Restoring Connections: Social Workers' Practice Wisdom towards Achieving Social Justice

Abstract

'Restoring Connections' was an action-research study that examined social work practice by focusing upon resilience and reconciliation with people who have experienced traumatic loss arising from social injustice or institutional abuse. The project examines the ways social workers can foster links and restore connections between the experiences of people's private experience of loss with public and structural issues. This research served as a means of understanding personal trauma arising from unjust social policy and practice, and how such affected people seek and obtain social justice. A focus group of social work practitioners met to discuss questions aimed at eliciting their practice wisdom about moving personal testimony associated with interpersonal practice towards the public sphere. The social justice insights and questions resulting from this focus group are examined using Finn and Jacobson's 'Just Practice Framework' and Margalit's writings about a decent society. The findings from this group support previous studies that achieving social justice in social work practice remains a difficult but integral concept in our work. This paper concludes with suggestions for strengthening socially just processes and practices in social work education and professional development through a stronger focus on the concepts of history and possibility.

Keywords: social justice, trauma, social work, resilience, reconciliation

Introduction

A publication of five women's testimonies (Irizarry and Kleanthi, 2004) who came to Australia as former British child migrants at the end of the Second World War provoked over 100 phone calls to social service providers from other adult survivors of orphanages and associated institutions throughout South Australia. In their book, these women speak of the loss and trauma they experienced in such institutional settings and the grief of being taken away from their homeland. In response to this publication and the creation of a sculpture at Adelaide's migration museum recognising the former British child migrants' experience, many other adult survivors reported a desire to publicly tell their story. Such an overwhelming response suggests that there are many people similarly affected who could benefit from social justice-oriented work. This is only one of several recent examples in Australia and elsewhere of client populations who are seeking social justice after experiencing traumatic loss arising from unjust institutional practices and policies.

The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) highlights the importance of a social work profession that 'promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being' (IFSW, 2012, n.p.). Further, the IFSW revised its definition of social work to stress the importance of human rights and social justice in the pursuit of the empowerment and liberation of those we work alongside to support. While there is a growing body of knowledge that addresses social justice theory and practice, its associated place within social work at the intersection between loss and trauma remains relatively difficult to define. Though social workers play important roles in many areas involving significant losses, the core loss, grief and trauma literature includes relatively few contributions compared to some other disciplines. This study attempts to build upon previous scholarly work that has looked at the question of the how, why and related processes of moving the expression of private pains associated with interpersonal practice towards public realms in social work contexts. Thus, there were two primary research objectives: (1) to critically engage with the process of how people move from experiences of loss and trauma arising from unjust social policies and practices towards restoring connections between the private and public realms of their lives; and (2) to identify the role and practices of social workers in addressing social justice issues related to traumatic loss.

The former British child migrants

The history of children being deported from the United Kingdom to Australia, Canada, New Zealand and several other Commonwealth nations can be traced from the 1800s. These children were known as 'home children' and were forcibly relocated to these places; often without their parents' consent or knowledge (many of these children were told that they were

orphans and were denied information about their families). Margaret Humphreys, a British social worker, was a whistle-blower to this scheme and in 1994 published a book entitled *Empty Cradles* (and later turned into a popular film, *Oranges and Sunshine,* in 2011) where she notes that up to 150,000 children 'migrated' under this scheme and about 7000 of these children went to Australia. The Australian Government delivered a formal apology on Monday 16 November 2009 to the former British child migrants who suffered abuse and neglect whilst in state care. In February 2010, the United Kingdom Prime Minister followed suit and made a similar apology; the British Ambassador to Australia made a tour of the country to deliver the apology in person.

This history raises important questions and represents a critical case study for social work. The institutional abuse of these children and the structural barriers used to prevent an inquiry into the injustices suffered by these children and their families highlight that social work must operate on multiple levels. In relation, the authors present an action-research project that presents their work with the Former British Child Migrants living in Adelaide as a case study to ascertain social work practitioners' understandings of social justice and the associated contestations and possibilities of restoring connections between people's personal lives and the wider societal/structural contexts.

A civilised, decent or just society?

Social work practice often finds itself in the role of 'witness bearer' where people's experiences of unjust institutional policies and practices are first expressed in interpersonal professional practice. Avishai Margalit (1996) makes a significant distinction between a civilised society and a decent one through the concept of humiliation, which he defines as a behaviour or condition that results in a person's self-respect being damaged or compromised in some way. He differentiates the two: 'A civilised society is one whose members do not

humiliate one another, while a decent society is one in which the institutions do not humiliate people' (1996, p. 1). The concept of humiliation is important and provides a direct justification for why social work practice should be aware of it in both the private and public realms. There would be very few who would argue against the idea that the social work profession needs to embody the ideals of a civilised society where our interpersonal practice does not humiliate others. However, attending to the concept of a 'decent society' is more difficult once it moves outside interpersonal practice. Recognising that institutions have far-reaching powers to influence the lived experience of people's daily lives, the concept of a decent society is helpful. For Margalit, a decent society is one 'that fights conditions which constitute a justification for its dependents to consider themselves humiliated' (1996, p. 10). However, how social work practitioners attend to such conditions and illuminate such concerns often remains elusive considering the many obstacles towards addressing institutional policy, practice and power.

Social work practice has a rich history of working with people who have been humiliated by institutions and has stimulated heated debates about social work's role in addressing such issues. Whilst the concept of humiliation provides a basis to understand what hinders social justice outcomes, it does not adequately establish what social justice is or how it is achieved. Despite the ubiquitous reference to social justice in social work practice and theory, it remains a concept difficult to translate in day-to-day applications from its theoretical and intellectual realms. Few would argue that it is not a core organising principle of professional social work and yet recent studies have shown an ongoing difficulty in finding a mutually agreed definition (Baines, 2011; Ife, 2012; Hölscher and Grace Bozalek, 2012; Bradt and Bouverne-De Bie, 2009; Swenson, 1998), as to how it is achieved and the models that inform it (Gray *et al.*, 2012; Jacobson and Rugeley, 2007; Thompson, 2002). In addition,

Hawkins *et al.* (2001) found that a significant proportion of both beginning and experienced social worker's language did not embody or evidence an awareness of social justice issues. Others have noted the complexity of pedagogically delivering social justice concepts (Ali *et al.*, 2008;) and the associated considerations of racial, ethnic, cultural and linguistic diversity within such contexts (Banks, 2004). Such difficulties are not surprising when one considers the multitude of social, economic, political and historical lenses that can be employed to understand complex concepts such as relational deprivation and distributive, procedural, restorative and retributive forms of justice. There is also a plenitude of social work theories and models that address different components of these considerations: systems theory, ethnic sensitive practice, cultural competence, ecological theory, structuralist approaches, strengths perspectives, narrative and empowerment approaches to name a few (see Finn and Jacobson, 2003; Lee, 2013; Swenson, 1998). These aforementioned theoretical frameworks, models and approaches introduce many perspectives and contested debates upon the role of social justice in professional practice. However, the aforementioned studies are also clear that that social justice is not limited to relativist understandings dependent on time, place, culture, context, etc.

Thus, we are left with the question of what social justice practice looks like on the ground, and how it is embodied towards creating a decent society where institutions do not humiliate those it purports to protect? What can we discover about practitioners' practice wisdom towards achieving social justice in our professional work? This paper attempts to address these questions through presenting an action-research study with experienced social work practitioners as participants. Through their commentary and response to the FBCM case study, we employ Finn and Jacobsen's (2003) 'Just Practice' framework to unpack what social justice practice can look like and identify the possibilities and tensions of such realisations.

Restoring Connections: study design

This project involved facilitating a focus group of twelve experienced social work practitioners who work with people living through traumatic loss in Adelaide, Australia. A provoked and facilitated analytical discussion (Hamel, 1997) was conducted where participants were asked to provide their insights and experiences about how the people they work with move from personal experiences of trauma and loss associated from unjust policies and practices towards seeking, and obtaining, social justice. The focus group was facilitated by the lead author as an 'interlocutor' while the other three authors were present as scribes. The interlocutor facilitated participants' reflection upon their practice wisdom and assumptions on social-justice-oriented practice. In this way, the participants were challenged to consider perspectives often overlooked in their work and the evidence base for their interventions.

The group discussion was facilitated through two main components. First, the participants were given an 'exemplar' case study, which outlined an analysis of social-justice-oriented work done with a group of former British child migrants (FBCM) mentioned in the introduction. This case study represented an action-research focus as it is informed the authors' experience of working with the FBCM as social workers over several years. We developed this case study by interviewing the FBCM group members about the process of gradually working through their experiences of private pain and loss to addressing this in increasingly public ways. In this sense, the case study presented the FBCM members' reflections on the social justice-oriented processes of coming together and regularly meeting over several years. This reflection included the FBCM's perspectives of publicly launching their book and a large sculpture that acknowledged their migrant experience and associated

losses. The FBCM members gave permission for this case study to be used for the purposes of this study.

The focus group participants were asked to voice their perspectives of the FBCM case study's relevance to social justice issues and practice. Secondly, the focus group participants then discussed the relationships between loss, trauma and social injustice and how they address such considerations in their own practice contexts. Afterwards, notations were compared to ensure consistency and reliability across the four researchers present in the focus group. These notations were then used to develop focussed codes and develop key categories through the process of memo writing (see Saldaña, 2009). After this process was achieved, it became apparent that the participant comments had synergies with the Finn and Jacobson (2003) model which is used to structure the section that follows. This project received ethics approval from the relevant academic institution.

Role and practices of social workers in addressing social justice issues related to traumatic loss

To explore the focus group members' comments, Finn and Jacobson's (2003) 'Just Practice Framework' is used, which breaks a social justice-oriented approach into five main concepts: meaning, context, power, history and possibility. These concepts provide important foundational considerations for achieving social justice in social work practice and help particularise this complex endeavour into more identifiable components. Thus, the responses from the focus group members are explored within these concepts to garner this group's insights about moving personal testimony from interpersonal work towards the public sphere. Each of these concepts is briefly summarised and then used as an interpretive lens to evaluate and analyse the focus group comments. Along with Finn and Jacobson, we acknowledge that these five concepts do not exist as discrete particulars and are often used to inform and

buttress others. It is within this understanding that the group's responses are embodied though meaning, context, power, history and possibility and are discussed separately.

The 'just practice' framework

Meaning

> The process of engaging with others develops, recreates, challenges, negotiates, and affirms meaning. Therefore the search for meaning requires reflexivity... It calls for questioning taken-for-granted assumptions about reality and for the consideration of multiple and contested interpretations (Finn and Jacobsen, 2003, p. 70).

As humans, we are interpretive beings and thus must find ways to attach meaning to our world. Critical to social work practice has been a focus upon meaning that is ascribed by those we work alongside and the associated meanings that we ourselves carry. From this reflexive perspective, the focus group members were very clear about self-awareness, noting that there can be differences between client- and practitioner-desired outcomes, and acknowledged that the client group might not even necessarily aspire for social justice. One person critically questioned, 'Who does social justice serve: clients, community, agency, or the worker?' Others emphasized the constructive nature of justice stating, 'Justice is a cultural construct, and the Western ideas of justice may not work with people from Middle Eastern backgrounds.' The group recognised the need to acknowledge many forms of diversity and difference and then to critically consider who social justice serves and the various pathways this work may lead. Within this discussion, participants clearly noted the value of social justice in their work alongside valuing diversity and diverse perspectives.

Within the discursive nature of meaning is the often cited but poorly understood concept of 'resilience'. Many participants asked critical questions of resilience noting that the 'appearance' of resilience might or might not actually be representative of such a quality.

The group acknowledged that resilience can be a helpful construct in many cases as it can be used to signify when a person might be able to move from private pains to public realms. However, they also cautioned that it might also deny those seeking justice because the person may not be deemed 'resilient enough' for the potential barrage of media, public opinion and contestation that can often follow disclosure.

Paolo Friere (1990) argued that social workers should endeavour towards embracing a 'critical curiosity' where one must not only be curious about the lives of others and their associated meanings, but must also engage in a reflexive exercise of exploring one's own assumptions, forms of privilege and possible areas of domination (see also Swenson, 1998). Thus, participants communicated the possibilities of coincientisation that required a holistic perspective that included a critical curiosity on multiple meanings. As one participant stated, 'It is important to consider how can I practise in a way so that I do not make who I am working with in my own image and likeness.' Other questions that the focus group members posited included:

- What is the value of going public? Does it create healing? Create more hurt?

- What about the risks of re-telling and re-traumatising the individuals?

- Is going public even a strategy of social justice?

- What are our assumptions about the healing of taking to the public sphere?

- Do we as social workers place an emphasis on social justice upon what we see is just? (i.e. what is our place working with those convicted of murder).

These critical questions were positioned alongside other comments such as that social justice starts with a story, involves equity and equality, and requires consideration of community led perspectives, non-pathologising approaches and a holistic approach. These questions and

statements essentially ask social work to iteratively examine the meanings behind the how, why, when and for whom of social justice.

Context

> Context pushes us beyond generic discourses of "structure" to the specific examination of the micro practices, schema, relations, resources, and discourses through which structures translate to practice (Finn and Jacobsen, 2003, p. 70).

Mills (1959) introduced the concept of the sociological imagination as a way to think and inquire about the social world and social relations by linking the expression of private pains to public troubles. The sociological imagination provides a perspective for examining our personal experiences in relation to what is happening in the broader social arena by focussing upon the intersection between personal biography and social structure. Such a perspective has also been discussed more directly in social work practice (Schwartz, 1969), and allows one to see the structural forces that may place direct influence and power over individual experiences of pain and suffering. Finn and Jacobson (2003, p. 70) aptly state, 'Fundamental to social work's claim of uniqueness is its understanding of individuals, groups, organizations, and communities as always existing within a larger framework of social, political and economic relationships and interactions.' The focus group participants acknowledged that social workers are often frontline witness-bearers to expressions of private pains from unjust policies and institutions. As witness-bearers, they noted the need to recognise the aforementioned larger structural frameworks that influence people's daily lives. One participant noted, 'You may not always move the person but you may move the issue.' Others stated that it is important to consider what a person who chooses to go public stands to lose. Further to these perspectives was the recognition that social work practitioners, while having amazing potential to heal and foster positive outcomes, also have the capacity to

contribute to the further marginalisation and oppression of those we are supposed to support. Thus, the group acknowledged that critical and central in our roles as social workers is the need to be honouring and dignifying of people's experiences.

Related to the notion of context are those of time and process. Many of the group participants asked a complex and potentially paralysing question: 'Does one wait to move private pains into the public realm to a point when it is less painful for the individual or does delaying the move towards social justice inflict further harm?' One social worker stated, 'We harbour the idea if only social work operated outside real world contexts but we need to work within them.' Within these real world contexts, it was acknowledged that social justice work must be accomplished alongside other professionals (allied health, guards, managers and politicians).

Power

> Social justice work calls on us to ask how power is created, produced, legitimized, and used and to understand how relations of power influence the nature of social work practice (Finn and Jacobsen, 2003, p. 71).

The concept of power was one of the most clearly articulated themes by the focus group members with respect to where it is derived and how it is exercised. The group acknowledged that there is a relationship between trauma, grief, and social injustice and that it must be named. The challenge they noted, however, is how this is done. Legitimising power can be derived from funding bodies and associated interests, agency mandates leading to the recognition that, in any professional social work relationship, that there will always be a discrepancy of power differentials, from the almost imperceptible to vast disparities. At this point the discussion turned to the question, 'how do we engage with structural forces yet

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ensure that we are not dominant and use privileged power with clients?' Thus, many participants indicated that accountability plays a direct role in the awareness and exercise of power. One woman stated, 'We must examine what it means to be dominant, not having as many roadblocks as other people… We cannot leave consulting the people we work with to chance—it must be organised and expected.' Another person stated, 'In recognising private pain and that it should lead to public issues… what are the assumptions behind that, what are the politics that are influencing it?'

The group members also generated a flurry of questioning around whether social work practice should focus on the individual or on broader systemic change and the role of advocacy and social action in the therapeutic process—should such roles go hand in hand or remain separate? Further, should our work with private pain always be contextualised within broader social, economic and political arenas? While these complex questions were not directly answered (and arguably cannot be generalised regardless), what was clear from this ensuing dialogue was that the group was highly aware of the barriers towards addressing such concerns. These barriers, while situated in understandings of meaning and context, were also directly influenced by manifestations of power. Such power structures were vocally expressed through higher level management, tenders and funding sources, legal processes (or the threat thereof), and the precarious nature of one's own employment when addressing institutional humiliation and structural forces.

History

> Looking back enables one to see … the interplay between everyday means of being and relating and the institutional forces that have helped shape them (Finn and Jacobsen, 2003, p. 71).

The historical considerations of meaning, context and power are related to socially constructed understandings of knowledge and discourses upon how we ought to live our lives. Looking into history, it is possible to see how structural forces and policies have impacted upon peoples' daily experiences. Within such explorations, contested and constructed positions of gender, culture, (dis)ability, sexuality, age, clearly show that there is not always a level playing field in our social world and relationships. Further, historical enquiry informs us that there are potential dangers in moving private pains to public realms including that people can be blamed, dragged through legal proceedings, and experience the further disenfranchisement of their grief even if this work is done very cautiously. One focus group participant soberly stated, 'How can vulnerable people defend themselves when placed on the front page of the newspaper?'

Finn and Jacobson further emphasise the nature of history as something that continually forms *us* as we construct *it*. Clearly, social justice work must take into account how history has coincided with the lives of the clients with whom we work. As one focus group member stated, 'We are somehow the tools of the system we work in.' Others noted the history of social justice work falling short of the line by giving an example of closing an institution while failing to provide those who lived within its walls a sincere opportunity for rehabilitation, self-determination and agency after the material structures were dismantled. A group participant stated, 'Sometimes we make the mistake of partialising the problem and not completing the process.' Another warned that going public and not providing support afterwards can 'hijack' someone's grief. Going public has often represented the last phase of work with people or a group, as was noted in the FBCM case study. Some of the historical cautions that were noted included that often groups dissolve after going public as it is often established as the 'end goal' of a long and arduous journey that results in a critical 'where to

next?' point for the group. While the group noted the historical importance of social-justice-oriented practice, the predominant focus on history was where social justice had failed or had been obstructed rather than recognising its achievements.

Possibility

> As we expand our possibilities for thinking, we may change the way a problem is perceived and therefore envision new possibilities for action (Finn and Jacobsen, 2003, p. 72).

Social work values remind us that practice should endeavour to explore what is possible to know, aspire to and to achieve rather than counselling those living through loss and trauma at the hands of unjust policies or institutional abuse that they can find happiness within their ensconced position in the world. 'Possibility' provides fertile grounds to imagine and can deliver social work practice into areas that may bring about meaningful and lasting forms of healing, liberation and justice. While these comments were agreed upon, the group members also established that 'social justice' was a very hard term to define which is often envisioned idealistically, leaving practitioners searching for practical approaches to achieving such outcomes. One person noted that it is a term often used but not fully comprehended stating, 'I am suddenly aware that we always talk about social justice in our work but never how we define it.' While this group discussed possibility in limited ways, it was more evident that there was a stronger vocal awareness and focus upon the barriers to achieving possibility rather than its realisation. The group members noted difficulties working alongside difficult agency policies, job insecurity, funding concerns, legal proceedings and coronial processes. They noted that such barriers certainly made it easier to focus on interpersonal work rather than addressing powerful structural forces that have contributed to humiliation and injury to a person's self-respect.

However, while these difficulties were recognised, the group members acknowledged that there were some inherent qualities in a worker who might be better able to achieve social justice outcomes. They stated that one must be brave and astute enough to address unjust practices with more powerful entities (and that this can at times place their social justice stance in conflict with their employer or funding body). The worker must be able to refine their political analysis and be astute enough to recognise the structural forces that may lie beneath a person's expression of pain and suffering. This astuteness, above all else, requires the ability to establish a therapeutic relationship built upon trust and genuineness. Finally, they noted that the worker must also ultimately accept that 'we cannot assume that we are necessarily part of the answer.'

In sum, there was a general group consensus around foundational considerations towards achieving social justice outcomes: process, values and areas for critical reflection. Further, the group stated that there is a relationship between trauma, grief, and social injustice and that it must be named. The challenge, they noted, is how this is done. Overall, the focus group members did not clearly articulate a model or approach of practice that exemplified social justice principles. However, several group members stated that we must employ a process of finding a 'goodness of fit' between those who we are working alongside and the justice-oriented approaches that inform our practice.

Discussion: moving beyond the 'twilight of knowing'

Haebich (2007, p. 21) introduces a type of 'public blindness' which she terms 'the twilight of knowing' and not knowing where 'discriminatory treatment becomes normalised to the extent that it is rendered unremarkable and virtually invisible to the wider society.' While people might be aware of existing forms of discrimination and humiliation on some levels, they generally remain unaware of unjust policies and practices because they are interwoven into

the fabric of society, often rendering them indiscernible. Thus, illuminating such issues presents very real and contemporary challenges in social work practice. Further, Margalit's (1996) concept of a civilised society (where individuals do not humiliate one another) and a decent one (where society's institutions do not humiliate its members) provide an important backdrop to examine social-justice-oriented work as it relates to moving such concerns beyond the twilight of knowing.

The concepts of a decent society and the twilight of knowing provide analytical lenses to examine the focus group discussion with respect to its strengths and areas for further consideration in work towards social justice. Overall, what was clear from the focus group members was that social justice practice was something that had inherent value though it remained difficult to define. Part of this challenge also seemed indicative of operating within neoliberal environments characterised by increasingly short term contracts and organisational cultures that are averse to risk (see Beddoe, 2010; Liedenberg et al., 2015). It was a relatively small step for the group to envision social justice in our microcosms of interpersonal practice as is necessitated in achieving a civilised society. But yet, this group could not as readily address the macro-level considerations of unjust policies and institutional abuse needed for a decent society within the purviews of day-to-day professional practice.

While the focus group participants in this study did not state a unified or completely coherent perspective of what social justice is and how it might be delivered, they did evidence an agreement about an awareness of, and commitment towards, social justice principles—particularly within Finn and Jacobson's concepts of meaning, context and power. This finding is understandable considering that the focus group participants came from fairly diverse practice environments, each with its own contextual limitations and possibilities.

However, it is also arguable that, before a greater realising of history and possibility within Finn and Jacobsen's framework, that it is first helpful to establish foundational understandings of meaning, context and power between the client system and worker. While it is important to emphasise that this model is not linear, it is argued within this study that an engagement with the first three concepts are often precursors to realising the last two. For example, it is difficult to establish possibility in social justice practice without a firm grounding in meaning and context.

Indeed, as meaning, context and power are more fully explored both within client and worker purviews, these open up further perspectives on history and possibility. Such reflections are true with the FBCM case study as the publication of their story and the public launch of their statue were possibilities only realised after considerable dedication and patience towards understanding the meaning and context of their situation. As time progressed, it was then possible to further explore the other concepts and a mutual endeavour from the expression of private pains towards recognising them as public troubles.

A related and important component of a social justice mindset is the awareness of the barriers that may impede progress to social justice. Working towards social justice can create tensions between ethical practice and agency mandates, funding providers, managers and workers in multi-disciplinary settings where considerations of power, voice and representation come to the fore. Thus, it must be recognised that going public represents not only a risk to the client system; it can also threaten the social worker's standing within the agency, managers and people's future employment prospects. Such an emphasis upon barriers provides a sobering reminder that we, too, work within institutions and encounter powerful discourses about what is possible within our professional social work identities. In

particular, the focus group members had such an awareness of potential barriers that it made it difficult to discuss 'possibility' in social justice practice. In addition to this impasse, a clear understanding of what has been possible in historical settings was also generally lacking; again, historical 'barriers' were emphasised rather than positive examples. In light of Finn and Jacobsen's (2003) five concepts, it is argued that possibility and history were the two that demonstrated the greatest potential for further engagement and perspective towards the realisation of social-justice-oriented work.

The focus group members noted the difficulties in achieving social justice with marginalised voices by giving examples of working with children and Indigenous peoples. Often, people directly affected by the unjust policies and practices of powerful institutions are ignored or silenced. As Ignatieff (1994, p. 12) states, 'Politics is not only the art of representing the needs of strangers; it is also the perilous business of speaking on behalf of needs, which strangers have had no chance to articulate on their own.' Thus, a needed and historically powerful associated role of social work has been that of speaking on behalf of the 'needs of strangers.' Moving increasingly to macro-practice and structural considerations, Esping-Anderson (1990, p. 159) aptly notes, 'The welfare state is not just a mechanism that intervenes in, and possibly corrects, the structure of inequality; it is, in its own right, a system of stratification. It is an active force in the ordering of social relations.' Having such an awareness of how structural forces stratify and rank these people's needs and abilities remains a strong determinant in how those who find themselves on the margins of social policy will be treated in the future.

A commitment to social justice work highlights the necessity for the social work profession to embrace strong interpersonal practice coupled with an ability, awareness and a desire to engage with associated concerns in more public realms. Mills' (1959) sociological

imagination presented a way of looking at our personal experiences in relation to what is happening in the broader social arena by asking a number of historical, structural, critical and comparative questions in our work and daily lives. These questions must be contextualised within the social, political, economic and environmental considerations that surround each unique individual, group or community. It highlights the need for social work to be highly informed on a number of levels to more appropriately address associated challenges of social justice and its necessity within our profession. The contexts of globalisation, unprecedented migration flows and the historical impacts of colonisation highlight the importance of critical and anti-colonial traditions that provide a 'counterpoint' (Said, 1993) to dominant discourses of which understandings of social justice are also included. Further, the indigenous social work literature in numerous countries (see Gray et al, 2012) reinforces that power and politics remain at the heart of social justice, where truth, meaningful participation and reconciliation remain focal to achieving socially just processes and outcomes. This emphasis alongside awareness and honouring of the past further bolsters how the integration of Finn and Jacobsen's five concepts can support such understandings within social work education and professional development.

The focus group comments and the academic literature exhibit a difficulty in being able to clearly define social-justice-oriented work and how it can be translated into actual practice. From this observation, Finn and Jacobsen's concepts of possibility and history occupy an important place in social work pedagogy and theory. To help social work professionals and students move beyond the twilight of knowing and not knowing of social justice work, we suggest some recommendations for social work educators and supervisors:

- Continue to help professionals and students work through, and remain cognisant of, barriers to social justice but to also give examples where social justice initiatives have succeeded;

- Provide students and professional with local, regional, national and international examples of social-justice-oriented social work practice (both contemporary and historical);

- Encourage and facilitate greater awareness and linkages between the expression of private pains in our interpersonal work to the recognition of public troubles;

- Incorporate supervision that includes going beyond clinical interpersonal practice towards a critique of structural forces and ways of potentially addressing these concerns (see Beddoe, 2010);

- To critically consider: What are the ways that profession can contribute to intellectual inquiry, critical debate, political awareness and action that can lead to greater understandings of the intersection of private troubles and public issues? Alongside this is an awareness of the associated possibilities and cautions of engaging the media in such activities.

- Provide 'small' examples of social justice work, or in other words, not just the most glowing case studies but ones that may exist on local levels or represent initial smaller steps that can build towards greater social change and structural engagement;

- Present the debates upon justice and the different forms of distribution; differentiating important concepts such as equality and equity;

- Encourage reflexive and reflective social work practice and supervision where the practitioner examines self-as-social-worker and associated actions in wider contexts, outside interpersonal engagements;

- Use case studies that are relevant to social work students and professionals' fields of practice to create greater linkages to theory and understandings of social justice.

Finally, the assumption that there is only one good model for social justice practice clearly has limits in recognising the plurality of professional practice and the uniqueness of

individual, family, group and community populations. In response, the IFSW (2012) provides a flexible and critical framework to address the many complexities involved in addressing social justice issues that include local and indigenous-based knowledges. Thus, whilst we argue that social justice practice remains a concept difficult to define and translate into social work practice, an awareness of different models and practical examples reinforces the possibilities of realising socially just processes and outcomes.

Conclusion: social work practice and social justice

Addressing the goal of Margalit's (1996) 'decent society' can often become paralysing because the 'big step' of social justice has too many associated unknowns and risks. While social justice practice must be considered within these constraints, Finn and Jacobson's (2003) five concepts of meaning, context, power, history and possibility provide identifiable processes. They provide beginnings or points of departure from known and familiar barriers whereby a series of small, but manageable and safe, steps can be made towards achieving loftier goals and aspirations. The process of moving from the 'twilight of knowing' in interpersonal practice towards taking experiences of unjust social policies and institutional abuse into the public sphere remains a contested discussion among social work practitioners. While such lively debates are encouraged, it is also apparent that clearer renditions of social work practice, especially as it is accomplished on the ground, are needed. Such a call resonates with the need for a more profound and integrated approach to the understanding of social justice in pedagogy, theory and practice.

The principle of social justice remains a core component of social work practice. While the focus group members did not articulate a coherent social justice framework, there was unanimous agreement over its inherent value. In line with Finn and Jacobson (2003, p. 66) that these ideas are 'hard to think and good to think', there is a recognition of the complexity

of this work and the necessity to engage with it critically. Models and theoretical perspectives, while indispensable to our understandings of social justice, never completely translate to what happens on the ground. It is here that exploring practice wisdom becomes important and it is further maintained that social work practice has an obligation towards further realising the decent society about which Margalit writes. The humiliation resulting from unjust institutional policies and practices must be named and addressed if we desire a more just society. However, the processes towards achieving these aspirations are complex and must be considered from a multitude of perspectives. Recognising our own rich history, background, implicit (and explicit) assumptions and how we operationalise and give life to the many great thinkers of social-justice-oriented work creates a colourful mosaic of what is possible in our profession. Indeed, the link between the theory, pedagogy and the direct practice of restoring connections between private pains moving and public issues represents a strong historical tradition that has served the profession for well over a century.

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