Critical Social Work
School of Social Work
University of Windsor
401 Sunset Avenue
Windsor, Ont.
Canada N9B 3P4
Email: cswedit@uwindsor.ca

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Developing a Cohesive Emancipatory Social Work Identity: Risking an Act of Love

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Liza Lorenzetti

1 University of Calgary

Abstract

Within dominant North American discourse, individual freedom is a substantive tag line for the mind-numbing tacit approval of the loveless marriage between capitalism and democracy. This paper provides an overview of the conflicted relationship social work have with the politics of liberation, empowerment theory, and self-determination, underscoring an ongoing identity crisis, which has been dressed-up as ‘various tenets of the profession’. Connecting with the humanizing aspirations inherent to social work while building on critical and anti-oppressive theories and practices, I argue for social work to re-visualize and act on a cohesive emancipatory social work identity. True solidarity, which can only be uncovered through the relinquishing of a professional identity based on false consciousness and fear, is risking an act of love.

Keywords: critical social work, anti-oppression, empowerment, liberation
Freedom and the Politics of Liberation

Harnessing the constructs of freedom and liberty, the neo-liberal/neo-conservative agenda within North American society can be viewed as both brilliant and highly destructive. A most evident representation of this strategy within our recent history was the Bush Jr. Era of the colour-coded national threat alert system. Intended to incite a continuum of conditioned responses, this approach produced a climate of national fear, individualistic nationalism, and a complacent consumerism of ideas, legislation, and related products such as the proliferation of national flags; all of this framed under the banner of protecting individual freedom as a collective national identity. This phenomenon, a form of isolated patriotism (Pattanayak, 2005), perpetuates a mistrust of diversity and difference, and creates false separations between the natural needs and rights of any individual across all nations, for instance clean water, food and education (Pattanayak, 2005).

Within dominant North American discourse, individual freedom is a substantive tag line for the mind-numbing tacit approval of the loveless marriage between capitalism and democracy. This includes the plethora of clothing, advertisements, and other products that upload the concepts of peace, justice, or liberty as symbols to be purchased or worn without the needless commitment to an allied philosophy, or activities to express one’s allegiance to the professed cause.

A further false representation of freedom and the misuse of human rights discourse continues to feed the dangerous and self-indulgent fantasy that the West is liberating other peoples from oppression that does not exist ‘here at home’. Freedom’s almost inevitable association with Western imperialism, unabashed individualism, or the misled notion of choice, is posited to normalize inequality, reframe dominance as the ultimate success and unwittingly or consciously blame the victim. Concepts of free markets, free trade, and the individual’s right to amass limitless wealth can confuse and lull the citizen into the complacent role of eager, yet unsatisfied, consumer. The culture-ideology of consumerism, as explained by Sklair (2002, 2009), is foundational to the increasing chasm of between “those who have too much…those who have just about enough and those who have too little (Sklair, 2009, p. 2703).

With the spread of global capitalism and the encroachment on rights and sustainability across the planet, there is an increasing urgency for social work to contend with the socio-political climate that shapes our conflicted roles within the profession. The internationally ratified definition of social work centralizes human rights and social justice (International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW], 2000), and minimal elements of the profession focus on community development practice and “understanding conditions from social, economic, and political perspectives…and matters of public policy” (Canadian Association of Social Workers [CASW], 2013, para. 4). This text, however, concentrates on traditional “client-centered” social work practice, which is predominant in the practice field. This paper provides an overview of social work’s discordant relationship with the politics of liberation, empowerment theory and self-determination. Connecting with the humanizing aspirations inherent to social work while building on critical and anti-oppressive theories and practices, I urge that the profession re-visualize and act on a cohesive emancipatory identity.
Social Work’s Relationship with Freedom and the Politics of Liberation

When critically analyzed, freedom, constructed through the lens of the mainstream white, hetero-male and western-elite class, can evoke both anxiety and cynicism. The failure to internalize individual freedoms as expressions of social rights and responsibilities, highly problematic for social work, is an example of moral nihilism, the perspective that “nothing is morally wrong” (Sinnott-Armstrong, 2006, p. 34). Nietzsche’s critique of nihilism within European culture in the latter part of the nineteenth century reinforces the notion that morality or good, represented by “unegoistic action” (Nietzsche, 1887, Part 2) is non-existent as a universal code, and therefore socially constructed. This is easily demonstrated in the extent of income stratification and intersecting oppression that exist in our society today.

Social rights, such as human welfare and the right to security, contrast with the inequality that is embedded within a capitalist framework (Marshall, 2009). While the articulation of social rights may appear universal (see, for example, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948), Marshall notes that it is within the act of materializing these stated rights that the social divisions become apparent. Social rights continue to be enshrined as social charters without the legislative means to address the inequality in accessing these rights (see, for example, the Convention on the Elimination of All of Forms of Discrimination Against Women [CEDAW] 1979). Freedom is depicted as the vehicle through which the attainment of welfare and security is primarily possible. With freedom’s conceptualization as an individualistic pursuit and moral universalism a refuted theory, social rights and responsibilities, if not incorporated into mainstream social and legislative contracts, will be left aside in exchange for individualism and greed.

While it is imperative that social work develop a critical analysis of dominant ideologies and behaviours, it can be argued that debates on moral nihilism and the evident failure a social rights agenda can hinder one’s motivation for social change. At the same time, a core consideration for social work is the deconstruction and understanding of individualistic or libertarian expressions of freedom that do not include social rights and a social moral code. There is ample evidence that moral universalism is not a realistic construct that can be relied upon to produce societies that are rights-based, harmonious, and non-violent. The implementation of social rights that protect the individual and the collective, perhaps seen by many as an impossible utopian fantasy, is a necessary dissention to a normalized view of greed, impoverishment, racism and male violence that characterizes our societies today.

Social work’s association with freedom and dominance, and our commitment to social rights is highly conflicted and often poorly understood within the profession. Regularly hidden under the auspices of “helping people”, the client-centered, ethics-laden and human-betterment taglines associated with our field masks the underlying counter-story. The political climate and associated meta-narratives of normative social relations that support and entrench inequality are often ignored within Western social work practice, in exchange for quicker wins. These wins, without a critical lens, feed the capital-driven feel-good charity cycle, and rationalize the profession’s conflicted raison d’être. This, in effect eases us into a more palatable consumption of outrageous injustice. Without the acknowledgement of such, we continue to “contribute to dominance in spite of our liberatory intentions” (Pease, 2002, p. 135).
Current social work theory, ethics, and practice, demonstrate varying degrees of commitment to mainstream notions of “freedom with responsibilities”, which, in action, is mostly an expression of what Kees van Kersbergen's (1995) coined as social capitalism. Key elements of a social capitalist ideology include the incorporation of a welfare state within a capitalist framework (van Kersbergen, 1995) and support for a certain amount of regulation, which some argue maximizes the stability potential of the markets (Ramirez, 2002).

It can be argued that a social capitalist model, which in effect re-purposes citizens as donors or volunteers within a charity-model, is a comfortable framework for social work; one that allows for the middle class and elites to actively participate or provide funds that ultimately maintain the functioning of the system. This model is a known and lauded reality within North American societies, and is a capitalist industry in its own right. In Canada, for example, more than 2 million people work in the non-governmental or not-for-profit sector, which is more than 11% of persons who are deemed economically active (Statistics Canada, 2007). This sector represents a GDP that is larger than the manufacturing or automotive industries, with $78.1 billion dollars or 7.8% of the Canadian total (Statistics Canada, 2007). A cornerstone of this industry is volunteerism, which in Canada is purported to include 42% of citizens over 15 years of age (Statistics Canada, 2004). This work, although well intentioned and with evident benefits, often solidifies and commodifies human relationships in an organized system of helpers and those in need of help, thereby reaffirming the status quo.

In social work departments across Canada, volunteerism is a cornerstone of social work education, with many university programs making this experience a requirement or a strongly recommended pre-requisite for admission. A history of activism, and in particular civil disobedience, are less desirable attributes, as they are in direct conflict with the unwritten codes of social work professionalism and written agency policies within the field. In the practice field, most social workers are compelled to operate within the charity model, while the capitalist (and decreasingly social capitalist) paradigm remains intact (see, for example, Carniol, 2005; Pease & Fook, 1999; Harlow, 2004; White, 2006).

The implicit and explicit roles of dominance and oppression within the profession create the undercurrent of dissatisfaction that troubles many social workers and social work students. The proliferation of manuscripts on anti-oppressive or critical social work practice (see for example, Carniol, 2000; Dominelli, 2002; 1998; Fook, 2003; Mullaly, 2002) is a testament to this collective angst.

Further, a social worker must accept a certain degree of historical-rooted and deeply embedded social inequality in order to maintain employment within the system. With over 93% of Canadian social workers employed within the health, social services, or government systems (CASW, n.d.), the freedom rhetoric, both a motto and battle cry of the mainstream, has been primarily adopted by our field. The problem, as a profession, is that we have yet to collectively articulate which interpretations of freedom we are truly supporting.

Derived perhaps from a mix of our ambivalent professional existence, genuine liberatory aspirations developed through critical consciousness, and the practicality of keeping the profession afloat, social work has implemented its own dominance-protecting mechanisms that uplift the rhetoric of freedom, while at the same time continuing to master and promote
constrained and tolerated expressions of liberatory-action. This ongoing identity crisis, which has been dressed-up as ‘various tenets of the profession’, has resulted in the following: the elicitation of those whom we call ‘the client population’ to continued conformity to dominance-rule and the eternity of a client-identity.

For social work, one of the dangerous but seemingly emancipatory rubrics within which we often operate includes “empowerment” and “self-determination”. Empowerment, a concept derived from feminist and other rights-based theories and popular movements (see, for example, Fals Borda & Anisur Rahman, 1991; Freire, 1970; Hill-Collins, 2000) is integral to the various existing social work codes of ethics, principles, and definitions (see Canadian Association of Social Workers [CASW], 2005; IFSW, 2000). As stated in the CASW (2005) code of ethics, “the profession has a particular interest in the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and/or living in poverty” (Preamble). The IFSW (2001) definition of social work posits that the profession “promotes social change, problem-solving in human relationships, and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being” (p. 1). Concepts and practice approaches related to empowerment proliferate throughout the social work literature.

Empowerment theories, deeply embedded in postmodern interpretations of knowledge posit a construction of reality, which values the diversity of lived experiences, and aims to deconstruct expert knowledge or claims (Campbell & Unger, 2003). Ingrained in the social work psyche is the conviction that the empowerment of individuals, communities, social workers, and the profession as a whole will challenge the oppressive and hegemonic role of social workers as system agents. Unfortunately, empowerment and postmodernism without a critical lens will not reverse the impact of structural inequality (see, for example, Agger, 1991). The root of inequities needs to be addressed, which includes a focus on dis-empowering dominant discourse or “reality”, and systems and structures that perpetuate oppression.

Pease’s (2002) paper on the postmodern challenge to traditional and critical social work provides an opportunity to deconstruct the daily use of empowerment language, stating that neo-conservative/liberal contexts such as the corporate sector have reformatted its applicability in a manner that does not interrogate power relationships and its associated conflict. A content analysis of empowerment in journal articles from 1976-1991 (Gutierrez, Parsons, & Cox, 1998) indicates a consistent focus on the individual or micro-use.

Unfortunately, mainstream social work’s platitudinous approach to empowerment has rendered this concept nearly meaningless. For instance, empowering or assisting the oppressed client to self-empower (a play on language that does not denote substantive change) in order to access a food bank or address the mistreatment of an individual landlord, cannot address the root causes of inequities. Unless these actions are part of a critical praxis-oriented framework that includes forms of social action. Furthermore, the focus on the “individual self” within daily social work discourse on empowerment continues to promote a conflicting message: the role of social change is individually focused, and not centered within the collective and the systemic nature of oppression that requires change. The fundamental question inherent within this argument that opposes mainstream approaches to empowerment: does a marginalized person require empowerment to confront an entrenched oppressive system, or, does this system need to be disempowered if not fully eradicated?
Self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2002) can be viewed as both a positivist and post-modernist concept popularly co-opted in the support of individualism. Although Deci and Ryan (2002) underscore the impact of social environments on natural attributes, self-determination erroneously posits choice and agency of the “self” over social rights and responsibilities, masking the structural forces that limit both of these. Dominant interpretations of the empowerment/self-determination rubric as seen in the practice field contend that a person who is provided with the associated tools of empowerment is able to achieve self-determination and change the (oppressive) circumstances impacting their lives. This notion feeds the social capitalist agenda, reinforcing the Marx’s notion of the social relations of production (Tucker, 1978). It also underscores an additional running script that those who do not accept the prescribed route to self-determination, or do not *choose* to change their lives for “the better” when given the opportunity, will be judged and critiqued, and are individually responsible for their failures.

In this light, empowerment within dominant society and mainstream social work connects with Gramsci’s (1929-35) conceptualization of hegemony as a process that is “applied to single individuals so as to obtain their consent and their collaboration, turning necessity and coercion into 'freedom’” (p. 243). This script, a tool to be possessed and utilized by the elite and adopted by the oppressed, dehumanizes both those who wield and who are subjected to it. Freire’s (1970) contention that both oppressed and oppressor are locked into a cycle from which all require liberation, underscores the mutually alienating character of this unhealthy paradigm.

The unmasking of empowerment and self-determination rhetoric is not intended to refute the aspirations of socially-justice minded social workers, refute agency, or imply helplessness on the part of those victimized by systemic oppression; nor is it an attempt to undermine the historical gains of feminist or civil rights movements and the benefits of postmodern thought. However, one has to question whether social work’s wholesale adoption of this framework under a banner of freedom and choice, reformatted as liberation, truly benefited those who are oppressed by a socially and economically stratified system? Alternatively, has it merely created a false consciousness within the profession, while privileging the charity model and maintaining the status quo?

The IFSW’s definition of social work, a continuum of relief-to-revolution, is presented in a seemingly congruent fashion that paints over the diametrically opposed nature of charity and social rights and justice. Although the creation of this definition demonstrates an important effort to underscore the liberatory and human rights obligations inherent to the profession, a rights-based ideology (not as a binary, but a fluid concept including the individual and the collective) and the alleviation of symptoms will never be mutually acceptable/reconcilable. These are the conflicting paradigms navigated by social workers on a daily basis.

For the overwhelming majority of social workers who practice within the system and rely on its benefits for survival, Mullaly’s challenge of “Working Within (and Against) the System” (1993, p. 162) is a daunting endeavour. However, this frightening and seemingly necessary praxis (cyclical process of action, reflection, and the development of critical consciousness, Freire, 1970) has the potential to deepen the authenticity, relevance, and legitimacy of social work, creating true solidarity with those who are oppressed, and reinvigorating the profession.
Another possible outcome of a collective social (economic, political and environmental) justice praxis within social work, one which social workers may not have fully conceptualized, at least within the comforts of the Western mainstream, is a systemic rejection of the profession as a radical and dangerous sphere of social influence. This possibility, although remote within the Canadian context, is a sub-text that pinpoints a key area of contention within the field.

**Social Justice Social Work and Liberatory Action**

Social work continues to exist in a bedlam of contradictory models, policies and practices, hampering progress towards a more unified vision and role. These divisions are enacted within the academic and practice fields, and reinforced through at times arbitrary specializations that are not effective in connecting the personal with the political and the clinical with the systemic. With the erosion of social rights and the entrenchment of shocking levels of poverty and income inequality, it is an ethical imperative that social workers engage in critiques of the profession in order to inspire and catalyze actions that will compel its transformation. It is also important, however, to avoid the cycle of endless binaries that currently exists within the profession, and the ideological ‘infighting’ that supports the culture of domination wherein a divide-to-rule approach allows the current system to flourish, un-resisted.

Narratives and movements for equity-based alternatives to a neo-conservative/neo-liberal charity model, although still marginal, increasingly occupy a segment of popular social work discourse. This praxis within the profession, an outcome of what educator and activist Paolo Freire (1970) coined “liberatory education,” is built on a foundation of learning and acting upon notions of freedom and liberation that exist within dissenting paradigms to moral nihilism or a culture of domination. It is essential that current concepts of individual freedom be re-envisioned and that collectivist, and humanizing alternatives be proposed.

The teachings of liberatory education and critical pedagogy can be found in evolving feminist knowledge (Crenshaw, 1989: Mohanty, 2002) and other critical social theories (Agger, 2006). Feminist Betty Friedan (1963) emphasized that liberation is rooted in one’s personal reflections and the activities of everyday life approaches that (1986) termed as ‘unabashedly ideological’ (p. 67). Mary Brydon-Miller’s article entitled, “The Terrifying Truth: Interrogating Systems of Power and Privilege and Choosing to Act” (2004) connects with the complex and potentially frightening task confronting modern-day social work.

**Social Work Resistance: Emancipatory Theories and Practice**

Now is the moment to act. It is not unreasonable to imagine Leonard’s (2001) view of a future of “increased impoverishment and repression of large populations, manifested in the depredations of multinational corporations in alliance with their junior partners, nation states” (p. 1). It is, in fact, our reality of today. I would argue that now is the moment for social workers be counted, not as rogue individuals - code of ethics in hand against the current - but as a collective based on an integrated and congruent social work identity. I suggest that critical, collectivist and decolonizing theories, connected to epistemological and ontological assumptions that become broadly adopted within all aspects of the social work profession, could create the environment for transformative ethical standards and charters, professional codes of conduct, definitions,
designations and eventually, systems. The “strong historical critique within social work that refutes the attempts to cajole or coerce victims of social problems to adjust to the very systems that victimized them in the first place” (Mullaly, 2002, p. 138) is a focal point for a congruent emancipatory social work identity.

There are various approaches that provide insight and inroads towards reimagining social work as a profession of resistance (Leonard, 2001). The best of these are wrought from the lived experience of dissent, understanding one’s own role in subjugation and resistance (see for example, Freire’s conscientização), and the explicit challenge to dominance-thinking perpetuated within a cloud of ‘good intention’. An important realization towards centralizing a diverse and collectivist voice within our profession is that power-relations become a central feature of knowledge creation (Brown & Strega, 2005). Inherent in this approach is that the false dichotomy of “political” and “a-political” social work practice and education be eradicated, and all actions and inactions be deemed political.

As rigid disciplinarism is a symptom of hegemony within academic circles (Agger, 2006), and is largely meaningless to those who live and create knowledge outside of academic institutions, there are many theoretical approaches to draw upon from both inside and beyond social work in order to catalyze a central emancipatory framework for the profession. Feminist theories (Brooks & Hesse-bieber, 2007; Maguire, 2006) and anti-racist feminism (Calliste & Sefa Dei, 2000), critical social/social work theory (Agger, 2006; Fook, 2003) and decolonizing/post-colonial theories (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999) are some of these approaches.

Intrinsic to the development of an authentic social justice framework within social work is the leadership and participation of practitioners, activists and “clients” (acknowledged as full human beings) who are largely marginalized from the academic debates on knowledge-creation and the social work role. The current condition of social work demonstrates that it is a fruitless exercise to develop, teach, and instil social justice theory that is viewed as both irrelevant and potentially dangerous in the field. Only through the inclusion and leadership of practitioners and those “impacted by” social work, will social (economic, political, environmental) justice become a praxis as opposed to a lofty and idealistic counter-theory within the profession.

Attempts to gain professional credibility within the social sciences and related fields of practice and academia, including an aversion to close association with the marginalized and stigmatized client population, continues to be a primary preoccupation of social work (Krumer-Nevo & Weiss, 2006; Mullaly, 2010). Common discourse in our field denotes a historical and largely accepted and internalized belief that social work is lacking in the professional attributes and rigour of other disciplines. The reality of our critical role and the uniqueness of our discipline that is grounded in praxis and liberatory politic is mostly unheralded and undermined. These factors have hindered what I consider social work’s primary aspiration: to humanize ourselves, understand our own experiences of oppression and dominance in the development of an authentic and motivating compassion for others, and work in solidarity with oppressed members of our community to achieve a more caring and just society. This aspiration begins with the courage to define our social work identity within a human, environmental, and social rights context, and then to act on it.
It is both challenging and essential that we strive “to gain critical distance from contemporary experiences of chaos and uncertainty” (Leonard, 2001, p.1) in order to re-envision a narrative of emancipation within social work. This “internal” work involves the development of counter-narratives to the individualistic notions of freedom, dominance, empowerment and self-determination that pervade our profession today. These liberatory underpinnings would compel us to both re-position the individual social worker and the profession as a whole in an act of solidarity with those are oppressed - both outside and within of the field. Social work as a profession of resistance would include “a deepening belief in the interdependence of human(s)” (Leonard, 2001, p.1.), as opposed to the dependence of clients on a cruel system and its agents. True solidarity, which can only be uncovered through the relinquishing of a professional identity based on false consciousness and fear, is what I believe Freire (1970) referred to as risking an act of love.
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