



# Child welfare workers and social justice: Mending the disconnect



Anne Marie McLaughlin <sup>a,\*</sup>, Erin Gray <sup>b</sup>, Maureen Wilson <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> University of Calgary, Canada

<sup>b</sup> Lakehead University, Canada

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Received 25 June 2015

Received in revised form 5 November 2015

Accepted 5 November 2015

Available online 6 November 2015

### Keywords:

Social justice

Child welfare

Qualitative research

Distributive justice

Equality and fairness

## ABSTRACT

While professional social workers are clearly obligated to pursue social justice, controversies abound surrounding what that means in theory and practice. Perhaps nowhere are the paradoxes inherent in practice for social justice seen in sharper contrast than in the field of child welfare. Intended to protect the rights of children, child welfare systems themselves have been characterized as instruments of oppression. This article hopes to enrich that discourse through an examination of how these issues are conceptualized and acted upon by front-line child welfare social workers. Through in-depth interviews with 25 child welfare workers, and 3 focus groups, in two Canadian provinces, and employing grounded theory strategies for data collection and analysis, we have explored understandings of the social justice mandate and how it is expressed in practice. Participants in this study conceptualized social justice in terms of both wider societal goals of fairness and equality, and of the quality of interactions and relationships between social workers and those with whom they work; conceptual emphasis on one or the other of these we found to be associated with differences in practice. We reflect on the implications of each of these emphases for effectiveness in advancing social justice aims in the child welfare context, and make recommendations regarding a grounding for educators and practitioners in theoretical orientations that includes attention to the linkages between macro and micro opportunities to advance social justice.

© 2015 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

## 1. Introduction

Child welfare systems present a social justice paradox for social workers: on one hand intended as a means to provide justice for children (Sharland, 1999; Weinberg, 2010), on the other frequently evaluated as oppressive and unjust (Crane & Ellis, 2004). Justice for children occurs through the protection of them in the face of abuse and/or neglect. Yet the system itself has been implicated in the oppression of the poor, of Indigenous communities and others who find themselves outside of the dominant society (Bywaters, Brady, Sparks, & Bos, 2014; Lonne, Parton, Thomson, & Harries, 2009; Trocme, Knoke, & Blackstock, 2004). While social workers are obligated to strive for social justice (Canadian Association of Social Workers, 2005; International Federation of Social Workers, 2004), clarity is lacking about what the concept actually requires. This “conceptual muddle” has led to overuse as well as misuse of the notion (Hong & Hodge, 2009; Longres & Scanlon, 2001; Thyer, 2009).

These theoretical and conceptual controversies have a direct impact on social workers who experience difficulty translating the concept of social justice into practice (Hawkins, Fook, & Ryan, 2001; Reisch, 2013; McLaughlin, 2006). This has been blamed in part on the profession’s difficulty in articulating a “clear and common” understanding of social

justice (Olson, Reid, Threadgill-Goldson, Riffe, & Ryan, 2013; McLaughlin, 2006). However, rather than seeking a unifying conceptualization, some authors suggest social justice should be considered contextually (Gasker & Fischer, 2014; Miller, 2001) and pluralistically (Harris, 2006; Sen, 2009). To this end, the objective of this grounded theory study was to examine the concept of social justice from within the context of child welfare practice. Understanding how practicing social workers think about the concept of social justice will contribute to developing context sensitive goals and processes, and will ultimately help bridge the gap between theory and practice.

## 2. Background

### 2.1. Practice

A significant number of social workers are employed within the field of child welfare (Barth, Lloyd, Christ, Chapman, & Dickson, 2008). Child welfare social workers’ conceptualization of social justice may be influenced and constrained by social, economic and political pressures (Duffy & Collins, 2010; Swift & Callahan, 2009) and be sensitive to organizational climates (Smith & Donovan, 2003) and culture (Shim, 2014). Although historically viewed as an arena of social work practice, increasing managerialism, bureaucratization (Burton & van den Broek, 2009), and a trend toward de-professionalism have changed the work environment considerably over the last 20 years (Ellett & Leighninger, 2007; Healy & Meagher, 2004). The policy pendulum has swung

\* Corresponding author at: University of Calgary, 444, 11044-82 Ave., Edmonton, AB T6G 0T2, Canada.

E-mail address: [amclaugh@ucalgary.ca](mailto:amclaugh@ucalgary.ca) (A.M. McLaughlin).

between child protection at one extreme, and family preservation at the other (Driscoll, 2009). These policy directions impact practice, which has often been critiqued as risk averse, overly managerial and even punitive (Lonne et al., 2009; Swift & Callahan, 2009). This complex policy/practice environment challenges social work professionals, especially in the face of longstanding issues such as high caseloads, limited access to supervision (Chenot, Benton, & Hansung, 2009), and continuous staff and management turnover. These organizational stressors have high potential to negatively impact outcomes for children and families (Ellett, Ellis, Westbrook, & Dews, 2007; Strolin, McCarthy, & Caringi, 2007; Williams & Glisson, 2013).

Child welfare work focuses on vulnerable populations, is grounded in notions of social care, and is inextricably linked to social justice issues through its association with power and resource inequity (Lonne et al., 2009; Sharland, 1999; Swift & Callahan, 2009). Questions of justice within child welfare are complicated by tensions between competing paradigms with, for example, forensic approaches to child protection focused on risk management, and a justice approach achieved through the promotion of child welfare and wellbeing (Hayes & Spratt, 2009; Sharland, 1999; Spratt, 2001). Regardless of the paradigmatic perspective, within the arena of child welfare, the costs of social injustice are high. Overwhelmingly children from the most deprived communities are coming into care at rates much higher than children from more affluent communities (Bywaters et al., 2014). Social and economic inequities combine with race and culture to produce injustices such as racial disproportionality (The Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2011) and the overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in the child welfare system (Trocme et al., 2004). Children and families receiving services from child welfare systems often encounter complex social justice issues concerning human and cultural rights, access to resources, powerlessness, marginalization, inequity, and poverty (Hughes, 2013). Social workers must know and understand not only the impact of current inequities but also historical insults (Blackstock, 2011; Strega, 2007). Constrained by political and organizational complexities, social workers within the field of child welfare need a firm commitment to the pursuit of social justice if they are to effectively assist the vulnerable and resist the status quo. Yet social workers in child welfare often feel “mystified” regarding how best to incorporate social justice into practice (Strega, 2007, p. 68).

## 2.2. Theory

In the context of liberal democratic societies, historically three conceptualizations of social justice have dominated: utilitarian, libertarian and liberal equality (Brighouse, 2004; Kymlicka, 1995; Rawls, 1971; Sandel, 1984). Social work, both in theory and in practice, has been influenced by these traditions. Utilitarianism's maxim “the greatest good for the greatest number” implies that social justice can be obtained through actions and policies that improve the welfare of the greatest number. Alternatively, libertarians argue that any coercive intrusion by government into the lives of individuals constitutes injustice. Social justice for libertarians rests on securing and ensuring personal freedom, civil and property-rights, and the primacy of the free market. The philosophy of liberal equality holds that all persons are morally of equal value and as such should be treated with equal concern and respect. One way to demonstrate equal concern and respect, and therefore social justice, is to ensure all people have access to a sufficient level of goods and resources in order to enable them to pursue their own good life (Rawls, 1971).

These distributive theories of social justice (Miller, 2001) and have been critiqued from feminist, communitarian and multicultural perspectives and been found inadequate (Kymlicka, 1995; Nussbaum, 2000; Sen, 2009; Solas, 2008; Walzer, 1983; Young, 1990). Social justice requires more than a redistribution of resources and income; it also requires an examination of the very social structures, processes and practices that perpetuate inequity. Young (1990) offers a non-distributive

social justice perspective that focuses on unjust social processes and structures, including decision-making, that lead to oppression and domination. Feminist philosopher Martha Nussbaum (2003, 2011), advances the Capabilities Approach providing a normative account of what constitute human need and what governments should provide in order for individuals to maximize their capability to achieve well-being (McGrath Morris, 2002). Social workers are challenged to expand their understanding of social justice in order to recognize that different contexts and conditions require different responses.

Recently scholars (Harrison & Pierpont, 2007) have called for a research focus on direct practice in order that the profession develop an understanding, from the ground up, of how practicing social workers, sensitive to practice contexts, actually define and enact social justice. Interest is growing in speaking directly to front line practitioners to determine their conceptualization of social justice (McLaughlin, 2009; O'Brien, 2011; Olson et al., 2013). There has been little inquiry to date, however, into the significant practice context of child welfare. Child welfare is increasingly identified in the literature as an arena of social work in which the tension between social justice aims and practice is profound. This study, following on previous work exploring social justice for clinical social workers in a mental health setting (McLaughlin, 2009), responds to this call of how social workers in child welfare understand the concept of social justice and how this is reflected in their practice.

## 3. Method

Grounded theory was selected for this study for its process sensitivity, and for its usefulness in facilitating the uncovering of strategies people use in managing their daily lives (Benoliel, 2001). These processes include those that occur between social workers and clients or systems, in the pursuit of social justice (Charmaz, 2005; McCann & Clark, 2003), and grounded theory, as a research strategy, is also promotes sensitivity to larger social mechanisms and structures (Clarke, 2005).

### 3.1. Sampling and recruitment

We used purposive sampling to recruit study participants from within child welfare who represent a cogent example of a widespread and diverse sector of social work delivery. Inclusion criteria included the requirement of at least 6 months front line child protection experience and either a bachelor's or a master's degree in social work. Sampling was carried out in two Canadian provinces, Ontario and Alberta, selected for their ability to increase variability within the sample and for the existence of established social work networks available to the researchers. These two provinces differ in terms of the political and the professional contexts and as a result represent differing arenas of social work practice. In Alberta, social work is a regulated profession under the provincial Health Professions Act and child welfare services are delivered directly by the provincial government. In Ontario, registration with a professional association is voluntary. Ontario delivers its child welfare programs through a decentralized Children's Aid Society. Samples in each province included workers from both urban and rural locations. Recruitment was facilitated through mail-outs to available membership lists provided by each province's professional association, by advertising in local association newsletters and publications, and by word of mouth (snowball sampling).

### 3.2. Data collection

In total 25 social workers were individually interviewed. The youngest participants were 25 ( $n = 2$ ) years of age and the oldest participant was age 63. Of these, three were male and four identified as Aboriginal. In terms of practice experience 10 participants had less than 5 years of experience; 8 participants held and MSW, 17 held a BSW. Ethical approval was sought and obtained through two universities' institutional

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/6833913>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/6833913>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)