

# **Anniversaries, Critical Reflexivity and Being on the Right Side of History**

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This is an important year in which the Social Work programs at the University of Sydney and the University of British Columbia are marking significant anniversaries and using these anniversaries as an opportunity to look forward and backward to assess our successes as well as times when we could have done better. At the University of Sydney, Social Work is celebrating their 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary while at University of British Columbia we are celebrating our 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary. In the tradition of critical reflexivity that is central to our discipline (Morley, 2020; 2016), when we look back over our many years of research and education we have many, many things to be proud of, but we also can identify moments where we could have done better or failed to embrace a sufficiently critical and in-depth analysis and, unintentionally, ended up standing on the wrong side of history. Ioakimidis and Trimikliniotis (2020) argue that the prevailing approach in social work history is to ignore the profession's "complicity, or at least acquiescence, in acts of state violence and institutionalised oppression" (p. 2). They argue further that "re-discovering and address(ing) these histories, not only would allow social work to learn from mistakes of the past, but, most importantly it will allow a reconciliatory process with the victims of past violence" (p. 2). At the University of Sydney and the University of British Columbia, we want to mark our important anniversaries by recommitting ourselves to standing

on the right side of history on social issues, and this Special Issue is part of building critical analysis, research and pedagogy dedicated to identifying the right side of history and defending this with all our knowledge, passion and skills.

Regrettably, there are moments in the history of social work where we uncritically joined mainstream practice in ways that contributed to the harm experienced by a number of groups including Indigenous peoples, racialized populations, LGBTQI2S+ people, women, people with disabilities, and other people experiencing what they now call “wicked” social problems (Head & Alford, 2015) or multi-layered, complex, interwoven, and hard to solve social, economic, physical and mental health problems. As Ioakimidis and Trimikliniotis (2020) note, “One side of social work’s history inflicted unspeakable damage to some of the most vulnerable people in society (p. 13)”. In Australia and Canada, a particularly grim phase of oppressive social work practice included participation in the apprehension of First Nations children including the stolen generations in Australia, residential schools in Canada and the sixties scoop, as well as ongoing problems in the delivery of fair, anti-racist and equitable child welfare services in both countries. Similarly, ideas and policies of white superiority and racism have too often found their way into every day, commonsense explanations for spaces in which social workers are active including: poverty, addictions, homelessness, police violence, and domestic violence.

Clinical social workers have also perpetrated harm and pain by uncritically adopted the diagnoses of the DSM or Diagnostic Systems Manual. A particularly egregious example of this concerns pathologizing those with sexualities that did not fit the narrow definition of heteronormativity within the DSM. Indeed, homosexuality was not removed as a form of psychopathology from the DSM until 1973, and many years and decades after LBGTQI+

populations continued to feel the damaging impacts of this allegedly evidence-based, “medical” diagnosis.

Though many social workers have defended the rights of women and female-identified people, others have internalized all or parts of binary, gendered norms that mean that women and female-identified people remain the second sex (de Beauvoir, 2010), and the targets of violence, exploitation and inequity. Similarly, people with disabilities have often had to fight to have their voices heard within social services, though the growing appreciation of the social model of (dis)ability has provided an important way for social workers to reconceptualize (dis)ability as the attitudes and structures of society, rather than the bio medical diagnosis of an individual.

Simply acknowledging our dangerous histories is not enough. As Ioakimidis and Trimikliniotis (2020) note three broad factors facilitated the profession’s involvement in activities on the wrong side of history: 1) a focus on social work as a purely technical and apolitical activity; 2) prioritizing the self-image and status of the profession over commitment to equity and the human rights of the communities served sometimes leading to participation in pseudo-science including eugenics, rigid positivism particularly psychiatric and bio-medical models and the uncritical involvement in government projects, including the Nazi government in Germany, the Franco fascist government in Spain and many others; and 3) individualizing ethical dilemmas by reducing complex political debates to questions of individual skill and responsibility (p. 7-8). In order to counter this oppressive tendency in social work, our work needs to be firmly centered in human rights and transformative justice as well as practices of resistance and social justice-based change.

Resistance to social injustice is a central and foundational component of critical and anti-oppressive approaches to social work (Baines et al., 2019; Pease et al., 2016; Strier & Bershtling,

2016). As Ioakimidis and Trimikliniotis (2020) note, activism and the pursuit of social justice has always been an aspect of radical approaches to social work and Australia and Canada are no exception. For example, there have always been social workers who resigned their jobs instead of enforcing policies that they felt to be immoral and oppressive. Similarly, there have always been social workers who advocated for service users and for policy change from within the system and outside of it (Kennedy Kish et al., 2017). There have also been those who quietly or openly bent rules in the organizations in which they were employed, and sometimes openly confronting oppressive situation and sometimes “flying under the radar” of injurious and exclusionary regulations in order to defend the dignity and entitlements of service users and the larger community (Davies, 2017; Smith, 2017). There have also been many, like the many social workers we currently see involved in Black Lives Matters protests worldwide, who are prepared to undertake ongoing activism to challenge taken-for-granted injustices and inequities, and push policy makers and elected officials beyond their comfort zones to new social justice-engaged practices and policies.

In British Columbia, to mark our 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary and our anti-oppressive social work tradition, the School of Social Work issued a number of important statements this year. Principally among these is a Statement of Accountability and Commitment to Indigenous people. The statement is an integral part of our process of critical reflection as well as a commitment to reconciliation and decolonization with the ancestral, traditional owners of the country we currently call Canada. In October of this year, we will hold an online event at the University of British Columbia (to which you are all invited), where we formally present this statement and invite discussion and reflection from Elders and Indigenous alumni from the School of Social Work. We hope this helps to propel an entirely new generation of social workers committed to

working as allies on reconciliation with Indigenous people and on other overlapping, pressing social justice issues.

Following hate speech, threats and hate speakers on campus, the UBC School of Social Work also issued a statement on the rights of transgendered people on campus. We undertook this as part of our critical reflection on the policies of the institution in which we are employed and the way that they may unintentionally promote oppression and hatred while seeking to defend rights such as free speech. We were part of a large coalition of groups and disciplines demanding changes and we are pleased to say that UBC has now adopted a more forward-looking policy on hate speech and closely vetting and vetoing those speakers and events that promote hatred and violence at any member of our UBC community.

Despite social work's ignominious history in both countries, it is important to emphasize that there are many moments in the history of social work where we provided emancipatory services and support and stood in solidarity with marginalized and vulnerable groups, even when we were among the few doing so. A recent example of this took place in early March when the UBC School of Social Work chartered a bus and took 60 students and faculty members down to the Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women Annual Memorial Walk through the downtown eastside of Vancouver. It was a very moving commemoration and a demonstration of our commitment to stand with those leading the fight for social justice for Indigenous people in our cities and countries.

## Reflecting on and celebrating 80 years of Social Work Education in Australia (Fran Waugh PhD)

In this editorial, Donna has highlighted the shortcomings of social work practices in both Canada and Australia that support the three claims proposed by Ioakimidis and Trimikliniotis (2020) in *Making Sense of Social Work's Troubled Past: Professional Identity, Collective Memory and the Quest for Historical Justice*. While I do not purport to make claims about social work practices in Canada, I suggest broadening the analysis to take into account the historical, political and economic contexts of Australian social work practice during the past 80 years to interrogate where social work sits in the webs of decision-making power that have resulted in the injustices and oppressions described. I am also interested in highlighting some of the moves within social work education in Australia that have sought to disrupt these power relations.

During the past 20 years as a social work educator at the University of Sydney, critical reflective pedagogy and practices have been central in assisting students integrate their campus and practice learning experiences. Preparing students to be social change agents in the context of increasing complexities in the lives of service users, increasing inequity, continual change and uncertainty, requires students to gain knowledge and confidence in understanding the interdependence of relevant theories, research, social work practices and social policies. The current challenges and opportunities facing social work education in Australia have been discussed by Crisp (2019), Craik (2019) and myself (Waugh, 2019), noting the various ways in which social work students are responding. This kind of work has found that adopting an

intersectional approach, feminist theories, structural lens and anti-oppressive approach, students employ their critical analysis skills, in seeking to understand the person in their social environment. Social work values, ethics and skills underpin their actions and interaction with others, in assessment, intervention, advocacy, activism and as future leaders. As lifelong learners, social work educators and students are called to be open to new ways of improving practice, challenging inequitable policies and structures and engaging in constructive activism.

In our chapter *Afterword: Resistance, White Fragility and Late Neoliberalism* (Baines and Waugh, 2019, pp.247-260) we provide two vignettes of contemporary Australian social work practice that illustrate the kinds of responses that can be deployed in the current context. The first shows the agency of an individual worker in being responsive and culturally sensitive to service-users needs in a refuge for women and children who have experienced domestic violence. The second is an example of the importance of the agency of a manager in influencing organisational culture where Board members are risk adverse. We note in the conclusion to this account:

*Our vignettes underscore the importance of a social analysis, individual and collective critical reflection and a willingness to ‘massage’ practices that reproduce inequities and exclusion (Fook 2016; Pease et al. 2016). Though spaces for critical reflection and resistance are difficult to find in neoliberal, managerialised workplaces (Baines 2017; Morley 2011; Carey 2014), our vignettes show that this is still possible, and that strong leaders can help enlarge and legitimise this space.*

*The workers and managers in these vignettes found creative ways to covertly or overtly shift power and agency to staff and service users, and to live in tandem with the values that drew them to the field in the first place. (Baines & Waugh, 2019, p. 258)*

In reflecting on the 80 years of social work education at the University of Sydney I would also like to pay tribute to past and current champions of social justice across Australia. Norma Parker's extraordinary leadership in social work education and commitment to the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) is a cause for deep celebration. There are numerous social work academics and practitioners who are current champions and I would particularly like to acknowledge Cassandra Golding for her leadership of the Australian Council of Social Services, Imelda Dodds for her past leadership of the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), Cathy Humphreys for her leadership in research and education, and Karen Healy for her leadership in education and contribution to the AASW. The collaboration and support of members of the Australian Council of Heads of School of Social Work (ACHSSW) with the AASW during the COVID-19 pandemic and in response to the proposed Higher Education Reforms, exemplifies the strengths of social work. The Australian and New Zealand Social Work and Welfare Education and Research (ANZSWWER) online symposium, and the National Field Education Network (NFEN) to be hosted by the University of Sydney in November, 2020, with the theme *Social Work in a Climate of Change* highlights the vibrancy of social work in Australia and New Zealand. This bodes well for the future of Social Work as we continue to strive to be agents of social justice in the diverse contexts of human and community services. I take this opportunity to endorse Christine Craik's final comment *This is an exciting time for social work education with so much potential* (2019, p.131) in her guest editorial, *Social Work Education: Challenges and Opportunities*.

## Keynote addresses

As further extension of our commitment to critical reflexivity, this Special Anniversary Issue includes the keynote addresses of three leading academics in critical social work, thought and practice. All three addresses provide in-depth critical analysis, positive recommendations and inspiring strategies aimed at keeping us on the right of history and in defense of social justice. Jude Irwin, Emeritus Professor of Social Work and Social Justice, University of Sydney delivered the central address at the ANZSWWER Symposium at Edith Cowan University (Perth) in 2019, entitled, *Activism and Social Change: Enacting Social Justice - Challenging, Disrupting and Building Resistance*. In this pivotal address, Irwin explored the challenges social work schools confront in building the knowledge, skills and commitment needed to provide our students with the confidence to work towards social change and a more just society. Noting that neo-liberalism has increasingly aligned higher educational institutions with the private market and corporate priorities, Irwin asked, how can we as educators, researchers, practitioners, and students move beyond this to work towards a just society? Her solutions were comprehensive and layered, involving critical social analysis, critical reflection, social organizing and, in particular, activism. Irwin defined activism as an intentional action to promote, impede, direct, or intervene to bring about social, political, economic, or environmental change which will contribute to social justice, equality, and freedom. She reviewed aspects of her personal history to highlight the ongoing importance of activism and encourages future practitioners to apply these kinds of insights and analysis to the pressing social issues of climate change, refugees, violence, human rights and equality for particular groups and communities, urban development, homelessness, poverty, racism, homophobia, etc. Irwin concluded her address on an energizing note, in her words,

Working towards a just society demands that we take risks, speak out, stand up, act out and be outrageous. All it takes to become an activist are passion, knowledge, and a desire to help bring about change. Anyone can do it! I invite you to do this in your own way.

In February of 2020, the UBC School of Social Work held an international Symposium on Social Justice and an Ethic of Care. Consistent with the theme of critical reflection, we invited Professor Christine Morley (Queensland University of Technology), an international scholar on critical reflexivity, critical pedagogy and theory as the keynote for the Symposium. Professor Morley delivered a keynote address titled, “Reactivating Social Work Practice as an Emancipatory Project: The Role of Critical Theory, Pedagogy and Reflection”. Reviewing the devastating experience of massive bush fires and climate change in Australia over the last year, Morley argued that these events bring home the message that Australians could become some of the world’s first climate change refugees (Pandey, 2020). She noted that this is deeply ironic given Australia continues to have the harshest policies globally for refugees and asylum seekers (Briskman, 2020). Though many feel cynical and powerless in the face of the massive social problems facing humanity, Morley asserted an important role for social work to play in activating alternative, emancipatory responses through social activism, advocacy and critical reflection (Morley 2020, 2016; Morley & Abelett, 2020). For Morley, high quality social work always involves twinning a clear critical social analysis with critical reflection on the individual, social and structural realities shaping our experience and that of service users and communities. In a recent research project, Morley (2016) confirmed that critical pedagogy directly influenced social work students’ participation in providing more ethical outcomes for service users, as well as participation in advocacy, activism, social action, and protest. Morley concluded her address

by noting that she joins the many theorists argue critical education should be a practice of hope and freedom, and never just about training or the acquisition of credentials.

The third address in this Special Issue was delivered by Professor Stéphanie Wahab (Portland State University), the 90<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Fellow, UBC School of Social Work. The talk was titled, “Teaching Social Justice in Dangerous Times: Practices of Hope”. Wahab opened her keynote with a reflection on her experience as a visiting scholar in New Zealand at the time of that country’s largest mass shooting at two Mosques in Christchurch. As she debriefed a myriad of emotions and reactions with students and colleagues in the coming days, she was reminded of the transformative potential of grief and sorrow within social justice and liberation work, as well as the relationship between grief and hope. Wahab’s address revolved around some of the practices of hope that she has learned through her journey of teaching about social justice and settler colonialism, specifically: interrupting extreme othering; seeking and holding complexity and complicity; collective grieving; and imagining together. She argued further that practices of hope (through collective grieving, connection, dreaming, imagining, emergent strategies) can repurpose (la paperson, 2017) settler colonial and oppressive systems, and in their place foster far reaching practices for decolonizing and liberatory purposes.

Hope is also a central tenet of this Special Anniversary Issue. As Wahab reminds us, without practices of hope, both in and out of the classroom, we can become easily frustrated, impatient, and feel powerless to affect change. For the two Social Work programmes involved in anniversary events this year, part of this hope comes from critical reflection and learning from the grievous mistakes of the past and resolving to do better in the future. Part of this hope also comes from grounding ourselves in the lived experience of those oppressed and marginalized

within today's world and by working closely with many groups to base our social justice practice and theory in the struggles of people for dignity, equity and fairness.

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