

The politics of social work: Do racialized social workers belong in the practice space of public policy development?

THE HELPING PROFESSION

Many institutions in our society have determined through credentialing that only certain types of professions deserve the power to make decisions that affect citizens. These professions include economists, medical professionals, lawyers, political scientists, and those seen as valuable to the productivity of society, such as professionals in the private sector. Historically, social workers have occupied a devalued position as the “helping” profession.

Social work has been absent from significant areas of advocacy and inclusion such as policy practice and social policy development. Westhues defines social policy as “a course of action or inaction chosen by public authorities to address a given problem or interrelated set of problems” (2003, p. 8). Policy practice can be defined as “efforts to change policies in legislative, agency and community settings whether by establishing new policies, improving existing ones or defeating the policy initiatives of other people” (Weiss-Gal & Peled, 2009, p. 369). Social workers possess first-hand knowledge and experience of implementing public and social policies that directly impact marginalized groups. For social work to be a representative profession, both public and social policy must be active areas of practice. Cynthia Bisman states that “social workers have a duty to . . . bring to the attention of those in power . . . and where appropriate challenge ways in which the policies or activities of government . . . create or contribute to structural disadvantage” (2004, p. 110). In the following sections, I assess the need for intervention in this practice space and suggest how social work can formulate public policy as a legitimate advocacy area for marginalized people.

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HISTORICAL ROOTS

Themes of colonialism, patriarchy, and classism are rooted in Canada’s historical treatment of minority peoples. Canada’s Aboriginal peoples continue to provide a narrative of the impact of colonialism. The systematic dismantling of family structure and the loss of cultural identity caused by residential schooling continue to have negative socio-intersectional reverberations for this minority group. Similarly, classism was expressly active in the exclusive practice of the application of a head tax on Chinese people. Black people have also experienced this inherent classist narrative where immigration and the ability to access the labour market and to be settled in Canadian society are concerned.

Professionals such as doctors, lawyers, and economists, who are typically white males, also typically inform public policy development. According to Block and Galabuzi, in the area of public administration, only “4.0% of racialized men and 4.1% of racialized women were employed in this sector” (2011, p. 10). In light of these abysmal race representation statistics, it is clear that policy writers who do not experience the same social determinants of health concerns will not prioritize these issues affecting minority populations. Greater representation of racialized people among policy writers will assist in highlighting where discriminatory practices exist for racial minorities and will open the conversation as to how these discriminatory practices can best be addressed. Many institutional structures establish exclu-

sive hiring practices that contribute to professional marginalization. A *Toronto Star* report calls for more diverse selection criteria to Canada’s top court. “Professor Rosemary Cairns Way of the University of Ottawa reports that Aboriginal and visible minority members account for roughly 23 per cent of the population, and yet from 2009 to 2014, only 1.04 per cent of appointees to the provincial superior courts were Aboriginal, and only 0.5 per cent were members of a visible minority group” (Hasan & Siddiqui, 2016). The statistics offered by Cairns Way again highlight the implicit and explicit barriers to productive societal engagement for racialized people.

BEYOND INTENT

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau attempted to change this reality in Parliament in 2015. Yet exclusion for racialized people is still pervasive. Tamara Johnson in her discussion paper on the visible minority experience noted that, “in 1999, only one in 17 employees of the federal public service was visible minority.” Johnson further quoted the Treasury Board Secretariat data that “the representation of visible minorities in the managerial or executive capacities is even more staggering . . . 1 in 33 . . . held by a member of a visible minority group” (Johnson, 2006, p. 13). In addition, “neither Elections Canada nor the clerk’s office . . . keeps data on the ethnic breakdown of members, with the exception of those from First Nations backgrounds” (Wolf, 2015). Employment practices of screening names and addresses, streamlining through career-path forecasting, and selecting candidates on the basis of an organization’s “culture” are multiple barriers to diversity and representative bureaucracy. Yee and Dumbrill counter

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inadvertent exclusion by declaring that “discriminatory practices are not always about intent; they are often about how people are socially constructed into positions” (2015, p. 115). Often, disadvantage is constructed by tokenism implemented as a Band-Aid solution to the diversity problem. The result is that those in power forfeit their responsibility to further interrogate the power structures impacting marginalized people.

In my research, a participant in a member of Parliament’s constituency office highlighted the discourse of the “capable worker” as she talked about how race played a role in empowering or negating power for the worker (A.S., personal interview, April 19, 2016). The participant stated that “racialization was a huge part of our office politics ... race was at the centre of everything ... when white workers who were not social workers were inserted into the [problem-solving] equation, the constituents chose those workers because they trusted the authority of the white workers.” While racialized social workers are uniquely positioned to offer expertise on how social policies impact marginalized people, they themselves are also likely to have experienced navigating these barriers professionally and personally.

Given the adverse impacts that social policies developed without social work input have had on marginalized people, policies developed with social work participation can translate into meaningful change. Westhues states that “social workers have come to accept social policy development as an essential component of our work as professionals ... the values we stand for, infused in social policy will shape and give definition to the vital, ever changing culture we know as Canadian” (2003, pp. 19-20). Because the bulk of the practice of social work is to engage with and analyze how systems of dominance impact vulnerable and marginalized populations, this same method of assessment, employed by racialized social workers, could be effectively applied to the practice area of

public policy development. This mechanism could be more reflective of the plight of all Canadians.

GOVERNMENT FAILURE

The 2016 suicide crisis experienced in the Attawapiskat community speaks to the failure of the government to address social issues effectively. Social work inclusion would open avenues for groups affected by adverse social and broader public policy conditions to shape these policies by providing a critical eye to the language, funding, and the institutional structures of legislated policies. This collaborative professional approach between structural social workers, service users, and legislators can positively shape how funding is distributed, how discrimination and tokenism are challenged, and how agencies are interpreting and mandating their front-line work. The role of social workers, through policy evaluation, will be to determine whether and how the legislative and implementation process affects marginalization.

Steven Hick suggests that social problems and inequalities are a built-in “feature of society” and he “calls for society itself, including major institutions to change radically” (2014, p. 94). With public policy legislation and regulation now being viewed by universities and colleges as a legitimate practice space for social work students, social work as a profession is increasingly interdisciplinary. This translates into engagement with other discussions of social work inclusion in law and society, and health and well-being. This interdisciplinary approach to policy development activities enables all people in our society to gain access to the resources available, not just to what is portioned out for the marginalized through social policy. 🍁

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