Interrogating the operation of empathy in social work with noncitizens

Author

Chizuru Nobe-Ghelani, School of Social Work, York University, Canada

Abstract

Based on interviews I conducted with social workers in Canada, this article offers a critique of empathy as a foundation of good social work. More specifically, I examine how empathic feelings produce the social worker as a knowing, moral and innocent subject in their work with noncitizens. Drawing on critical theories of affect and emotions that reconceptualise feelings as social practice, I examine how empathy facilitates proximity with and knowledge production about noncitizens among social workers. I attend to various historical lines of empathic feeling among differently positioned social workers and trace the concrete ways in which the feeling of empathy circulates and 'sticks', as social workers navigate exclusionary practices towards noncitizens. I argue that empathy, while imagined as an affective entry to minimising the professional–client distance, could instead function to secure social workers' sense of innocence and morality, confirming their professional identity as facilitated by the script of whiteness.

Introduction

In conventional social work approaches, empathy is unquestionably positioned as an essential quality for good social work. Empathy is imagined as an affective entry to better understand the clients' life situation, minimising professional–client distance. Accordingly, social work instructors are expected to teach empathic skills in the classroom so that students are ready to use them as tools for good social work practice. The certainty that empathy is a critical piece of good social work is what I wish to disrupt in this article. Based on interviews I conducted with seventeen social workers who have worked with noncitizens[1] in Toronto, Canada, this article argues that empathy could

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[1] My use of 'noncitizens' in this study carries both empirical and theoretical significance. Empirically, 'noncitizens' refer to migrants who lack the full immigration status that would allow them to stay permanently in the country of their residence (i.e., permanent residency or citizenship status). In Canada, these individuals include those who are considered legal (e.g., refugee claimants waiting for a decision, temporary workers), illegal (e.g., rejected claimants, expired visa holders), or undocumented (e.g., people without identity documents).

function to reproduce the centrality of whiteness in social work. Drawing on critical theories of affect and emotion that reconceptualise empathy as social practice, I trace the concrete ways in which the feeling of empathy circulates and 'sticks' as social workers navigate exclusionary practices towards noncitizens. I attend to different ways in which empathic feelings are associated with social workers' own experiences. My analysis shows that although the processes of this affective conduct differ depending on the social locations and personal biography of social workers, empathy nevertheless produces the subject position of social workers as moral, innocent and knowing subjects, confirming their professional identities that operate within the script of whiteness. Before I present my analysis of social workers' empathic feeling in their work with noncitizens, I examine how empathy is typically taken up in social work discourse, so that I can address the importance of conceptualising empathy differently.

Empathy in Social Work

Empathy can be described as "putting yourself in someone else's shoes" (Pedwell, 2014). This conventional understanding of empathy can be traced back to its semantic origins; in the German language the word *Einfuhlung* means *feeling into* the other (Stueber, as cited in Eriksson & Englander, 2017). Einfuhlung as imitation and an inner resonance was translated to the English-speaking world in the early twentieth century. It has been closely associated with the therapeutic relationship and become a standard term in helping relationships (Eriksson & Englander, 2017). Carl Rogers, one of the founders of humanistic psychology, asserted that empathy is a vital therapeutic tool for "entering the private world of the other and becoming thoroughly at home in it" (cited in Pedwell, 2014, pp. 6-7). Empathy is seen as an ability "to gain a grasp of the content of other people's minds and to predict and explain what they will think, feel and do" (Coplan & Goldie, cited in Pedwell, 2014, p. 123). American social work pioneer and early organiser of the Charity Organization Society, Mary Richmond described the use of "'imaginative sympathy' to see the world of the other in a similar way to how the other sees himself or herself, at the same time maintaining one's 'own professional work in mind'" (as cited in Eriksson & Englander, 2017, p. 608). While Richmond uses the term "sympathy," Eriksson and Englander (2017) assert that the meaning is more aligned with what would now be considered empathy; that is, imaginative perspective-taking.

I also use "noncitizens" theoretically to indicate a figure that is constituted through the particular script of Canadian citizenship.

Since the time of Mary Richmond, the centrality of empathy has continued in contemporary social work. Empathy is regarded as central to social work practice, particularly in the context of relationship building. The Canadian Association for Social Workers states in its "Standards of Practice" (1995) that "empathizing with clients' feeling and concerns" would help "establish egalitarian relationships with clients" (Standards III 2). Ingram (2012) argues that emotional attunement and empathy are the foundations of establishing an open and trusting relationship. The advancement of information technology, the transnational migration of people and global social justice movements have also facilitated emotional attunement and empathy globally. Knowledge attained through empathy is regarded as vital in ethical relationship building (Gerdes & Segal, 2009).

Gerdes and Segal (2009) have argued that, while empathy is emphasised in social work education and practice, there exists a lack of social work models of empathy. Accordingly, they advocate for a unified conceptualisation of empathy through social cognitive neuroscience. Gerdes (2011) explains that social cognitive neuroscience offers a new understanding of empathy that focuses on "how mirror neurons and neural networks mediate the process of empathy in the brain" (p. 235). According to social cognitive neuroscience, the human brain is wired to mimic other people, and this mimicry involves automatic and thus involuntary affective experiences in the observer (Gerdes & Segal, 2009). While affective responses are automatic and thus involuntary, Gerdes and Segal (2009) argued cognitive processing and conscious decision-making are voluntary, so it is possible to train and facilitate this empathic ability among social work students by helping them develop the skills of perspective-taking, self-awareness, and emotional regulation.

Drawing on a phenomenological approach, Eriksson and Englander (2017) critique Gerdes and Segal's model of empathy as the subjective experience of another person and instead advocate for other-oriented perspective-taking. Citing Zahavi, Eriksson and Englander (2017) explain that:

> … empathy is a basic, irreducible form of intentionality that is directed toward the experiences of others… In empathy, the experience you empathically understand remains that of the other. The focus is on the other, and not on yourself, not on what it would be like for you to be in the shoes of the other. (p. 610).

Eriksson and Englander (2007) suggest that empathy was experienced as a primordial account of interpersonal understanding, not as an embodied simulation as suggested by Gerdes (2011). Accordingly, they suggest that social workers should focus on the clients'

meaning expression—"what is expressed and what is unfolding right in front of us" (p. 619)—to foster and facilitate empathy.

Despite their different approaches to empathy, neuroscience and phenomenology coalesce around the notion that empathy, if done correctly, leads to better understanding of the client in social work practice. The fundamental assumption here is that the affective process of empathy and the knowledge following from it are fundamentally good. I wish to critique this assumed goodness of empathy via critical theories of affect and emotion. Several feminist scholars have noted that empathy is a double-edged sword. On the one hand, radically 'unsettling' affective experiences of empathy may lead to the realisation of one's complicity and thus social responsibility and meaningful engagement (Bartky, 1996; Davis, 2004; LaCapra, 2001). On the other hand, the claims to 'know' or represent the experiences of 'others' through empathic identification may involve forms of appropriation on the part of already 'privileged' subjects (Spelman, 1997). Hemmings (2011) also argues that empathy is not boundless but tends to follow along already defined lines of cultural investment.

In introducing the concept of affective economies, Ahmed (2004) explains that emotions, while often regarded as a private matter belonging to individuals, are indeed a social practice. By emphasising the sociality of emotion, however, Ahmed does not mean that emotions simply move in from outside (e.g., ideology of the state). Instead she proposes that emotions only exist within the mediation between the psychic and the social, and between the individual and the collective. The repetition of words and signs are important to this mediation, as it is through these repetitions that emotional responses are elicited. Through this repetitive mediation, emotions create 'others' by "working through signs and on bodies to materialise the surfaces and boundaries that are lived as worlds" (p. 191).

Ahmed (2004) further articulates that "[emotions are] not only about movement, they are also about attachments… what moves us, what makes us feel, is also that which holds us in place, or gives us a dwelling place… [that] connects bodies to other bodies" (p. 11). Thus, emotions circulate socially and work to align individuals with communities by creating social relationships that designate the rhetorical terrain of the nation and by defining whom we relate to as proximate and who is distant (Ahmed, 2004). Ahmed's theorisation of emotions poses an important disruption to how we think about empathy in social work. In the literature examined above and in the conventional social work approach, empathy is unquestionably placed as an essential quality of good social work. Accordingly, as I demonstrated above, the discussion on empathy within social work is

often centered on the question of how to cultivate empathy, not on how to question it. Yet, I argue that empathy cannot exist outside power relations.

My argument is similar to scholarship that critiques cultural competency, a concept that has gained significance in social work in the last few decades. Sakamoto (2007) argues that the literature of cultural competency presents culture as apolitical and neutral and lacks the analysis of power relations in the construction of culture. This is because cultural competency is centered on the idea of whiteness in social work where whiteness is regarded as the standard by which cultures are differentiated (Sakamoto, 2007). Wong (2003) similarly argues that the conceptualisation of culture in the cultural competency model dismisses the fluid boundaries and the political character of culture. The assumptions embedded in cultural competency are firstly, that culture is uniform and fixed, and thus knowable, and secondly, that practitioners are members of the dominant Euro-American culture and clients are members of a minority culture (Wong, 2003). These assumptions position people of the dominant culture as knowing subjects in opposition to people of minority cultures as needing help. Pon (2009) asserts that cultural competency resembles the new form of racism by essentialising culture and thus othering non-whites without using racist language. Pon argues that cultural competency constructs the knowledge of cultural 'others' while confirming the notion of a pure (white) Canada. This knowledge is founded on the ontology of forgetting (Lowe, as cited in Pon, 2009) which functions to erase the settler colonial and racist histories of Canada as well as of social work.

These critiques demonstrate how the knowledge produced through the discourse of cultural competency not only de-politicises marginalisation and oppression but functions to re-centre whiteness in social work. I suggest that empathy could function similarly: knowledge produced through empathic feelings makes particular power relations invisible, while confirming the professional identity of social workers which operates within the script of whiteness.

In the context of Canada, the centrality of whiteness in social work is historical. As several scholars have pointed out, social work in Canada has historically upheld whiteness as it emerged and developed as the professional helper and contributed to settler colonial projects (Johnstone, 2016; Lee & Ferrer, 2014; Nobe-Ghelani, 2019; O'Connell, 2013). As Canada established itself as a white settler nation-state, the discourse of civility became central to settler colonial projects, setting up whiteness, masculinity, and Britishness as the ideals towards which all 'Others' should progress (Coleman, 2006). Social workers were key players in upholding the discourse of civility

that simultaneously erases Indigenous Peoples and disciplines the racialised 'Other' through the institutionalisation of poor relief, residential school, newcomer settlement, and child welfare (Nobe-Ghelani, 2019). My analysis below elucidates how the historical investment in whiteness and settler colonialism continue to shape the affective operation of empathy in Canadian social work with noncitizen migrants in present days.

Context and Methods

This article is based on a larger study that examined the politics embedded in the social work with noncitizen migrants. The temporal focus of this study was 2008 to 2015, the time period during which major shifts took place in Canadian immigration and citizenship policy under the Conservative government of Stephen Harper. Methodologically, I employed Foucauldian concepts of discourse, power/knowledge and subject (Foucault, 1972, 1980, 2003) and examined the personal narratives of social workers, immigration and citizenship policy documents, and histories of border making to trace how everyday social work practices with noncitizens are entangled with global geopolitics as well as the colonial and racial politics of Canadian citizenship. Most of the data presented in this article comes from the in-depth interviews I conducted with seventeen social workers who have worked with noncitizen migrants in Toronto, Canada. To protect confidentiality, all participants' names were changed to pseudonyms.

In what follows, I illustrate how empathic feelings circulate and 'stick' to produce particular knowledge in social work with noncitizens. Considering the slippery nature of empathy, in addition to the narratives that explicitly use the word 'empathy', I also attend to affective moments when social workers express feelings for and with noncitizens. Drawing on critical theories of affect and emotion, I conceptualize the empathic expressions of social workers as a prevailing site where we can witness social and political relations involving the imbrication of cognitive, perceptual and affective processes (Ahmed, 2004; Pedwell, 2014).

Given that particular emerging discourses interact differently according to an individual's social locations and histories, I engage with two sets of analysis: the first focuses on the affective experiences of self-identified white Canadian-born social workers who entered the social work profession via their work experience in the global South. The second set focuses on affective experiences of social workers who have (or whose family have) migrated to Canada. By juxtaposing two types of transnational and migration experiences, my purpose is not to put them in a dichotomous position in a deterministic way. Rather, I hope to elucidate some ways in which empathic feelings are generated and function

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among social workers who bring to their work varying histories of transnational and migratory experiences.

Knowing Noncitizens through Work in the Global South

An examination of affective moments elucidates how social workers make a linkage between empathy and knowledge. Many believe that knowing the life circumstances of noncitizen clients helps to cultivate empathy in themselves, and those around them. Interestingly, social workers attributed their knowledge of noncitizens to their work experience abroad, particularly in the global South. This was particularly prevalent among self-identified white social workers. All self-identified white social workers, in one way or another, commented on how their work experience in the global South led to a deeper understanding of the global, geopolitical conditions that influence the lives of noncitizen clients in Toronto.

For example, Thomas, who used to work in a Central American country and in the United States, explained how his time abroad enabled him to be more understanding and empathic towards the clients he works with now in Toronto:

> You know, my time abroad taught me many things. That there really exists the global inequality that we talked about in the textbook, and people do suffer because of it. Having this kind of understanding makes you feel more empathic and compassionate towards suffering you see in the lives of my clients here… I have encountered a lot of different values while living in the U.S. too, which is very anti-immigrant. There was real lack of understanding of why people leave their country of origin, why people take the risk without being sure they can stay…. so, I think seeing those values [anti-immigrant] really made me aware of what mine were—how humanity doesn't stop at the border and how the border is made and how much it has changed. Am I supposed to stop caring about someone once they, you know, cross the border? Is that the defining line, are we only caring about people in this city or this province or this country?

As Thomas's account shows, knowledge gained through his time abroad was crucial in fostering empathy towards his noncitizen clients. Thomas imagined that empathy and compassion premised on knowledge of global geopolitics transcended the borders of communities and nations. For Tania, who also spent a few years in Central America prior to entering social work, experience in the global South led to not only an understanding of global geopolitics but also an awareness of her white privilege. Originally wanting to pursue a career in international development, Tania decided to pursue social work upon

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returning to Canada. When I asked her to elaborate on her decision to make this career shift, she stated:

> Well, like my privilege, right? There were so much I didn't understand that was cultural, like I could read all the books about (a Central American country) and conflicts there but you know, you realize when you get there, you know nothing. There are so much politics involved in developing capacity, and who am I, a white privileged lady to come down and teach them how to do things, right? So, you know, yes, I understand that there are some areas I had more education, but I had so much to learn too so I just felt conflicted about, you know, trying to be the person who knows. I felt like, a lot of development can be like colonial relations.

Tania felt conflicted about how her status as a white woman, which automatically positioned her as 'knower' and privileged in the context of international development. Awareness of her white privilege was prevalent throughout the interview and a recurring theme. Though not as extensively as Tania, other white social workers similarly recounted how they became aware of privilege and inequality through their time spent in the global South. Initially motivated by a sense of adventure, Kathy spent a year teaching English in a Central American country after finishing her undergraduate degree. Yet, her time in Central America offered more than the adventure she was expecting:

> I was kind of bombarded by civil war that is happening there. Lots of atrocities were happening in the country while I was there. And I was teaching English as a second language and just the way I was treated versus how local folks were treated and Indigenous peoples[2] were treated, it was really shocking to me, and again, the whole inequality… It was quite an experience….

Thomas's, Tania's and Kathy's accounts reflect the empathy and self-awareness gained through their experience in the global South. All of them, to varying degrees, became self-consciously aware of their whiteness, white privilege, global inequality, and even the violence embedded in the civilizing project of international development (in Tania's case). Their critical awareness of privilege and global inequity ignited their desire to pursue the social work profession upon their return to Canada.

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[2] Kathy is using the term "Indigenous peoples" in the context of a Central American country where she was teaching English.

For Tania, her critical awareness of privilege was heightened when she expressed her feelings about the immigration and citizenship policy reform that took place under the Conservative government:

> I feel like I blame on Harper, hate the federal government we have, I hate their attitude towards immigrants… I get angry at the federal government. I feel like it has been very ill of refugee claimants, and I am very sensitive to that. Anytime a friend or someone I know has anything negative to say about refugees, it takes a lot for me to stay in a moment to cope with it….

When I asked her to clarify where her sensitivity came from, Tania stated:

> I mean, myself I grew up in a very privileged position, and 10 years I worked with people who had such challenges that they never asked for, you know a lot of people don't understand. There is a divide between those who grew up in privilege and never necessarily had a connection with somebody who was a refugee, who was kidnapped or affected by war. They don't understand. You know, I feel like a need to educate my social network, or some of my colleagues, people in the education system about what their experiences might have been like, so that it will help them gain empathy or compassion, right? Maybe it will change the way they vote or it will change the way they see the immigration policy, anti-terrorist law or you know, some of these things that are kind of flying under the radar for most people. They don't see it even as an issue because they are not their people or they don't have a connection with the issue, you know?

Tania understands her sensitivity as coming from her experience working with underprivileged populations. As she learned about the challenges her clients faced, she came to see a divide between those who grew up with privilege like her, and those who did not. Accordingly, she feels obliged to educate her social network so that they too can learn about the challenges facing underprivileged people. She believes that this knowledge will help privileged people connect with the issues that underprivileged people face, and gain empathy and compassion towards them, which may then lead to changes in their political views.

While both Thomas and Tania stated that gaining a better understanding of noncitizens' life circumstances can lead to empathy and holds transformative potential, critical scholars question how, specifically, we can understand the workings of empathy, and its political and ethical implications. For example, Sandra Bartky (as cited in Pedwell, 2016) asks:

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What does it mean, exactly, to become more "sensitive" to the Other — in addition, that is, to my learning more about her circumstances? Does it require that I feel what she feels? Is this possible? Is it desirable? Does a heightened sensitivity require an imaginative entry into the affective life of the Other? ... Is such an entry possible? ... Does greater sensitivity require perhaps a merging of Self and Other? (p. 34)

Bartky's questions are important in thinking through how empathic knowledge could involve problematic forms of appropriation on the part of already privileged subjects (Pedwell, 2016; Spelman, 1997). Contrary to what Thomas and Tania reflect in their statements, empathic knowledge does not simply lead to the positive changes they envision. Instead, empathic feelings involve the risk of obscuring the complicity of the already privileged individual in wider relations of power in which marginalisation, oppression, and suffering occur (Pedwell, 2016). This risk is particularly high when empathic knowledge is gained through a highly privileged activity, such as work experience in the global South. While Tania is acutely aware of her privileged position, she blames the Conservative government (i.e., "I feel like I blame Harper") for anti-immigrant and anti-refugee sentiments, and consequently, she discursively removes herself from the power relations that actually situate her in a privileged position.

Tania's sense of innocence and moral superiority is further affirmed when she positions herself as a 'knower' who needs to educate other privileged people and is aware of the challenges and suffering of underprivileged people. As Lamble (2008) puts it, "Those who know and educate are positioned as morally superior to those who are ignorant: we congratulate ourselves for our political awareness without moving outside the comfort zone of moral authority and self-knowing" (p. 35). Once we position ourselves as moral subjects, it becomes extremely hard to see our own complicity in the unequal power relations that sustain our privileged position. Further, by positioning herself as a knowing subject, Tania secures her professional status as a (critical) social worker. As Healy (2000) suggests, professions are legitimised through the possession and exercise of special knowledge, and this knowledge, in turn, is associated with power and privilege.

The ways in which social workers position themselves through affective conduct point to Ahmed's argument about how identity is established through rendering strangers internal rather than external to identity: "the journey towards the stranger becomes a form of self-discovery, in which the stranger functions yet again to establish and define the 'I'" (Ahmed 2000, p. 6). In the case of the self-identified white social workers in this study, the 'I' imagined in their narratives relies on and is confirmed by the figure of the

(racialised) stranger (i.e. 'local' in the context of their work in the global South, noncitizens in the context of their work in Canada). In the process of establishing the 'I', the figure of the (racialised) stranger is frozen into the subordinate position of someone who is in need of help here in Canada and in the global South. Through this subject making, the historical notion of whiteness is produced as caring, innocent, moral and knowing (Heron, 2007). Accordingly, empathic knowledge does not always facilitate the transgressive relationship building in social work with noncitizens; instead, empathy sometimes functions to confirm white social workers as knowledgeable, moral, and innocent subjects.

Knowing and Feeling through Proximity: "I am an immigrant/refugee" too

While white social workers associate their empathic feelings with knowledge they primarily gained from their experience in the global South, other social workers, some of whom identified as racialised, discussed their own or their family's migration histories when expressing their empathic feelings towards noncitizens. For example, Erica, whose parents moved to Canada from Southeast Asia in the 1970s, discusses how much her immigrant parents influenced her choice to pursue her career as a social worker. She recounted childhood memories of her parents sponsoring and taking care of other newcomers despite their own challenges with resettlement. This childhood memory led to her desire to "help in any way and whatever capacity I can". Erica explains that she uses her parents' story to build rapport with her clients in her work in child welfare:

> I tend to bring up my own family's immigration story. I think by doing so, I kind of open myself and give them a little bit of information about myself, but also I try to explain, I know that coming to a new country for my parents was difficult, so I can imagine that it is for you as well. I think that it really opens doors and just opens them [noncitizens] to working with me.

Jonas, who works at a Community Health Centre, recounted his family migration history and discussed how his migration experience has enabled him to have empathy towards noncitizens:

> My family comes originally from [a Southeast Asian country]. We were refugees. It is not easy. But at least we were sponsored… You see now Syrian people, the same. No different then. So, I can empathize a little bit. I can see that it is not easy; I can see that desperation, the need and vulnerability as well. So for me, it is easy to engage and easy to work with the clients like that. I don't see it as difficult at all.

I can see that what they go through will happen to me easily. To my family, easily. That is what happened to us. So I don't see difference between what I am and them. I don't see it as legal thing or I don't see it as... yeah, I don't see it different.

Jocelyn, another social worker who works at a school board, similarly recounted her own history:

My family faced discrimination since I was young, simply because we were [a particular ethnic background]. My parents couldn't even go to school, and I grew up thinking that it was not fair… When things got really bad, we moved to [a neighbouring country]. When I came to Canada too, it was difficult. I didn't have money, no house… So I think that these experiences have a lot to do with how I work with my clients now… like I think I understand them better, because I went through the same.

While Erica, Jonas, and Jocelyn described their migration histories differently, their feelings of empathy towards noncitizens were drawn from their own histories of oppression and hardship during the migration process. In other words, they consider their empathy not as simply a feeling (i.e., as if you were in another's situation) but a shared migration experience (i.e., I am an immigrant/refugee too). Empathy based on shared experience is, as Ahmed (2004) would argue, 'sticky'; it becomes central to the ways in which racialized social workers set themselves apart from white Canadian-born social workers and make sense of their social work practice and relationships with noncitizens. Jocelyn's account describes the stickiness of empathy based on shared experience:

If you don't suffer, you don't quite understand... Oppression, oppression is something that gets stuck in your brain. When you experience it, you always feel you have to do something about it. It's like a… urge to help. Maybe, as I told you because I had always seen my parents suffer… When I started to work with immigrants in Canada, for example, I always compare their lives with ours. Imagine if you can't go to school just because of who you are. So I said, now I have power. I can help, you know. Long, long time ago my parents didn't get this kind of help just because of who they were….

Here Jocelyn addresses the impossibility of separating her personal history of oppression (i.e., oppression is something "stuck in your brain") from her work with noncitizens. As she recounts her childhood and her parents' suffering, her empathy - based on shared experience - prompts her "to do something about it" whenever she sees oppression. She describes this as an impulse (i.e. "urge to help"), something that doesn't involve much

thinking. At the same time, her accounts make it clear that her empathic feeling is grounded in her history of oppression. In other words, the stickiness of empathy is produced historically. When Jocelyn and other racialised social workers deploy the feeling of empathy based on their own version of migration, the histories become sticky, prompting them to discursively and affectively position themselves in proximity to their noncitizen clients.

I want to suggest that both possibility and risk exist in this stickiness. On one level, this stickiness is a reminder of the injustice embedded in the global migration regime and Canadian immigration system. The social workers I spoke with, particularly those who came as refugees to Canada, were well aware of how global geopolitics played a role in their or their family's migration. The social workers' narratives above also point to how the Canadian immigration system and resettlement process is far from the idyllic experience captured by the celebratory script of multicultural Canada. As common struggles of migration experiences become apparent, it is possible to disrupt the celebratory script of multicultural Canada and consider how global geopolitics and the Canadian immigration regime intersect to produce marginalization and oppression.

But there are also risks in this stickiness. As social workers position themselves in discursive proximity to their client based on their migration history, migration experiences become the 'truth' or reference point of empathy. Empathy rests on a particular story of the migration experience—in many cases a story of pain and suffering—that social workers identify with. In this process, the story of pain and suffering comes to hold an essentialising quality. In her study of racialised social workers in Canada, Badwall (2013) identified the ways in which racialised social workers constructed their professional identities by framing their experience of suffering and oppression as foundational to being a good social worker. Badwall (2013) addresses the tension racialised social workers must negotiate because their identities are built upon their cultural, social, and political histories as well as discourses shaping professionalism. Badwall (2013) argues that as racialised social workers use the essentialising script of suffering and oppression to construct a space of belonging within a mostly white profession, this script also works to secure a subject position that is moral and innocent. Drawing on Badwall (2013), I contend that while social workers gain critical awareness of the geopolitical conditions that shape the marginalisation of noncitizens through their own migration experiences, this critical awareness secures their subject position as moral and innocent, particularly when their migration experience is constructed via essentialising script of suffering and oppression. In other words, empathic feelings premised on their 'shared experiences' move them to a site of goodness and innocence

while also constructing a space of belonging in white dominant social work and the Canadian nation-state.

Further, while social work often represents migration as a site of struggle, migration in itself is not a purely forced or voluntary phenomenon. As Ahmed (2000) puts it, "[m]igration involves complex and contradictory relationships to social privilege and marginality (they are not necessarily about one or the other) and they involve complex acts of narration through which families imagine a mythic past" (p. 91). In other words, migration is not simply about shared suffering that social workers' empathy tends to draw on. Ahmed (2000) reminds us that the telling of (migration) stories "is bound up with — touched by — the forming of new communities. In this sense, memory can be understood as a collective act which produces its object (the 'we'), rather than reflects on it" (Ahmed, 2000, p. 91). Drawing on Ahmed, I suggest that when we as social workers discursively position ourselves in proximity based on our migration histories, we are attempting to transcend a line that separates us as professional helpers from vulnerable noncitizen clients.

Yet, as social workers become a unified 'we' with their noncitizen clients based on 'shared' histories of migration, other relations of power that operate to sustain our privileged position as professional helper become overlooked. Chapman (2011) argues that while referencing our own experience with social work clients may be inevitable and certainly a useful way of incorporating new information and viewpoints, it carries the considerable risk of imposing our meaning, context, values, or norms onto others if we do not take interlocking power relations into consideration. For example, as professional helper, a social worker is afforded the power to 'help'. Jocelyn's account signals this acknowledgement when she states, "Now I have a power. I can help." However, her accounts of being a helper do not address how 'helping' in the social work profession in itself operates within the hierarchical power relations that are founded on the script of whiteness. Instead, empathic feelings through shared migration histories lead social workers to construct a meaning of helping that is more authentic, pure, and relatively free from oppressive power relations.

Here I want to draw on Jafri's (2012) discussion of the distinction between privilege and complicity in regards to settlerhood. Attending to the conversations around communities of colour and their relationship to settler colonialism, she proposes a shift from discussing privilege to complicity in order to "think about settlerhood not as an object that we possess, but as a field of operation into which we become socially positioned and implicated" (2012, n.p.). In considering this shift, Jafri (2012) poses a critical question:

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"Is it possible to be complicit within a system of hierarchical power without at the same time accruing its benefits?" (2012, n.p.). Jafri suggests that considering systemic inequities, underemployment, and the racialisation of poverty, most people of colour do not enjoy settler privilege; however, people of colour, as settlers on this land, are still complicit in an ongoing colonising process. Drawing on Jafri's discussion, I argue that although social workers with migration histories, particularly those who are racialised, may not have enjoyed the privilege that is accorded to white Canadian-born social workers, we are still complicit in a system of hierarchical power that positions us as professional helpers. Just as people of colour cannot escape historical and ongoing settler colonialism as we live on stolen land, social workers with migration histories, racialised or otherwise, cannot escape the history and contemporary practice of social work that is built on white supremacy and Indigenous dispossession as we become and act as professional helpers. However, when social workers generate empathic feelings towards noncitizens through shared migration histories, there is little affective space to consider our complicity as professional helpers and settlers on this stolen land.

Concluding Remarks

This article disrupted the certainty of empathy in social work through a critical analysis of social work with noncitizens. Attending to different transnational and migration experiences among social workers, I examined how empathic feelings emerged, circulated, and became 'sticky' through broader histories and social relations of power. I identified that white social workers often associated their empathic feelings towards noncitizens with knowledge gained abroad, particularly through their work in the global South. The accounts of white social workers suggest that they gained a critical awareness of global geopolitics as well as awareness of their own privilege through their time in the global South. Yet, this critical awareness did not necessarily disrupt the operation of privilege; it re-secured the privileged positions of white social workers as superior knowing subjects who are more aware of global geopolitical conditions, thereby securing their sense of morality and innocence.

A different pattern of affective conduct of empathy was traced in social workers with migration histories. Unlike white social workers whose empathic feelings operated through their work experience in global South, they often associated their empathic feelings with their own or their families' migration histories to Canada. In other words, their empathic feelings were premised on the discourse of "I am an immigrant/refugee too." Accordingly, empathy was employed to position themselves in proximity to the noncitizens they work with. I have suggested that the empathic feelings of social workers

with migration history, function to establish their legitimacy as professional helpers who understand noncitizen clients better through their own struggles of migration and resettlement. Yet, as social workers carry their histories of oppression and marginalisation into their work with noncitizens, they do not see themselves as complicit in the oppressive helping relations that operate within the script of whiteness.

Though this paper focused on the affective operation of empathy in the context of social work with noncitizen migrants, the discussion can be applicable to other contexts of social work practices in which social workers base their empathic feeling on their presumed knowledge of or similar experiences with their clients. Accordingly, the analysis offered here poses a critical question as to how empathy is treated in social work practice and education. I suggest that when empathy is depoliticised and understood as an affective entry or skill to gain the knowledge of the client 'Other', it could reproduce the oppressive helping relations that operated within the script of whiteness. This is not to say that empathy always functions to secure a sense of morality and innocence. Nor do I suggest that empathy has no transformative potential. Gregorio and Merolli (2016) point out that affect in itself has been deployed both to control and resist. This is because affect has an ephemeral, evolving, unpredictable character, rendering it inherently flexible and open to deployment against the state, capitalist economic structures, and related racist, gendered, and colonial logic (Gregorio & Merolli, 2016, p. 938). Pedwell (2016) similarly points to the ambivalent, complex, and contingent nature of empathy and proposes approaching empathy in ways that "open up rather than resolve, that mutate rather than assimilate, and that invent rather than transcribe" (p. 55). Pedwell (2016) calls this "empathic failures" (p. 55)—that is, when empathy is no longer about knowledge of and proximity to others, but rather about embracing difference, conflict, and the impossibility of certainty.

In the context of social work, Pedwell's conceptualisation of "empathic failures" directs us to understand empathy not as a foundation of proximity with or knowledge of the client but an opening to consider broader social relations at play in the way we feel about our clients. This opening may allow social workers to ask questions such as: How do societal norms and assumptions shape the way I feel empathic towards particular clients (but not others)? What do my empathic feelings do to my professional identity? What does my empathic feelings tell me about the way I relate to my clients? How do my personal experiences come into play in the way I feel about my clients? How do my empathic feelings prompt me to address my own complicity in clients' struggles? and How can I transform my empathic feelings into meaningful political action? I suggest that this line of questioning disrupts the certainty of our professional knowledge or high moral standards associated with empathy; instead it fosters the critical awareness of power

relations embedded in our empathic feelings as well as an appreciation of the complexity of our social world. Such an approach to empathy may open up opportunities to explore meaningful ethical relationships and political engagement.

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