Solidarity and Heart - The Development of Structural Social Work: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract

A politically progressive approach to social work is the structural approach. Based on a Marxist perspective, structural social work seeks to create a welfare state built upon socialist principles. This paper described historical antecedents of structural social work in Canada, including the circumstances around its emergence in the 1970s and 1980s. I discussed recent developments and explored its possible future. Throughout the article, a critical lens is applied elucidating the structural approach’s strengths as well as shortcomings. I found that structural social work highlighted a moral dichotomy between the social worker’s conscience and the demands of our capitalist society, and advocated a definite need to mobilize voting for progressive candidates in elections. The shortcomings of the structural approach included an Euro-American centric bias, a weak potential as a decolonizing discourse, and its lack of an ecological imagination.

Keywords: structural social work; Mullaly; history; socialism; capitalism; culture
Radical Social Work

Based on a Marxist perspective, structural social work seeks to dismantle colonialist, patriarchal, and capitalist domination in order to build a welfare state that is ultimately based on economics and a society along socialist lines (Abramovitz, 2008). Structural social work is but one of many schools of anti-establishment social work, all of which may be called radical approaches (Murray & Hick, 2010). Since the nineteenth century, social work has had a tradition of critique. Jane Addams of Chicago (Jennisen & Lundy, 2011) led one such tradition, the settlement house movement. In 1889, Addams started Hull House in an immigrant Chicago neighbourhood (Knight, 2005). Hull House featured opportunities for wealthy, highly educated women to live among the poor and learn from them. Courses in literacy, history, art, and practical skills were offered to local residents, and Addams took particular delight in engaging the children of immigrants (Elshtain, 2002). The main teachings of the settlement house movement to the nascent profession of social work included an element of parity and reciprocity between the social worker and the consumer; and fruitful solutions to social problems were reached by local, grassroots involvement, not top-down instructions (Addams, 1897). There was an effort to cut across, if not do away with, class lines (Knight, 2005). Research on the causes of poverty and social problems was carried out and advocacy efforts applied to civic officials to improve conditions. Of note, however, was Addams’ initial lack of interest toward material and physical issues in her immediate neighborhood, given her upbringing and education, which had emphasized the world of ideas (Knight, 2005). This distaste toward material questions manifested despite Chicago’s serious pollution and environmental issues – irregular garbage pickup, animal carcasses, human and animal waste littered about the streets, infestation of large rats – which led to high rates of tuberculosis and typhoid fever (Nugent, 2005; Vieweg, 2005). Although Addams later began to work on urban sanitation issues, the disinterest toward environmental problems was a recurring lacuna in social work (Gray et al., 2013; Knight, 2005).

Undoubtedly, during the first years at Hull House, Addams had believed that people of her class, the educated and highly cultured women, were superior to the poor (Knight, 2005, 2006). Being a “do-gooder” and acting upon a sense of moral absolutism coincided with her outward duties as an advocate (Knight, 2005). Yet by 1910, Addams had carried out a revolution in her thinking. Addams became a full-blown pragmatist, emphasizing the necessity of allowing experience to shape one’s ethics and arguing that ethics must evolve in response to the times (Knight, 2006). Biographer Louise Knight (2006) suggested Addams came to the conclusion that education did not confer moral superiority and, “furthermore, those who felt such superiority and chose to isolate themselves from the rest of humanity were, in fact, uncultured in the more profound sense of the word” (p. 99).

Addams was only one of many politically radical women in North America giving birth to modern social work (Reisch & Andrews, 2001). Subsequent generations of social workers were inspired by their pluck and audacity, often against overwhelming odds (Lee, 2001). Addams struggled with illness much of her life (Knight, 2005; 2010). She did not marry but had long-standing female companions, which were deemed so-called Boston marriages, but only acceptable among upper class women of means, of which Addams was one (Knight, 2005). She managed rather weighty leadership duties at Hull House while also remaining open to new ideas and political movements. For instance, Addams was a supporter of W.E.B. Dubois, a leading
African American activist, and a Marxist (Elshtain, 2002; Hynes, 2004). Ehrenreich (1985), however, critically assessed that these early social workers, including Addams, as part of an emerging managerial-professional class, understood that their own self-interest, including their occupational self-interest and their concern for the preservation of their own class values, must involve reforming capitalism through mediating class conflict. Knight (2005) further concluded cultural and class elitism is comparable to White privilege or masculine privilege. When a person, such as Addams, is raised in an ethic that confers superiority, one’s psyche “relinquishes it under protest and fitfully” (Knight, 2005, p. 404).

In the 1930s, social workers in Canada were dissatisfied with their government’s very inadequate response to the Great Depression (Jennissen & Lundy, 2011). Employment slowed to a trickle. Industry in some sectors came to a standstill. Starvation was not unknown. There were dustbowl conditions on the Canadian Prairies (Bumsted, 2003). Yet the Canadian government would not provide relief, aid, or minimum standards of living until its hand was forced (O’Shea, 2006). Dissatisfied social workers parlayed their energy and anger into the peace movement and the labour movement. They identified the injustice in both the capitalist system and the very restricted welfare provisions available (Horn, 1984). Interestingly, most texts on social work history, including those with a radical perspective, pay little attention to the natural environmental factors accompanying the Great Depression (e.g., Ehrenreich, 1985; Jennissen & Lundy, 2011).

The remedy lay in creating an alternative system of politics and welfare. Some looked to the Soviet Union as an inspiration. Many more looked to socialist alternatives at home, such as radical unionism (e.g., International Workers of the World) and the growing Cooperative Commonwealth Federation party (Blaikie, 2011). Unfortunately, the governments of the day were hostile to anything that smacked of socialism. In collaboration with big business, they deployed measures to combat socialist movements. These included using police to crack down on unions and intimidate prominent activists, with these overt repressive tactics continuing well into the 1940s and 1950s (Whitaker & Marcuse, 1994). Nonetheless, progressive-minded social workers continued to convene and form associations with left-leaning movements, in particular unionism, the peace movement, and the daycare movement (Jennissen & Lundy, 2011).

A small but influential cooperative movement, headed by Catholic priest Moses Coady, emerged in the 1930s from Saint Francis Xavier University in Nova Scotia and spread throughout Atlantic Canada. Coady was driven to organize and empower impoverished fishers, coal miners, and farmers, all of whom, especially the coal miners, had suffered severe hardship caused by the Maritime provinces’ economic decline (Welton, 2001). Coady and his colleagues facilitated study groups, encouraged unionism, and set up credit unions. He approached his work as a social Catholic, and wishing to transform society into an interconnected network of cooperative economic ventures, as a method to remedy the despondency and isolated individualism bred by early twentieth century capitalism (Lotz, 2005). His measured and moderate approach, buttressed by the authority of Catholic tradition, did not face government repression but in fact attracted the support of successive Liberal governments in Nova Scotia (Welton, 2001).
After the Second World War, Canada became embroiled in the Cold War with the Soviet Union and its national government repudiated any formal connection with socialism, except for representatives of the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation who called for a planned and socialized economy (Finkel, 1997; Morley, 2006). Nonetheless, after the trauma of the Great Depression, the Canadian government accepted aspects of social liberalism, moving away from the pre-war conservative ideology (Mullaly, 2007; Rice & Prince, 2000). Citizens did not wish to return to the deprivation of the 1930s and wanted government to safeguard a minimum standard of living (Finkel, 1997; Horn, 1984; Struthers, 2013). Afraid that unregulated markets were a recipe for disaster, as demonstrated in the 1929 stock market crash, bank failures, farm failures, mass unemployment, and mass hunger (Mullaly, 1997). Keynesian economics gained legitimacy as politicians wished to deter excessive stock market speculation, maximize employment, and moderate cycles of growth and recession (Guest, 1997; Palmer, 2006; Rice & Prince, 2000).

Despite the 1940s injection of social liberalism into mainstream politics, organized attempts to change politics toward socialist principles were met by repression. Although less severe than the American red baiting trials, people who supported socialist politics in Canada suffered ridicule, harassment, government surveillance, even dismissal from employment (Reisch & Andrews, 2001). Mary Jennison was dismissed in 1947 from her post in a nongovernmental organization not because of any performance inadequacy, but due to her sympathies toward socialism (Jennison, 1948; Whitaker & Marcuse, 1994). For many years, Jennison had served admirably as editor of the journal *The Social Worker*. She held various leadership positions in regional branches of the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW). Her firing caused an uproar. Yet despite years of dedicated service to CASW, the association did not support Jennison’s convictions to engage in social activism and instead concluded that her firing was only an individual “personnel” issue (Jennissen & Lundy, 2011; *The Social Worker*, 1948). As recently as 1977, Marlene Webber, a leftist social work professor at Memorial University in Newfoundland, had her contract terminated due to her political beliefs (Canadian Association of University Teachers, 1978; Newfoundland and Labrador Human Rights Association, 1978; Tudiver, 1999). Again, the CASW stayed largely passive towards this event (Jennissen & Lundy, 2011).

Perhaps social work radicalism was motivated also by the CASW’s reactionary attitude. The CASW tended to react to emerging societal issues mostly after the fact instead of providing proactive leadership (Jennissen & Lundy, 2011). Although the CASW normally promoted social justice, in times of crisis, the association tended to shrink back, paralyze, and declare a sort of political neutrality rather than entertain any possibility of a radical, anti-capitalist professional association. For example, the CASW’s national office never submitted a brief to the Royal Commission on the Status of Women, circa 1968 (Jennissen & Lundy, 2011). Social workers sympathetic toward socialist politics understood that to spur the profession to promote a just society, they needed to have their own space and a distinct intellectual foundation (Leonard, 1984; Mullaly, 2007). The CASW has not contested Jennissen and Lundy’s interpretation of this era’s events and their current leadership is not aware of any current attempts to provide an alternate account (Fred Phelps, personal communication, January 19, 2017).
The Emergence of the Structural Approach in Canada

Proponents of socialist-oriented social work have had to be careful not to arouse government or employer repression, while remaining provocative and idealistic enough to generate sufficient interest. The maturation of this type of social work took shape in the 1970s due to a convergence of historical forces. First, government repression of anti-establishment politics lessened in the late 1960s as a new generation of leaders emerged (Lee, 2001). Young people were no longer willing to tolerate systemic social injustice (e.g., militancy among college students was a force with which to be reckoned; Jenkins, 1983). At the time, the Trudeau government incorporated at least some elements of this counterculture into its platform (Staggenborg, 2012). There was also a blossoming of many “new” social movements distinct from older movements that had focused on struggling for state power like nationalism, unionism, and socialism. Some of these new movements were based on minority identity politics – second-wave feminism, black power, gay and lesbian liberation – as well as movements focused on broader issues, like the environmental movement. They emphasized consciousness-raising as well as changing broad cultural norms (Enns & Neufeldt, 2003; Pelka, 2012; Staggenborg, 2012).

Second, in the 1970s, the post-war economic boom began to fade. A series of events, including the Oil Crisis, government insolvency, and stagflation, prompted Canada to move away from Keynesian economic policy (Bumsted, 2003; Guest, 1997). Government thus began to chip away at the welfare state, as the feeling was that retrenchment and smaller government were to become the new normal (Rice & Prince, 2000). The seventies also saw the rise of concerns about industrial pollution, particularly air pollution, the use of pesticides, and industrial chemicals, while prospects for unalloyed economic growth diminished. Some began to see a connection between capitalist economic expansion and the damaging of the natural world (Lundy, 2011).

Third, new developments in social theory undermined the authority of social work. Systems theory and cybernetics theory dismissed linear models of causation and consequently individualistic ways of practice, prevalent in social work at the time (Carniol, 2000; Kirk, 2005; Robbins, Chatterjee, & Canda, 2006). Radical sociology pointed out that social work beneath the guise of so-called helping the client actually served as an agent of social control. In intervening with the poor, social workers insidiously inculcated and enforced middle-class values and norms, radical sociologists asserted (Moreau, 1989). Some studies found casework, a core social work method, to be in fact ineffective in achieving its stated goals, at times making things worse for clients (e.g., Cambridge Somerville youth study; see Hoyle, Harris, & Judd, 2001). This was a painful blow to the profession’s sense of legitimacy.

Canadian social work’s response to these turbulent times was fourfold (Moreau, 1989). One response, which Maurice Moreau deemed the conservative response, was to ignore the critique completely and emphasize that class struggles had no place within a profession, particularly social work. Another response, the structural determinist view (Moreau, 1989), pessimistically said progressive politics was impossible within the profession. Ruling class interests, enforced by agency management, together with structural determinants in society predetermined and reinforced the goal of social control. Structural determinism declared that
social work symbolized ruling class hegemony (for a critique of this view, see Pease & Fook, 1999).

Most social workers considered the above responses unacceptable (Leonard, 1984) and crafted a liberal reformist response that became the profession’s new mainstream (Mullaly, 2007). System theory and humanistic psychology were included in this liberal response (Carniol, 2000; Payne, 2014). Germain and Gitterman’s (1980) life model of social work became the liberal perspective’s flagship text. However, Moreau (1989) felt this reformist response remained inadequate in tackling social problems. Although humanistic therapies and community work resonate and catalyze peoples’ strengths and potential, he felt that structural determinants still skewed their life-chances in favour of the wealthy and powerful. The last response, a structural response, to change both individuals and societal structure toward progressive ideals, found favour among leftist social workers.

It is telling that Germain and Gitterman’s (1980) life model of social work, premised upon biological systems theory, had actually very little to say about biology outside of the biological basis of personality and psychological coping. Indeed, the biological environment was mentioned very little, and in this model’s subsequent formulations, named the eco-systemic perspective, environment seemed only a shorthand term for the human sociocultural context, such as housing, the availability of social services, the quality of one’s job setting, and family characteristics (Gray et al., 2013). This anthropocentric orientation would continue in structural social work.

Structural social work found a home in the fertile political ground of 1970s Central Canada. In Quebec, the Quiet Revolution was well underway. In 1976, the Parti Quebecois, a progressive separatist party, was elected to power. However, many activists were not quite satisfied with the Parti Quebecois and wished to further solidify and extend social democratic ideals (Moreau, 1986). In southern Ontario, the heartland of Canadian industrial capitalism, signs began to appear that things were shifting in the longstanding manufacturing sector as corporations began to transfer industry abroad to low wage unorganized labour in Mexico and Asia (Finkel, 1997; Harvey, 1989). It was understood that Canadian capitalism was undergoing a change from the national to the global, as corporations continually searched for greater profits and lower wages and expenditures (Mitchell, 2004).

In an atmosphere of academic freedom, structural social work flourished in the academy. Carleton University (Carleton University, 2016), McGill University (particularly under the leadership of Peter Leonard – less so during other times; McGill University, 2016), Ryerson University (Ryerson University, 2016a), Universite du Quebec a Montreal, and Universite de Montreal were all key foundries for the structural approach (Moreau, 1989). Carleton University reorganized its social work department around this approach, energized by such personalities as Helen Levine, Mike Brake, Allan Moscovitch, and Roland Lecomte (Lundy, 2011). Some seminal, if obscure, studies were published. In 1989 and 1993, Carleton University produced an evaluation on the use of structural approaches in child welfare and health care settings (Moreau, 1989). Peter Leonard (1984) produced work on the relationship between personality and material conditions, a milestone bridging the personal – political divide in social work. As director of the McGill School of Social Work from 1987 to 1990, he was a key force behind the structural
approach (Carniol, 1992). Francophone social work departments at Université du Québec à Montréal and Université de Montréal also played key roles; for instance, Moreau was based at Université de Montréal (Jacob, 1990).

Given its Marxist politics and direct-action imperative, it is not surprising few social agencies and government departments accept the structural approach. Those who embrace the approach face significant opposition from funding bodies, senior bureaucrats, and individual social workers (Carniol, 2000). As this approach advocates working within the system to change the system, this lack of acceptance is a major shortcoming. Recent work highlights several smaller agencies actively promoting structural principles, such as, No Ordinary People Allowed Youth Centre and the Women’s Contact Society, both of Williams Lake, British Columbia (Burrill & Peters, 2010). I know of no government department or large quasi-governmental agency (e.g., health region) willing to entertain structural social work. However, practitioners’ use of creativity (e.g., popular education, photography group) may enable them to facilitate structural social work in agencies that might not necessarily have any public commitment to social justice (George, Coleman, & Barnoff, 2010). As well, there exist in Canada large organizations; although, not normally considered within the social work field, which nonetheless provide social services to thousands of people and whose values have some overlap with the structural approach – one that comes immediately to mind is the United Church of Canada (Cairney, 2015).

**Structural Social Work Theory: Mullaly Style**

Robert Mullaly is one of Canada’s most prominent structural social workers. Mullaly (1997) considered structural social work an applied critical theory. He argues that structural social work aspires to the highest intellectual ideals because, as a critical theory, it seeks to liberate humans from oppression (Mullaly, 1997). Critical social theory originated in the 1930s Frankfurt school. Frankfurt school theorists asserted that the coming together of capitalism, science, and bureaucracy limited the possibilities of critical consciousness and autonomy, thus producing hegemony (a consensus based on false consciousness) in culture, government, and personhood (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009).

Critical social theory gave birth (at least in part) to such varied and diverse disciplines as cultural studies, post-colonial studies, queer studies, disability studies, post-structuralism, and critical realism (Agger, 2013). These younger theories critique Marxism as too narrowly focused on material conditions and on ambitions for seizing political power (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009; Woods, 2016). A major plank of Marxist theory is seizing control of the means of production, as this control is seen as pivotal for accessing material resources and generating self-worth and social acceptance (Woods, 2016). Marxism is seen as quashing minority identities because it insists on class struggle above all else, relegating to sidelines the concerns of women, indigenous people, and queer people (Agger, 2013).

Mullaly included identity politics in structural social work (in all three editions of his seminal text on structural work, 1993, 1997, and 2007; and in particular see Mullaly, 2002, 2009), but this “fit” appears awkward. Donna Baines has criticized structural social work as based on Marxist authoritarianism, with few gestures toward social work as female terrain (as
Another aspect of structural social work’s awkwardness is its modernist assumptions, whereas many identity theories draw upon postmodern ideas, resulting in a philosophical clash (Murray & Hick).

The structural approach’s strength is its linking together of personal troubles with the structural determinants of life chances, a blend of radical structuralism and radical humanism. It focuses on the material conditions that bring hardship and misery to the majority (e.g., insufficient benefits from part time work at Tim Horton does not allow a parent to purchase dental care for her son) while the privileged few maintain abundant resources and power (e.g., access to the best dentists). The structural worker might declare: Smash those material conditions! Create government policy allowing all citizens access to proper dental care.

Structural social work aims to assuage people’s immediate needs while simultaneously engaging in consciousness raising and direct action to dismantle a system of domination undergirding unequal life chances (Mullaly, 2007, 2009). Despite its interest in material conditions, structural social work conceives of “the environment” as mainly a social environment, an anthropocentric conception that precludes an in-depth analysis of how human activities resulting from aggressive capitalism, including industrial pollution and degradation of natural habitat, interrelate with the wider natural ecology to produce the conditions of life as we know it (see, for an example of anthropocentric analysis, Reisch & Andrews, 2001).

Structural social work seeks to build solidarity with oppressed people against the existing structure of oppression. “Structures of oppression” mean the entire power structure of capitalism that puts control of the means of production into the hands of capitalists and the managerial, professional classes supporting capitalism (Mullaly, 2007). This power structure is buttressed by the capitalist ideology holding sway over culture, producing what is often called hegemony. The notion of hegemony is well developed by Marxist theorists, particularly Antonio Gramsci (Sassoon, 1991a, 1991b). Hegemony may be an advancement when class conflict results in demands and goals being met, without necessarily threatening the ruling class’s position, a consensus by which the state’s power is slightly reduced and the civil sphere increased (Sassoon, 1991b). More commonly, hegemony refers to a more negative situation in which the middle and working classes are put into a state of acquiescence through constant cultural messaging supporting the political status quo (Sassoon, 1991a, 1991b). The ideology of capitalism can then seem like a seamless cloth, covering over everything in society, without end and without beginning. This seamless cloth covers over all the contradictions and gaps in capitalist society, making glaring contradictions seem like rational, natural occurrences understandable and agreeable to everyone (Siebers, 2008).

**Oppression: Personal, Cultural, and Structural Spheres**

Mullaly (2009) argued that oppression manifested in three spheres within the social world: the personal, the structural, and the cultural. These three spheres overlap and integrate with one another. The personal sphere represents the relationship of individuals and families to one another and to the dominant culture. This sphere includes personal troubles, such as drug addiction, which are related to broader social forces (Mullaly, 2009). The structural sphere is the traditional focus of structural approaches. It includes the government, the armed forces, financial institutions, courts of law, and institutions like health and social services (Mullaly, 2009).
The cultural sphere mediates the two other spheres. Culture can be said to be an integrated pattern of knowledge, belief, and behavior (Merriam-Webster, 2017). Mullaly (2009) suggested culture as the cement holding together the entire system of oppression. An important dynamic of culture is the mediation between personal and structural. For example, since the 1980s, Canadian popular culture has valorized “fit” and “lean” bodies. Science discourse offers techniques to strip away fat and gain leanness. These narratives infuse the popular lexicon (e.g., the diet infomercial). Neoliberal discourses incorporate both culture and economics with the goal of producing customers for consuming and workers for working (who in turn consume in their off-duty hours). The a priori assumption is that consuming brings happiness irrespective of community, family, or spirituality (Dutt, 2006).

In Vancouver, a culture of so-called yoga, shed of its spiritual core and reformulated into a mainly physical exercise, is advertised as the proper endeavor for young, mobile, lean entrepreneurial professionals (Godrej, 2016). They can even do yoga on the job in the corporate studio! (For example, the head offices of Yahoo and Google in California reputedly have yoga studios, ostensibly to encourage employees to work longer hours – Guthrie, 2013.) Neoliberal imagery of lean personhood vividly contrasts with the image of the non-mobile, ungainly blue-collar worker working in outmoded manufacturing industries (Godrej, 2016; Hatherley, 2016). The logic of leanness, supported by the pop discourse on dieting and health, employs a tautology, to reinforce what we had started out with, “leaness”. The image is a cipher for personal mobility and fitness, monetary mobility and fitness (i.e., super quick flows of capital around the world), and government fitness (leaner government, cutting down public services).

### Structural Social Work: Practice Principles and Response

Structural social work is meant to be a clear break from conventional social work. Mullaly (2007) defined conventional social work as social welfare premised upon classical liberal (or even conservative) ideology. Conventional social work seeks to reform individuals but leaves intact society’s unfair, unjust structure (Lundy, 2011; Mullaly, 2007). Thus, social work helps people cope with the difficulties of life in capitalist countries without addressing the influence of capitalism itself.

In contrast, structural social work facilitates both personal change and structural change (Mullaly, 1997). It posits that change aimed solely at the individual and small group level is unlikely to improve conditions for society’s masses (Weinberg, 2008). This is because society would still be arranged into unequal classes where classes with the greatest wealth and power...
continue to enjoy the best life outcomes. Classes with the least resources and power would eke out an existence with the worst life outcomes (National Research Council, 2001). No one has a choice of whose family s/he are born into (wealthy, poor, white, or black) and it is this that determines in large part, where one will end up in life. What the structural approach sees as justice is a leveling of opportunities for all citizens, generating equitable outcomes (Mullaly, 1997).

Unlike several other radical social work approaches, structural social work has concrete practice guidelines. It has had impressively four decades of formal development in the academy, policy, and direct care environments. In 1992, Ben Carniol, building on the work of his friend Maurice Moreau, influentially suggested that in practice, structural social work would consist of defense of the client; sharing power/demystifying professional techniques; unmasking structures of oppression; personal change; consciousness-raising; and political activism and solidarity (Carniol, 1992). In subsequent formulations, consciousness-raising was subsumed under one of the other practice categories (e.g., unmasking structures of oppression, which was renamed materialization; Carniol, 1992; Oliver, 2010). Once again, the social-political emphasis of structural social work, in which the consideration of the material only extends as far as housing conditions and labor conditions, seems to lack the ecological imagination to envision how biology, non-human entities, and the earth itself mediate human oppression and wellness (Gray et al., 2013).

Nonetheless, Moreau conducted an evaluation to find practical ways that structural social work theory could work in the field (Moreau, 1989). He posited that if the theory were only of interest to theoreticians, confined to purely philosophical speculation, it would be a wasted effort. The imperative for structural social work is practice. Theory is only just a jumping-off point for emancipatory political practice (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009).

**Practice Example: British Columbia Housing Relocating Tenants**

The following scenario comes from my own work as a social worker, with details changed to preserve anonymity. The example is to show a situation that is seen and responded to through the lens of structural social work. The tenants of a British Columbia (BC) Housing Management Commission (BC Housing) complex in Vancouver are told they must move to a new building. BC Housing is public housing and tenants are mainly low income and disabled people. The current building is on Main Street, a major thoroughfare convenient for public transit and local groceries. The new building is farther away from the thoroughfare, requiring a ten-minute walk to public transit. Tenants have mostly been long-term residents, having developed social networks with one another and local businesses. A few tenants experience mental health and drug addiction problems. Main Street used to be a working-class neighborhood, but now is rapidly gentrifying into an upper middle-class neighborhood, with the emergence of trendy boutiques and expensive condominiums (average price around 651,885 dollars in Q4 2017) (Connolly, 2018). The rumor is that BC Housing will sell the building at a profit to a condominium developer.

How would a structural social worker working at BC Housing respond to this situation? Moreau (1989) had found that graduates trained in Carleton University’s structural social work
employed some structural techniques more than others did, but almost none used all the techniques.

A structural social worker would first see if the case fell within their jurisdiction and powers of intervention (“intake”), as Mullaly (2009) emphasizes situational ethics and pragmatics. Would social work involvement make things better for the tenants, the community? Would the social worker have resources to resolve whatever work is generated? If the answers to those questions were yes, then the structural worker would assess what data is available and where further inquiry is suggested. What are the hypotheses about the situation? Who are the key actors and how would you communicate with them? An assessment report and a plan of action to achieve certain goals are made (“assessment”). The main principles of structural social work would be applied, so that the assessment does not focus on the perceived weaknesses of clients but on their strengths. The focus is instead on empowerment of minority social groups, the context of the problem, and on what are the antecedents and outcomes of mainstream personal, political, and economic practices. In collaboration with community members, the social worker would construct a “plan of action,” consisting of feasible emancipatory personal and political practices, drawing upon the community’s unique strengths.

The next step, “intervention,” calls for carrying-out a plan of action while receiving continual feedback (“evaluation”). For example, BC Housing asks the social worker to present ideas for tenant wellness activities at the new, relocated housing complex. The structural worker confers with likeminded BC Housing workers and managers, identifying the short term political needs of BC Housing in relation to the tenants’ politics and goals. The worker with allied colleagues may build a case for wellness activities incorporating critical analysis of the determinants of poor health related to Vancouver housing inequality (e.g., landlords charging exorbitant rent in an atmosphere of rampant profiteering). The structural worker illustrates the commonalities that poor and disabled people in Vancouver share, to inspire solutions and action (“consciousness-raising;” e.g., writing to the MLA). Perhaps the social worker may initiate a community garden with the tenants, providing a resource for nutritious, organic vegetables, together with education on how to manage and sustain cooperative enterprises. If their job security is high, the social worker may encourage tenants to join or start a tenancy rights group. If job security is low, the worker may wish to tailor their political action more modestly to achieve certain gains for tenants without risking a direct confrontation with government managers. In contrast, a conventional social worker would rather carry out a wellness activity that gives a more superficial relief, like a board game night or running a class on stretching and muscle relaxation exercises. A structural approach could utilize the same activity as the conventional method but adding a political-economic-spiritual analysis.

Critical Analysis of Structural Social Work

This section provides a critical analysis of the structural approach, focusing on five areas: ideological coherence, usage in academia versus agency settings, potential for a decolonizing discourse, dialogue between different cultures, and ecological and spiritual applicability.
Ideological Coherence

The structural approach is a clear break from conventional social work. This leap ahead, structural workers would assert, is based on the adaptation of an ideology – socialism – that makes it possible to identify social problems at their root. In contrast, conventional social work assumes a reform-minded liberal ideology or a conservative ideology, which would only perpetuate capitalism’s problems. Mullaly’s (2007, 2009) strongest contribution was his cogent analysis of ideology as the main determinant of the welfare state. He did not shy away from explaining the contradictions and divisions within socialist theory and practice, as he saw these as places of potential synthesis or advancement. He also provided a nuanced reading of social democracy and revolutionary Marxism, seeing neither ideology as monolithic but each subject to critique and evolution. Mullaly (2007) also provided clear motivation for social workers to vote in the elections, to support a political party that would enact legislation to produce (or as close as possible) a structural welfare state in solidarity with oppressed groups.

The structural approach has made efforts to learn from feminism, with varying degrees of success. Iterations of the approach in late 1970s became immersed in the principle of the personal is political (Hanisch, 1969/2006). In particular, Carniol (1992) emphasized structural social work’s debt to feminist theory. Unfortunately, Mullaly’s texts (e.g., 1997) have received a few stern rebukes from feminist critics who say it inadequately reflects lived female realities of social work, instead mirroring a masculinist, Marxist perspective (Murray & Hick, 2010). Feminist principles may be more successfully deduced from the work of female structural social workers. Recent work from a structural perspective has been done regarding women’s safety in Williams Lake, British Columbia (Burrill & Peters, 2010) and on Afro-centric social work in Nova Scotia (Bernard & Marsman, 2010).

Utilization in Academia

In academia, the structural approach is strong. Entire academic departments (e.g., social work at Carleton University) have devoted their teaching and research toward it (Lundy, 2011). Structural social work has had four decades of development in the academy. Nonetheless, other social work schools tend to emphasize a broad social justice orientation but not necessarily a specifically structural approach (MacEwan University, 2013; Thompson Rivers University, n.d.; University of British Columbia, n.d.; University of Fraser Valley, n.d.; University of Manitoba, 2016; University of Regina, 2016; University of Victoria, 2016).

The academic emphasis is also its weakness. A prevalent view among agency-based social workers is that it is very difficult to implement academic ideals in the harsher, utilitarian environments of direct practice (Poole, 2010). The failure of structural social work to find a home in any direct care agency demonstrates this major limitation. It is difficult to envision how structural social work could evolve into the mainstream of the profession if it is confined solely to higher education (Carleton University, 2005).

Despite its scholarly focus, empirical study of the structural approach has been rare. In one of the few available studies, Moreau (1989) reported only 41% of respondents returned the research survey. Generally, a low response rate introduces significant doubt into study findings.
Moreau’s study suggested that Carleton University-trained social workers actively used the structural approach in their direct practice. However, it may also be that the majority (59%) non-responders discounted it as a viable practice model.

Potential as a Decolonizing Discourse

The structural approach does not adequately address colonization. Although Mullaly (2007, 2009) often mentioned the interconnected evils of capitalism-colonialism-militarism, along with racial oppression, the approach he took was not at all reflective of indigenous knowledge. Rather, structural social work is rooted in a White union activist tradition, emphasizing the alienation inherent in industrial, factory capitalism (originating in England; Bentley & Ziegler, 2007; Murray & Hick, 2010). This seems to parallel the debate about whether it is worthwhile for indigenous people to get involved in unions, or whether unions represent an industrial process and genealogy alien to indigenous needs (Nicol, 1997). Mullaly’s three editions of Structural social work (1993, 1997, 2007) are based almost completely on Euro-American political and economic history. Compared with indigenous social work approaches wherein decolonizing knowledge and practice are central (e.g., Absolon, 2009; Hart, 2002; Green, 2008), structural social work is far, far away, ontologically and epistemologically. Hence, structural social work as it is currently understood has limited potential as a decolonizing discourse.

As a Critical Social Theory: Dialogue between Different Cultures

Mullaly (1997, 2007) asserted that structural social work is a form of critical social theory. However, there are two problems when structural theory is viewed through the lens of critical theory. First, structural social work theory implies that all societies are subject to the deleterious effects of capitalism and these negative effects follow a similar course. Critical social theory, at its best, is aware of its own historicity and it should not entertain the idea that the problem and the solution are one in the same for all cases (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009). Thus, Mullaly’s valorization of the big idea of socialism is subject to some censure.

Second, critical social theory should engage in a dialogue between different cultures (Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009). Mullaly’s texts (1997, 2007) described socialist projects in North America, Europe, Russia, Scandinavia, and the United Kingdom. Socialist initiatives in Latin America have been overlooked, particularly political developments among indigenous groups in Bolivia, the formation of Cuba, amongst many more. The nation building project in India, along ostensibly socialist lines, since independence from British rule has also been ignored by the structural social work literature. Writing earlier, Leonard (1984) also made the same omissions. One exception is Purnima George, a social worker working in Toronto and Mumbai (Ryerson University, 2016b).

Canadian social work can also learn from Cuba. There, the training and mobilization of emergentes are impressive indeed. The emergentes are youth from disadvantaged backgrounds who receive training in social work, and once graduated, they become eligible to enter university without the onus of the entrance exam (Herman, Zoltnik, & Collins, 2011; Strug & Teague, 2008). In their work for the government, these emergentes fan out across neighborhoods, house
to house, in public health and community projects, with a special emphasis on engaging and empowering disaffected youth. However, this type of youth mobilization likely depends on having a strong neighborhood network and a sense of loyalty to the state, things not necessarily in existence in Canada (Binkley & Capetillo-Ponce, 2008; Zager, 2017).

**Ecology and Climate Change**

Although the structural approach makes some passing references to climate change and industrial pollution, the approach has few plans to address what is arguably the most important social problem of our time. The structural approach to the environment is similar to conventional social work’s nebulous commitment to ecological justice, with ecological issues subsumed, and often ranked last, under human needs which first take precedence (e.g., refer to page 5 of CASW Code of Ethics; CASW, 2005; Gray et al., 2013). Given Canada’s financial support for the tar sands industries, subsidies to other polluters, and systematic scrapping of environmental regulations, with significant deleterious consequences to plant life and animal life, and to human health and wellbeing, such environmental issues need to be an important area for structural social work intervention (Nerenberg, 2013). Lysack (2010) introduced what a structural contribution to ecological justice might be like: personal courage, consciousness-raising, and spiritual connections to the land. However, the structural approach needs to be careful to not appropriate indigenous teachings then claim these teachings as its own idea (Coates et al., 2006).

**The Future of Structural Social Work**

In 1984, Madonna sang: “living in a material world, living in a material world…” This is the essence of structural social work – we are living in a material world. Similar to the ending of Madonna’s song, structural social work teaches journeying through life by connecting the heart (emotions, relationships, conscience) with the material world. One would no longer separate the malevolent influence of materialistic ideas, such as trickledown economics (cutting the corporate tax rate) from such idea’s personal effects (e.g., anxiety paying the rent when neighborhood rents are skyrocketing). Mullaly (1997) and Carniol (2000) maintained that social workers experience a dichotomy between their work and their conscience because of the larger social dichotomy between what they know to be right and the demands of the materialistic world. Instead, healing comes through allowing the conscience to speak to the needs of the material world, promoting right relationships in work, play, and self-care, in ways that build community and honor human differences.

Capitalism proclaims that separating conscience from material reality is a rational, clever way of living, but wiser philosophies would chuckle at such an idea. This brings to mind the Cree (Nehiyaw) principle of interdependence (Sinclair, Hart, & Bruyere, 2009). The two legged, the four legged, the ones that crawl, the winged ones, the insects, rivers, oceans – these are seen not as “things,” but as relatives. Humans are not viewed as the pinnacle of creation, but as one of the less important beings – we as humans depend on all the other flora and fauna for our survival (Makokis (wahpimaskwasis), 2005). Within Nehiyaw principles, as I understand them, it must be an alien concept to exploit, extract, and destroy forests, rivers, and oceans because it is akin to attacking one’s own core. When lands and waters are despoiled, many feel a sense of despair (Kirmayer, 2007). Psychological distress due to pollution is very difficult for Canadian settlers to
understand, and that includes me. Yet coming from an ethos of interdependence and right relations with creation, it is very understandable. A Cree elder had instructed me, if you are lonely, why not speak to the trees, to the birds? If you are patient and listen, they will speak. (I am only a beginner when it comes to immersion within Nehiyaw epistemology and methodology. For in-depth education in this area, prolonged learning within a circle of traditional Nehiyaw knowledge keepers is recommended.)

From Nehiyaw principles, as I have been taught, rampant pollution constitutes an attack upon one’s own family. It is not possible to assume pollution would not affect human, animal, and plant wellbeing, indeed threatening the survival of the chain of interdependence. Structural social work at its best can ally with Nehiyaw and other indigenous knowledge systems. Although structural social work shies away from spiritual undertakings, fundamentally it can be said to be about establishing the right relations between making a living and living a life.

By humanizing the material and the structural, Mullaly (2009) highlighted a clear political choice in elections, a choice that would enact legislation making possible a truly socialist welfare state. Similarly, Member of Parliament Rev. Bill Blaikie (2011) is convinced that only a clear Parliamentary choice would bring about fundamentally progressive change. Blaikie felt Parliament is where the rubber hits the road in social activism. He said much of the social activism the past thirty years has been vague on where to put your vote in the ballet box. Blaikie (2011) claimed that the Left had won the battle over culture but vacated the all-important governmental realm to the right, in this case the Reform Party of Canada.

I believe Reverend Blaikie is partly correct, although I am not certain that the Left has indeed “won” the battle over popular culture, given the power of corporate interests over the media. Structural social work, in its goal for a socialist welfare state, must declare which political party most closely resembles social work ideals and beliefs. Social workers at election time can vote accordingly. No doubt, this explicit political engagement would be seen as improper by mainstream standards. It would be necessary to have checks and balances, strict ethical guidelines, when formulating a social work election platform. For example, robust boundaries between the New Democratic Party (or whichever party receiving endorsement) and the CASW would be necessary to prevent a conflict of interest.

The mobilization of a clear electoral choice must consider the political requirements of decolonization and ecological justice. Historically, social democratic principles did not mix well with decolonization. It is unclear if any political party would be open to indigenous knowledge, as all of them seem to relegate such knowledge to second tier status. In addition, other than the Green Party, no political party has a workable plan to prevent climate change. Thus, Mullaly’s (2009) reticence to support any one political party is quite justified. Although building a political party is outside the scope of social work, I believe the structural approach’s future depends upon creating a clear political choice that enables both participatory social democracy and ecological justice, under a rubric of decolonization.

A structural approach also influences the future of rank-and-file social workers engaged in the daily jumble of agency work and care giving. Wharf (2002) rightly criticized individualized, office-based practices that turns people into objects of benevolence and
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algorithms of risk, robbing clients of their strength and dignity. Such individualized office-based practice is as much a failure for the service user as it is for the social worker and the agency. Traditional social work (indeed most modern occupations) is rooted in the doctrine of scientific management and the ordered day of factory work (Sawchuk, 2010; e.g., ten-minute coffee break between 10 to 10:10 AM, half-hour lunch at 12 noon, and then entering statistics on how you had spent your shift). In office-based agencies, management typically discourages social workers from leaving the office, even for client home visits. In my own experience, I have felt that office-based social work, even at its best limits, creativity and inhibits health (it is sedentary). The focus on “getting back to the office” to sit some more and sort files requires using gasoline vehicles for quick travel. This limits the possibility of riding bicycles or using public transit for home visits.

At indigenous organizations, from my experience, there seems much less pressure to adhere to rigid “factory floor” timelines and fewer disincentives to visiting service users, other welfare agencies, even cultural events. I propose structural social work embrace ecological justice and indigenous knowledge in crafting agency structures celebrating flexibility, community engagement, and green transportation. After all, should not sage picking be prioritized as a healing activity? Would it make sense to limit sage picking to a one-hour slot between 1 PM and 2 PM?

What is the possibility of joining the spiritual impulse to progressive social work? Reverend Blaikie (2011) suggested that spirituality not be left at the door when working in politics (or indeed, social work). The founders of social work are Christian social gospelers – Jane Addams, J.S. Woodsworth, Tommy Douglas, Martin Luther King, Desmond Tutu (Brown & Cocker, 2011; Jennissen & Lundy, 2011; Johannson, 2001; Lee, 2001; Takamura, 2015). Coming full circle, our society, I believe, thirsts for spiritual nourishment yet prefers to be free of dogmatism. I am aware that for many social workers, especially activists, spirituality is the source of their perseverance (Johannson, 2001). Traditional spiritualism is, I believe, becoming powerful again in many indigenous communities, when after decades of government repression people are becoming active in language revival and traditional medicine (Hart, 2002). Openness to spiritual practice combined with a warrior spirit in correcting injustice may lead structural social work to shed the accusation that it is a Godless Marxist movement. Far from it – to paraphrase Paulo Freire, the humanistic and historic task of social workers is for us to liberate ourselves.

References


