

My Journey Toward Anti-Oppressive Work in Child Welfare

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Abstract: The following narrative describes a social worker's journey of critical analysis and struggle as a worker in the bureaucratic framework of child welfare. The narrative describes a process of self-exploration that led the social worker through an evaluation of personal and professional values. The outcome of this journey was a reinforced commitment to the self-determination of clients, to rebalance power inequities, and refute systemic inequities.

Keywords: anti-oppressive, social work, child welfare, power, self-discovery

It is not uncommon for social workers practicing in the fields of child welfare or mental health to unwittingly participate in oppressive practice with clients. This happens whenever we engage in coercive social control of the individuals we serve thus we move away from social justice, empowerment and egalitarianism and instead create an unequal balance of power (Wilson & Beresford, 2000). Oppression in social work practice can surface at multiple levels when we fail to recognize the practice implications that grow out of the complexity of the intersections of our clients' race, gender, class, age, sexual orientation and ability among other factors (Danso, 2009).

Self-reflection is a cornerstone of anti-oppressive social work practice as it allows social workers to begin to understand the inherent power and privilege related to her or his social location and how this may contribute to the unwitting oppression of the client (Danso, 2009). However, we argue that reflection that leads to increased awareness alone is not enough. For anti-oppressive social work to occur, awareness must lead to a change in practice reflected in greater power sharing and egalitarianism. Our professional experiences in child welfare (KB) and mental health (A G-P) have reinforced the notion that as social workers we have an ethical and professional responsibility to actively work to create and nurture an anti-oppressive environment when working with our clients. In this article we focus on the experience of one of the authors (KB) to reflect on the various factors that gradually and unintentionally may contribute to oppressive practices and the transformational process to anti-oppressive social work practice. The second author (AG-P) served as a mentor in the development of this manuscript and provided me (KB) guidance in my journey of self-discovery and through the process of conceptualization of anti-oppressive practice.

My (KB) journey begins with a critical examination and self-exploration of my struggles as a social work professional working within the bureaucratic framework of child welfare in Canada. These struggles lead me to the belief that there is a deep-rooted systemic nature of oppressive practices in that system. This realization did not come easy for me and resulted from a series of circumstances that caused me to re-consider my work with families. Although the core of the social work profession encompasses underlying values that guide our principles and the service we provide to vulnerable populations, the nature of child-welfare practice is, in itself, oppressive to the very populations that we aim to serve (The Child Welfare Anti-Oppression Roundtable, 2009). The Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) embraces values that highlight the need for a non-judgmental attitude of unconditional acceptance. In reality, however, the child welfare system is full of evaluation and judgment of clients and child protection workers. In my work, I have used my position to control the dynamics of my relationship with my clients. I have acted oppressively. I have intervened as the expert and judged parents for their perceived failures. I excluded parents from decision-making processes and minimized self-determination. I am not proud of these actions. I now see that as I tried to cope with the severe responsibilities and incredible pressures inherent in child protective work, I lost sight of my ethical obligations as a social worker.

My Personal Journey

Although my oppressive work with clients likely resulted from a culmination of factors, there are certain situations that stand out as pivotal for me. One particular event that stands out as the beginning of my drift into oppressive practice happened years ago when I was assigned the "Smith" family. I was a relatively new worker at the time, bright-eyed and full of hope.

The Smith family was a somewhat chaotic family. The mother, “Tina Smith,” was a single mother struggling to parent four young children. I received several referrals on the family surrounding issues of child neglect and lack of supervision. I worked hard to help Tina parent more responsibly. One evening the children were found wandering a busy street in the middle of the night. Tina was sleeping and had no knowledge of their whereabouts. The following morning, my supervisor called me into his office. I anticipated his direction of removal of the children and I had my checklist in hand why I believed she deserved another chance. I argued that Tina was simply exhausted and doing the best that she could despite her situation. I highlighted her strengths and argued that with continued work, she could keep her children safe. My supervisor reluctantly agreed with me. I felt victorious! Less than a week after that supervision session, the two year old fell out of a second story bedroom window. The toddler had several broken bones and a punctured lung. After hearing the news, I hung my head low and entered my supervisor’s office. I knew what had to be done. I didn’t argue with my supervisor this time. In fact, I found myself angry with Tina - as if she let me down and I was angry with myself for being so gullible. When I gave Tina the warrant to apprehend the children, I was void of any understanding or compassion for her situation. With tears in her eyes, Tina tried to tell me that her landlord was supposed to fix the window screen. I couldn’t hear her excuses. From this day forward, I began to doubt my clients’ abilities to make healthy choices and became more skeptical in my work. Instead of promoting power sharing and inclusion of parents and families in the decision-making process, I gradually took it upon myself to decide what I thought was in the best interest of the client.

As is the case with all serious events involving children, my work underwent critical review. My perceived failure in the Smith case created a heavy burden on me personally and professionally. As a result, I became hyper vigilant in my work and I became exceedingly concerned with eliminating any possibility of child harm. This concern was exacerbated by my work with the “Clint” family. The Clint family was involved with our agency for ongoing issues of excessive corporal punishment. For months, I ensured that I saw the 4-year old unclothed and checked for marks on a regular basis.

I became less concerned with education or discussing the options and alternatives for discipline. Instead, I was more focused on “catching them.” On one particular home visit, I noticed the child walking tenderly on her feet. I realized that the entire time I was checking the child for marks; I never looked at the bottom of her feet. On this day, I found the soles of the child’s feet to be covered in marks. This situation reinforced my belief that my clients would inevitably fail. A controlling attitude began to underscore my interactions with families more and more. Once again I was motivated by my fear of failing to protect the vulnerable children I was expected to safeguard. Over time, the power imbalance with my clients became more evident. My oppressive work was epitomized in my work with “Elliot”, a First Nations family. The mother, “Clair”, had 3 young children and an abusive partner who struggled with alcoholism. While I was aware of some of the First Nations history of trauma and oppression, I failed to see how this history might have contributed to the mother’s lack of trust in me. By neglecting to understand the complex intersection of her cultural history, gender and social location and the influence of such interaction on her perspectives and actions, I missed the opportunity to build a more just and egalitarian relationship and instead unwittingly contributed to replicating a power imbalance in our relationship that likely mirrored her past experiences with authority figures. Consequently, my meetings with Clair were especially difficult. Clair was extremely quiet and obviously agitated with my presence. Rather than trying to understand her, I saw her lack of engagement with me as a lack of motivation for change. Clair continued to associate with her partner who I deemed as a risk to the children. I warned her that her continued association with him would result in the children’s removal from her care. My assessment of her was deficit-based and I failed to recognize her contextual circumstances. On the day of the apprehension, she had to be taken down by police when she refused to let go of the children. She continually called me a “White bitch.” It was an incredibly emotion-charged day and I found myself sobbing in my car after the event. In order to get through it, I told myself that I was simply “doing my job.”

Unfortunately, my oppressive work was never questioned by my colleagues or supervisors. Oppressive practices are entrenched in child-welfare practice and they typically remain unchallenged

(Wong & Yee, 2010). Power imbalance is inherent in child-welfare service delivery and the application of sanctions to noncompliant parents is commonplace in our work (Wong & Yee, 2010). When child welfare standards are based on the premise that child maltreatment is a result of the parent's lack of capacity to be an appropriate caregiver, the act of judgment is never an issue. As child protection workers, we are trained in the use of actuarial instruments to "assess" parenting ability and we subjectively judge parents' value as caregivers on a regular basis. To be honest, it would have been easier for me to continue my work within a "power over" framework than to question my oppressive practice. Self-examination can be threatening and difficult (Horejsi, 1982). However, I realized that my personal values and inability to face criticism led me down a self-serving path that was adversely influencing my work with families. Somewhere along the line, I lost sight of the social work values of self-determination, client empowerment, and social justice. When I reflected on the power that I had over the families to determine the trajectories of their lives and on the relationships that parents had with their children, I knew that I was at a crossroads and that I needed to make a change. This change started with a process of self-inquiry that focused on trying to understand how my past experiences in child welfare had come to shape my present reactions in my work with families. This insight opened the path that eventually and gradually led me to increased awareness of key factors that began to shape the foundation of my anti-oppressive philosophy and practice, these included: acknowledgment of how my attitudes and behaviors had contributed to oppressive practices; recognition of the privileges of my social location due to race, education and profession; and awareness of the influence that my clients' socio-cultural-economic-political context had on their lives. Consequently, I began to consciously make a concerted effort to create healthier interactions rooted in shared power and respect.

Seeking Balance

As I continued in the field of child welfare, my cynicism began to take a personal toll on me. I felt an incredible amount of despair in my work. I was uncertain of my values, and I knew that such

uncertainty was affecting me. I sensed that clients were becoming guarded and unresponsive. As I questioned the worth of my work, my commitment to the field was becoming tenuous. My need for critical self-examination came to a head after one incredibly difficult and emotionally charged visit with a family. During this meeting, my clients accused me of being "cold" and asked if I was always so "harsh and judgmental" in my work. That evening I found myself re-evaluating my personal and professional values and my approach with families. I turned to the NASW Code of Ethics (2008) for answers. Specifically, I reflected on:

1. As a social worker, my values compel me to protect the weak and the mistreated. I must "enhance human wellbeing and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable" (NASW, 2008). As I read this section of the Code of Ethics, I clung to this statement and used it to reinforce my past decisions to remove children from their families in my attempt to protect them from harm. After all, children involved in the child welfare system are incredibly vulnerable. They are often the recipients of abuse, neglect and maltreatment. However, I knew that I needed to dig deeper. My past decisions with families went beyond my desire to protect the vulnerable. I knew that I had a professional responsibility to continue to reflect and understand the factors that influenced my decisions.
2. The NASW Code of Ethics (2008) also advises social workers of the importance of human relationships. In this sense, social workers have an ethical responsibility to strengthen relationships, so as to promote and restore the well-being of individuals, families, groups and communities. Clearly, protecting children while enhancing the well-being of families requires a constant balance. Upon reflection of some of my past decisions, I was ashamed to admit that I did not always engage in a purposeful effort to promote, restore, maintain, and facilitate the wellbeing of individuals and families (NASW, 2008). Rather, my choices were driven by a system that placed a high level of accountability on my decisions and sought to place blame in times of crisis.
3. Lastly, I turned my attention to the need for social justice. I reflected on the current child welfare standards and how they may in fact perpetuate

judgments based on globalized standards that reflect Western, middle-class values (Parrot, 2009). My practice clearly required more work in this area. My decisions were based on dominant and mainstream values that failed to recognize the marginalization of certain groups. I recognized that, in my work, I needed to make a greater effort to prevent and eliminate the exploitation and the discrimination of others. Moreover, I realized that, if I was going to be true to the values of my profession, I needed to work to empower families by actively including them in decisions that affected them.

The Code of Ethics does not specify which principles may outweigh others when they conflict. My ethical decision making is an ongoing process of self-reflection and it compels me to continually reassess whether my work is consistent with my values as a social worker. For instance, I have specifically questioned how might child welfare employees balance their values and make decisions with families in a manner that upholds their ethical responsibilities? I have considered whether it is possible to protect children, while respecting the autonomy and uniqueness of families who struggle with their parenting practices. Although at the time I grappled with finding the answers to those questions, I knew that if I wanted to practice as an ethical and effective social worker, I would need to realign my values, my use of power, and redefine the nature and quality of my relationships with the families I served (Callahan & Lumb, 1995).

I began this process by engaging in a systematic and introspective process of exploration and critical analysis of my feelings and attitudes toward decision-making. My first step was to stop assuming full responsibility for making the decisions that impacted families. I also came to accept that in child welfare, no matter what I do, or what direction I take, my actions may come under criticism. Turnell and Edwards (1997) have suggested that child welfare services are often addressed by professionals who may assume an authoritarian and paternalistic approach that leads them to take on full power and responsibility for assessing the nature of the problem and deciding on the “solution.” In my evolution as a child welfare worker I worked to divest myself from such attitude and beliefs. Gradually I saw a shift in my decision-making processes. I began moving away from making

judgments that were motivated by the fear of criticism, and instead I focused on deciding what was in the best interest of families. I strived to develop partnerships and cooperation with the families I served. This led me to incorporate more family-oriented decisions in my work. I also became more aware of the impact that my own power, privilege, and social location had on my decision-making processes. I was not always perfect. Nevertheless, I began to examine my clients concerns within the wider sociocultural context of their lives (Pollack, 2004). Now, before I engaged in any decision-making, I began to work from a place where I could truly listen and understand the needs of my clients (Wong & Yee, 2010). This was a significant change for me.

Anti-oppressive Work in a Child Welfare Organization

While I recognized that I needed to make changes and conscientiously worked at doing so, I also realized that practicing within the current social structure of the child-welfare system inevitably leads to reproducing power imbalances in the worker-client relationship. Child-welfare advocates working from an anti-oppressive framework have identified many mechanisms by which families can be marginalized and oppressed by the child-welfare system (Wong & Yee, 2010). For instance, there is an inherent power dichotomy that is maintained through the constant spoken or unspoken word that parents may lose their children if they don't comply with the rules of the child-welfare system (Callahan & Lumb, 1995). Although I was beginning to make personal changes in my work, I questioned whether it was possible to empower clients within a disempowering framework (Pollack, 2004). I saw that, embedded within the current child welfare system, are policies that are not informed by anti-oppressive principles. Such policies can deepen the inequalities experienced by families (Wong & Yee, 2010) and entrench oppressive assumptions and practices. The impact of structural inequalities is rarely, if ever, considered in our work. We are trained to employ the values of the organization, to evaluate and make judgments. According to the Child Welfare Anti-Oppression Roundtable (2009) “As part of the process of defining users, the systems has relied upon binary language such as good/bad, fit/unfit, safe/dangerous, and normal/abnormal” (p. 3). Such judgment stigmatizes the individual, embodies the privileged social location

of child-welfare case workers, perpetuates dominant discourse and reinforces our power role. To challenge deficit-based assessment in this system is not an easy task and my work to maintain strength-based, social justice themes throughout my practice is a constant struggle. When the very standards of practice that I am proscribed to follow reinforce client vulnerability, I grapple with my efforts to continually engage and empower parents. Nevertheless, I continue to examine how my own power perpetuates the marginalization of others.

Conclusion

My journey has led me to understand that there are no risk-free decisions in child welfare and that mistakes are part of the human condition. Moreover, often despite my full attention, preparation and best intentions, the outcome of a case is beyond my control and some adversity may come to the children. This is an unfortunate reality that child welfare workers face. It is my hope that this narrative may allow other social workers to recognize that adversity and, at times, tragic consequences are aspects of the field of child welfare. When faced with such circumstances I believe that it is also important for social workers to avoid falling into the pitfall of toxic blame and self-condemnation. If I burden myself with worries and fears this would only reduce my abilities to serve my clients effectively. This process of self-exploration has helped me understand that practice based on fear of scrutiny does not epitomize the core values of the social work profession. In the end I must know that I have worked to the best of my ability to fight oppression, promote partnership and cooperation, and support families and protect children.

As a social worker I am committed to work with vulnerable populations and, in that work, I must continually determine if my actions rebalance power inequities and refute systemic inequalities. The importance of examining my own values cannot be understated. Our values form the basis of what we choose to do with our clients (Horejsi, 1982). Therefore, it is important for me that I continually and explicitly engage in a critical examination of my values to ensure that they influence my work with marginalized families in a manner that promotes self-determination, empowerment and social justice.

Through my mentorship with A G-P, we explored the process of developing an anti-oppressive philosophy and practice perspective and how it poses a significant challenge for social work practitioners at all levels of experience. Honest self-reflection, a key aspect in the development of anti-oppressive social work (Denso, 2009), can be uncomfortable and at times brutally painful. We also believed that having a framework of principles to guide anti-oppressive practices is helpful. Larson (2008) has suggested seven principles to help build a framework to guide anti-oppressive practice. Here we present an adaptation of these principles to make them more reflective of child welfare practice: (1) ensure that parents and/or families are included as full participants in the identification and implementation of the services that they receive including the goals and strategies implemented to resolve the problem; (2) when communicating with parents and/or families use empowering, egalitarian and respectful language as the basis of communication; (3) be cognizant and respectful of indigenous practices and strategies (e.g., parenting strategies) and when applicable encourage the use of such; (4) establish a just and collaborative working relationships based on trust and power sharing; (5) promote education and professional development among child welfare workers to increase awareness of individual and institutional biases as well as discriminatory and oppressive attitudes and practices; (6) promote cultural diversity and a strength-based perspective in practice (rather than a deficit-based perspective) that recognizes the parents and /or families innate capacity to make choices and change; (7) promote social justice that goes beyond intellectual awareness of injustice and instead transforms into action to challenge and reform oppressive practices that impact upon parents and their children.

Finally, we suggest that the challenge that social workers face is the development of effective anti-oppressive practices. It has been suggested that a critical issue facing anti-oppressive practices is that the perspectives and debates around such practices often reflect more the views of academics and practitioners rather than the lived experiences of oppressed individuals and groups (Danson, 2009; Larson, 2008; Wilson & Beresford, 2000). Wilson and Beresford (2000) have called for a more active involvement of service users in research and the analysis of their perspectives in the development of anti-oppressive theory and practices. Robbins (2011) however, points

out that conducting quantitative research in the area of oppression and anti-oppressive practices is difficult due to the focus on assumptions, premises and variables that do not readily lend themselves to quantification and empirical validation. Consequently, qualitative research with service users as well as service providers may be the means to deliver the type of rich narrative and detail to help us generate knowledge on the lives of and challenges faced by oppressed individuals; the complexity of the intersection of factors such as race, class, gender, age, ability and sexual orientation among others; and the structural barriers that perpetuate inequality. Such knowledge would help in the development of empowering and effective anti-oppressive practices.

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