



Critical Social Work

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Lost and Finding: Experiences of Newly Graduated Critical Social Workers

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Abstract

The first year of social work practice can be very stressful for new practitioners. Practice develops in response to the meaning we place on what we do and on our professional goals. Having a better understanding of how new graduates navigate the transition from idealized work to real practice is important if the profession is going to improve the overall self-efficacy, happiness, and commitment of social workers. In this paper, I discuss some of the findings from research that utilized philosophical hermeneutics as an approach to understand how newly graduated social workers, educated in a critical tradition, experience their practice. Critical social workers described their practice as experiences of being both lost and finding. Specifically, it is an experience of trying to get into, around, or through the real world of paid work-based practice. This is the challenge of emancipatory work. The “real world” becomes a box where it is very difficult, if not impossible, within which to move. Arguments are made for critical social work schools and organizations to develop peer-support groups, focused on critical reflection and reflexive practice, to assist current critical social work students and new graduates to recognize, support, and sustain emancipatory practice.

Keywords: Critical social work practice, new graduate experiences, peer-support, critical reflection, reflexive practice, philosophical hermeneutics

Nobody's child
 Nobody's child
 Just like a flower
 They're growing wild
 Got no mama's kisses
 And no daddy's smile
 Nobody wants them
 They're nobody's child
 (Coben & Foree, 1949)

As a professor of social work, I have heard students who are embarking on their journey to become professional practitioners state that they feel as if they know nothing upon entering their practicum, and later their work-based practice. As a critical social worker, my critical peers have also told me that I know nothing because the theories we ascribe to are thought to be difficult to operationalize. The roots of critical social work practice involve adopting a political perspective and lie in the work of Karl Marx, Antonio Gramsci, the Frankfurt School theorists, feminist theorists, and critical pedagogy theorist Paulo Freire. Over the years, the term “critical” has come to define a number of distinct approaches, such as radical, structural, feminist, anti-racist, and anti-oppressive social work practice (Hick & Pozzuto, 2005). These traditions tend to share the following themes: “A structural analysis of personal problems; an analysis of the social control functions of social work and welfare; an ongoing social critique, particularly regarding oppressive functions; and goals of personal liberation and social change” (Hick & Pozzuto, 2005, p. x). Critical approaches to social work practice attempt to integrate professional social work values within personal, social, and political contexts (Haynes, 1999). As Fook noted “...critical social work, as a coherent term, has only been used more explicitly in the last few years, mostly in literature from Canada (e.g. Rossiter, 1996) and Australia (e.g. Ife, 1997)” (2003, p. 124). In Canada, critical social work theory and practice are closely identified with structural approaches developed by Carniol (1979, 1990), Moreau (1979), Moreau and Leonard (1989), Mullaly (1993), and Rossiter (1996). This approach to social work practice questions the validity of pathology-based social work perspectives and theories, and focuses on the oppressions that cause the private troubles or pathologies (Rossiter, 1996).

With neoliberal momentum privileging personal over political, consumer over citizen, and certainty over uncertainty, the focus on social justice activities has been greatly diminished in the field's attempt to be a progressive and legitimate profession (Taylor & White, 2011). Specifically, because much of the theoretical and knowledge base of a critical social worker involves a practice focused on the political, citizenship, and uncertainty, critical social workers are thought to lack tangible skills (Olsen, 2007). Unfortunately, it is now a widely held belief that once critical social workers enter professional practice and the “real world” they will be unable to use their skills to create large system-wide change (Olsen, 2007). A neoliberal, pragmatic skills-based approach to social work practice appears to be the only thing that counts as something (Gallop, 2013).

In this paper, I discuss some of the findings from research that utilized philosophical hermeneutics as an approach to understand how newly graduated Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) students, educated in a critical tradition, experience their practice. There are a number of

accredited social work schools in Canada that offer critical social work programs. These schools question the banking method of education, which treats students like empty containers to be filled (Freire, 1970), and education as a commodity to be cashed in for highly paid jobs (Campbell, 2012). The core pedagogical practices and curricula in critical social work education help students explore their power and privilege, and better understand their role as both oppressor and oppressed (Mullaly, 2007). Influenced by Freire's critical pedagogical theories, critical social work education engages students in a dialogue of learning and practice for revolution and insurgence (Mullaly, 2007). Knowledge is not treated as a commodity, or one-way narrative to be delivered in lecture format that reinforces a hierarchical social order. Instead, being a critical social work student entails being an engaged participant and stepping out of the accustomed master-student relationship (Razack, 1999). It involves engaging in emancipatory practice, where "the purpose of practice is to reconstruct not only the practice and the practitioner, but the practical setting as well" (Kinsler, 2010, p. 175).

Upon graduation, a new critical BSW practitioner is expected to be comfortable with conflict and resorting to quiet, low-key practices that favour the service user over the agency (Moreau, 1990). Diplomacy (Ingamells, 1996) and creativity (Dominelli, 1996) are also competencies of a critical social worker. Both are necessary when attempting to find the balance between rights versus risks, needs versus resources, and autonomy versus protection (Dominelli, 1996). New practitioners are also expected to have an unquiet mind (Macedo, 2006). As such, a critical social work graduate should be capable of critical consciousness and reflexive practice. This involves being more comfortable with questions than answers and more interested in knowledge than isolated facts. It also requires graduates to be more tolerant and hopeful (Freire, 1970).

The first year of social work practice is significant for all new graduates, regardless of their theoretical orientation. For new practitioners, the transition from educational ideals to the real world of practice can be very stressful (Bates et al., 2010; Marsh & Triseliotis, 1996; Newberry, 2011), particularly if an organization is not sensitive to this transition (Newberry, 2011). A lack of organizational support during the first year can lead to reduced job satisfaction and commitment to remaining with the organization (Jack & Donnellan, 2010).

Practice develops in response to the meaning we place on what we do and our professional goals. Having a better understanding of how new graduates navigate the transition from idealized work to real practice is important if the profession is going to improve the overall self-efficacy, job satisfaction, and commitment of social workers in the human service field (Carpenter, Shardlow, Patsios, & Wood, 2015; Grant, Sheridan, & Webb, 2016; Jack & Donnellan, 2010; Moriarty, Manthorpe, Stevens, & Hussein, 2011; Newberry, 2011).

Method

I reject the assumption that new graduates know nothing. Instead, I believe there is an essence to the word 'nothing' that makes it difficult to articulate. The idea that social workers begin their education and careers as empty vessels that need to be filled, knowing and thinking nothing, but then become something after being taught theory and engaging in practical work, is a remnant from Cartesian and reductionist thinking. It comes from the belief that knowledge can

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be permanent and dependable, and it is possible to reduce concepts and ideas down to an essence free of compromise, complication, and value (Ceci, Houger Limacher, & McLeod, 2002). Instead, similar to Sartre (1956/1943), I see nothingness, and what is absent, as significant as what is present. Both are equally important in defining who we are and how we see the world. Attempting to understand the essence of what is missing is why I began this study. I wanted to understand why some forms of knowledge and practice are seen as something and others as nothing.

I chose to use a hermeneutic research method to answer the question, how might newly graduated Bachelor of Social Work students, educated in a critical tradition, understand their practice. A Hermeneutic research approach is highly consistent with social work practice due to its focus on personal agency and critical inter-subjectivity (Newberry, 2012). It also recognizes the importance of human experience and seeks to connect private troubles to public issues (Newberry, 2012). The hermeneutic approach to inquiry aspires to understand the everyday meaning of lived experiences (Bosma, 2011). Guided by the early insights of German philosopher, Hans-Georg Gadamer (1976), it is a research approach that attempts to uncover both the differences and commonalities of lived experiences (Benner, 1994), and helps us discover some of the unique aspects of what those experiences are like (van Manen, 1997). It does not look for explanations through thematic reduction, theory generation, or constructs. Instead, a hermeneutic research method invites us to make sense of the particulars of new graduate experiences and arrive at deeper understandings of how these graduates experience the angst and challenge of new practice (Moules, 2002; Moules, McCaffrey, Field, & Laing, 2015).

Participant Recruitment

By seeking participants who are exemplars of the phenomenon being studied, the goal of any philosophical hermeneutic research is to understand the unique characteristics of an experience more deeply and substantively, rather than broadly (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). Philosophical hermeneutics embraces an ideographic approach to data collection. That is, it “is committed to understanding how particular experiential phenomena (an event, process, or relationship) have been understood from the perspective of particular people, in a particular context” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 29). This is in direct contrast to a nomothetic approach, which attempts to establish generalizations and make claims at the group or population level (Smith et al., 2009).

I selected two postsecondary programs that offer a BSW with a focus on Structural and Critical Social Work. One institution is located in Western Canada; the other is located in the Central Eastern region of Canada. In addition to having mission statements and mandates that encompass a critical framework, Mullaly (2007), a well-known Canadian critical social work theorist, identified the included schools as being critical and emphasizing structural dimensions of society in their curriculum content and focus.

Because the goal of a Hermeneutic inquiry is to examine a topic more deeply than broadly, this research approach often involves a small number of participants (Moules, 2002). I included six participants in this project. I contacted individuals at the chosen institutions who were in charge of the alumni and student communication list and asked them to forward my

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recruitment poster through their email listserve. I received two participants using this technique. I acquired the remainder of my participants using the snowball sampling method. I received two participants through referrals from social work colleagues, and two via current participants. This recruitment process allowed me to find an equal balance of participants from both the Western and Central Eastern universities.

The six individuals included three men and three women. All of the participants had graduated in the last 3 years from a critical school with a BSW degree, self-identified as “critical”, and were practicing from a structural and/or critical social work perspective. With the exception of one participant who was in his mid-thirties at the time of our interview, all of the participants were in their early to late twenties. Three participants (two men, and one woman) were graduates from the Western school, and three participants (two women and one man) were graduates from the Central Eastern school. At the time of the interviews, two of the participants had recently completed their Masters of Social Work (MSW) from a noncritical university in Ontario, and one graduate had recently entered a Master’s program in a critical school during this study.

All six participants were working either part-time or full-time in the field of social work. The breadth of practice experience was diverse, including government and nongovernmental organizations, small grassroots agencies, and large bureaucracies. The participants occupied frontline, community-based, policy, and international positions. They also worked in children’s services, mental health, and the disability fields.

Data Collection

Research ethics approval was granted for this project. Each interview took 60-90 minutes and was audio-recorded. Basic demographics of the participants were obtained at the time of the interview. The semi-structured interviews were transcribed verbatim into written text for analysis. Field notes were also written after each interview to capture contextual details and beginning interpretations.

I conducted eight semi-structured interviews in person and six via Skype. The interview guide included 10 open-ended questions aimed at understanding the participants early practice experience, including questions that centred on how the participants defined critical social work, why they chose this particular stream, and what they perceive to be both benefits and challenges of practicing in critical social work manner. Questions also focused on advice they might have for upcoming graduates of critical schools.

The use of reflexivity involves acknowledging the researcher’s voice, but not putting it before the participants (Leitz, Langur, & Furman, 2006). My social position as an experienced social worker and professor meant that my vantage point of this topic could be quite different from the participants. I was aware that this position could be a hindrance, since my participants could view my knowledge and experience as having priority over their experiences and understandings. I knew I needed to create an environment where the interview experience allowed my participants to say what they needed to me. I did not want to overlook their claims or attempt to assimilate them into mine (Schwandt, 1999). I recognized that if I became too

dogmatic in my beliefs, I would not be open to new understandings (Lawn, 2006). I made a point of letting each participant know during the interview that although I consider myself a critical social worker, it has been a long time since I have been a newly graduated one. I also let them know that this project was not meant to determine whether critical social work “works” or not. Instead, I explained as openly and honestly as I could that I wanted to hear what they had to say about this topic, even if they might say something with which I did not expect or agree.

Analysis and Interpretation of Data

Hermeneutic analysis is in itself an encounter. Although the actual practice is difficult to communicate (Addison, 1999), getting into the hermeneutic circle has been aptly described as an organic and iterative process (Bosma, 2011) of focusing on the whole and the parts of the meaning. My analysis began with listening to each interview and making notes. I then listened to the tapes again once I had the transcriptions. I reflected on the spoken words, the subtle pauses and lengthy silences. I also focused on the laughter. I wrote my thoughts and my impressions. Once an idea or speculation surfaced, I would begin to journal my newly forming thoughts. As an idea or word emerged that made me take note, I would also discuss it with colleagues and sometimes turn to the literature to explore it further. In addition, I conducted follow-up interviews with two participants to clarify and expand on my developing interpretations. I read and listened to each transcript in isolation. I also read them in relation to other transcripts. To be clear, this back and forth between different tapes and transcripts was not meant to find themes. Instead, it was my attempt to “...bring forth general impressions, specific and recurring ideas, and perturbing and distinctive resonances, familiarities and echoes” (Moules, 2000, p. 46). I was seeking an experience that drew my attention to the unique (Lawn, 2006), and ultimately surprised and unsettled me.

The process of making something foreign or forgotten understandable is achieved through the interpretive writing process (Moules, 2000). Similar to the analysis process of reading and listening, interpretive writing involves a circular movement where one action begins to uncover then build upon another (Moules, 2000). After listening to audiotapes, reading text, and consulting peers and mentors, I began to take my memos and my notes and turn them into interpretive text. I found the words in the transcripts then explored them further, in classical literature, and research literature. I took these words and began to tie them together by moving back and forth between my participants’ understanding, my understanding, and the literature. I used mythology and etymology to help me turn these words into richer meanings.

Interpretive Findings

Although a hermeneutic inquiry is typically not looking for repeatable themes or experiences, it is notable that all of the participants in this study used both the words “lost” and “finding” while describing the negotiation of their practice. The new graduates described their practice as being “lost in the theory” and “lost in the system.” They also discussed their struggles and efforts at finding time, finding the right words, and finding courage to practice the way they thought best. The word “finding” is quite interesting, and very appropriate for this discussion, in that, the original etymology of the word dates back to c.1300, and means “an abandoned child” (“Finding,” n.d.). It is related to the word foundling. Foundlings are “nobody’s children.” In

particular, “foundlings were those children who were left (often anonymously) by an incapacitated or unwilling parent to the mercy of charitable or civic resources” (McCants, 2004, p. 332). These individuals are displaced by society. They may be physically cast-off, or emotionally or morally discarded (McCants, 2004). After reading about the sociology of abandoned children, I was struck by how familiar the description was to accounts given by newly qualified social workers. Like abandoned children, critical social work graduates in this study often felt cast off and alone, unsupported, and lost.

Interpretations of being “Lost”

Discarded and disconnected. Historian John Boswell (1988) researched the roots of abandonment back to the Latin root as “*exposito*”, which means “to expose”, “to put outside”, or “to throw out” (p. 24). Feeling exposed to the elements, left adrift, or simply discarded are similar statements the social workers in this study made when describing their experiences after graduating. For example, one participant stated,

...There is a big disconnect there between theory and practice. There is, right? That is what [the Critical school] lacks is the practice aspect of it. So it's very easy to sit in class and talk about what structural social work is, and what the theories are... You know critical and anti-oppressive and whatever else you wanna talk about. But then you get thrown into the world and it's like, “Ok now go do your job.” And they are sort of two different things...

Critical pedagogy challenges students to develop new knowledge and skills in the hopes they will be able to critique and reflexively question long-standing patterns of thinking, feeling, and doing (Campbell, 2003). They are taught to constantly question everything they thought they knew and are currently experiencing (Campbell, 2003). This is in direct contrast to the focus of most human service organizations, which is to educate for efficacy and certitude (Saleeby & Scanlon, 2005). The assumption is this constant analysis and questioning can easily continue once the student leaves the safe confines of the classroom and enters into a human service organization (Campbell, 2003). While efforts are often made in the classroom to support students through the sometimes very disquieting period of value and knowledge adjustment, very little appears to be in place once the student graduates. As one participant explained, she was unprepared for just how overwhelming some of the challenges were in her new practice.

I think ... I think a lot of ... especially my first year working up in the [Northern community] probably, and the second year definitely I was able to bring a bit more [social work skills] in. But the first year I remember feeling very lost about ... and that the problem was so much bigger than me, which was very humbling in a lot of ways and definitely has kind of fueled my fire to continue on this journey. But ... the problems are, you know, intergenerational.

The experiences of these participants are similar to the findings from a UK study conducted by Jack and Donnellan (2010) wherein the graduate participants often described their early employment practice experience as a reality shock between their social work ideals and the workplace ideals. Similarly, findings from two Australian studies conducted over thirty years ago

by Smith and Sanford (1980) and O'Connor and Dagleish (1986) also found many of the social work graduates surveyed at that time experienced a significant discrepancy between their expectations of the profession and the reality of the work environment. These studies found many of their new graduate participants reported feeling unprepared to work in a bureaucracy and struggled with working in an agency where others did not share their interests or support their practice goals. Specifically, the new graduates from O'Connor and Dagleish described feeling "...adrift in an alien and unfriendly environment" (1986, p. 442).

In contrast, more recent reviews conducted in the UK to measure the competency of newly graduated social workers have found a majority of these new graduates do feel prepared for practice upon graduation (Bates et al., 2006; Carpenter et al., 2015; Grant et al., 2016; Moriarty et al., 2011). Bates (2006) found

over three-quarters of the newly qualified social workers agreed or strongly agreed that they had been well prepared in areas such as communication skills, social work methods, responding to cultural differences, social work law, critical perspectives, evidence and research-based practice e, social work values, working in an organization, inter-professional working, and the role and responsibilities of a social worker. (p. 161)

However, participants did not feel prepared in more tangible skill areas, such as record keeping, time management, and practice as assessment (Bates et al., 2006). As Moriarty et al., (2011) highlighted, some of this variation in findings may be due to the broad way in which "preparedness" is defined and understood.

For the newly graduated social workers in this study, part of the alienation may have also come from a loss of like-minded peers after they left their critical social work programs. Professional isolation, which often emerges from a lack of supervision, can be compounded by a lack of peers or co-workers from whom to draw local support (O'Connor & Dagleish, 1986). Once the participants were cut off from their supportive institutional community, and found a permanent position without a fixed duration, sharing similar values, and theoretical perspectives with co-workers and supervisors became much more important. One participant explained,

I didn't even know where to begin. Like I sort of said earlier there wasn't supports operating, there wasn't supports for me being on my own in that environment and not ... there was just ... there was nothing...

It would appear that the 'real world' involves more institutional responsibility, less supervision, and fewer supportive relationships. Unfortunately, the collective identity these graduates had as critical social work students also gets lost after they graduate. Not only is there a sense of loss once they leave the safety of the classroom, many of these new practitioners also felt abandoned by the workplace agencies for which they were employed. By providing little support and supervision, the human service organizations essentially became the incapacitated or unwilling parent.

Disillusioned. Even though critical social work graduates have been trained to question

authority, status quo, and everyday institutional rules and procedures this may be an unrealistic expectation if they are experiencing a sense of loss and abandonment. When viewed from a psychological perspective, abandonment can lead to certain anxieties that create an overemphasis on security (Salerno, 2003). Newberry (2011) found that although there has been limited research conducted on newly graduated social workers, the current findings suggest the first year of practice can be very emotionally distressing, and has been equated to “baptism by fire” (Bates et al., 2010, p.152). Post-graduation is an important confidence building time in their career (Jack & Donnellan, 2010). However, new social work graduates often face this important developmental period in relative isolation. Many of the participants of this study described moments of feeling alone, disheartened, and discouraged. Thus, even though their training has taught them this “rightness” is a fallacy, they cannot help but want it as a mode of self-recognition. The anxiety that comes from being disconnected and alone can limit spontaneity and overemphasize ritual and rule-bound behaviors (Salerno, 2003). When continually denied a safe harbor, confidence, and optimism can easily turn to resentment and disillusion, as noted by one participant:

...like with leaving the [Northern community] because that was ... Essentially I felt myself getting burnt out, I felt myself getting frustrated with my clients, but knowing that it wasn't necessarily my clients' fault. It was just I felt like I was failing them and I didn't want to feel that way and then I would get mad at them, and nothing was going on and my bosses had nothing that they could really do, and then I would get mad at them. But it was just that feeling of where do you put this frustration at the way the system isn't working? People aren't able to change because the system isn't changing and how ... like this is a negative feeling and where do I direct that? Do I direct that at myself as a worker? Do I direct that at my client? Do I direct that at my boss? Do I direct that at the government? At society? You know? I just have kind of shifted through, and continue to shift who I get angry with, but ... yah.

A part of feeling lost is to be so focused on macro issues that you are unable to directly help or make an impact on a service user's immediate needs. A person is effectively rendered useless because they are unable to do anything.

Given the primary focus of critical pedagogy is theoretical and reflexive, it can be difficult for new practitioners because they feel they lack something tangible, such as a recognizable tool-kit (Healy & Leonard, 2000). Analytical reasoning and knowledge-making is not condoned as a form of practice (Jeffery, 2005) by most human service organizations. As such, the tool-kit has become of paramount importance to agencies and the majority of social workers. It implies a tangible set of skills that can be pulled out and utilized in any given situation. Schools from the critical social work tradition are often accused of not properly preparing their graduates by teaching their students pragmatic skills. However, they do teach these students to seek radical transformations from the social world. The critical social work tool-kit is one that focuses on how to change the world, rather than simply what to do in it. As such, participants in this study experienced a disjuncture between the types of social worker they wanted to be, and who they actually were, or what they are able to accomplish.

...when you are either wanting to become an anti-oppressive practitioner or when you are just in the field, and you are fresh, and you want to fix it all. You want to make it all better, and you want everything to be good, and then you hit this wall of it is not and 'people don't listen to me, and I can try and I can try and there is not enough hours in my workday. And it doesn't matter if I take the work home, I still don't find the right answers necessarily all the time,' you know?

Postmodern critical theorists, Healy and Leonard (2000), suggest the condition of uncertainty is a permanent feature of what currently exists in the world. However, this uncertainty is particularly problematic for radical thinkers operating within the framework of emancipatory politics. This is especially true for new graduates. It is difficult for these social workers to avoid being drawn into some form of prescriptive practice to help quell those feelings of angst, insecurity, and uncertainty. However, critical social work schools ask their students and graduates to embrace their uncertainty and treat it as a strength (Hughes, Chau, James, & Sherman, 2003; Miehl & Moffat, 2000; Razack, 1999).

Illegitimate. Media reports on serious offenses, such as children dying in care, violent acts against women and children, and juvenile delinquency have further questioned the adequacy of social work's claims to an appropriate level of professional knowledge and expertise (Taylor & White, 2001). These reports have led to a significant rise in technical and procedural monitoring of practice in Western nations. This regulatory monitoring makes it difficult for budding new professionals to abandon agency-approved knowledge and techniques that are more likely to bolster their sense of confidence (Gabbrill, 1997). Therefore, in addition to feeling abandoned by their educational programs and disillusion with their new workplace agencies, critical social workers also face the challenge of not ascribing to mainstream, positivist social work theories and practice. These are the theories and practices regarded as disempowering their clients, but are deemed necessary, not only by human service organizations, but by Western society. As such, critical social workers truly are practicing on the margins. The knowledge they possess and the theories they ascribe to are subjugated, which means they are discounted and ignored in favor of knowledge that is informed by the experiences of privileged individuals who belong to a higher and dominate social class (Figueira-McDonough, Netting, & Nichols-Casebolt, 2001; Maxwell & Aggleton, 2013).

...And a lot of people got quite upset with the school and that ... that seems to have been the way it has gone off. 'Why is the school teaching us ways the employers don't actually want?' It has kind of been this interesting ... there has been this interesting split within our graduating class of students who were really angry at the school that they were being so AOP and so theory based that our employers didn't ...didn't necessarily want us.

Sometimes new graduates feel abandoned because of what they have been taught, and what they believe as necessary for positive change and social transformation.

Interpretations of “Finding”

The time. A part of the challenge of critical social work is that translating the theoretical ideals into a form of practice takes time, even for the most seasoned professional. It takes time to reflect on what went right and went wrong. It takes time to analyze each incident from a structural perspective, which includes a global context, as well as the individual, family, and community context. It takes time to deconstruct oppressive narratives and fully understand the impact. Finally, it takes time to search for, or construct, new and more emancipatory strategies to address the situation (Stepney, 2006). Unfortunately, in today’s climate of austerity and budget cuts, most social workers are left with a considerable amount of work, but very little time.

So you look at something, or something is, you know, a taken for granted truth... Why is it that this policy is in place?’ And not just assuming that it is all there because it has to be or it has always been that way, but that it is actually just ... like maybe there is another reason and maybe it doesn’t need to be that way, and so it is kind of just taking those ... taking those steps to actually question the way things are done, I guess. And ... and then taking it a step further and also discussing that with other people. So that is kind of what I am doing with myself, so when I am practicing with someone or working with someone, or looking at the way things are being structured I am constantly having that question, ‘Who is this serving? What was the purpose historically? What is the purpose now? Is this still needed?’ and kind of going through all those steps, and then, ‘What are the alternatives, like, be them better or worse?’ and without having that value placed on it necessarily, just, ‘What else could there be done?’ And then with other people often I like to ... like I said before, that troubling, so questioning it also. I find critical social work is a lot of questioning of things and kind of mulling things over and challenging...

Finding time and energy for emancipatory change cannot be done in an atmosphere of instrumental action pragmatism. This is the space “...within which a system of drives reorganizes itself” (Honneth, 1982, p. 51); where decisions are made based on predetermined rational outcomes and expectations (Morrison, 2006). Instead, it needs to be thoughtfully negotiated. It requires commitment by both the practitioner and the agency to provide a practice that includes dialogue, reflection, and action (Stepney, 2006). The above participant’s reflection on her practice closely resembles Schon’s (1983) reflection-in-action theory. This practice method involves a practitioner thinking through an action and the solution to the problem in question. Reflection-in-action requires a reflexive stance and the opportunity to consult peers and mentors. Instead of knowledge being treated as something stored and retrieved, this approach suggests knowledge is actually made in practice (Schon, 1983).

Critical social workers, particularly those new to practice, need time to dialogue around how we make meaning, and understand the range of evaluative mechanisms we use to make judgments. All of the graduates interviewed for this study stated they appreciated participating in interviews with me because it gave them an opportunity to reflect on their practice with someone. In addition, they all expressed a desire for more opportunities to continue to dialogue and reflect. In the end, they all felt it helped them be reflexive and deliberate in their work with

service users and organizations. Clearly, this is something that is needed in the field, but often difficult to find.

The right words. Language has the power to create and recreate a different world (Grondin, 2004). As such, finding the language of emancipation was very powerful for these new graduates. For example, many of the participants discussed how attending a critical social work school helped them put a language to something they knew intuitively, but lacked the words to explain. It was the first time that they felt they truly understood some of their personal and professional lived experiences.

[Before attending the Critical school] I had no understanding in a verbal way of what systemic issues or oppression might be. Like I couldn't ever even articulate that, I was just like, 'Well they are not ... they have had a lot more difficulty in their life,' and I just didn't have that vocabulary. Yah, and I think that was ... that was a huge, huge thing for me that I sought from [the Critical school] and further education and it was just like this feeling like I knew this stuff in my gut but no one would believe me because I didn't have the ways to articulate it, or convince anyone or even just discuss it with anyone because it was just something that felt true for me but I couldn't ... couldn't get that across.

However, like any newcomer to a language, these graduates needed others to converse and engage in dialogue with, or they risked the language getting lost because there is nothing to support or sustain it.

I don't know, maybe it's once you leave school for a while and you stop...And you start doing your real work and if your agency doesn't talk about those things, that's not a language that we talk about at my work. Maybe if you worked at an agency or an office where they practiced structural social work, where they practiced those things and you were hearing about it all the time. I mean, we have supervision but we don't ever talk about anti oppressive or structural social work in my supervision. Do you know what I mean? So maybe it gets lost there...

What is being lost here are more than words. The fear is not about forgetting what to say or not saying the right thing in that moment. Those indiscretions are expected in new practice. Instead, the loss of language here could potentially lead to a loss of the values ascribed to emancipatory practice. In this case, the language constructs the world, rather than simply mirroring it (Taylor & White, 2001). As noted here by one participant, on any given day, the words used by a critical social worker could create emancipatory or oppressive practice. As such, careful consideration and effort is always necessary.

Like when I am writing a piece I put so much time into making sure I am using words that don't contribute to pathologization or don't contribute to maintaining bad dynamics that I have seen. Because maybe someone will read this, and this term that I have used will get planted in the back of their head, and they will see it again and contribute it to that.

These critical social work graduates illustrated that language can provide vision and empower, or it can control and demoralize (Gregory & Holloway, 2005). However, finding the right words and understanding, and then maintaining a hold on them, continues to be their challenge.

Courage. In addition to needing to navigate potentially disempowering policies and practices of human service organizations, critical social work graduates may also struggle in the day-to-day interactions with the individuals and communities with whom they work. Anti-oppressive and empowering practice involves using techniques that involve power sharing. As such, critical social workers may never be sure how their intervention strategies will work out when they are sharing the power. Sharing the process means that you alone do not get to decide what the outcome will look like.

Graduates of critical schools are asked to embrace their anxiety and uncertainty and trust that it will eventually become a strength. However, this requires time, confidence, and courage. It requires graduates to have an ability to hold to the impossible point, without needing to account for the whole of the situation (Badiou, 2010). This can be very challenging for a new graduate, particularly if they are not using a normative practice method, such as Evidence-Based practice, which is thought to improve a social worker's professional status and credibility (Bates, 2006; Fortune & Proctor, 2001; Webb, 2001). Because they are new to practice, they do not have previous experiences from which to draw comfort and confidence. For many new graduates, their practice may feel like a leap of faith into the unknown.

...Because the situation up there you are pretty alone and so I remember that as kind of being the wake-up call that I was, I guess, really working and that I was alone working on this, and that my choices and my decisions affected someone's life in a way I couldn't ever contemplate or understand, because I don't have my own children, I don't know what it means to ... I can't even fathom what it would feel like, regardless of what choices I have made in my life, to have someone have the right or the ability to choose whether to take those children from me, so I have no ... like I can't fathom someone taking my children because I can't fathom the love you have towards your kids, and I can't understand, yah, the helplessness or the fear, or whatnot. I remember feeling that the sense of complete power that I had and feeling very ... I guess partly unsure of myself in regards in how to utilize that and almost unworthy of the title of having that ability to use that.

In the UK, Carpenter et al., (2015) found age is directly correlated to self-efficacy and perceived competence. Specifically, being older usually meant having more confidence in her or his practice. Carpenter et al also found that having more practice and life experience had a positive impact on the first year of practice. Ryan, Fook, and Hawkins (1995) found similar results over twenty years ago, in that, they discovered young workers struggled more than mature students in the social work programs because the older students were able to draw on their previous life experiences. These life experiences translated into confidence and practice wisdom. Trusting the process and the person is much easier when a person has had some previous experiences and practice

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wisdom that may further guide them, or offer them some comfort. New graduates, particularly young ones, often have neither.

Discussion

The path to maturation can be heavily negotiated terrain for many newly graduated social workers. The participants of this study described how they felt abandoned and left by the educational institutions that suckled and cultivated them. Once cast-off into reality they felt alone, without support, and lost. The real world becomes a box where it is very difficult, if not impossible, within which to move. When they began their critical education, they regarded themselves as out of the box thinkers. Although they are answering the call of emancipation by attempting to refute status quo, and step outside the box, they are still human. They have needs.

Similar to the findings of other studies on new social work graduate experiences (Chenot, Benton, & Kim, 2009; Grant et al., 2016; Guerin, Devitt, & Redmond, 2010; Jack & Donnellan, 2010; Marsh & Triseliotis, 1996), the participants of this study also experienced significant anxiety when beginning their paid practice. However, for the newly graduated social workers in this study, much of the stress they experienced came from feeling they were not able to find enough hours in a day to practice reflexively, and also being unable find the right words to sustain emancipatory practice.

The experiences of the critical social workers in this study were also similar to participants in other studies (Chenot et al., 2009; Grant, et al., 2016; Guerin et al., 2010; Jack & Donnellan, 2010; Marsh & Triseliotis, 1996), in that they craved more support from their agency supervisors and colleagues. In those moments when faced with new and unfamiliar situations, newly qualified critical social workers, like all social workers, might find their practice lacks courage, magnanimity and integrity. However, unlike the findings of other studies on new graduate experiences, much of the perceived lack of support for these critical social workers came from differences in theoretical orientation. The stress experienced by these out-of-the-box thinkers included the challenges of working in the real world, which was described as a small and difficult space within which to maneuver.

As with many universities around the world, Canadian institutions are under a great deal of pressure to produce graduates with employability skills that meet the identified needs of the workplace and society. Institutions have become analogous to factories, where academics are expected to deliver key performance indicators, and students are reduced to products to be marketed to employers (Campbell, 2012). However, it has been argued social work education that incorporates both critical pedagogy (Brookfield, 1987; Freire, 1970, 1994) and critical reflection (Fook, 2002; Fook & Gardner, 2007) provides resistance to the negative consequences of neoliberal ideology (Morley & Dunstan, 2012; Gray & Webb, 2013).

What appears to be needed is leadership from both human service organizations and social work educational institutions to provide programs and structures that can support newly graduated critical social workers to reduce the anxiety and sense of abandonment

that might come once they leave the safe confines of the classroom and their community of critical peers. A peer-support, mentoring buddy system or collaboration structure could be very appropriate for a critical social work graduate because of its focus on reciprocal and egalitarian relationships. “Peer collaboration differs from mentorship in that the essence of peer collaboration is an equal, nonhierarchical relationship in which each participant is seen as offering a significant contribution to the group” (Barlow & Phelan, 2007, p. 6). However, being equal does not mean being the same. Instead, equal status is given to different knowledge, skills, style and temperament. Peer collaboration also utilizes dialogue, as conversations are considered the key mechanism for both learning and support (Barlow & Phelan, 2007).

Two studies were conducted in Canada on the effect of peer support models on competency in practice. One project (Barlow & Phelan, 2007) explored the impact peer-support had on clinical self-care. The other study (Barlow et al., 2004) investigated the impact on instructional competency with a group of field instructors. Both studies concluded that peer collaboration could improve the continuous learning in the workplace (Barlow & Phelan, 2007; Barlow et al., 2004). Benefits to individuals were found in the peer-support programs focused on self-care. Specifically, Barlow and Phelan (2007) found individuals engaged in peer collaborative groups were able to “create space” outside the workplace to be themselves, be supportive to each other, and learn about different practice from each other (p. 12). Participating in a peer collaboration group helped new field instructors overcome feelings of abandonment and isolation. Participants also noted they had increased self-confidence and a sense of competence because the group support helped reinforce the concepts they had learned in earlier field instruction workshops (Barlow et al., 2004). Peer-support programs were found to provide an excellent opportunity to stimulate critical thinking and reflexive practice, and overall were found to be energizing (Barlow & Phelan, 2007).

Critical reflection and reflexive practice peer-support groups lend themselves well to new critical social work graduate experiences because these individuals are already immersed in a constant state of self-questioning and uncertainty. What these new graduates do not seem to have is the opportunity to explore their self-questioning and uncertainty about practice with other colleagues in a safe and supportive environment. Clearly new graduates need the space and support to embrace and learn from their discomfort. Deprived of this support and space, they are likely to become incapacitated or disillusioned.

Study Limitations

As this research involved using a nonprobability sample, the findings are not generalizable beyond this particular group. As such, this preliminary study is one step in attempting to better understand the experiences of newly graduated social workers educated in a critical tradition. A social desirability bias was also considered when conducting this research. Given the nature of the questions about their perceived success or challenges with their practice, participants could have altered their responses in an attempt to avoid feeling shamed, exposed, or inadequate (Bernard, 2012). I mitigated most of this bias by reassuring participants to speak as openly as they felt comfortable, and creating an environment that provided sufficient

conversational space for the participants to feel shame and embarrassment without perceived repercussions (Bernard, 2012).

Ensuring the authority and trust of readers is only possible if I am able to achieve a plausible interpretation. The findings should provide enough contextual information in the analysis that others will be able to make similar readings and interpretations (Koch, 1996). Namely, the findings of this study should speak to the reading audience, and encourage them to consider things they previously understood, in an alternative way.

Concluding Thoughts

The struggle between a conformist acquiescence and emancipation is not a new battle. Indeed, it is part of the ongoing discourse of transformation (Salerno, 2003). As such, some social work researchers (Ng, 1993; Wong, 2004) have suggested that what is needed in critical social work education is not to create a sense of safety, but more openness to discomfort and tension. Perhaps this is true. However, given the findings of this study, I would also argue that more research is needed on better ways to support critical ideology and critical reflection once students graduate from an institution. Additionally, more research is needed on the experiences of seasoned social workers that practice in a critical tradition. What supports individuals who have been educated in a critical tradition maintain their practice, or conversely, give it up? Although strengths-based practice and research is promoted in the critical social work field, rarely do we try to truly understand the strengths and resiliencies of our own social work practitioners, and more importantly, how to sustain this important practice.

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