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Paradox and Trespass: Possibilities for Ethical Practice in Times of Austerity

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ABSTRACT



How social workers do construct what is 'ethical' in their work, especially when they are positioned at the intersection of multiple paradoxes, including that of two opposing responsibilities in society: namely, to care for others but also to prevent others from harm? Paradoxes in practice are especially complicated to manage in the neoliberalism of the Global North where the priority of efficiency has been heightened and the obligation towards the most vulnerable has been weakened. Taking data from a Canadian study, this paper delineates the structural paradoxes of practice and elaborates on the concept of ethical trespass, especially in times of austerity. Ideas are illustrated with case material from participants who were practitioners working with a population of young single impoverished mothers. Impacts of the discourses on single mothers, resource inadequacies, and increased surveillance on clients are discussed, and the effects on workers such as individualization and burnout will be outlined. Despite the challenges, practitioners in the study found ways to minimize trespass and act ethically. The strategies employed included problematizing the helping relationship, being a responsible traitor, dissident speech, and the use of contextualized practice.

KEYWORDS

Paradox; ethics; ethical trespass; managerialism; practice; governmentality; discourse; resistance; critical theory; neoliberalism

Introduction

How social workers do construct what is 'ethical' in their work, especially when they are positioned at the intersection of multiple paradoxes, including that of two opposing responsibilities in society: namely, to care for others but also to prevent others from harm? Paradoxes in practice are especially complicated to manage in the neoliberalism of the Global North where the priority of efficiency has been heightened and the obligation towards the most vulnerable has been weakened. Such a values shift leaves social workers struggling with how to act ethically when at times they feel blocked by structural constraints, making the possibilities to be one's best ethical self very difficult. It can also result in ethical trespass, which can be understood as the harm that individuals do, not out of evil intention but through participation in day-to-day living and working,

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since no matter which way a worker resolves the paradoxes of practice, unintended harms may follow.

Taking data from a Canadian study (Weinberg 2016), this paper develops the concept of ethical trespass and explores the paradoxes of practice that lead to ethical trespass, especially in times of austerity. The ideas are illustrated with case material from participants who were practitioners working with a population of young single impoverished mothers. Impacts of the discourses on single mothers, resource inadequacies, and increased surveillance on clients are discussed, and the effects on workers such as individualization and burnout will be outlined. Despite the challenges, practitioners in the study found ways to minimize trespass and act ethically. The strategies employed included problematizing the helping relationship, being a responsible traitor, dissident speech, and the use of contextualized practice.

The research

The central focus of the research was to explore the ethics of practice, given the paradoxical positioning of practitioners as agents of discipline and care, particularly in the current era of fiscal restraint. Five front-line workers from the province of Ontario in Canada were interviewed. Four were in two cities and one worked in a rural setting. The practitioners all self-identified as white women: between 30 and 40 years of age, 3 married, and 2 single. They had a range of educational backgrounds, including early childhood education and social work, but each one had been hired as a 'social worker' in a province that only later reserved that designation for individuals with professional social work degrees. A total of 28 exploratory, in-depth interviews were conducted over a 2-year period with between 5 and 7 interviews per person. My query was what constituted ethical practice for them in their work? By ethics I am referring to 'the reflective inquiry into the way that people feel, think and behave with a view to formulating norms of conduct and the evaluation of character' (Webb 2006, 13–14).

The organizations in which the participants were employed included a maternity home, an educational day programme, a community health clinic, and two outpatient agencies. The rationale for the focus on work with young single mothers was that this population is at the intersection of a number of marginalities as well as conflicting discourses about the 'legitimacy' of their status and right to social services. I was interested in which discourses were taken up by the practitioners to understand both their clients and the nature of their own responsibilities. In my previous work as a consultant for this population, the immense divide between how workers perceived the young women's 'choices' to be lone mothers and the young women's perceptions themselves had been revelatory. I wished to understand these discrepant discursive frames and their impacts.

There were three discourses about young single mothers that were particularly relevant (Weinberg 2016, 12–14). By discourse I am referring to competing 'structures of knowledge and systematic ways of carving out reality' (Chambon, Irving, and Epstein 1999, 272). The first, a liberal discourse that while recognizing the structural constraints for this population, for the most part, emphasizes the psychological dynamics that 'explain' the 'ill-fated' situations these young women find themselves in. This was the most often used discourse by workers in the study. As an illustration, Patricia¹, one of the participants in the study,

articulated: ‘a lot of the pregnancies are intentional and I really think they are looking for an instant family, somebody to love, somebody to give them a reason to be’.

In a second discourse, the reactionary discourse, the young women are framed as irresponsible and promiscuous, at high risk of being inadequate mothers. In this discourse, there is often a conflation with poverty and other social ills such as ‘broken homes’. Their pregnancies and eventual childbearing are viewed as out-of-time acts for which they are ill-prepared. Jannie, a second participant, expressed this discourse when she said, ‘I don’t think teenagers are ready.’ One could speculate that a take-up of the reactionary discourses about lone mothers might be a driving factor in the policy and legislative decisions that have continued to disadvantage young single mothers. Fern, the third interviewee, in response to this discourse conjectured, ‘they’re young single parents and society doesn’t have a lot of tolerance ... for them’.

The third discourse, denoted as a revisionist discourse, opposes the two more dominant frameworks, putting more emphasis on the macro factors that contribute to the struggles for this population. These young people did ‘have hopes and dreams’ that could be attained suggested Patricia, if there was a ‘better government’. The revisionist discourse was the discourse most often employed when workers resisted the austerity measures that had been enacted towards young single mothers. This discourse includes recognition of the power and authority of professionals, and the benefits accrued through the construction of ‘clienthood’. For instance, Patricia relayed that others perceived her as a ‘good person’ since she was prepared to ‘work with people like that’.

Let us start with some context about the welfare system in which these discourses exist.

Erosion of the welfare state for young single women

Post World War II, in response to austerity the war engendered and due to concerns about human rights and social inequality, the Canadian government had taken major responsibility for the provision of social welfare (Chappell 2014). The rise of social movements contributed to a belief in communal obligation for the impoverished and marginalized. Thus, a significant number of social programmes and universal benefits were established, demonstrating an ideology of government responsibility to care for citizens. But since the early 1980s, accelerating in the mid-1990s, there has been a major shift in policy direction. Like most countries in the Global North, the welfare system in Canada has gone through a period of significant retrenchment, including the end of support for universal programmes. By the early twenty-first century, Canada was perceived as ‘failing the most vulnerable’ (Lightman and Riches 2009, 61), including young single mothers. Fern, stated, ‘the system is brutal’. In one UN study in 2006, out of 21 developed countries, Canada was ranked as 6th, declining from first place in 1995 (Lightman and Riches 2009). And in other research, out of 17 countries, Canada was positioned 12th in the statistics of inequality (Chappell 2014). Ontario, the province in which this study took place, had the greatest inequality of incomes, not seen since the Great Depression (Chappell 2014). Universality had been seriously eroded (Lightman and Riches 2009; Rice and Prince 2013) and denial of entitlements had increased. In terms of the situation in a major city in Canada, Charlotte, participant number four, gave an example related to her own early history before becoming a social worker, ‘I was able to be on Assistance. I was able to have fully subsidized day care – that’s non-existent. You can’t do that now.’

In Canada, the effects of policy decisions have been highly gendered (Armitage 2003; Brodie and Bakker 2007; Rice and Prince 2013). Ninety per cent of the female-headed single-parent households lived in poverty in 2001 (Brodie and Bakker 2007). In Ontario, lone mothers had more than double the average rate of poverty (Maxwell 2009). According to Luong (2008, 11), teenage childbearing has 'been shown to have negative and long-term effects on women's socioeconomic outcomes'. And the intersections with other categories such as race and disability increase the likelihood of inequalities for entitlements from the welfare state.

Although this research was focused on Canada, these trends are consistent with many other countries. Women comprise 70 per cent of the world's poor (Nadkarni and Dhaske 2012). And while the socioeconomic effects for lone mothers vary across the globe, one study suggested that single mothers have the highest probability of poor health outcomes (Witvliet et al. 2014). With regard to the erosion of the welfare state across countries, while the effects vary and are not all-encompassing, social service cutbacks have occurred in most Euro-Western countries such as Australia, the United Kingdom, and New Zealand (Baines, Cunningham, and Fraser 2010; Banks 2011; Humpage 2016; Rogowski 2012; Wallace and Pease 2011).

Neoliberalism, managerialism, and governmentality

While there have been multiple causes for the attrition of the welfare state, neoliberalism has been a major contributing factor. Neoliberalism is a policy framework, a 'political discourse about the nature of rule and a set of practices' (Larner 2000, 6). Neoliberalism holds that minimal state intervention is the best path forward for a country (Larner 2000) and the values of the marketplace should be elevated above all others. Fern, to her dismay, indicated that social welfare is 'conducted as a business ... where the bottom line is money'. Values of efficiency, competition, minimal state government, flexibility, and choice have been actualized through privatization, deregulation, and the commodification of social relations (Peck, Theodore, and Brenner 2012). Patricia articulated an example of the commodification, 'I ran this ... group for pregnant women and they got food coupons as part of attending this group.' Neoliberal discourses are legitimated through claims of universality and the superiority of the market for decision-making processes (Clarke 2004). Emphasis on the individual (individualization) rather than on the community for meeting the needs of citizens is central. Therefore, the state's responsibility through welfare is residual to that of the private sector, family, and volunteers for the well-being of the most marginalized. As a discourse, neoliberalism encourages individuals to conform to economic values. For example, Fern heard of a teen mom who 'missed three days in a row of school because her child was ill and so her worker pulled her cheque and wouldn't give it to her anymore because she wasn't fulfilling expectations'. This was one of many similar stories from the research.

Neoliberalism is linked to managerialism through discourses that focus on the strategies of rational, business-oriented approaches to the management of organizations, including those in the social services (Clarke 2004). The discourses in managerialism highlight the benefits of efficiency and productivity for non-profits (Clarke 2004; Dickens 2008; Rogowski 2012). These discourses encourage agencies and individuals to adopt values of enterprise and economics. Efficiency rather than quality becomes paramount with an

emphasis on technical, short-term solutions while prolonged engagement with service users is frowned upon. All five workers spoke of having insufficient time to do the work. They worried about doing an inadequate job for their clients. Jannie stated, 'I know my time is limited' and 'I don't have the time to follow it through [to] the end.' Charlotte described spending 'the whole day with [a client] at the hospital. I wasn't supposed to do that'. She elaborated that while her supervisor was supportive, the supervisor would still 'have to keep account on that'.

These trends are accompanied by an emphasis on evidence-based practices, utilization of technology, working to targets, and auditing procedures to ensure that targets are met. Documentation plays a major role in managerialism of both worker and client. Jannie described a format she was required to use by the government department that funded her agency. She said, 'the software really ... didn't fit with our clients and the descriptors and the fields that they gave us really didn't get at who our clients were and what they ... were coming in with in terms of ... the difficulties and their challenges'. The final participant, Kristine, explained that in her agency, clients '[helped] write the case notes' and were required to sign the written record, in subtle ways enforcing agreement with the agency's and worker's assessments and plans. Fern mentioned, 'there was a binder that you're supposed to write down ... and then go over and then see if this person had accessed any of the resources [inaudible word]. Then you were supposed to decline them this service, right?' These mechanistic procedures reduce social work to a narrow range of activities that miss the essence of relational, critical, and creative aspects of the profession.

At the same time, 'while neo-liberalism may mean less government, it does not follow that there is less governance' (Larner 2000, 12). Governmentality is a Foucauldian concept that expands the view of what is political to diffuse tactics of power in the actions of institutions – including policies and procedures – that act upon the conduct of citizens as practices of social control and discipline. Governmentality refers to forms of regulation of whole populations (Foucault 1991). The notion of governmentality links the mechanisms of the state with those of individual citizens in the management of their behaviour. Through it, individuals take up the principles as their own, thereby making this type of governance powerful by regulating everyday aspects of life and by engaging social actors in their own self-management (Webb 2006). Through the legitimation of certain behaviours while others are rejected, behaviour is moralized and controlled. Clients are governed through the extensive expectations that accompany the receipt of services. According to Fern, young women must 'dance, like A, B, C, D. [If] they've jumped through the right hoops then they can keep their children'.

One primary method of governmentality is through andragogical strategies. Their importance, according to Foucault, is as a means to make a subject productive and docile, by accepting the dominant discourses as one's own (Foucault 1978). The narratives of the research participants were rife with language such as 'prompts', 'reading difficulties', and 'learning plans', and many of the programmes revolved around education. Charlotte specified the requirements placed on her clients to attend four programmes in one day in the maternity home where she was employed. 'We have a school programme running ALL morning and then we have independent living, we have addictions. We have parenting. We have boom ba boom ba boom. They're [the clients] up in the morning, they're

moving all of the time ...' Kristine, talked about providing her clients 'with education around personal issues ... their child's development. But more, it's to help them understand their decision-making processes. ... their environments have not ... provided good role models around decision-making'. This narrative is an example of the liberal discourse of young single mothers and illustrates clearly the intention that education will indoctrinate the young women to particular forms of governmentality. However, Fern struggled with this orientation. She said, 'Now everything at [the agency] is based on school, right? ... But I have a lot of issues with it.'

At times, complex finagling was necessary to meet both managerial standards and the needs of clients. For instance, Charlotte had to write a care plan to fulfil Ministry criteria but the expectations and means in which this was to be accomplished interfered with what she considered to be good practice. She explained, 'there is a whole section at ... the bottom of the care plan that says, "other people involved in the care plan process"'. One difficulty was involvement of individuals she deemed as detrimental to her client's welfare but required by Ministry guidelines. Charlotte described how she handled this: 'The care plan is once a month and there [are] three other ... opportunities to meet with them [the young women]. So we do the care plan based on ... the paper work that needs to be done.' Then, the work she really wanted to accomplish had to occur in the other three meetings that month.

Effects on clients and workers

Neoliberalism and managerialism are moral projects, linking the market with norms that should be adopted and the moral worth of individuals (Fourcade and Healy 2007). From a standpoint of moral regulation these young women may be viewed as undeserving, contributing to the acceptability of deficiencies in needed resources. The workers talked about 'huge waiting lists' for all kinds of services. Insufficiencies in housing, income, subsidized day care, and respite, as examples, were consistent themes in the data. From Jannie's perspective, 'these young women ... need ... financial support, [and] Social Assistance just doesn't give enough'. Charlotte said, clients are 'facing day care lists of two years, if they're able to find one [day care]'. Patricia talked about 'how really important it is that they [clients] have diapers and they have formula. And really the amount of money they make or they get on Social Assistance and the rents in the city, it's just ridiculous. There's no way'. These shortages increase the likelihood of clients failing to manage, contributing to ongoing sequences of their being 'at risk' and 'a risk'. And the values of caring and communal responsibility for the most vulnerable, which may not easily translate into economic benefits or efficiency, have almost disappeared. Programmes that in the past had provided means to improve a woman's possibilities often no longer occur, as Charlotte identified above. Patricia stated, they 'used to have a lot more preventative programmes ... All that stuff has been completely cut'. And Fern said, 'you won't get funding to do respite'.

Those services that are still available are often punitive and harsh. As an example, regarding the hostel system, Patricia stated, 'a lot of times [clients are] not allowed to stay there during the day'. Those kinds of restrictions mean there are limited opportunities to receive a call about a possible job or housing, amplifying the likelihood of failure to succeed. And the moralization of sexuality is also seen in policies. So for instance, shelters

had no spaces for couples and the sexuality of the young women was not recognized, according to Patricia and Fern.

Often there have been cycles of poverty and loss in these women's backgrounds, with many of them former wards of the state as children, contributing to an underclass. Fern declared, that wards of the CAS² are 'put under a microscope' and then social service personnel

re-victimize the most horrifically victimized people in our society. In order to become a ward it's got to be pretty brutal you know, and then not help them at all for the entire time that they're in the custody of society ... and then to just, no matter what sort of strengths or attributes they have now bring up their past and use it against them ... '

These patterns reduce the chances of these young women ever climbing out of successions of hardship and loss.

Consequently, clients regulate themselves in order to meet the demands. Fern judged that rather than be profligate, that if anything, her clients 'underspend'. When she accompanied one service user to the store, she described how her client would obsess over purchasing a brand of orange juice that she preferred rather than one that cost 10 cents less. Yet, the moralizing discourses of women on assistance are of spendthrifts and addicts. Another result of the reactionary discourse is that these clients are loath to seek help for substance abuse problems for fear of losing their children. Patricia talked about the way governmentality silences the young women from getting the help they need, for instance when struggling with addictions. She said,

she [a service user is] afraid that if she says to me 'I used last night,' I'm going to report it to Children's Aid and she's going to lose her baby so she's really caught between this rock and a hard place.

Governmentality works on all citizens, including practitioners. Therefore, workers also self-regulate. Patricia had to explain to clients that she could be fined \$10,000 if she did not report appropriately to the CAS. Additionally, when Patricia did not agree with the directions of her agency, she feared sharing her more radical perspectives for fear that she would be seen to be 'bad mouthing' her agency. Fern too stated that what 'control[ed]' her was that her actions could 'come back on her', and she could be viewed as having 'ruined something'. Also, she feared for her 'credibility' with her manager.

Paradoxes in social work practice

The environment is only one factor in complicating the prospect of acting according to one's ethical standards. One of the primary findings of the study was the delineation of a number of underlying structural paradoxes in the work that complicate (Weinberg 2016). So what are those paradoxes that make acting ethically so complex? I will outline four of those that are particularly salient for this discussion.

The first and central one that beleaguers not just social work practitioners but all helping professionals is that of being both agents of care and discipline. Given where professionals are positioned in society, they are responsible to both look after the needs of the most vulnerable (care responsibilities) but also to act as agents of the state to discipline others (control). A common example is the act of apprehending a child when a mother is perceived to be jeopardizing the well-being of her offspring. In that act, both care for

the child but also discipline of the mother occurs and managing the paradox can be thorny. For instance, Kristine, when talking to a mother argued, 'I don't stop caring about you because you acknowledge that you did something that I had to call the Children's Aid [about].' Discipline and moral regulation, as central features of the helping professions, are actions that shape societal norms. Discipline is not just repressive or punishing but also acts through the creation of identities and desires. So the wish to be a 'good mother' and not lose a child to the welfare state may contribute to the structuring of how a young woman views herself and conducts herself, one aspect of governmentality.

This example also demonstrates the structural anomaly that besets social work professionals, namely, of having more than one client in a case. This is a second ethical paradox because what might meet the needs for one client may in fact hurt another in the same case. Patricia grappled with this contradiction:

in the case of working with a young mom who's addicted to alcohol ... when there's a child involved, you want to support the mother in her addiction and if you have kind of a harm reduction philosophy that often doesn't gel with the fact that there's a young infant.

And in group settings where there are a multiplicity of needs, no action will likely meet the wishes and needs of all clients. If one views the organization in which a professional works as a client, even more diversity of need must be addressed without there necessarily being adequate resolution for all the parties involved. For example, Kristine worried about ensuring her behaviour did not jeopardize funding for the agency, thus shaping how she acted at times to meet organizational rather than client objectives. This paradox is especially acute in the current fiscal environment of residual services, since workers cannot afford to jeopardize the funding of their agencies. Preserving the institutional relations with other community partners such as CAS becomes another 'client' in the decision-making process. Also other staff can be seen as other players whose needs must be considered. Charlotte had to handle this complexity in a maternity home where the young women were playing music with the 'bass on ... really loud'. Although she saw this as normal teenage behaviour, other staff referred to it as a 'big revolt going on upstairs'. Furthermore, Charlotte had concerns about an open window, thus requiring a response that met the needs for alliance with other employees and with neighbours, not just those of the clients. Fern believed that challenging these partners could be seen as 'undermining them' and the 'system'. Therefore at times the needs were based on others' rather than the clients'.

A third paradox revolves around the expectation of professionals being non-judgemental in order to connect deeply with service users all while they are forming judgements in their mandated and work responsibilities to monitor and evaluate socially unacceptable behaviour. Regarding an unclear situation Jannie held, 'that to me is a grey area and I'm concerned that if I make a report at that point in time the only thing that's going to happen is that mother is never going to confide in me again'. Determinations such as who is an adequate mother are normalization practices (Foucault [1975] 1977), those mechanisms that separate out those who are healthy from those who are not and contribute to the standards of good and bad. Further, professionals determine eligibility for any number of resources, dividing practices (Foucault 1982) that are of particular importance to manage scarcity in a time of fiscal cutbacks. How one is to fulfil those responsibilities while remaining non-judgemental is a conundrum faced by all helping professionals.

A fourth paradox concerns providing consistency in the allocation of resources versus the acknowledgement of special circumstances and unfair disadvantage in accessing those resources. We are speaking here about whether equality or equity should be the principle adopted. Equality refers to providing a homogenous response to all in need, seeing this as the fairest way to deal with distribution. But equity assumes that there are structural disadvantages for some, meaning individuals do not have the same access to power and resources, and are not at the same 'starting gate'. The rationale underpinning an equity approach is the need to reduce barriers or recognize special circumstances that could be viewed by others as favouritism or biased special treatment. Charlotte struggled with this paradox in describing a client who was not attending a programme but for whom Charlotte saw the need for equity: 'It causes a really negative dynamic because she won't do it. Because the other girls think she's just ... getting away with lots of stuff she ... I don't know if she's painfully shy. She very rarely talks.'

In climates of austerity, the amount of available funding can be so inadequate as to make the distinction between equality and equity moot. Patricia described in detail her job as the 'diaper lady' trying to get enough basic supplies to provide for these young women. She talked about being in a team of four and receiving 'two hundred dollars a month in food coupons to split between the four of us'. Often her 'stinky cupboard', as she referred to her stash, was 'quite empty' requiring her to go to extraordinary lengths through quid pro quos with other agencies, former clients who had had their own children apprehended, and commercial companies to obtain essential goods. In the Canadian Code of Ethics, 'the right of people to have access to resources to meet basic needs' (CASW 2005, 5), this is one of the central principles. Yet workers are hard pressed at times to meet this standard.

Finally there is a paradox connected to normalization practices. At the same time that workers are supporting certain behaviours, they are articulating free choice of service users and encouraging self-empowerment. 'By the utilization of power, the helper "gives" power to those helped to make "free" choices and decisions for themselves' (Weinberg 2016, 3). Fern worried,

she needs to ... settle down and do something ... like just get some focus but then you know that's me putting on expectations because that's not necessarily how she's lived ... so ... for myself it's hard to work with her ... because I'm feeling that she needs to be doing things and she might not be feeling that way.

Implications for ethics

The effects of the current environment on this population are grim. They are pathologized through moralizing reactionary discourses and viewed as undeserving. All five workers talked about extensive surveillance of these young women. From the most negligible interactions that participants identified including clients' 'choices of language', to 'not changing diapers as often as they should', to 'punctuality', clients are being evaluated about their adequacy to mother and their morality as citizens. Patricia summed up the situation: 'the truth is they are being watched ... the minute they go to the hospital they're being watched by me, they're being watched by Children's Aid, they're being watched by the doctors, the paediatricians ... they really are'.

Surveillance does not come from just professionals, but also from other clients. Some participants in the study saw this as problematic, but in one instance Jannie's attitude was that this was positive. She said,

the students like to tell on one another because if you can tell on somebody else and make them look bad then you look even better, right? So there were a few students that really like[d] to keep us updated which in some ways is good because then we're on top of things a bit more. We have more information.

The individualization of neoliberalism means that ethical struggles are viewed as private dilemmas rather than part of broader structural features. This is happening in an atmosphere of amplified blame-laying and magnified risks of liability that are all part of that individualization discourse. At the same time, with the rise of managerialism, the authority and trustworthiness of professionals have been questioned and eroded (Parton 1996). Individualism puts increased pressure on workers to make the 'right' decisions, with censure and the threat of lawsuits constant threats in the background. And the codes of ethics that are turned to for help in making judgements are also rooted in individualism with the emphasis on the dyadic relationship between worker and client, often outside of broader contextual factors. One of the features of social services under these conditions is that of 'low trust' (Banks 2011, 10), with more and more emphasis on short-term, contractual relationships rather than the commitment from employers to long-term full-time employment, so sometimes job security is threatened as well. The requirement of professionals having the information to make evaluations contributes to their stance as moral regulators. Therefore, we can comprehend Jannie's need for information to protect herself to make the 'right' decision.

When coupled within an environment of diminishing resources and increased need, and the embedded paradoxes of practice, the complexity of ethical action intensifies. All individuals, including professional helpers, have an internalized image of their ideal self (Benjamin 1995). But at times, what is realized in practice falls short of that ideal. When superimposed on the values of neoliberalism and managerialism as well as the pressures of organizations to fall in line with those trends, these paradoxes and pressures can result in a discrepancy between a worker's preferred self and actualized self (Weinberg 2007) causing distress for workers and failing to accord with their own sense of ethical behaviour. For instance, the 'policing' according to Patricia changed the nature of the work: 'we become ... watchdogs as opposed to the advocates and the support'. Then the value of social justice was eroded and at times she had the sense of not living up to her preferred self.

Furthermore, the paradoxes and austerity measures mean there is an increased chance of iatrogenic effects for clients, not due to malevolent intent but due to where workers are positioned in society as both agents of discipline and care, the first paradox we discussed. Also, the responsibility to judge contributes to the creation of 'spoiled' identities, pathologizing of clients, no matter how skilfully workers may handle the need to evaluate. This leads to the inescapability of ethical trespass, viz. harmful effects that result from workers' 'participation in social processes' (Orlie 1997, 5). Additionally the paradox of having more than one client in the same case whose needs and desires diverge contributes to this certainty. Orlie contends that, in fact, it is individuals such as helping professionals who are the most likely to trespass since they are the citizens who contribute

to the creation of norms and identities, extending society's 'patterns of rule' (23). Moreover, workers can never fully predict the outcomes of their decisions. A decision of what constitutes a good mother in one case will have implications in other cases later on. The ripple effects are endless and unknowable. Uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity underlie all actions in the field. Practitioners can only choose among an array of less than perfect options, knowing that they cannot get it 'right', only better or worse.

Practice strategies to minimize trespass

One of the effects of managerialism and neoliberalism is to de-politicize public issues 'through installing economic and managerial discourses as the dominant frameworks for decision making' (Clarke 2004, 34). Because there are no textbook solutions and the possibilities of unintended harm are strong, the work of ethics must be broadened to encompass thinking and acting on the situated and political nature of 'help'. At times the workers in this study resisted policies and discourses with which they disagreed. Resistance, according to Foucault (1978, 96), is 'the odd term in relations of power; they are inscribed in the latter as an irreducible opposite'. What this means is that wherever there is power, there will be resistance. It is an inescapable component of the dynamics of power. Resistance can be used to change one's identity, relationships, and society. However, resistance can be utilized to support trends that shore up oppressive practices. I am concerned in this paper with resistance that supports critical anti-oppressive practices designed towards social transformation. Which discourses practitioners took up seemed to be closely connected with the likelihood (or not) that a participant would resist the dominant discourses that could be oppressive to this population. In those instances when workers did resist, they often articulated a revisionist discourse to explain their actions. But which comes first, the discourse or the action? Why one practitioner tended towards acceptance of, for example, the reactionary discourse, for understanding the young moms and why another would not, and under what circumstances (since no worker relied entirely on any of the tropes listed above), necessitates further investigation.

Problematizing the helping relationship was a step for the participants in reducing trespass. Awareness of one's privilege and power was crucial. Workers, at times, acted as 'responsible traitors' (Heldke 1998), namely, using their power to upend privilege and reshape the systems that supported unfair advantage. They limited their use of power, illustrated by refusing to read a record until they had formed their own opinion about a client. Fern restricted her use of psychiatric jargon because she did not like to 'put people in boxes and label them' and was concerned about the 'connotations' that would follow clients through their lives. Several of the participants worried about the powerful and long-lasting effects of documentation on the women. Charlotte said, 'the words we're using are very subjective and ... we cannot be writing them down because they'll take on a completely different context if they're read in court'. Limiting one's power, such as not checking on how funding was used, or using one's power to give clients the keys to the master's house were both ways to be a 'responsible traitor' employed by the participants in the study. While it seems minor, Patricia spent time role-playing with a client heading off for a job interview on how to shake hands. The client reported how successful she felt when 'the handshake was good, because [she] initiated it and it was a good one'. At times the participants talked about middle-class

values and the problematic expectations those values placed on impoverished young women. Fern gave the illustration of the expectation of clients having a layette: 'You don't need to go out and buy a thirty dollar pot to sterilize your bottles in; you can use the pot you cook spaghetti in.' Therefore, Fern changed the educational programme to be more in keeping with the funds of poor mothers.

Knowing that one will at times cause inadvertent hurt requires humility. And fighting against dominant narratives entails bravery. Charlotte 'got into big doodoo' for going against policy to allow a client to have access to a record. Working in Catholic agencies, both Jannie and Kristine admitted they had provided basic information against Catholic doctrine, even when it went against their own personal values, since this was what clients requested. This is a process and relational approach to ethics. Kristine shared, 'if the funders found out that I'd even MENTIONED abortion ... and supported it in any way then that would be very problematic'. Considering multiple perspectives is essential, particularly to empathize about the general circumstances of these young women. A bottom-up rather than top-down approach seems more likely to minimize trespass.

Another characteristic to reduce trespass is critical self-reflexivity, which includes questioning structures, one's own worldview and assumptions, and the discrepancies between those perspectives (Kondrat 1999). It also entails examining the paradoxes that underpin helping work. With regard to the paradox of judgement and non-judgementalism, Fern acknowledged, 'I'm just thinking what I'm saying [laughs]. I can decide who can change and who can't change, who I can judge and who I can't judge. That's not very good.'

Querying the taken-for-granted and who has authority are necessary processes. Fern questioned other workers' views of the residents as 'acting-out'. Her interpretation was that the young women were 'trying to get back as much control as they can from a situation that doesn't appear to give them any control' and 'then they rebel [laughs]. I mean who isn't?' Fern was suggesting that acting-out was a rebellion based on a lack of control that anyone in that situation could understand. This quote is an example of dissident speech (Meyers 1994), deconstructing dominant discourses to bring unconscious meanings to the surface, allowing for the possibility that alternate subjugated interpretations will take hold.

A couple of the workers saw their work as being with whole contexts at mezzo and macro levels. This is a form of contextual practice (Fook 2002) where one's obligation is not solely to one's clients but to be a change agent more broadly. Then certain strategies would be employed. They included, finding the congruence between a worker's own motivations and the goals of administration, even when they seemed disparate. Workers would use the heterogeneity of an organization to find allies on issues. Then practitioners would act as translators through the way debates were framed. For instance, Patricia did this by attending a meeting at the hospital where people had been hostile to her concerns about the treatment of her clients (Weinberg 2006). She began by articulating her recognition 'that at a management level they were trying to put structures in place', softening the resistance to her input. Advocacy and activism are often touted strategies that are essential components to reduce trespass. By finding like-minded individuals, power is enhanced. Whole groups wield more power than one person to push back against inequality and marginalization.

All these factors result in burnout being a significant risk, especially in a gendered profession such as social work where the trope of giving to others is central (Weinberg 2014).

Moreover, the codes of ethics place, as a primary value, ‘the subordination of one’s own needs to that of clients’ (International Federation of Social Workers 2012). During my interviews, four of the five practitioners either left the field completely or discussed seriously the possibility of that choice. Regarding one situation, Charlotte described doing her ‘third best’ on a day when there had been a series of serious situations she was required to manage. She said, ‘I was feeling so much stress by it. I wasn’t doing one thing good. I was doing three things not very well and being stressed at it.’ As is consistent with individualism of neoliberalism, while burnout is an effect engendered by the problems at a systems level, in general, the solutions are viewed as private personal matters. Therefore finding supportive colleagues, whether in person or virtual (e.g. Weinberg 2017) to maintain one’s equilibrium will reduce the risk of burnout at a time of tremendous stress for workers, given the residual model of welfare and the effects of austerity.

Conclusion

Through the findings of a Canadian study of front-line social workers whose field of practice was with young single mothers, this paper has examined the effects of both the underlying paradoxes in practice and the influences of neoliberalism and managerialism on the possibilities for ethical practice and for the success of this population. We have investigated the primary discourses taken up by practitioners to make sense of the young women and their responsibilities as social workers. Given the current environment, the dubious chances for these young women to climb out of the cycles of loss and poverty have been outlined.

Both the internal structural paradoxes and the context of cutbacks from a residual model of welfare placed significant stressors on social workers to practice according to their preferred sense of self, but at times without success. These pressures lead to the inevitability of ethical trespass, which cannot be entirely avoided. By defining social problems as individual issues, rather than economic, political, or structural, and by emphasizing economic rationality, as the prime values, the field has the hazard of losing its centre. Parton and O’Byrne (2000) refer to this as social work shifting from a practical-moral activity to one that is rational-technical.

Despite significant pressures that impacted the work, with the perils of the field becoming a rational-technical activity where the social justice and ethical components have been gutted, the practitioners did find ways to resist. Strategies were delineated, starting with politicizing ethics and viewing one’s practice as being with whole contexts. Thus, notwithstanding the substantial difficulties in the present era, the paper offered hope of practitioners being able to move towards the reduction of ethical trespass.

Notes

1. All names are pseudonyms.
2. Children’s Aid Society – the child welfare agency responsible for care of children.

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