Critical Social Work

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Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information can be found at: <http://uwindsor.ca/criticalsocialwork>

Link to article:

<http://www.uwindsor.ca/criticalsocialwork/stories-from-the-field-practicing-structural-social-work-in-current-times-practitioners%E2%80%99-use-of-crea>

Critical Social Work, 2010 Vol. 11, No. 2

Online publication date: August 2010

Stories from the Field: Practicing Structural Social Work in Current Times: Practitioners' Use of Creativity

Critical Social Work 11(2)

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Introduction

In a global climate where political and social priorities are increasingly focused on advancing business interests at the cost of human welfare, there is a rising need for strengthening movements aimed at promoting social justice. Social work has a significant role to play in such movements yet, as a profession, it is increasingly at risk of becoming caught in a discourse that demands people be placed in “problem” categories to be dealt with on an individual basis rather than examining systemic factors. In this climate, social work has been increasingly confined to the role of “service provider,” rather than as the voice of dissent to mainstream politics that it has the potential to be.

Nevertheless, there are, and have always been, groups within social work communities who resist these trends and persevere in building collective power to change inhumane policies and advocate for a world which encourages the fulfillment of human potential. As researchers, we wanted to understand how this type of work was being done in our local context. Taking the model of structural social work as our starting point, we investigated the practices of two community-based programs in Toronto. These programs utilize the main tenets of structural social work (i.e. linking personal problems of people to broader social structures and holding a critical analysis of social structures) (Mullaly, 1997) as their guiding framework. Our research finds that these programs are able to engage in social justice oriented practice even in the current context where it has increasingly become difficult to do so through the use of “creativity.” The term creativity in this paper refers to the intentional ways in which practitioners blend the structural social work approach while implementing social service programs within organizations that are not necessarily “structural social work agencies.” Practice infused with “creativity” involves practitioners’ conscious blending of a structural analysis and use of solidarity building processes within services offered to individuals and groups in their agencies. With “creativity” practitioners transcend the character of potentially apolitical / non-controversial service delivery models from simply micro level services to services that can be a catalyst for transformative social change. This definition of “creative practice” is original and has emerged from our research findings. To date we have found no literature which makes use of the term “creativity” or “creative practice” in quite this way. This paper recommends “creativity” as a critical element

for successfully practicing structural social work in the current context of practice and within agencies that might not necessarily have a publicly stated commitment to "structural social work" or to the social justice and social change agenda of this model of practice. Through this paper, as we explore how practitioners utilize "creativity" in their everyday practice, we are able to document how practitioners maintain a structural social work approach even within this milieu.

The paper offers a narrative / descriptive account of practice as it unfolds in two specific programs existing within two larger community-based organizations in Toronto, and is able to demonstrate how practitioners are successfully able to engage in social justice oriented practice in these settings. The title of the paper 'stories from the field' is used intentionally to highlight the descriptive nature of the data in the paper. The first story describes practice in an alternative education program for 'at-risk' youth in a grassroots youth-led organization. The second story describes practice in a community arts program for marginalized women in a community centre.

The Current Context of Practice

The current context of practice is characterized by services that increasingly function according to the needs of the market rather than those of people (Birkenmaier, McGartland Rubio, & Berg-Weger, 2002; Lonne, McDonald & Fox, 2004; Pedlar & Hutchinson, 2000). Due to the narrowing of service-users' needs that occurs with efficiency-driven services, social workers have been placed in the position of providing brief, barely adequate assistance only to those experiencing intense distress (Aronson & Sammon, 2000; Dominelli, 2003). Moreover, the abandonment of politicized, preventative practice (Aronson & Sammon, 2000; Fook, 2002) in favour of tightly regulated, residual services (Baines, 2004a) is reflected in diminished financial support for social justice and community-oriented practices (Aronson & Sammon, 2000; Cox, 2001), and increasing demands for individualized work with clients (Abramovitz, 2005).

In this climate, ethno-specific services and smaller, grassroots alternative organizations are being sacrificed (Abramovitz, 2006; Bischoff & Reisch, 2000), while many larger "neighbourhood" organizations, which have long remained grounded in their activist settlement house roots, have forsaken their community focus to act as problem-focused "service providers" (Husock, 1993; Jacobson, 2001; Koerin, 2003). These changes have impacted the field by compromising its historic professional commitment to social justice (Baines, 2004b; Barnoff, George, & Coleman, 2006; Fisher & Shragge, 2000; Hyde, 2004; Mullaly, 2001; Razack, 2002).

Still, research and anecdotal evidence suggests there are agencies which continue to hold onto a progressive vision and maintain a commitment to social justice oriented social work practice in spite of the challenges to doing so. For example, a small body of literature examines the social justice strategies used by individual social workers in their everyday practices to respond to the current context (Abramovitz, 2005; Aronson and Sammon, 2000; Ferguson & Lavalette, 2004; Jones, 2000; Moffatt, 1999; Mullaly, 2001; Roche, 1998; Smith, 2007). Similarly, there is some literature which has focused on entire programs whose philosophies and practices challenge traditional service provision. Some of our own earlier work, for example (see Barnoff, 2005; Barnoff & Coleman, 2007; George & Marlowe, 2005; George, Barnoff, & Coleman, 2007) has begun to explore the strategies used by progressive social work agencies, to

maintain a progressive approach to practice in the current times. Other scholars have focused on specific programs which are informed by social justice theoretical lenses. For example, Vodde and Gallant (2002) offer examples of how a structural analysis of problems, which they call 'narrative-deconstructive' practice, can lead to innovations in women's services. Similarly, Houston, Magili, McCollum, and Spratt (2001) highlight how their starting point of critical theory, which rests on the use of consciousness-raising to understand oppression, can facilitate a move away from uniform, bureaucratized services. Nevertheless, there is still much to learn about how social workers can and do continue to maintain social justice oriented social work practice in the current context of practice.

Structural Social Work as the Starting Point

Structural social work endeavours towards the fundamental transformation of the current inequitable and unjust society, with the aim of ending oppression in all its forms (Carniol, 1992; Mullaly, 1997, 2002). Structural social work links personal problems to broader societal conditions, characterized by inequalities of power and resources among groups, (Moreau, 1979), and challenges the belief that the source of individual problems lies only within individuals (Fook, 1993; Mullaly, 1997). Personal issues are made political by engaging in processes of developing critical consciousness (Carniol, 1992; Fook, 1993; Freire, 1970) and examining the impact of the oppressive social environment on individuals' situations (Mullaly, 2002; Dominelli & McLeod, 1989). Structural social work emphasizes the importance of social care to address immediate material needs and the psychological consequences of oppression (Carniol, 1992; Fook, 1993), as well as social action for long-term transformative change (Dominelli, 2003).

Recent discussions of structural social work have critiqued the model for a perceived over-reliance on modernist notions of an "essential" or universal experience of social identity and oppression which does not account for subjective experiences and responses, such as communities' capacity for local resistance to oppression (Mullaly, 2007). Authors writing about structural social work in the millennium have proposed more nuanced understandings of its role and contributions to social work theory and practice, which incorporate post-modern thinking (Hick & Pozzuto, 2005; Lundy, 2004), feminist and anti-racist critiques (Mullaly, 2007), and challenge simplistic and dichotomous constructions of power (Carniol, 2005).

In this article, we aim to build on our own previous work, and the growing literature on progressive social work practices, to develop knowledge about how structural social work is being practiced within social work agencies in our local context. In particular, we aim to illuminate what structural social work looks like in the current context of practice, in our local community of Toronto, Ontario, a large diverse, urban centre in Canada.

Research Methodology

The stories presented here describe two programs in two community based organizations in Toronto. One of the organizations is a community centre and the other is a grassroots, youth-led agency. Both of these organizations were purposively selected to participate in the research based on contacts developed through the researchers' professional experiences in Toronto and their past research work with these organizations (see George, 2003; George, Coleman & Barnoff, 2007). Based on these experiences, the researchers were well informed of the nature of

practice in these agencies as well as the reputations of these agencies within the community and among service users. Both programs, within and outside their agencies, enjoy a reputation for being progressive (with a social justice focus) and innovative (different from other programs) as well as successful even in current times. While other similar agencies and programs have been hard hit in the current funding context, these organizations have thrived and have even been able to expand their funding sources and grow their programs. These programs have been positively rated by service users and funders (George, Coleman, & Barnoff, 2007). This rationale guided us in selecting these programs.

In terms of selecting the sample for the study, while the programs currently operate with a team of workers, they were initially conceived, implemented, and managed by only one practitioner. In keeping with the rationale of the study it was important for us to talk to the practitioners who were originally responsible for the conception and implementation of the program because it was the success of the programs (as they were originally conceived) that led them to receive additional funding for expansion. We believed the founders of the program would be the best people to interview as they would know the programs well. We are aware that had we interviewed additional staff members in the new expanded teams, we may have collected data which would have been able to provide a broader perspective on the practice in these programs. The study was exploratory and descriptive in nature. Since there is little information existing about the use of structural social work perspectives in the current context of practice, the research focused on exploring the nature of practice in these two programs, specifically focusing on the terms used by practitioners to describe their work and the supports these practitioners receive from their organizations.

Our intent was to allow the practitioners to freely narrate their practice. As a result, our interview guide was focused only on two broad areas: 1) Description of their practices, terms they used to describe their practice, and their rationale for engaging in such practices; and 2) Contextual factors (i.e. organizational characteristics; funding patterns) which influenced their practice. The interviews were less structured than a typical semi-structured interview.

Both interviews were recorded and transcribed. We struggled to find the best possible way of organizing, understanding and reporting the data. We realized that presenting the data thematically using quotes as is typically done in reports of qualitative research would fragment the data and not provide a rich description of the dynamics of practice used in these programs. We wanted to describe practice in the words of the practitioners as a way of retaining their voices thereby rendering greater authenticity and trustworthiness to the data. Based on this rationale, we decided to follow an unconventional approach of stringing together multiple quotes to create narratives or 'stories'. As is true of all data analysis and interpretation, we are aware that even with this method of analysis and reporting, these narratives to some extent continue to be influenced by our own perspectives as researchers. The first and second authors separately read each transcript, highlighting passages we believed would help us further elaborate upon or describe the nature of practice in these two programs. Following the individual readings, we came together, compared highlighted sections of text, and retained for further analysis all the common sections. We then strung these relevant passages together in a logical way to develop each story. Presented below are the narratives of practice in the voices of the practitioners.

Adia's Story of Creative Practice in a Youth Serving Agency

“.....At [my organization], the type of practice we use we loosely call alternative education practice. Basically, how we define that is sort of imparting education to young people using very different types of methods. It can take the form of urban culture, popular culture, any types of methods that allow us to build trust and make the learning experience really fun and innovative and engaging... What [the youth] were doing was learning how to analyze media and analyze all these things around them and have the tools to basically decide what they felt was good for them and what wasn't. So, they weren't just blindly exposed to all of these things anymore...When [youth] start talking about the issues that they face in their community, the staff try to pull out that information from them and help them to build critical thinking skills to look at what exactly is happening to them, put it in a cultural context, in a historical context, in a social context, so they are really thinking about why these things are happening to them and then looking at...how to deal with these things...[The youth] are sometimes not even aware of the fact that they are learning and being a part of something that's educational, which we find really works well because when you are working with the hardest to reach, most marginalized youth, you can't use traditional ways of teaching.....”

“....Internally, in the organization, we were actually really lucky because we were able to be very flexible in meeting the needs of the community and still are which is amazing...We had that type of structure, the by-youth for-youth structure and the fact that we were grassroots and really a smaller organization with less bureaucracy. Basically what we tried to do was ask them what they feel the needs are in their community as well as looking at environmental issues, societal issues and analyzing all of that before we actually then implement whatever type of program or services that we implement....We were finding that the highest numbers of youth dropping out of the schools in our areas were young Black male youth and that was of great concern to us and to the youth that came to the centre. We approached the school system and we said that a lot of the youth that we work with at [my agency] are feeling disengaged from the school system. We want to ensure that youth that are in school stay in school, and maybe that one creative strategy that we could use to ensure that that happens is for us to come into the school and offer some type of programming within the school...In approaching the administration in the schools, we had to put a package together outlining what our goals and what our intent was for having programming within a school that already offers a wealth of programming. You don't always have credibility unless you put something on paper and research it...When you are dealing with the school system as well, they need to see research and statistics and a lot of very formal ways of convincing them that something is needed and urgent and important. So, we applied to the National Crime Prevention Centre for a grant to conduct a research study involving Black and Native youth and looking at their experiences in the school system...And what we basically had to do was convince the school system that the number of workshops or the clubs that they had were not completely representative of the students at the school, that basically there are different forms of education that the youth need to have access to in order to really survive on the streets that they were living in and in their communities. They needed access...to critical thinking skills that would help them once they leave that school....”

“.....[In implementing the school-based program], we actually created a workshop tool. It was basically a manual that was put together using different types of case histories from the past and creating discussion questions around it...For example, if you are looking at the Black

Panthers as a revolutionary group in the United States that tried to advocate for change, they put together a ten-point platform that talked about breakfast programs for young Black children that were living in poverty. They talked about really revolutionary things for the Black community. Having more representation in the schools, having more representation in the police forces...and it's so funny to see that half of the issues that they set out in this ten-point platform are issues that coloured [sic] communities are still facing. So, what we did was try to use that as an example and as a tool to teach young people about revolutions and what happened in the past and how that affects today. So, there's a series of questions that basically are used to get the youth talking about the story and what that means to them and how they relate it back to their experiences now....It forms an amazing example of alternative education because it's so engaging to young people to talk about these leaders and what they've done. And, it spurs them to try and effect change in their communities. [My agency] is always very conscious of effecting long-term change with anything that it does, because you know with funding cuts...the effects of programs can be very short lived because of funding. So, we consciously always try to make sure the skills that we impart will have a long-term impact in the lives of youth...."

"...What we ended up doing was putting this group together, going to the equity board of the [local school board] to advocate for changes to the mainstream school curriculum. That [work] happened for about a year and unfortunately wasn't sustainable...but, from that, we were lucky that we were able to then help to form a different type of coalition of youth led organizations and youth serving organizations and projects across the city with a similar type of mandate...They are trying to engage and work with and serve communities that are really hard to reach and youth that are the most marginalized...It was amazing to find that there were other groups in different pockets in the city that were trying to do the same thing as us because it was really difficult in the beginning not to have any supports....It was great to come together and have these seven groups...that could then support each other and share resources and really look at advocacy and fighting for what we felt was important in terms of engaging young people...."

"...I would say that in terms of the funders, it was really difficult at times trying to convince them that the work that we were doing was legitimate and meaningful and had really positive effects on the youth and on our community. Especially way back, I would say, five years ago. Youth were not necessarily considered a priority...I think that there was a serious lack of understanding on the part of stakeholders and funders that a different type of method was needed in order to really be able to work with these young people...Whenever we had a chance to meet with political people, like our councillors or people that actually have control of money...we would make an effort to go and talk to them and try to enlighten them the best we could about the reality of the situation to get those funding processes to change...Now that we've come together [as a coalition] we've created a really powerful advocacy voice that really speaks to the needs of young people...."

Rachel's Story of Creative Practice in a Photography Program for Women

"...The World March of Women happened in 2000 and it was an international campaign to raise awareness around violence against women. The power of the movement was that their goal was to have over that 6 month – 1 year period leading up to the final events, there would be grassroots movements happening around the world that people would connect into this larger movement...Our photography group at the time had created an exhibit on violence against

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women...and then we hooked into the World March of Women. The first one was our local movement and we did a series of portraits of community women who were inspirational to us...and then we went to the march in Ottawa and New York and documented that. We did a road trip and documented it all....”

“...[The photography group] started in a support group. At that time in the late 90’s, the Harris government was still in full force and so [the women] looked at violence against women in the way of, sort of systemic forces that contributed to violence. So, how the cuts to housing, cuts to education that were happening at that time were forms of violence against women, that they trickled down and were directly impacting women’s lives. [The group] had been coming quite regularly and...they wanted to look at how they could express themselves in a different way and so that group expressed enough interest that the agency applied for funding to do it. They were continuing to want to use photography in a way that connected into social movements, [and] I was interested in how to use art as a tool for activism. We’ve sort of come together to this place of wanting to engage women who are not in the mainstream with media to be able to access that and become producers rather than consumers of it....”

“.....The goal [of the program] is to support women to tell their stories, to share their experiences, tell the stories of their communities, use photography as a way to explore social issues...It’s something that’s not support group based; it’s not to explore a specific issue or talk about your problems in a certain environment, the way things sometimes get laid out in social work. But, it is a way for people to sort of get out and connect with other women and not feel as isolated or have a way to explore their own experiences and their own healing in a way that is creative...just having that space to share and have people listen. That’s sort of where the power is...We [also] take time to have conversations with women around why it’s important to tell our stories and what is the significance? Whether it’s the healing aspects, whether it’s that their stories are not often heard, whether it’s generally not seeing yourself reflected back in the media. So, we incorporate those kinds of conversations into the program.....”

“...We also sort of couple that with peer leadership, so we are training a group of women to teach the program. First they took the [photography] program and then we did a training program after where they were looking at facilitation, looking at workshop design, how to support women with technology, how to mentor people and not take over. I work with another artist, so she and I have developed teaching models to support women in the community to lead. We’ve had lots of different forms of peer leadership but in this particular one it has shifted from us being the leaders and them sort of helping out to us supporting them to teach and us taking a backseat or an equal seat. ...”

“...I’m always interested in ways that community agencies can not just be a place that gives services, like “I’m providing this service to you and you just come and use it and then you leave”. But, that it creates a space where the community is engaged or they are developing skills to be leaders in the community. So, I find that this creative practice is a way for them to have that continually develop...It creates that ongoing sense of women’s visibility, of women as leaders, women representing their communities and being seen...And we have this impression that people are so closed off or will never talk, and you know, and then, it’s like that creative process can break down so much. [And] I have a lot of independence within my role as a manager so I can sort of do a lot of visioning and sort of imagining of what we want to see, what

responses we are getting from women and how to take that and go with it.... So, I'm given that flexibility in my role and it's seen in the agency as an important element to the agency...."

".....What's hard is that community art or community media programs...they are not funded well, you are always sort of looking for new sources of funding or little pots in different ways and what that creates is, it creates an inability to connect with other practitioners. So, there are people out there doing amazing things and on occasion we get together and find out that these fantastic projects have happened in various areas. But, there's very little chance to connect. [But] we've been lucky in that I have received funding from several different angles of funders. So, we've received funding from arts councils, violence against women, or like funding base, access and equity ...There is certainly an air of funders pushing to get people to go away from "here's the service, here you go" kind of thing. Which is exciting because that's what we are doing... We have tapped into something that people are excited about....."

".....Technology is loaded with all those structural issues...around access to media and access to skills, but also who is represented. It's clear that people of colour, women, various marginalized groups have less access to media or to technology. But, you know, you take that farther and you take not just accessing but actually producing and creating yourself...So it's not just having these women create their own digital stories, it's by having it on the Internet you are also sort of creating these webs. On one hand it feels like it is a pin dropped into, you know a bucket or whatever. But on the other hand that intention is behind it. So, [what] we are looking at right now with [our program] is ways to support other agencies to make that a part of their practices. So part of an even broader train the trainer model where agencies will develop those skills to bring it back to their own so we are not just having to deliver the program to all of these places or develop the leadership here. But that it's something that we can bring to other people...so that's sort of the broader vision. How do we push the notion of what social work is in a mainstream social work setting? What's exciting to me is those intersection points and where we can broaden people's scope of what is actually creating change....."

Discussion

The stories demonstrate the use of "creativity" as a technique by which practitioners work towards the goals of personal and social transformation as outlined by structural social work practice within their everyday practices in their agency settings. In their work, both practitioners use art, culture and history as powerful media to engage the worlds of service users. Adia uses the media of popular culture, documentaries and the rich history of the Black Panther movement successfully to 'educate' youth who are disillusioned with the current education system. Use of these media provides youth with an opportunity to critically examine their realities and inspires them to get involved in organizing their communities. Rachel uses the medium of photography to approach the issue of violence experienced by the women in the program. Photography then becomes a vehicle for women to express and share about their lives, heal others and be healed, establish networks to overcome isolation, and, to understand the connection of their 'personal troubles' to societal forces, motivating them to participate in the movement to resist the oppressions of women in society. Ultimately, the tangible services provided by the programs (i.e. a place for youth to go, photography instruction and materials) are perceived and used by practitioners not as 'ends' in themselves, but as 'means' to the end of personal and social transformation (see Scott, 2001, for more discussion on distinctions between 'manifest' and

‘latent’ goals in social programs). Practitioners use the opportunities in the programs to create space for processes that allow free expression, sharing, networking and solidarity building among service users.

Adia and Rachel are "creative" in their practice in that they are able to use their work at the service level as a launching pad for influencing change at the societal level. For instance, Adia uses her work with youth to introduce alternative education formats within the school board. Lack of acceptance by the Board does not dissuade Adia from developing a coalition of agencies from the youth sector and approaching the local politician and funders to advocate for the issues impacting this population. Similarly, Rachel uses her photography project to connect her women with the women’s movement at the larger level. Rachel also uses the photography project to develop women peer leaders who are empowered to be leaders in their communities. The project is also developing a ‘train the trainer’ model with the intent of spreading these practices to other communities and cities. Further, Rachel is creatively using the internet to ‘create webs’ of women through ‘digital stories.’ The work demonstrates the ingenuity of both practitioners in operationalizing the vision of social change through their local projects.

Finally, both practitioners convert their challenges into opportunities for success, which for us is another aspect of their use of creativity in their practice. The lack of acceptance by funders and policy makers of alternative modes of knowledge production does not prevent Adia from moving forward. She practices creativity in using the conventional tool of research to get the voices of service users and providers heard by decision-makers. In fact, the coalition of youth-serving agencies that she co-founded has successfully used the dissemination event to educate and challenge funders and policy makers in the presence of community members (see Wright, Sahani, Zammit, & George, 2009). Further, both Adia and Rachel use the challenge of lack of funding for their sector as opportunities to establish relationships and work with funders to influence their thinking about what ‘services’ could be. The stories also demonstrate how these practitioners address the challenge of meeting funders’ expectations around ‘outcomes’ by providing programs that are novel, relevant and hence popular among service users to also serve the interests of service users.

Implications for Social Work Practice

These stories have important implications for structural social work practice. The stories clearly demonstrate that it is possible to engage in structural social work approaches even in the current context of practice by finding “creative” ways of implementing services. Both Adia and Rachel have managed to hold onto their progressive visions in a climate of ‘squeezed’ funding, short term, project-based funding, and increased expectations of funders around concrete ‘outcomes.’ While they agree that it has been difficult, they have both been able to secure and expand funding for their projects for a number of years. Adia’s coalition has been instrumental in influencing funders in the youth sector and initiating a novel funding initiative for the sector (Wright, Sahani, Zammit, & George, 2009).

The stories demonstrate that it is possible to engage in structural social work practice which simultaneously addresses both micro and macro levels. Adia’s and Rachel’s work engages marginalized individuals and groups but also includes a focus on participation in advocacy and

social movements. Further, the stories demonstrate that these micro and macro level practices are interconnected and complementary. Adia's work with youth inspires them to contribute to organizing racialized communities, building a coalition, and influencing politicians and funders. At the same time, the work of the coalition also addresses the challenges of youth and agencies serving youth sector. Receipt of funding by youth serving agencies provides an opportunity for continued work at a micro level. Similarly, Rachel's work with women has led to their participation in a social movement through their participation in the World March of Women. The experience of participation in turn becomes such an empowering experience for service users that one of them now sees herself as an 'activist' (George, Coleman, & Barnoff, 2007).

These stories illuminate how rooted the work of Adia and Rachel is in their structural analysis of the issues facing service users. Both practitioners have shown a clear understanding of the structural factors that impact their service users. Their work also shows that they know the 'pulse' of their service users – their background, their issues, their culture, their history, their strengths and their potential. These analyses, a deep commitment to service users and clarity of goals seems to have contributed significantly to their search for creative practices.

These stories highlight the need to focus attention on helping service users deal with the deleterious effects of oppression on their lives. Both programs created space for service users to heal wounds of oppression in their lives. Adia and Rachel have recognized the significance of this healing for transformative work. The process of healing requires opportunities to deal with inferiorization, guilt, shame, self blame and loneliness, along with poverty and deprivation (Mullaly, 1997). Service users have found these opportunities extremely helpful and liberating, thus motivating them to continue their contact with the program (George, Coleman, & Barnoff, 2007).

While both programs successfully incorporated the goal of social transformation into their program delivery, the current context of practice does not allow for an explicit expression of such goal. Funders do not allow these organizations to allocate resources for social action. Hence, the current context makes it difficult for them to engage in deliberate acts of social transformation as part of their stated purpose. Thus, their use of "creativity" in practice which incorporates the blending of 'service provision' with social transformation are necessarily in order to allow these types of goals which are so fundamental to structural social work practice to be actively pursued. For example, Adia's coalition was founded as a response to circumvent this limitation. Moreover, although the women in Rachel's program would not normally have been able to use project funding to participate in social action (e.g. The World March of Women), this possibility was created by incorporating the activism within the model of service provision.

The current context encourages practice which focuses primarily upon individuals. Structural social work has a focus on social transformation as well. Through the use of creativity, these practitioners are able to blend and interconnect micro and macro levels of practice and maintain a focus on political change, while supposedly providing programming and service delivery which is focused only on the individual. Not only did Adia and Rachel engage with individuals, they enabled these individuals to participate in movements for social change. Therefore, the current funding expectation, which is to focus practice at a micro level, is met but is also expanded upon to include political transformation. Creativity is how they make this

happen. The current context focuses on evidence based practice, emphasizing concrete outcomes without a necessary recognition of process. The preoccupation with accomplishment of tasks and outcomes often leaves very little time and energy for practitioners to engage in processes of conscientization and liberation (Freire, 1970). These processes form the bedrock for social transformation. Adia and Rachel made spaces within their programs for such processes to occur. Through the use of creativity in their practice, Adia and Rachel are able to engage in structural social work practice while meeting current expectations.

Conclusion

The narratives of Adia and Rachel offer stories of hope and provide an understanding of the ever evolving, complex and varied forms structural social work practice can take in the current times and therefore, make a significant contribution to our understanding of how structural social work operates today. Apart from that, the stories provide a contribution in terms of reframing prevalent discourses about social service funders. Adia's and Rachel's collaborative relationships with their funders contradict the common portrayal in the field of funders as nothing but adversaries to social justice oriented programs. The stories have brought forth new questions that warrant further research. Our narrators' have experienced considerable support and encouragement from their organizations for the creative work they are doing, but there is little known about how practitioners are able to move forward with structural, creative forms of practice in the absence of organizational support. Additionally, our research to date has explored the perspectives of key constituents, such as service users, practitioners and managers on structural social work practice. Given the current context of practice in which funders play a significant role (George, Barnoff, & Coleman, 2007), it would be worthwhile to explore the perspectives of funders on the approaches utilized by agencies engaging in progressive forms of practice.

It is important to share stories of creative, structural social work practice as a way to resist current regressive trends and (re)build alternative discourses of social work. What we hope we have done with this paper is to identify some of the commonalities between these two stories as a way of providing progressive practitioners who are experiencing the challenges of the current practice context with some ideas that can inspire them to use creativity to maintain their progressive agenda of social justice and social change.

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