines dominated, followed by the humanities and various critical studies. Scholarship from philosophy (39) was most popular, followed by sociology (26), and then gender studies (23).

Table 4. *Discipline of First Author of the Nominated Works (n = 384)*

Discipline	Frequency (percentage)
Social work	147 (38%)
Non-social work	237 (62%)
Academic	202

Discipline	Frequency (percentage)
Social sciences	68
Sociology	26
Political science	17
Anthropology	9
Psychology	9
Economics	4
Geography	3
Humanities	59
Philosophy	39
English	15
History	5
Critical Studies	49
Gender studies	23
Queer studies	8
Disability studies	5
Cultural studies	4
Equity studies	2
Indigenous studies	2
Media studies	2
Digital studies	1
Museum studies	1
Performance studies	1
Non-Academic	35

Topics

***Social Work Authored Readings* (*n* = *147*).** Thirty-one percent (46) of social work–authored readings were introductory texts or papers, such as UK-based Adams, Dominelli, and Payne's (2002) edited collection *Critical Practice in Social Work*. Most authors integrated some reference to general critical theorizing—critical, structural, anti-oppressive—into their work's title, for example (UK; Canada) Leonard's (1993) classic *Critical Pedagogy and State Welfare: Intellectual Encounters with Freire and Gramsci*, 1974–1986. These broad orientations were followed by scholarship like (Canada) Razack's (2004) *Transforming the Field: Anti-Racist and Anti-Oppressive Perspectives for the Human Service Practicum*. Social work–authored literature typically focused on some form of practice. For example, (UK) Taylor and White's (2001) "Knowledge, Truth and Reflexivity: The Problem of Judgment in Social Work," and (Canada) Swift and Callahan's (2009) *At Risk: Social Justice in Child Welfare and Other Human Services*. This literature was followed by smaller bodies of work on history, including (Canada) Moffatt's (2001) *A Poetics of Social Work: Personal Agency and Social Transformation in Canada, 1920–1939*, and research, including Anishinaabe scholar Absolon's (2011) *Kaandossiwin: How we Come to Know*.

***Extra–Social Work Authored Readings* (*n* = *237*).** The extra–social work authored literature was more difficult to categorize. Much of this

scholarship offered general socio-economic-political critiques, followed by philosophy and theory, and some intervention literature. There was also a broad literature on processes of racialization and settler colonization. The largest theme of socio-political commentary included (USA) Polanyi's (1944) *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* and (trans-national) Sen's (1992) *Inequality Re-Examined*. The Marxist (USA) Harvey's (2007) *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* was also included here. Continental work included Derrida's (1997) *The Politics of Friendship*, and Butler, Laclau, and Žižek's (2011) *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left*. Intervention literature for policy, the helping professions, and activism included (USA) Wright's (2014) "More Equal Societies Have Less Mental Illness: What Should Therapists do on Monday Morning?", and the (USA) Incite! Women of Color Against Violence Collective's (2007) *The Revolution will Not be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex*.

Work on White supremacy, imperialism, settler colonization, and racialization included (USA) Crenshaw's (1991) foundational "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics and Violence Against Women of Color," (UK) Hall's (1996) "The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power," and (USA) Muñoz's (1999) "Performing Disidentity: Disidentification as a Practice of Freedom." Historical work included (Canada) Valverde's (1991) *The Age of Light, Soap, and Water: Moral Reform in English Canada, 1885–1925*, and (Canada) Austin's (2010) "Narratives of Power: Historical Mythologies in Contemporary Québec and Canada." Research nominations included (USA) Geertz's (1973) *The Interpretation of Cultures* and (Aotearoa New Zealand) Smith's (1999) *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*.

In contrast to the prevalence of introductory works among social work authored texts, among the extra–social work authored scholarship only 6% (15) were overview texts or anthologies. In turn, these collections were more likely to be advanced undergraduate or graduate-level work. For example, (USA) Solomon and Murphy's (1999) *What is Justice? Classic and Contemporary Readings*, (USA) Harding's (2004) edited collection *The Feminist Standpoint Reader: Intellectual and Practical Controversies*, and (multi-national) Wilderquist and colleagues' (2013) *Basic Income: An Anthology of Contemporary Research*.

Overall, work identified as important by social work educators suggests we most often turn to other disciplines for our broad social-political commentary, for philosophy and critical theory, and for a noteworthy proportion of our intervention literature. Social work publications are more likely to focus on interventions with particular sub-populations and on preparing students for practice. Scholarship explicitly referencing history, research, and ethics was less frequently identified in both social work and extra–social work authored literatures. American scholarship dominates, followed by work from the UK.

Populations of Interest

Sub-populations were identified by their explicit reference within a given title. General social welfare and counselling texts are therefore not counted here. Sixty-nine percent (266) of uniquely identified work specifically referenced a sub-population in the title. Of these, racialized peoples were most frequently identified (28%), followed by women (16%), undifferentiated marginalization and exclusion (12%), and Indigenous Peoples (9%).

Contrasting sub-populations identified in the titles of social work writing with those in the extra–social work writing can help us to consider what we may want more of in social work but do not currently produce ourselves. This aspect of the survey can also help us to learn how we supplement our applied scholarship with less common knowledge (e.g., work on mental health in contrast to that of mad studies). According to responding educators, we are most likely to look outside social work for scholarship addressing women, citizenship, racialization, disability, and poverty. We more often nominate our own scholarship when it comes to children and youth, general marginalization and exclusion, Indigenous Peoples, and mental health.

What's Missing, Then and Now

Educators commented on the knowledge domains that were missing when they were in school, and what they would like to see more of in the discipline today. Many identified in their own history a lack of attention to justice and non-Western scholarship in curriculum focused on ahistorical therapeutic practice with individuals, families, and groups. Most noted that attention to racialization and colonization was missing altogether, while respondents either born later or who were newer to social work also identified the absence of critical disability, mad, and queer studies. Educators oriented towards the nation-state and social policy wished more attention had been paid to political economy and to the relationship between values and the definitions of social problems.

Speaking to today, a number of educators stated they would like to see deeper engagement with the complications of social justice and social work. For example, as one respondent put it: "at least try[ing] to open up social work to a stronger critique of itself and its roots," as a means to question "the self-celebratory notion of social justice/critical social work and to reinstate [the] political nature of such [a] claim. Otherwise, the discourse of transformation and emancipation will only repeat and reinforce the same power relation this discourse is meant to rupture." Respondents also identified particular bodies of scholarship as requiring greater attention: spatial theory, queer diasporic critiques, mad studies, transnational feminism, anti-blackness, critical whiteness, political philosophy, fat studies, spirituality, ecological theory, critical disability, postcolonial theory,

non-Western epistemologies, and decolonizing and Indigenous work. In particular, critical disability studies and women's and gender studies were identified as models of critical academic practice—ones that could be fruitfully applied to our own sub-fields of child welfare and aging.

Discussion

Educators' responses indicate that the majority of writing identified as pivotal to understanding social work and social justice comes from outside the discipline, most often from philosophy and the various canon-disrupting critical studies. However, the small number of frequently identified texts authored by a social work scholar were often in introductory textbook or anthology format, and many of these have had remarkable staying power, some with a second or third edition released since their original publication run. Some justice knowledges have in this way achieved canonical status, with structural, oppression or inequality-focused, and critical or power-focused frameworks solidifying into foundational—textbook—knowledge since around the start of the 21st century.

The textbook plays a pivotal role in social work education in North America (Wachholtz & Mullaly, 2001). Introductory textbooks in particular have the unenviable task of plotting generally agreed-upon overviews of disciplinary objects (e.g., social justice, the state), problematics (e.g., inequality, exclusion), and methods (e.g., advocacy, recognition) as a means to provide students with their initial orientation to the field. As a result of being so general, they are likely to be both relied upon and found to be insufficient by members of a discipline. For example, textbooks work with simplified, "popularized" theory, and as a result tend to promote categorical thinking while rarely engaging with alternative or conflicting understandings (White, 2009; see also Wachholz & Mullaly, 2001). Introductory textbooks are also typically slower to adapt to change than more focused work. For example, the common textbook practice of amplifying faith in the "heroic agency" of social workers to effect change in the world has been flagged as requiring greater care in light of the geopolitical entanglements and practice contexts from the 1990s onward (Marston & McDonald, 2012, p. 1024). In the survey reported on here, the expanding range of knowledges identified by educators as important to our justice imaginations, along with concerns expressed about how easy it is to make justice claims in academic social work, similarly suggests a desire to further nuance current critical disciplinary common sense.

These shifting dynamics among more and less common knowledges are one influential aspect of the conditions of existence and possibility of critical academic social work, and indeed all disciplinary configurations. The question thus becomes: how might we engage with and attempt to be accountable to these uneven conditions as they continue to move and

change over time and place? In light of the intense individualism of the hyper-competitive and hierarchical university outlined in the introduction to this paper, I would advocate that social work might, at least sometimes, put a hold on zero-sum judgements of *who is more right* and instead attend to *what is going on* in university and world. I will illustrate what this shift in focus can help us consider in this final section of the paper.

Knowledge claims in the university are typically founded in the modern belief that new or more correct knowledge will lead to progressive social improvement (Tuck, 2009a; 2009b; see also Bracke & Puig de la Bellacasa, 2004). This linear, comparative model—of a gap to be filled, of knowledge x vs. knowledge y—assumes increasing understanding and consensus, and in so doing, risks missing the ways in which multiple ideas and investments are always circulating and recombining. At the same time, modern Western thought typically also assumes the originality and insight of individual authors, along with a relatively direct transmission of an author's published ideas to their readers—the idea that, for example, if two people read the same book, they can be expected to end up with pretty much the same understanding of original authorial intent. In contrast to these more linear assumptions about authors and origins, consensus and progress, postcolonial scholar Edward Said (2000) argued instead that ideas are changed through their travels in the world (see also, Bachmann-Medick, 2016; Foucault, 1994/2003; Haraway, 1988).

In social work, Payne (2002) has traced this kind of change in relation to the different trajectories taken by systems theory in the US and the UK (see also Harris, et al., 2014; Köngeter, 2017). In the Canadian context, we can also think about the ways in which Marxist theory travelled here in part via British cultural studies (primarily the subcultures and mugging groups). These influences include generative engagements in the 1970s UK among cultural studies, sociology and criminology, youth and deviance studies, and social work. For example, work and imagining anchored to the UK National Deviancy Conference, and outputs like *Policing the crisis: Mugging, the state, and law and order* (Hall et al., 1978) and *In and against the state: Discussion notes for socialists* (London Edinburgh Return Group, 1979) (John Clarke, personal communication August 20-25, 2018). Over time, this sprawling, experimental work has been focused and refined in the Canadian state context into the more general conflict theory textbook knowledge that is common in undergraduate education. These dynamics—in which the lively and ongoing imaginings of a particular time and place are lifted out of history and focused so that they can be communicated to those of us who were not there—is a main way in which less common ideas become more common. And of course, the limits of these now more common things then also become something to be wrestled with.

Another example: the popularity of critical social work in Canada may be, in its own turn and similar to other contexts, a reaction to

the certainty of our iteration of Marxism (see Fook, 2001). Critical social work typically combines select themes from conflict theory (the German-Prussian philosophy of Marx thinking with Hegel, which is in turn reworked by thousands of scholars in other times and places) with select themes from a particular generation of French philosophy (e.g., Foucault, Derrida) and some identity knowledges (often but certainly not exclusively North American feminisms and critical race theories), to help us think about the relational nuances and subjective implications of agency-based social work practice in a liberal democratic welfare state context. These expansive political imaginaries from which "critical social work" is distilled continue to circulate and interact globally, along with a million other ways of perceiving and engaging the world. In turn, these circulations and reworkings are visible both in the literature on critical social work that introduced the work of this paper and in the range of foci participating educators identify as requiring greater consideration in social work these days.

The uneven circulation of perceptions of the possible and the desirable also shows up as less attention to things that were once perceived as central. For example, although some work in social work has mapped more broadly the challenges of post- or late-modern times for the modern project of social work (e.g., Leonard, 1997), responses from participating educators suggest that this macro-state-focused scale of imagination has not been taken up and extended in the same way as the more micro-practice focused work. This shift includes minimal explicit reference by responding educators to social welfare policy work, though it was once considered central to professional social work. No doubt due at least in part to the partitioning of policy work from social work within the academy (Chambon, 2012), this change has also been attributed to the priority given by the Canadian Association of Social Workers to professional advancement over advocacy (Jennissen & Lundy, 2011). I suspect, however, that it may also be a more general outcome of the generational shift from building a welfare state to nowadays repeatedly restructuring one, with many of us now struggling to imagine how we might engage with a state that sanctions our profession but fails to be reliably or enduringly responsive to democratic process in a globalizing world. More generally, it has been suggested social work is simply overdue to reconceptualize established understandings of policy work for contemporary social work (Marston & McDonald, 2012).

One final example of considering *what is going on* rather than adjudicating *who is more right*: participating educators made little reference to anti-oppressive practice (AOP), even though it is central in a number of schools of social work and even in the policies of some social service organizations in Canada. My hunch is that the popularity of AOP in Canada—another travelling knowledge from the UK academy—was a generational response that can be located within a broader embodied

history of politics and critical social theory. Namely, the challenge posed by an expanding range of social movement and identity-anchored knowledges that were strengthened by the emergence of the critical studies into the 1990s in North America. An AOP umbrella, similar to the "structural" (conflict) and "critical" (power) umbrellas, was as a pragmatic strategy for acknowledging heterogeneous and evolving political movements, and as such, provided a kind of "neutral" territory perceived to be able to house the various investments and theoretical allegiances of justice-desiring social work. If my hunch is in fact correct, a current disciplinary problematic may therefore be to assess how AOP, as a pragmatic strategy amplified since the mid-1990s, is working out over time.

Of note, both the strength and the weakness of AOP as a tactic in support of the larger strategic project of amplifying a community of affiliation—a justice-identified "us" that shares a general understanding of the world and a general orientation to practice—is that its generalist territory resonates with generalist social work, while the specificities of particular justice investments resonate with the sub-population divisions of our funded knowledge work and paid employment, such that they become difficult to distinguish from one another. Sometimes things are able to achieve traction because they fold together relatively easily with existing infrastructures of thinking and doing (Bowker & Star, 2000). This kind of traction and slippage is also a condition of existence (what is) and possibility (what might be) for critical and justice-emphatic academic social work.

The world *is* responsive to our work, just not always in the ways that we intend or might hope. We—the "we" who read critical social theory and share a discipline—need in our own turn to be responsive to the funny side-stepping ways in which the world, and our multiple perceptions of it, keep on moving. Attending, at least sometimes, to questions of *what is going on* rather than *who is right* is one strategy for amplifying shared disciplinary problematics over modern notions of origins, ownership, and individualized authorial insight. In turn, reflecting contributions from the critical literatures together with responses provided here by educators, and with my own impressions as a relative newcomer to the academy, I would advocate that this responsiveness, this accountability to what is and what might be, include greater attention to and care for our various embodied experiences of more and less common knowledges within the intense individualism and high-stakes claims making of the hyper-competitive and hierarchical university.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

There are a number of limitations to this work. These include most obviously the small sample size, that Indigenous educators did not

participate as respondents, and that French Canadian social work is not represented here. The survey was also designed for a larger imagined sample, and as a result the data gathered could only support the more general thematic reporting included in this paper. In turn, although this was an anonymous survey, there is a power difference between tenured, non-tenured, and sessional instructors, and this may have influenced who completed the survey. This exploratory work does, however, provide a useful anchor for further investigation into the changing imaginations of justice-emphatic social work.

Future research might therefore revise or extend the present survey, explore additional data sources such as course syllabi, work with students to understand what they make of canonical understandings of social justice, and engage faculty in in-depth interviews about their experiences working to change the discipline they themselves inherited. Recent work on disciplinary threshold concepts (e.g., Adler-Kassner & Wardle, 2015) looks especially promising for organizing the collective work of disciplinary reflexivity and renewal, as does emerging work focused on theorizing shared keywords for their multiple uses these days (e.g., Garrett, 2018; Park et al., 2020).

Conclusion

My concern is the noteworthy structuring influence of competitive individualism and promotional practices on both relationships and knowledge work in the intra- and inter-generational production and reproduction of critical and justice-emphatic academic social work in the Canadian state context. A strategy for better understanding and negotiating these working conditions has been to ask folks what they read and imagine with, and to reflect this anonymous imagining at the larger discipline. Educators' responses provide us with a snapshot that includes both textbook stabilities and expansive investments and traveling knowledges tuned to different perceptions of the possible and the desirable. Policy work and AOP in particular appear due for greater disciplinary attention. My discussion has in turn illustrated how a shift in inflection from who is more right to what is going on can help us raise shared disciplinary problematics for greater collective attention.

Canons limit and they enable. Ideas circulate and change through their travels. Progress and change are disorienting questions, the answers to which tend to shift over time. All of these dynamics contribute to the conditions of existence and possibility of critical and justice-emphatic academic social work. In addition to greater care for the influence of the geopolitically situated university on knowledge and relationships in academic social work, my own more general take away from this work is that the discipline is due for another major round of integrative philosophical work, including engagement with alternative theories

of change, and with the challenge for problem-solving social work of entangled relations that can be engaged but not resolved. This integrative knowledge work can be expected to foster new possibilities while also contributing to new constraints and additional unexpected effects, and these dynamics will in turn continue to play out in the intra- and intergenerational relations that comprise academic social work. My hope is that the work represented in this paper will therefore support different kinds of claims and conversations about critical and justice-emphatic social work within the Canadian university system, including greater speculative, imaginative, and collaborative work on how things seem to be working out over time, and further, on what this working out might mean for our research, education, and practice now and in the years to come.

NOTES

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