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Implications for Epistemic Resistance

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Résumé de l'article

L’engagement des théoriciens et des chercheurs en travail social, à travers leur pratique, dans une « désobéissance épistémique » face à « l’épistémicide » des savoirs des Autres est une question essentielle qui se pose dans le contexte néolibéral actuel. Toutefois, les possibilités d’opposer une telle résistance sont de plus en plus limitées par les exigences d’obtention de permis pour les professionnels du travail social. Le présent article examine les effets de la réglementation professionnelle du domaine du travail social au moyen de l’établissement de normes de compétence pour l’octroi de permis qui consistent à consolider les modes de connaissance occidentaux tout en transformant la profession, de concert avec le néolibéralisme, de manière à la soustraire à la désobéissance épistémique. Les normes de compétences élaborées par le Conseil canadien des organismes de réglementation en travail social serviront de point de départ d’une analyse des effets croisés du néolibéralisme sur la pratique du travail social et de la place essentielle que tient la réglementation de la profession dans cet écheveau d’effets. Les répercussions pour l’enseignement du travail social et l’impératif d’une résistance épistémique seront abordés en conclusion.

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Implications for Epistemic Resistance

Barbara A. Heron

Abstract: The question of how through social work practice, theory and research social workers engage in "epistemic disobedience" in respect to the "epistemicide" of Others' knowledges is crucial in the current neolielberal context. However, the possibilities of such resistance are becoming increasingly constrained by the encroachment of licensing requirements for social work professionals. This paper considers how the turn to professional regulation in social work via licensing competency standards further entrenches Western ways of knowing, while at the same time working in concert with neoliberalism to transform the social work profession in ways that stand to remove it from the reach of epistemic disobedience. The Canadian Council of Social Work Regulators' competency standards are taken as the starting point for an analysis, which seeks to articulate the intersecting impacts of neoliberalism in social work practice, and the crucial place of social work regulation within this web of effects. In conclusion, the implications for social work education are raised and the urgency of epistemic resistance is considered.

Keywords: neoliberalism, competency, standards, epistemic, resistance, disobedience

Abrégé : L'engagement des théoriciens et des chercheurs en travail social, à travers leur pratique, dans une « désobéissance épistémique » face à « l'épistémicide » des savoirs des Autres est une question essentielle qui se pose dans le contexte néolibéral actuel. Toutefois, les possibilités d'opposer une telle résistance sont de plus en plus limitées par les exigences d'obtention de permis pour les professionnels du travail social. Le présent article examine les effets de la réglementation professionnelle

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du domaine du travail social au moyen de l'établissement de normes de compétence pour l'octroi de permis qui consistent à consolider les modes de connaissance occidentaux tout en transformant la profession, de concert avec le néolibéralisme, de manière à la soustraire à la désobéissance épistémique. Les normes de compétences élaborées par le Conseil canadien des organismes de réglementation en travail social serviront de point de départ d'une analyse des effets croisés du néolibéralisme sur la pratique du travail social et de la place essentielle que tient la réglementation de la profession dans cet écheveau d'effets. Les répercussions pour l'enseignement du travail social et l'impératif d'une résistance épistémique seront abordés en conclusion.

Mots-clés : néolibéralisme, compétences, normes, épistémique, résistance, désobéissance

THE QUESTION OF HOW IN SOCIAL WORK practice social workers can engage in "epistemic disobedience" in respect to the "epistemicide" of Others' knowledges is crucial in the current context, and is particularly salient for social work's commitment to social justice. Ironically, however, what makes epistemic disobedience so important at this juncture is that it is being rendered less and less possible by a web of factors that, in a broad sense, can be summed up as neoliberalism and its effects. More specifically, the curtailment, if not actual foreclosure, of epistemic disobedience stands to be actualized by the Canadian Council of Social Work Regulators (CCSWR) licensing requirements for social work professionals – aka the 'competency standards.' This paper will take up these competency standards as the starting point for understanding how social work regulation secures Western ways of knowing, while at the same time works in concert with neoliberalism to transform the social work profession in ways that are removing it from the reach of epistemic disobedience, and by extension, social work's social justice commitment. In order to do this, key features of the competency standards will be examined, and an analysis offered, which seeks to articulate the intersecting impacts of neoliberalism in social work practice, social policy, and the place of social work regulation within this web of effects, a web that itself is constitutive of neoliberalism. In conclusion the implications for social work education and for epistemic resistance will be considered. First, however, the concepts of the epistemicide of Others' knowledges and epistemic disobedience must be discussed, and the encroachment of licensing regulation summarized.

Epistemic Disobedience

The recognition of the epistemicide of Others' knowledges originates with de Sousa Santos (2007), according to Hall and Tandon (2017),

who refer to it as "the process of dispossession of other knowledge … or the killing of knowledge systems" (p. 8). They note that the Western canon, which dominates the world, is a knowledge system that came into existence in Europe 500-550 years ago and was essential to colonialism. The foundations of Western epistemology were put in place by enlightenment scholars who sought to establish reason as a methodology and as the basis for the justification of knowledge (Kerr, 2014). The concept of epistemic disobedience is found in the work of Mignolo (2009), and is closely linked to his dichotomy of *anthropos* and *humanitas*: *anthropos* being those who inhabited non-European places and who were (and still are) both located and created by *humanitas*, the propagators of Western knowledge, colonizers, and knowing subjects. Mignolo holds that the former *anthropos*, who do not aspire to inclusion in *humanitas*, have two directions available to them, one of which he terms the "de-colonial option" – or options. These have in common the "colonial wound" and are aligned with de-westernizing approaches in rejecting "being told … what 'we' are, what our ranking is in relation to the ideal of *humanitas*, and what we have to do to be recognized as such" (p. 3). Although not defined in so many words by Mignolo, following his line of argument, epistemic disobedience would be a form of de-colonial thinking, and an actualization of a de-colonial option, which in fact demands such disobedience. As he states in summing up some other authors on de-colonization: "we know that we have to decolonize being, and to do so we have to start by decolonizing knowledge" (p. 13).

In light of this, it is clear that epistemic disobedience is a complex concept, and not one that would seem within either the purview or the ken of the current subjects of *humanitas* who make up the majority of social workers in Canada today. However, for purposes of this paper I wish to adapt Mignolo's concept of epistemic disobedience so as to render it something to which those of us among the *humanitas* may aspire, if only in hopes of not being implicated in further epistemic violence. In this paper I therefore treat the idea of epistemic resistance as within the reach of all practicing social workers and social work educators, although I recognize that this is more problematically the case for some bodies – and minds – than for others. My concern is not so much with who can actualize epistemic disobedience, as with whether it can be actualized given the current context. In utilizing and adapting, if (I hope) not quite abrogating, Mignolo's conceptualization, I am regarding epistemic resistance as challenging the prevailing episteme of Western knowledge and discourse. It is imperative to note here that from the outset social work has been deeply rooted in Western epistemology's foundational liberal concepts of rationality and scientific statements of reason, as was apparent, for example, in Mary Richmond's social diagnostic approach (Nothdurfter & Lorenz, 2010). Although now overlaid with and inflected by the discursive framework of neoliberalism, this dominant epistemology remains in place.

Epistemic resistance on the part of social workers would encompass an awareness of the operation and scope of this epistemology, its history, and its ongoing impact; a refusal to participate in propagating it; and support/create space for other knowledge systems. All of these are crucial to the actualization of social work's social justice commitment as well as to working against the epistemicide of Others' knowledges in social work practice. The argument I am making is that the current CCSWR competency standards, being instrumental to neoliberalism's web of impacts on social services, work to curtail social work's social justice aspirations and its resistance to the epistemicide of Others' knowledges. This curtailment entrenches the dominant episteme while furthering the reach of neoliberalism. I am not suggesting that prior to the advent of the competency standards, social work unequivocally advocated for and otherwise supported Others' ways of knowing – indeed, as mentioned above, social work has strong historical connections to liberalism's "rational man" – but social work has also had a social justice tradition that has co-existed with and resisted this direction, and that has found expression in recent years in the form of anti-oppressive practice, critical social work, structural social work, radical social work, feminist practice, and so on.

CCSWR Competency Standards

The CCSWR competency standards discussed here were developed as a means to determine who can be licensed as a practicing social worker in Canada. The immediate impetus for licensing derived from various coalescing interests: the 1994 Agreement on Internal Trade, social workers' own desires for professional recognition, the need to protect aspects of social work practice from the intrusion of other professions, and concerns to protect the public against unethical practices by social workers (Baines, 2004; Aronson & Hemingway, 2011; Rossiter & Heron, 2011; Spolander, Lambert, & Sanfaçon, 2016). However, the regulation of social workers through licensing, based on a particular kind of competency model, is an international phenomenon, not a Canadian one. For example, the United States, New Zealand, the UK, Hong Kong and South Africa have national registration arrangements (Beddoe & Duke, 2006). Canada's competency standards derive from the American ones developed by the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) and are so similar that the ASWB exams used in every US state, the District of Columbia, and the US Virgin Islands, are also utilized in Alberta and British Columbia (ASWB, 2017).

There are 152 competency standards included in the *Entry-Level Competency Profile for the Social Work Profession in Canada* (CCSWR, 2012). These are considered to be the "minimal essential profession-specific competencies that professionals must possess upon entering the first day

of professional practice" (pp. 7-8). The *Profile* document is organized into six competency blocks representing six primary areas of practice:

- Applying Ethical Standards: Competencies required for ethical and responsible service delivery.
- Conducting Assessments: Competencies required to determine client needs and assess their situations and eligibility for service.
- Planning Interventions: Competencies required to identify client goals and plan appropriate treatment and services.
- Delivering Services: Competencies required to provide services to address client needs.
- Improving Policies and Practices: Competencies required to actively engage in changes to social work policies and practices and for effective communication and collaboration with community stakeholders and professionals in social work and other professional areas to address issues related to social work interventions and protect best interests of the clients
- Engaging in Reflective Practice and Professional Development: Competencies required to monitor and manage one's own professional development, attitudes and behaviour to promote and advance the social work practice locally, nationally, and/or internationally. (CCSWR, p. 9)

Twenty-two competencies are specified under Ethical Standards, 13 under Policies and Practices, and nine under Reflective Practice and Professional Development. The great majority of the standards – 107 to be exact – therefore have to do with Assessment (43), Intervention (18), and Service Delivery (46): the stuff of traditional, client-based social work practice. It is to these standards that the discussion now turns.

While an examination of all 107 competency standards in these three blocks is beyond the scope of this paper, it is possible to identify some of the key common features, which speak to epistemic issues. In order to do so, some highlights of the competencies in each of the three blocks needs to be presented. The first 26 of the 43 competency standards in the Conducting Assessment block begin with the word "assess" and eight more pertain to information gathering, for a total of 34 standards around "fact finding." It is noteworthy that there is also an emphasis on risk: risk to both the client and others (CCSWR, p. 12). The second block, Planning Interventions, is the smallest of the three and the one that speaks most frequently to client participation in decision-making about service/intervention/treatment: seven competencies of the 17 in this block specify client involvement, which is given much less attention in the other blocks. However, throughout the competencies in the Planning Interventions block it is apparent that the social worker is the one who determines treatment plans and options. The third block, Delivering Services, makes the dominant role of the social worker clear within the

nuts and bolts, as it were, of the activities of service delivery, such as referral, coordination, report writing, etc. Similarly, eight standards here entail informing, or 'raising awareness' of, the client: eg., #122 "Inform clients about strategies to address separation issues;" and #126 "Raise awareness of parents about child development" (CCSWR, p. 14). In addition, one, #112, requires an evidence-based practice (EBP) approach: "Use research and evaluation and integrate evidence to inform practice" (ibid).

Perhaps the most salient theme running through the above competency standards is that of the centrality of certain kinds of knowledge in social work practice, which require the "knowing social worker," a professional who, as a capable fact finder, learns "the truth" of the client's problem and designs and implements interventions accordingly (Rossiter & Heron, 2011). The client is seen as available to be known and to be improved upon by the knowing worker. This presupposes certainty about what is knowable and what is to be known, which in turns rests not only on power relations between workers and clients, but also on epistemological assumptions deeply rooted in Western worldviews. The nature of the assumed social worker knowledge base is revealed in the phrasing of the information to be collected by the worker who is positioned as having an unmarked gaze: someone who asks seemingly neutral questions about, for example, clients' spiritual beliefs, cultural background, and sexual orientation. The implication is that the information thereby solicited can have only one meaning, which is apparent to all, which in other words is "objectively true" and which, as a reflection of "objective reality," would be understood in the same way regardless of who the worker is. Subjectivity, in the sense of personal bias as well as in the Foucauldian sense of subject position, is not admitted into this rationalist conceptualization of knowledge.

Occasionally the wording of the competency standards reveals more directly the underlying epistemological frame. Thus, there are notions such as person in the environment (competency #51), social functioning and development (#56), and psychosocial history (#58), which again suggest "objective knowledge" that can be known and that would not vary depending on the knower, and a conceptualization of human beings in Western, psychological terms. Indeed, the term psychosocial history is meant to be inclusive of social isolation and marginalization so that systemic oppression is reduced to a personal factor to be taken into consideration by the social worker. The overall thrust of the knowledge to be acquired by the worker implies that the client has, or *is*, the problem, rather than support a more critical analysis that would situate the client's issues in a broader context that itself contributes to and/or produces the problems. It is noteworthy too that the use of the word "client" rather than "service user" positions the person who is accessing service in a particular relationship to those providing it. All of the foregoing

express a positivist view of knowledge, which is an earmark of Western thinking. Most directly telling in this respect, however, is the competency standard (#112) that refers to utilizing evidence from research to inform practice, a requirement that speaks to a conception of research as able to produce information that affirms or negates the effectiveness of social work interventions and that can identify "best practices" to guide workers in all similar situations. Such empirical evidence often derives from positivist, scientific research (Plath, 2006). This brief overview of three of the competency blocks and their epistemological implications serves to illustrate the curtailment of space for epistemological disobedience that the *Competency Profile* accomplishes, through its implicit demand for epistemic obedience. I would suggest that for a social worker to be able to demonstrate these competencies is to ineluctably participate in this very curtailment. For even if a worker tries to think outside of the epistemological frame on which the competency standards rest, the conceptual foundation of the individual competencies requires that she or he work from within this framework to gather information about clients and their problems, design interventions, and implement them. The "competent" worker is the knower and teller, firmly entrenched in a relationship of power over, and operating from, Western ways of knowing with their attendant certainty about what is what, and who is who, in the world – *and* what is good, professional, social work practice. Not only is this incompatible with social work's social justice commitment, but there is a deep and pervasive congruency here with the very tenets that underlie Western epistemology and its current expression in the form of neoliberalism.

Analysis of Neoliberalism and its Effects

Much has been written about neoliberalism and its effects, and it is tempting to attribute the curtailment of the spaces for epistemic disobedience implicit in the competency standards to neoliberalism with its reliance on Western ways of knowing. What I hope to show here, however, is that in relationship to social work, neoliberalism is both productive of, and constituted by, a web of effects that impacts and reinforces the curtailment of epistemic disobedience in social work practice; a web of effects in which competency standards of the kind implemented by the Canadian Council of Social Work Regulators play an essential part. These effects include: a residual approach to social welfare, which assumes a climate of risk; fragmentation and tehnocratization of social services and social worker positions; valorization of evidence-based practice; and the operation of managerialism. It is within this larger context that social work's turn to professionalization, and consequent embracing of the competency standards, must be understood. So intertwined are the various parts of the web that it is difficult to discuss one aspect without speaking to the

others, and doing so necessitates some artificial demarcating between constituent parts. However, the following analysis will attempt to do just that so as to demonstrate the argument being made here in respect to the instrumental place of the competency standards in neoliberalism's impact on social work and epistemic resistance.

Neoliberalism

Dominelli (2007) posits that neoliberalism is the "political expression of worldwide economic globalization" (p. 31). She predicts that social services and education will both become increasingly subject to the reach of the market – to privatization – as the General Agreement on Trades in Services (GATS) becomes fully implemented by the World Trade Organization. Already, one consequence of neoliberalism has been the commodification of relationships between service users and service providers, so that the previous emphasis on relationship formation has been replaced by an insistence on following procedures that lead to predictable outcomes. In this vein, it is noteworthy that a focus on following procedures is integral to the CCSWR competency standards. As a consequence of the shift that Dominelli identifies, service delivery has become individualized and fragmented, and managerial control has intensified. These are points that I will return to below.

What, then, is neoliberalism? Harlow, Berg, Barry, and Chandler (2012) provide a comprehensive definition that was articulated by Harvey in 2005:

> Neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade. The role of the state is to create and preserve an institutional framework appropriate to such practices … There has everywhere been an emphatic turn towards neoliberalism in political-economic practices and thinking since the 1970s … Neoliberalism has, in short, become hegemonic as a mode of discourse. It has pervasive effects on ways of thought to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world. (pp. 536-537)

Spolander, Engelbrecht, and Sanfaçon (2016) similarly note that neoliberalism is not just an economic doctrine; it also shapes and infuses public discourse. Along the same line, van Heugten (2011) points out that neoliberalism has been refashioning how individual citizens understand the world, with the result that the market place has become the overriding principle of social organization. As she puts it: "[Under neoliberalism] needs become wants for which individuals are responsible, and health

and social welfare are commodities that should be delivered in such a way as to best support economic imperatives…" (p. 182). The social policy implications of van Heugten's assertion will be discussed next. First, however, it is important to note that the impact of neoliberalism is more than discursive; it is onto-epistemological, as Macias (2015) argues. Thus, neoliberalism produces and captures the subject who knows her- or himself within the neoliberal environment. This is a subject who, in the role of social worker, is constituted to work in ways that support neoliberalism by, for instance, embracing such standardizing and disciplining technologies as the competency standards. Pollack and Rossiter (2010) note that neoliberalism's imperative for subjects to construct themselves in economic, entrepreneurial terms has resulted in social work professionals focusing on self-interest rather than concern for the common good, and in private troubles being understood as consequences of personal failure. For, in contrast to the autonomous human subject essential to classical liberalism, a subject who can practice freedom, neoliberal subjectivity is produced to be enterprising, competitive, and entrepreneurial, with the consequence that those who do not demonstrate these qualities invite "surveillance, performance appraisal and accountability, and ever more vigilant forms of monitoring and control" (Olssen, 2016, p. 130). These are closely related to some of the effects of social work competency standards and the licensing that they bring into effect.

Residual Social Policy and 'Risk'

The ascendancy of neoliberalism has necessitated a change in welfare arrangements in all 35 Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries from the 1970s onward (Nothdurfter & Lorenz, 2010), with the consequence that the role of government has shifted from that of protecting the population from the market to that of extending the reach of the market, as Ward (2014) sums up. In fact, a central tenet of neoliberalism is to attack the idea of the public good (Olssen, 2016). This can be seen in Canada, where the redefined approach of government to its social responsibilities is expressed in the notion of the residual model of social policy (Good Gingrich, 2010). Rogowski defines residual social policy as:

> … both an assumption that welfare is primarily the responsibility of the family and community, together with a belief that when the state intervenes, it should provide only the minimum because welfare provided by the state is oppressive, inefficient and debilitating. (2011, p. 157)

Dominelli (2007) notes that residualism directs social spending to those who are considered the most in need in terms of their own welfare, education, and healthcare. However, in this model, individual blame and responsibility are accentuated so that while welfare benefits and services

are reduced, service users are construed as "customers or scroungers," (Spolander et al., 2016, p. 638) in other words, the failed subjects of neoliberalism. Herein lies a new spin on the historical division of the undeserving and deserving poor. Those who are seen as "customers," therefore, would be persons who have difficulties in managing their own risks, but are deemed eligible for state intervention via social work. In contrast, others who "fail" would be considered "scroungers."

To further understand why some persons who are unable to manage well in the neoliberal climate may be construed as scroungers, or failures (as Pollack and Rossiter termed it above) it is necessary to note that a common feature of the residual approach across different Western democracies is the prevalence of the concepts of "risk awareness" and "new punitiveness." This prevalence has been accomplished by positioning "scroungers" as threatening to the social fabric – in other words, posing a "risk" and deserving of punishment. Risk discourse and the punitive measures it warrants utilize categories about "kinds" of people, categories that permeate and shape social services, and, as Wilson (2011) points out, thereby enroll individual workers and agencies in the regulatory operation of neoliberalism. Webb (2008) has coined the term "actuarialism" to reference attempts made to predict where the greatest risk to society will be found and to target in advance, even act against, those deemed to be at risk of causing risk to themselves or others. As was noted in respect to the CCSWR competency standards, there is a corresponding emphasis on risk in the assessment block of standards.

Fragmentation and Technocratization of Social Services

Particular features of neoliberal residual social policy, namely public sector financial accountability and workforce casualization, are driving fragmentation in both social services as a field and the work of social workers themselves (Spolander et al., 2016). The neoliberal focus on efficiency in social spending favours the financial savings that accrue to all levels of government through funding time-limited projects and short-term contracts. In the interests of cutting social spending, the concept of lean work organization (LWO) has been incorporated and valorized in the public and non-profit sectors. Originating in the auto industry, LWO features outsourcing work, maintaining a flexible workforce, and efficiency and accuracy in delivering services and achieving objectives (Baines, 2004). Baines argues that in Canada such a narrow conception of efficiency has in turn led to specialization, which can also be read as fragmentation, of social services, which in turn has had the effect of constricting and de-skilling the social work profession as services become increasingly narrow in focus. This has happened not only in Canada, but in other countries as well. Van Heugten (2011), writing on social work regulation in New Zealand, notes the fragmentation of roles that

specialization calls for can enable cost saving. This is because resulting tasks can be accomplished by "a technologically-oriented workforce, who are not required or encouraged to draw on an educated capacity to reason across complex systems and contexts" (p. 182). Webb (2008) also posits that the actuarial approach mentioned above similarly recasts social work into low-level, functional tasks. This then sets the stage for increasing standardization in social work practice, particularly in the form of prescriptive program manuals to inform the actions and decisions of workers (Ponnert & Svensson, (2016). The parsing of social work practice in the competency standards is not only congruent with these trends, but serves to reinforce them.

Added to this is the transformative intrusion of technology into social work record keeping and other tasks, which means "social service work is increasingly computerized and remade as repetitive, technical tasks …" (Baines, 2004, p. 23). The transformation of much of social work practice into a kind of technological function has a synergistic relationship with the fragmentation of social services and the narrowed scope and reductive conceptualization of the work itself that is delineated here. The one facilitates and feeds into the others, and all are consistent with the approach of the competency standards. The evidence-based practice that is a requirement of CCSWR's standards is particularly salient in this regard.

Evidence-Based Practice

Evidence-based practice is described by Nothdurfter and Lorenz (2010) as following "an a-political, instrumentalist rationality, which tends to manage social affairs in a 'scientized' manner and to reduce social policy as well as social work practice to the exercise of social technology" (p. 50). The idea of evidence-based practice goes back to Sackett, who in 1997, writing in the field of medicine, argued for "the conscientious, explicit, and judicious use of current best evidence in making decisions about the care of individual patients" (as cited in Harlow, 2012, p. 543).

It is not surprising, in light of the above, that evidence-based practice is in the acendancy in social work today for, as Ponnert and Svensson (2016) note, EBP works well with the impetus to standardization in social work practice. This is not to categorize all EBP as problematic, however, but rather to indicate some of the issues and limitations inherent in the approach. EBP seems to offer a guarantee of high quality interventions that are assured of success, and this is attractive to employers. Not only does EBP hold out a promise of enabling agencies to meet the all-important, measurable outcomes required by funders under neoliberalism, but funding bodies themselves are increasingly insistent on the use of EBP (Wike et al., 2014), which fulfills the "what works agenda" of residual social policy (Nothdurfter & Lorenz, 2010). Agencies in turn prefer social

workers willing to follow guidelines and apply whatever positivist evidence is deemed appropriate for their practice (van Heugten, 2011), which is precisely the approach the competency standards call for.

Managerialism

The effects of EBP and the fragmentation/technicization of social work, including the casualization of labour and standardization of social work practice, are conducive to, and fostered by, the particular form of management that is called managerialism, or New Public Management (NPM) as it is particularly known in the UK. Spolander et al. (2016) refer to this as the "organisational implementation of neoliberalism" (p. 641), and Harlow et al. (2012) eloquently put it this way: "managerialism may be a means of making material the ideology or discourse of neoliberalism" (p. 536). Managerialism is an administrative/management model whereby social service organizations are "considered business units in which managers are given discretionary power to meet or exceed programme and individual goals" (Baines, 2004, p. 7). Accountability and efficiency are key, and value for money is a central concern (Ponnert & Svensson, 2016). Managerialism therefore seeks to ensure service outputs and outcomes, and utilizes audits and inspections to achieve performance management (Blyth, 2009). Under managerialism senior social workers are replaced by managers, who are preoccupied with performance and results (Harlow et al., 2012), but are not grounded in the realities of service delivery (Healy & Meagher, 2004). The adoption of managerialism in social service agencies has led to the development of performance indicators and targets for social worker practitioners to meet. Important here is the advent of technology-mediated reporting and the use of data bases to monitor and dictate the outcomes of practice (Macias, 2015), as well as the standardization of practice and adherence to program manuals mentioned earlier. What these forms of surveillance also accomplish is the accountability of social workers (Rogowski, 2011).

I would add that these are ways of working that have profoundly disciplining effects as well. The CCSWR competency standards, like similar ones in other Western countries, operate in harmony with the tenets and processes of managerialism precisely because the competency approach lends itself to these ways of working by valorizing a concretized, directive, and fragmented approach to social work practice that can be "objectively" assessed. With the advent of social work competency standards cast in a particular epistemic mold, the various strands of the web of neoliberalism's effects on social work are joined together in a mutually constitutive relationship.

Discussion

There have been numerous international critiques of the competency-standard model, and its place in social work regulation, over the last several years. Baines (2004) argues that, in their attempt to protect social work from the effects of the anti-public sector policies of residual welfare, social workers in the upper echelons of social services followed the example of other professions by seeking licensing and the legal recognition of their profession because they expected these would both prove the legitimacy of professional social work knowledge and protect social work's professional territory. In actual fact, the practicalities of fragmented social work practice have served to de-professionalize social work by eroding the boundaries of the field, and therefore the justification for expert knowledge (Harlow et al., 2012). Critics of regulation have similarly raised concerns about its negative impact on the exercise of professional judgment (Nothdurfter & Lorenz, 2010; Rossiter & Heron, 2011). Licensing has failed to provide protection to the most vulnerable of social service providers, or to safeguard against job losses in the field, particularly full-time permanent positions (Baines, 2004). This consequence seems almost axiomatic, given that breaking complex processes into discrete tasks allows for the hiring of less qualified workers at lower pay (van Heugten, 2011). Because of the nature of the competency standards that form the basis of licensing – standards that conceptualize competencies as discrete and "assessable" – social work regulation in fact works in concert with the de-skilling and fragmentation of the profession rather than serving to strengthen it, as proponents have contended.

In addition to the above critiques I would suggest that, as van Heugten (2011) asserted in respect to evidence-based practice, the new social work workplace needs the docile worker who understands her job in the ways that it is shaped by the processes described here, and for whom the idea of epistemic disobedience has no significance. As has been mentioned at different points in the foregoing discussion, the kind of social work practice that is being produced by the forces of neoliberalism, and the web of effects explicated here, does not require, or even want, a worker who exercises professional judgment based on critical analysis and reflection, much less an epistemically disobedient social-justice committed social worker. Aronson and Hemingway (2011) put it this way:

> The 'competent' social worker … is much more a job-ready employee trained to work in compliance with current constraints and agency procedures than a critical professional educated to exercise judgment and skill and to question constraints in the service of clients and communities. (281-182)

It is the valorization of the docile social worker that the competency standards are so crucial to delivering, because they confirm to the

professional worker what the social work field or practice *ought to be* like, with the implied corollary that the more it is like this, the more it is professional – even though these very processes, and the competency standards themselves, are acting to deskill and de-professionalize social work. More importantly, this is a direction that is antithetical to social work's social justice commitment. The competency standards, thus, not only parse social work practice into identifiable, discrete pieces for which an aspiring professional social worker can be examined to determine "competency," but define social work in the very ways neoliberalism seeks to transform it through the web of effects outlined here. This comprises a transformation of the field of social work in ways that inherently demand epistemic obedience to Western, neoliberal ways of knowing.

The CCSWR competency standards in their present form are, therefore, not only part and parcel of neoliberalism, and as such a predictable effect of it, but constitutive of neoliberalism's relationship to social work. They thereby play an instrumental role in the rapidly changing realities of the social work field and social work practice in Canada today. For this reason it is not accidental that parallel transformations, accompanied and facilitated by consubstantially similar approaches to social work regulation, are underway globally.

Conclusion

I would suggest it is only a matter of time until social work education in Canada is pressured to produce docile, "knowing" social workers. The possibility of epistemic disobedience then begins to become not only increasingly curtailed, but effectively foreclosed. This is an outcome the competency standards, *as they are now written*, are key to producing over time. I make the point about the competency standards as they are now written because I wish in passing to draw attention to the fact the province of Québec has a different set of competency standards, ones that are more in line with the complexities of social work professional practice, infused with a social justice orientation, and markedly less prescriptive (Heron, 2019). A further discussion of these standards is not within the purview of this paper, but it is nevertheless important that the existence of a viable alternative within Canada be noted.

Given what has been presented here, is epistemic disobedience still possible in social work practice? Can one resist the ways in which Western knowledge is being entrenched and expressed through neoliberalism's web of effects, and its pivotal instrument, the competency standards? At the outset of this paper I posited that epistemic resistance on the part of social workers would encompass an awareness of the operation and scope of the dominant epistemology, its history, and its ongoing impact; a refusal to participate in propagating it; and support/creating space for other knowledge systems, all of which are crucial to the actualization of

social work's social justice aspirations, as well as to working against the epistemicide of Others' knowledges in social work practice. I would say such epistemic resistance is possible in day-to-day social work practice, but I would also suggest we are at a moment where social work as we have known it is being transformed, and that this is a transformation in which the competency standards play an essential, even decisive, part. Particularly salient here is the competency standards' insistence on the knowing, fact-finding social worker who demonstrates certainty rather than a curious or questioning stance, much less a social justice conceptualization; in other words, a worker who is epistemically obedient to the dominant discourse of neoliberalism.

The future of social work can be seen in places like the UK where there are government-mandated entry points into child welfare and mental health work that essentially bypass university education (Cooper, Schraer, & McNicoll, 2016). The future is here too, with the effects of neoliberalism that have been discussed above. These changes, so well underway in the field, have deeply troubling implications for the social justice purpose of social work practice. Most concerning of all is the impact on people who need to access services that are diminishing and fragmented, and who find themselves confronted by workers who are being produced to perform a prescriptive kind of social work practice and to demonstrate themselves as competent in such reductive terms. I want to conclude by saying that, however limited the space is now, the need for epistemic disobedience has never been more critical.

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