McMaster University
DigitalCommons@McMaster

Open Access Dissertations and Theses | Open Dissertations and Theses

10-1-2012

"STANDING ON JELLO": IMAGES AND EXPERIENCES OF 'ALTERNATIVE' SOCIAL WORK

Jennifer A. Dustin
McMaster University, jennifer.dustin@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.mcmaster.ca/opendissertations

Part of the Social Work Commons

Recommended Citation
Dustin, Jennifer A., ""STANDING ON JELLO": IMAGES AND EXPERIENCES OF 'ALTERNATIVE' SOCIAL WORK" (2012). *Open Access Dissertations and Theses.* Paper 7314.

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Open Dissertations and Theses at DigitalCommons@McMaster. It has been accepted for inclusion in Open Access Dissertations and Theses by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@McMaster. For more information, please contact scom@mcmaster.ca.

“STANDING ON JELLO”:

EXPERIENCES AND IMAGES OF ‘ALTERNATIVE’ SOCIAL WORK

“STANDING ON JELLO”:

IMAGES AND EXPERIENCES OF ‘ALTERNATIVE’ SOCIAL WORK

By JENNIFER DUSTIN, B.A., B.S.W.

A Thesis

Submitted to the School of Graduate Studies

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

for the Degree

Masters of Social Work

McMaster University

©Copyright by Jennifer Dustin, August 2012

MASTER OF SOCIAL WORK
2012

McMaster University
Hamilton, Ontario

TITLE: "Standing on Jello": Images and Experiences of "Alternative" Social Work

AUTHOR: Jennifer Dustin, B.A., B.S.W. (Thompson Rivers University)

SUPERVISOR: Dr. Chris Sinding

NUMBER OF PAGES: vi, 73

ABSTRACT

Grounded in postmodern and social constructionist theories, this research was designed to challenge 'mainstream' views of social work practice. Three social workers with extensive backgrounds in various social work roles were asked to submit individual arts-based representations of 'alternative' social work. The arts-based representations (a story, a tool box, and a medicine wheel) were shared in a focus group where the topics of mainstream and alternative social work were collectively explored. I present an analysis of the representations, offer a brief structural narrative analysis of how the participants talked about mainstream and alternative social work, and explore the dissonance surrounding the term 'alternative social work.'

The findings indicate that social workers who are interested in, or identify with alternative social work implement creative strategies to balance many, often conflicting, responsibilities and commitments. At the core of this study is a fundamental ideological tension in how social work is understood. The focus group revealed that what is commonly identified as 'alternative' social work, is judged by these research participants as 'good' social work. Rather than being a form of resistance to mainstream social work, alternative social work appears as a means of implementing participants' visions of effective, responsible and humane practice.

This study highlights how social workers struggle to represent themselves and their (desired) practice in today's political context. Images of 'good practice' offer insight into how social workers can and do respond to neoliberal pressures; these images and participants' reflections on them have potential to widen public and professional consciousness.

ACKNOWLDEGEMENTS

A sincere thank you to my thesis supervisor, Chris Sinding, for answering my many questions and encouraging me through the thesis process; the faculty of McMaster's School of Social Work for checking-in and cheering me on; and the generous social workers who participated in this study for their invaluable insight.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract iii

Acknowledgements iv

Introduction/Purpose 1

Positioning Myself 3

Tensions in Modernist and Postmodern Research Approaches 3

Negotiating Postmodern and Modernist Research Approaches 8

Literature Review 12

Neoliberal Realities 13

How is Social Work Perceived? Why does it matter? 17

How Does Social Work Reclaim its 'Image'? Competency Profile 21

"Alternative" Social Work: What's in a Name? 22

How Does Social Work Reclaim its 'Image'? The Language of Social Work 25

Summary 26

Methodology 27

Discourse Analysis 29

Narrative Analysis 31

Recruitment/Participants 33

Focus Group 34

Confidentiality 35

Member Checking/Follow-Up 36

Findings **38**
Arts-Based Representations of "Alternative" Social Work *39*

Structural Analysis *45*

Apprehension with "Alternative" Social Work *50*

Discussion **55**
Limitation *59*

Looking Forward *61*

References **64**

Appendix 1: *Living in the Grey* **73**

INTRODUCTION/PURPOSE

My text is flawed not when it is ambiguous or even contradictory, but only when it leaves you no room for stories of your own.

-Nancy Mairs, 1994, 74.

As quoted in Neilson, 2008, 97

Social work is actively being shaped by our current neoliberal climate. Social workers, social service agencies, and service users are all feeling the pressures of fitting social policies and requirements that continue to drift toward an economic-minded model. Federal and Provincial governments continue to be preoccupied with financial issues; policies underlining individual responsibility, short-term, project-based interventions grow, while resources for long-term, preventative, and advocacy-based projects dwindle. Social workers have the choice to follow the emerging neoliberal ideal of social work, or to find ways to work around or against this continuing trend. This research explores and celebrates social work in the margins; it is designed to challenge "mainstream" views of social work practice and research by drawing on arts-based research methods grounded in postmodern and social constructionist theories, with a focus on "alternative" social work.

The tension between "alternative" and "mainstream" social work is central to this research, which is not intended to discredit either of these points of view, but rather to make space for 'other' ways of knowing and being. Susan Driver

(2007) refers to Patti Lather to describe her goal in research; "research is undertaken as an interactive and participatory project that does not aim to pin down a definitive truth, but pushes for change and revision" (Driver, 2007, 50). This concept has influenced my vision for this research, in that I hope to draw attention to how we understand "mainstream" and "alternative" social work, with the aim to contribute to the construction of a more inclusive model of social work in the future.

POSITIONING MYSELF:

Tensions in Modernist and Postmodern Research Approaches

Given the subjective nature of research, particularly in postmodern research theory, I believe it is appropriate to begin with *my* assumptions and understandings about the construction of social work. Sharing how I have come to understand social work (and my role within it), I believe, sheds light on the purpose and intent of this research in a way that analysis and critique could not communicate had I withheld this content. Choosing to incorporate the researcher's professional and theoretical foundations through a narrative lens gives context and texture to the research which aligns with my own beliefs and aspirations about academic research, while complementing the goals of this particular research project.

Previous to my social work education, I had no experience with "social work", or more specifically, had not connected my life experiences to "social work"; I had no experience, no context, and no language for "social work". In retrospect, my experience was based in community and volunteer sectors where social work is well represented, however, I was unaware of this connection at the time. Drawing from over three years as a volunteer with a mentorship program, two years volunteering in a grade three French Immersion class, and a lifetime of benefiting from community groups and organizations very clearly created a foundation from which to ground "social work". Influences such as my undergraduate degree in English has also had a considerable contribution to my

construction of social work; I have a genuine interest in the critical analysis of language and meaning, in multiple truths, and in the value of storytelling. I have come to realize that community development, volunteerism, and informal interventions are at the heart of my understanding of "social work"; everyone benefits, including myself, when the community is supported.

Pursuing my social work education was an interesting and formative process for me, specifically when considering reactions to "social work". I remember the responses from friends and family falling into one of two camps: utter disillusionment with social work, or a deep concern about my ability to withstand the weight of the work. I quickly learned that there was much I was unaware of about the profession. Some former social work 'clients' were unafraid to share their ideas of social work, many holding stories of foster care, and of 'meddling' professionals; these people warned me of the dangerous impact of social work. Others shared genuine concern that my bleeding heart, my optimism, my compassion would be crushed in bearing witness to insurmountable hardship. And while I recognized the possibility of burn-out, and shared some worries of being overwhelmed, I refused the common extension of the argument that social workers, by necessity, had to cut themselves off emotionally and avoid connection with the job and subsequent burn-out. From these caricatures of social work I began to build my own view of social work, where social workers leave space for client involvement, and are encouraged to create genuine *and* professional relationships.

My vision of social work quickly came under fire both from continued reactions of friends and family, but also from the collective conceptualization of "social work" by my school peers. The large majority of my classmates entered social work with a shared commitment to helping, but they also defined social work by drastically different terms. *True* social work, I was quick to learn, the 'social work' the class was often talking about, was associated with professionalism, with learned and measurable skills (interviewing, assessment, diagnosis, etc.), with specific sorts of tasks (intake, case work, etc.), and with particular agencies (Ministry of Children and Family Development, Child and Youth Mental Health, Royal Inland Hospital, etc.). There seemed to be two ways to discuss social work: theory and practice. The practice based definition of social work dominated discussions, and rarely left room for emotion, feeling, and tacit knowledge, but these were central elements of why many of us had entered the field - and certainly the driving force behind my own association with social work. A clear hierarchy was reinforced in my academic experience, placing government related and heavily funded work at the top, and community and non-profit work far below: practice over theory.

In addition, a second hierarchy emerged. Clinical, non-profit, community, education, policy, faith-based, child protection, etc., factions of social work are all guided by the same principles (often defined by the Canadian Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics - http://www.casw-acts.ca/en/what-social-work/casw-code-ethics). Class discussions, however, frequently focused on

practical, step-by-step, 'what-ifs' of practice in child protection and hospital social work. These discussions, albeit unintentionally, cut 'other' ways of knowing, and 'other' ways of practice out and narrowed in on skill-based implications. The practical drive of social work programs - to educate and prepare social workers for practice - superseded the philosophical and theoretical groundings of the field.

Once in the field, the gaps between social work education and social work practice quickly became clear. Curiosity, discussion, debate, and research, which were each encouraged and celebrated in a classroom setting, was not necessarily encouraged in practice. Which is not to say practice and academics share the same set of expectations, however, how social work was understood was unexpectedly different from one another, and became increasingly concerning. In class discussions about social work's foundations were grounded in the "pursuit of social justice" and "respect for humanity" for example, however, practice often led social workers to be caught up in administrative work, seemingly to serve the agency's needs over the service user's. In my experience, the social work position was evaluated by fiscal rather than social and ethical measures, which raised questions about who was benefiting from the social work role in the agency. Questions regarding these concerns, which in the classroom would be understood as critical thinking, were often met with hostility and perceived as a threat to the agency's cultures and traditions. However, on occasion, a supervisor would engage in the discussion offering frank opinions about agency aspirations, sharing

his/her personal visions, and giving glimpses into the bureaucratic behind-the-scenes. Funding was typically cited as being the block between what the agency would like to do, and what the agency could reasonably offer.

These discussions revealed to me that practitioners desired more out of their positions and agencies than what was permitted or even believed possible. Through these interactions I began to understand that even supervisors and managers, who I once believed had the power to make the changes I (and they) envisioned, identified areas of concern but felt as powerless as I did. I began to appreciate the small acts, the everyday forms of resistance that often went on undetected by those with more perceived professional power. Informing service users about agency policy, bending eligibility requirements, and creatively shaping programs to fit grant applications, are examples of techniques that I, and others, have practiced. While continuing my education, I recognized these everyday acts in the research of Jane Aronson and colleagues (Aronson & Neysmith, 2006; Aronson & Smith, 2010), for example, which helped to contextualize these practice-based experiences in a larger setting. What I had identified as isolated actions in a single agency by a few practitioners was effectively a part of a larger system of resistance.

I became aware that social workers across the country and beyond shared my feelings of frustration and felt powerless to make change beyond our scope of practice. I became voraciously interested in how social workers were resisting neoliberal pressures and quickly learned that pushing-back took many forms, from

the small everyday actions, with which I am familiar, to large scale social action. Rejecting the neoliberal construction of social work – that social work must be 'measured' to count, that professionalization *is* legitimization - has strongly guided my vision of social work and subsequent practice. I now focus on reconciling the discrepancy between theory and practice in social work, and reaffirming the understanding that while theory can influence practice, practice must also influence theory.

Negotiating Postmodern and Modernist Research Approaches

Postmodernism is a good fit for my own research in 'alternative' social work as it, "seeks to deconstruct or tear apart surface appearances to reveal the internal hidden structure"; in this case, I hope to shed light on the reciprocal relationship between theory and practice that is often believed to be unilateral (Newman, 1997, 81). Born of a rejection of modernism, postmodernism does not adhere to a search for truth, and resists empirical measurements as the only way to build knowledge. Postmodernists believe that there are multiple truths, and as such the likelihood of generalizability is very limited and the drive for objectivity in research is futile. Generally, the use of language as a means to examine power is primary in this area of research, tacit knowledge is applied and valued on the same plane as scientifically derived "evidence" (albeit with some tensions), there is a heightened focus on process, and finally, postmodern research points to the drive of many researchers to resolve the tension between postmodern and

modernist grounded research.

I was surprised to learn that many of the authors who write about research grounded in postmodern theory argued for the reconciliation of modernist and postmodernist theories. My feelings about this seemingly oppositional relationship was strongly tied to practice experience, as I had associated much of my tension in practice with a modernist focus on "evidence" and "fact", which often got in the way of immeasurables like "relationship" and "success". Postmodernism, in my mind, was associated with freedom to incorporate non-traditional, "other" ways of knowing, including qualitative research. It is important to note - if only for myself - that research grounded in postmodern theory is not in opposition to evidence-based practice, nor does it mean that it must use qualitative research methods.

> The principal challenge to embracing an applied postmodern theory has been a mistaken belief that postmodernism presents an insurmountable problem of relativism: If realities are simply the result of shared language, then who is to say that one reality is better than another? Far from a problem, the need to negotiate the meaning of individual realities is the strength of a postmodern perspective (Ungar, 2004, 489).

While I understand this concept intellectually, it continues to be unresolved, to a small degree, on a feeling level. As a result, when I read arguments for the merger of modernist and postmodernist theories that offer a "both/and position avoiding either/or sterility" (Walker, 2001, 37) I am immediately defensive,

viewing this arrangement as a modernist appropriation of postmodern ideas.

Jan Fook (2002) raises the question, "how do we best approach the theorizing of our complex practice, when the choices seem framed in relatively rigid paradigmatic terms?" (80). My "rigid" views have been challenged by this question and her following arguments, particularly in the concept that, "much of our research is already practiced within an embedded culture of positivism" (80) - that the theoretical tension between modernism and postmodernism is not new, that it is necessarily "grey", and is yet another example of the tension within which I will work and must settle into.

The real question that has emerged is *why* researchers find it necessary to ease the tension between modernism/postmodernism, or "alternative" research in a neoliberal context. The rationale behind the "legitimization" of "other" research in our current neoliberal context is of interest. The legitimization of "other" research by fitting into already constrained neoliberal evidence-based parameters can be seen as a means of supporting the very structures that progressive/alternative/'other' social work aims to resist.

In my opinion, there is an argument for legitimization of "other" research as a celebration of the breadth of social work skill. Quite different from the need to legitimize research based on rigid requirements such as the "competencies" forwarded by the CCSWR, for example, using postmodern research theory as a means to challenge the construction of "evidence" and to highlight the many sources of evidence holds emancipatory power. Fook (2002) outlines the goals

behind her "inclusive approach": "to minimize the influence of pre-existing formal theory; to maximize the number of perspectives available; and to maximize the fit between the method for accessing the experience, with the practice experience itself; and where appropriate, to include the perspectives of the practitioners/researchers" (88). Fook (2002) very clearly proposes to resist the narrowing political views of social work toward a broad, bottom-up, responsive, and flexible conceptualization of social work research. From this perspective, the purpose of "legitimization" or reconciliation of postmodern and modernist theories is to expand research possibilities and make alternatives more visible, thereby creating space for marginalized voices - including that of "alternative" social work.

Postmodern theory has been a part of my academic career for many years stemming back to my undergraduate degree in English literature, it is central to my construction of social work, and is the foundation from which to base this research. It also continues, however, to be at the heart of many of my practice and academic based tensions. These tensions, I believe, are the key to many of my most meaningful learnings, and while postmodern theory often brings discomfort, it also opens my understanding to a multitude of possibilities in and out of social work research. The same can be said for this research; while there have been (and continue to be) tensions, puzzles, hiccups, snags, speed-bumps, and detours, it is in the process navigating the unforeseen that brings the deepest learning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Reclaiming the pubic discourse involves challenging that official language which reifies risk, reduces need to quantifiable outcomes and immutably categorizes the recipients of services. ... Language is at the heart of the dynamic interface between policy and practice, and social work as a profession should never cease to question, expose, challenge and reframe.

- Gregory & Holloway, 2005, 50-51

To provide context for this research and to establish how this project fits into current research, I have compiled a body of literature to highlight the intersection between neoliberalism and social work. Neoliberalism is identified, in this research, as a force that greatly shapes social work and social worker's roles in everyday practice. Furthermore, public attitudes and beliefs about social work, public media representations of social work, and the changing language of social work, are used as indicators of how social work is being shaped in public and in the field of social work. These indicators point to a need for social workers to regain agency over social work's "image"; examples of how to do so, using the proposed Competency Profile of the CCSWR and a call to expand the boundaries of "social work", are explored. This exploratory research aims to join-in with the many social workers who engage "alternative" forms of social work.

Neoliberal Realities

Economic ideals associated with neoliberalism including open markets, individualization, and increasing influence of business on social policies are not new concepts, the discussion of neoliberalism and social work is commonly recognized to have escalated relatively recently in the early 1980's during the Reagan/Thatcher/Mulroney years. To social work, this period is identified through increased attention to economics, welfare reform, and ushering in a new era of globalization through the introduction of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). The clawing back of social services in this era is well documented in many facets of social work including, social policy (Mahon, 2008 and; McKeen, 2006), care (Aronson & Neysmith, 2010; Gregory & Holloway, 2005), First Nations issues (Abele & Graham, 2011), the nonprofit sector (Aronson & Smith, 2010; Baines, 2010; Mosley, 2010), and social work, itself, as a profession (Brodie, 1999; Carey & Foster, 2011; Walter, 2003). In each of these areas, authors suggest that social work is under increasing pressure to adapt to the privatization, individualization, and decentralization characteristic of this neoliberal era (Brodie, 1999).

In current practice, neoliberal trends continue to change the face of social work. In a 2005 study, "The Caring Community: Accounting for the Impacts of Provincial Government Changes", the Community Council outline the "specific impacts on community services" (23). The "Caring Communities" report identifies that nonprofit organizations, in addition to and as a result of funding

cuts, have experienced difficulties with long term planning, increasing stress on staff and a corresponding increase in turn-over rates, which results in "downsizing [of] staff in response to actual or expected funding cuts" (23-23), for example. Furthermore, the "Caring Communities" document highlights the impact of provincial cuts on clients, which subsequently reshapes client need; more clients emerge seeking a widening scope of services, nonprofits struggle to keep up, and in many cases, are unable to adapt (24). While "The Caring Community" document is a regional report focused around Victoria, B.C., the findings are consistent with my experience in Kamloops, B.C., and with the findings of similar research in Ontario (Aronson & Smith, 2010; Baines, 2010; Mosley, 2010; Scott, 2003). It is reasonable, I believe, to assume many of the findings from this report are consistent throughout the country.

In considering how individual social workers are affected, Nigel Parton (2008) argues that neoliberal requirements have lead to rapidly changing practice requirements and increasing demands; "time and space have become so condensed that the opportunity for using 'theories for practice' seems minimal (264). Aronson & Smith (2010) explore neoliberalism as it affects middle management often placing managers in a precarious position between directors/funders and staff/clients. Aronson & Smith (2010) characterize the neoliberal state as, "reducing citizenship entitlements, narrowing the redistributive capacity of the state, and de-politicizing the public realm" (Clarke & Newman, 1997; Brodie, 1999; Clarke 2004; Tsui & Cheung, 2004; Newman, 2007 all as

referenced in Aronson & Smith, 2010, 531). Baines (2010) assesses neoliberalism on an agency level, as it relates to social unionism. Neoliberalism is conceptualized as a threat to "voluntary spirit"; "nonprofit social services can be stripped of their collectivist content and delivered in bureaucratic, standardized ways that demobilize and disempower those who provide services as well as those who receive them" (Baines, 2004; Dominelli & Hoogvelt, 1996; Fabricant & Burghardt, 1992, referenced in Baines, 2010, 11).

As it relates to research, neoliberalism has heightened the demand for firm results and evidence-base practice; many agencies have recognized a shift toward increasingly narrow research mandates and quantitative reports, specifically regarding funding and project efficiencies (Scott, 2003; Community Council, 2005). Many researchers argue that postmodern and qualitative research is undervalued in our current neoliberal context (Applegate, 2000; Fook, 2002; Gregory & Holloway, 2005; Lawler & Bilson, 2004; Parton, 2008; Scott, 1990; Walker, 2001). Furthermore, Parton (2008) finds that most of social work practice is influenced by this neoliberal shift;

> Increasingly, it seems that the key focus of activity of social work and social care agencies is concerned with the gathering, sharing and monitoring of information about the individuals with whom they come into direct and indirect contact, together with accounting for their own decisions and interventions, and those of the other professionals and agencies with whom they work (254).

Parton highlights the shift from "social" to "informational" as a risk to the nature of social work (254); this shift directly informs how "evidence" is understood, which greatly influences expectations of legitimized social work research. This dynamic is ever-present in social work practice, often making it difficult to balance the needs of the service user, the agency, and the worker.

Evidence-Based Practice is one example of neoliberal standards of social work practice. EBP is not inherently damaging, as "the aim of EBP is to develop practice so that the most convincing information is used fully to inform the delivery of social work interventions for the most positive outcomes, from the perspectives both of service deliverer and user" (57). However, Lawler & Bilson (2004) offer an important critique of evidence-based practice EBP based on the effects of the restrictive definition of "evidence" and "evidence-based practice" on the culture of social work. When the knowledge given credibility in EBP is measured against tacit knowledge, as forms of "evidence", it has a direct impact on social work identity by devaluing practice based wisdom, while legitimizing particular kinds of (typically quantitative) "evidence" as created by EBP. Social workers have expressed how neoliberal frameworks shape everyday practice, which is strongly supported by research as presented above. Unfortunately, what we are learning is that the neoliberal shaping of social work is having detrimental effects on social workers, social service agencies, and service users.

How is Social Work Perceived? Why Does it Matter?

Examining language, public knowledge and attitudes about social work, and identifying public media representations of social work, we can gain a general understanding of how social work is publically understood. Gregory & Holloway (2005) follow neoliberal trends in social work in the United Kingdom from the 1950's to the early 2000's through the language of social work. Three eras are identified as "moral enterprise", "therapeutic enterprise", and "managerial enterprise" (37). Language, narrative, and discourse are evaluated to reveal a shift in language from "moral support" and "guidance", through a focus on "intervention" in "clinical" frameworks, to language of "risk" and "management" in the present day (40-49). Gregory & Holloway (2005) describe a period of "instability and crisis" in the UK parallel with the onset of neoliberalism; this period is, "reflected in the language used to portray the worker" (44);

> Social workers are defined by the task, both in terms of its demands and agency expectations. ... social work finds itself in a paradoxical situation in which an ever-increasing demand for its services is coupled with unprecedented criticism because of its failure to fulfill society's expectations (Butrym, 1976, quoted in Gregory & Holloway, 2005, 45).

As a socially constructed activity social work is as heavily influenced by the language that is used to describe it, as it is by the language it adopts. There are mutual goals between neoliberalism and social work including accountability and efficacy, for example. However, these qualities are measured in strictly financial

terms in a neoliberal context, whereas social work must take additional measures into account when measuring accountability, such as social and emotional considerations. Gregory & Holloway (2005) state that, "arguably, for social workers to espouse the language of citizenship and advocacy, when in fact engaged in controlling, rationing activities, is a misuse of language of Orwellian proportions" (49). Neoliberalism continues to shape social work, and Gregory & Holloway (2005) urge that a rediscovery of language and discourse is essential to understand how social work is, "perceived, undertaken, and received" (50).

Examining the public's attitudes and beliefs about social work, LeCroy & Stinson (2004) used a randomized telephone number list to survey 386 respondents. Findings indicate that common stereotypes about social workers present in the 1950's remained in the 2000's, including filling the "child protector" role, and being a "source of comfort for in times of need" (172). However, LeCroy & Stinson (2004) found a troubling developing stereotype that gives insight into the public's perception of social workers' power; 35% of the respondents agreed that, "social workers have the right to take children from parents", which was up from only 19.6% in a 1978 study (172). LeCroy & Stinson (2004) link these findings to "a long media history of stereotypically depicting social workers in roles that involve child protective functions" (172). The authors find while the results indicate a "generally favorable attitude toward social workers", they also point to gaps in public knowledge about social worker's roles and functions. Furthermore, "some data suggest that the public does not

necessarily share the same level of esteem for social work that the profession would hold for itself, nor does the public fully recognize all of the modern range of social work roles and activities" (173). LeCroy and Stinson's (2004) article, however, does not give insight, outside of speculation, into what social workers know about social work roles and responsibilities outside of their own positions.

Drawing from social constructionist theory, there is a body of work that considers how "social work" is represented in public media. Two articles by Freeman and Valentine draw from the same pool of films, however, have different points of focus. In the earlier article, Valentine & Freeman (2002) examine how "child welfare", "causes" for social work intervention, children, and social work "activities" are represented, and the occurrence of "empowerment-based" practice in film. In the 2004 article, Freeman & Valentine look at social work representations as they reflect gender, race, and socioeconomic status. In both articles, Freeman and Valentine use discourse analysis and deconstruction, and find that there are generally narrow representations of social workers:

> Social workers are mostly women, mostly white, middle-class, heterosexual; they mostly work in child welfare, are likely to be incompetent, have a tendency to engage in sexual relationships with clients, mostly work with people living in poverty, and mostly function to maintain the status quo (Freeman and Valentine, 2004, 159).

"Seeing ourselves as other see us" has spurred Freeman and Valentine to call for direct social work involvement in shaping media representations; social workers

are urged to, "work toward greater clarity among themselves about exactly who we are, what we do, and why and how we do it" (Freeman & Valentine, 2004, 161). Freeman & Valentine (2004), Gibelman (2000), and Valentine & Freeman (2002) find that social work has a narrow public perception, leading to an overall concern with current social work images in media.

Contrary to LeCroy and Stinson's (2004) somewhat optimistic view of social work, Gross (2007) argues, that "unpacking social work's low self-image and even lower social prestige reveals multiple layers of assumptions both within and outside the discipline that coalesce to construct a profession at odds with itself" (5). Gross' (2007) two part article draws from the discipline of business and advertisement somewhat humorously in the first section as a tool to frame social work. Gross (2007) lists fictitious catch phrases for social work, for example, "Social Work: A little dab'll do ya" and "Social Work: Can you hear me *now*?"(12). Gross (2007) argues that this type of social communication, which he calls 'signs', creates a foundation for discourse, and that these signs shape public discourse and subsequently public perception (7-8). Referencing a survey from *Social Work Today,* Gross (2007) highlights that in 1994, 91.5% of the respondents answered "Yes" when asked, "Do you believe the image of social work needs repair?" (10). Gross (2007) believes that the image of social work is in disrepair, and that "perhaps time as arrived for social work to perform as a product" (9). The commodity-based representations reveal a sarcastic and dark vision of social work; "advertising seems a fitting arena because social work

exists as a consumer good within the service economy"(8). After considerable cynicism, Gross (2007) concludes with a number of recommendations for the profession of social work to, "take hold of its own construction" (18). Given current neoliberal contexts and the public's narrow perception of social work, there is a strong argument for the rehabilitation of the 'image' of social work (Gibelman, 2000; Gross, 2007; Freeman & Valentine, 2004; Gross, 2007; Hodge, 2004; King & Ross, 2004; LeCroy & Stinson, 2004; Valentine & Freeman, 2002).

How Does Social Work Reclaim its 'Image'? Competency Profile

One strategy to address social work's image to the public, to our funders, to academics, to fellow professionals, and to ourselves, has been forwarded by the Canadian Council of Social Work Regulators (CCSWR). The CCSWR's proposed Social Work Competency Profile consists of over 250 entry level social work competencies in ten competency blocks: Assessment, Intervention Planning, Direct Service Delivery, Indirect Service Delivery, Evaluation, Supervision, Management, Ethics and Values, Community Building, and Professional Development and Contribution to the Field. Each block is comprised of several skill and knowledge informed competencies that entry-level social workers should have, or work toward, in effective social work practice. The Competency Profile "is expected to clarify standards of social work practice across the country and, thereby, facilitate the monitoring of expectations and performance in diverse fields of social work practice" (CCSWR, 2010).

Good intentions aside, the Competency Profile model has come under significant criticism. The "narrow and mechanistic definition of 'competent' social work practice", is of primary concern (Aronson & Sammon, 2010). The CCSWR's competency profile displays an image of a profession preoccupied with economic definitions of efficiency, accountability, evidence, and value. There is little doubt to any social worker, on either side of the competency profile debate, that social work has great value in Canadian and global society, and many will agree that the image of social work is in need of some attention. A point of contention, however, seems to be around how the profession of social work communicates this value in a way that is both authentic to the field and understood by the funders, authorities, regulators, and the public. The competency model proposed by the CCSWR hyper-compartmentalizes social work toward an auditable profession (Munroe, 2004); "in the current political climate of increasing central control and managerialism, it may increasingly lead to a prescriptive, one-size fits all approach to interventions with a consequence for individual users of services" (Lawler & Bilson, 2004, 65).

"Alternative" Social Work: What's in a Name?

Haynes & White (1999) and Walter (2003) give insight into continuing debates from within the field of social work about the definitions and priorities of the discipline/ profession, and especially what counts as 'mainstream' and 'alternatives'. Haynes & White (1999) address the tension between "altruism"

and "social justice" in social work, while Walter (2003) explores the long existing divide between "art" and "science" in social work. These issues may appear stale and idealistic, however, these authors encourage discussion about the construction and conceptualization of "social work", and confirm that even from within the profession, there is disagreement about 'real' social work and the language used to define it.

How these debates are conceptualized often hinges on discourse; how an issue is being defined and discussed changes how it is understood. "Progressive", "resistant", "radical", and "deviant" social work are all explored with varying aims and conclusions, but all tethered to the central concept that there *is* a "fundamental", "mainstream" or "traditional" social work from which to stray (Barber, 1996; Carey & Foster, 2011; Healy, 2000; Westhues, 2005). Karen Healy (2000) uses the terms "activist"/"orthodox" social work; "activist" approaches to social work, she argues, are rooted in activism, which is a contributing source to critical social work (21). Healy (2000) continues on to identify three main characteristics of "activist" social work:

- The critique of the individualist focus of orthodox social work;
- Emphasizing the inequities that underlie the worker-client relationship;
- The critique of professionalism. (22)

The boundaries and definitions of social work continue to be debated. Westhues (2005) writes an overview account of the "progressive" vs. "professional"

discussion in Canadian social work; this perceived dichotomy includes debates over social work education, training, policy, practice standards, etc. Extending beyond Canadian social work, Fargion (2008) confirms the presence of many of the same debates as reported by social workers in Italy; "Italian social workers may be facing a difficult choice: it might endorse a more traditional view of the profession, perhaps more legitimized, but distant from vital aspects of social work, and likely to reproduce feelings of inadequacy among professionals" (216). Tensions between "individual" and "social" aspects of social work, "scientific" and "humanist" views, and "practice-based" or "academic-based" theory as appropriate for social work, were revealed in Fargion's (2008) study (207). As evidenced by many of the readings as well as the ongoing discussion regarding the CCSWR's Competency Profile, I presume that Canadian social workers echo several of these tensions.

Many academics reject the notion of social work's dichotomous nature, and argue for a merger of oppositional standpoints - an understanding based on the ties between the two extremes. Haynes & White (1999) offer a compelling manifesto of sorts on the reconciliation of what they conceive as the two, often oppositional, camps of social work identity - "altruism" and "social justice" (1). Walter (2003) further unsettles the notion of dichotomies in the understanding of professional social work by bringing attention to the "art" vs. "science" debate in social work. "As a profession", Walter (2003) argues, "social work seems to sit on the fence, on what appears only a thin and uncomfortable borderline between

existing categories such as science and art. ... it is not a borderline so much as a borderland in which social work and much of social life happens" (321).

How Does Social Work Reclaim its 'Image'? The Language of Social Work

In "Language and the Shaping of Social Work", Gregory & Holloway (2005) draw on social constructionism to examine how language, narrative and discourse have shaped social work in the UK from the 1950's through to the early 2000's. The authors contend that it is through language that people develop an understanding of the environment and how they relate to it; "the way we talk about our practice is actually *part of our practice*" (Hawkins et al., 2001, quoted in Gregory & Holloway, 2005, 38). By identifying discourse and how it is used to shape understanding, it follows that one can also use discourse to "(re)create the world" (Gregory & Holloway, 2005, 39).

In highlighting the interplay between discourse and subject (in this case, the social worker), Gregory & Holloway (2005) create space for the possibility of having agency over the representation and conceptualization of "social work" on individual and cultural levels - a concept that is pivotal in understanding the social construction of "social work". Gregory & Holloway (2005) indicate that social workers, as well as the field of social work, are shaped by the language used to define it - from outside and from within the profession. In this way, Gregory & Holloway (2005) support the call for social workers to affirm their agency over their/our public image. In a small way, this research, by gathering representations

of alternative social work, affirms this potential, while also securing a space to explore and expand the "borderlands" of social work (Walter, 2003).

Summary

Social work is under increasing pressure to adapt to the privatization, individualization, and decentralization characteristics of this neoliberal era (Brodie, 1999). Neoliberal pressures, born of economically minded theory, continue to shape how social work is perceived by funders, regulators and the profession itself. In addition, popular media proves to have a largely myopic and stagnant view of social work as represented in film and television (Freeman & Valentine, 2004; Gibelman, 2000; Valentine & Freeman, 2002). Combined, these forces have resulted in a troubling public image of social work that has lead to a call for the profession to take a greater role in asserting its identity and public image. *How* this is to be accomplished is widely contested, and divided along lines of theory, method, art/science, practice/theory, individual/social, etc.

Exploring social work in the margins, this research attempts to align with the body of research and literature that aims to repair these divides; a fluid space between often imagined opposites. A postmodern understanding holds great promise for this particular research in that it allows for a space to explore beyond the search for a singular definition of social work. Adding texture to the discussion of social work moves toward a more authentic dialogue that reaches beyond looming "competency-based" boundaries.

METHODOLOGY

The historical separation between art and science is muddled in this research - arts-based methodologies fuse art and research through the mutual goal of uncovering/sharing knowledge. Social work's perpetual identity crisis has yet to be satisfied through traditional academic research, and it is likely that alternative research methods hold significant contribution in the resolution/conceptualization of this debate (Walter, 2003, 317). Arts-based methodologies offer opportunities to explore the "hard-to-put-in-words" (Weber, 2008, 44), which may be of particular use considering the many contested reincarnations of "social work". Arts-based methodologies hold a certain economy of language; the old adage "a picture is worth a thousand words" for example, draws attention to how art can evoke multiple messages, stories, and can spur reflective processes often without formal language (Weber, 2008, 45). However, "it is in the paying attention, the looking and the taking note of what we see that makes images especially important to art, scholarship, and research" (Weber, 2008, 42). Weber (2008) makes a strong claim for images in research, however these benefits are also shared with a wider range of art forms (sculpture, photography, creative writing, performance, etc). In the same way institutional ethnography uses text as an opening to inquiry, arts-based research uses artistic representations and processes to explore and investigate.

Christopher Walmsley (2004) draws on the concept of "social representations" in his article, "*Social Representations and the Study of*

Professional Practice". Walmsley (2004) contends representations are not cookie-cutter repetitions of reality; they are viewed as "social creations and are, therefore, seen as a part of social reality" (42). Further, Walmsley (2004) argues that representations, "reflect a commonsense understanding of the social world ... they reflect the practical, everyday knowledge" (42). The "everyday knowledge" is important; asking social workers to use arts-based representations to answer the question, "what does 'alternative' social work look and feel like?" gets beyond the researcher's voice, and gathers information beyond the language and voice of "mainstream" research.

Arts-based representations tightly fit this research in theory, function and purpose. Deeply compatible with social constructionism, using representations in research allows for participants to aid in the construction of knowledge. While each representation demonstrates an individual's reality, the collection contributes to a shared reality. Walmsley (2004) summarizes four main functions of representations: knowledge, identity, guidance, and justificatory (44). Representations in this particular research fill the knowledge function to explore "alternative" social work, the knowledge function, "enables reality to be understood and explained" (44). Walmsley (2004) continues on to discuss the processes through which representations are generated, one of which, "objectification" describes what was asked of the participants; "[turning] an abstract idea into something almost concrete and thereby [transferring] something in the mind's eye to something existing in the physical world" (Moscovici, 1984,

29, referenced in Walmsley, 2004, 44). Susan Finley (2008) defines arts-based research as, "'cultural action' to resist the tides of neoconservatism in service of liberation" (75), thereby highlighting the critical potential of arts-based research. From my perspective, arts-based research challenges "traditional" concepts of research, in the same way "alternative" social work challenges the neoliberal notion of "mainstream" social work.

Encouraging participants to discuss their representations, and through them, their vision of "alternative" social work, set the stage for the discussion in a way that in the same time frame, simply asking questions could not have achieved. Arts-based research, with a focus on discourse analysis and narrative analysis, offers a strong platform from which to navigate the varied data. Discourse analysis, as a method of arts-based research, takes into account that all "representations" transmit messages, and narrative analysis extends this tenant to consider the social context of the narrator. Arts-based research and discourse/narrative analysis are a strong pairing with postmodernist and social constructionist theories as they allow for multiple voices, and respect all experiences, and in this case "representations", as truth.

Discourse Analysis

"Discourses are frameworks for making meanings" (Rose, 2012, 139); the term 'discourse' refers to, "a particular knowledge about the world which shapes how the world is understood and how things are done in it" (Rose, 2012, 190).

Discourse analysis is a broad methodological approach that ranges from Michel Foucault's analysis of power in discourse, micro-linguistic analysis, political and institutional analysis, to Critical Discourse Analysis. Generally, discourse analysis includes an examination of the meanings and contextual implications of the text, however, in arts-based methodology, text is extended to images, video, music, etc.. In most cases, the specific step-by-step details of *how* discourse analysis is taken-up in a study is unclear, however, Gillian Rose (2012), in the third edition of *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Research with Visual Materials*, outlines seven strategies for using discourse analysis:

- looking at your sources with fresh eyes;
- immersing yourself in your sources;
- identifying key themes in your sources;
- examining their effects of truth;
- paying attention to their complexity and contradictions;
- looking for the invisible as well as the visible;
- paying attention to details (220).

While this list is helpful to the novice researcher by providing more concrete guidance, in many ways discourse analysis shares a certain "greyness" with visual methodologies in that there are guidelines, but specific 'how-to's are not necessary and not particularly helpful given the wide range of potential data formats. This list does, however, provide an entry point into the tensions of using arts-based research in a neoliberal context preoccupied with "evidence-based"

research. Rose's (2012) list appears to be an attempt to comply with positivist notions of "objectivity" and "truth", while also maintaining a focus on the multiple, changing, and (in)visible meanings of discourse.

Narrative Analysis

Catherine Kohler Riessman's (2008) *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences*, has guided the analysis of the focus group transcript. While, perhaps not the most common interpretation of "narrative", the focus group fits somewhere in the narrative continuum, which, as Riessman (2008) reminds us, ranges from a "discrete unit of discourse, an extended answer by a research participant", to "an entire life story, woven from threads of interviews, observations, and documents" (5). Narrative analysis takes aim at, "intention and language – how and why incidents are storied, not simply the content to which language refers" (11). Here, discourse analysis and narrative analysis overlap in the examination of what is said, how it is communicated, to whom, and why. Narrative analysis, however, takes into account the narrator's social context to a further degree than discourse analysis.

Riessman (2008) outlines both thematic and structural narrative analysis as potential methods of narrative analysis. Riessman (2008) argues that thematic analysis is likely, "the most common method of narrative analysis, and, arguably the most straightforward" (53). Thematic analysis identifies recurring themes in the narrative, and examines patterns and connections that represent the data. In

this research, thematic analysis will help to explore the participants' representations how they relate to "alternative"/"mainstream" social work. Riessman (2008) argues that structural analysis, "adds insight beyond what can be learned from referential meanings alone" (77). Riessman (2008) draws from two examples of structural narrative analysis; William Labov and Joshua Waletzky's traditional analytic style, which she describes as the touchstone of structural analysis, and James Gee's attention to the actual *saying* of the words and the *telling* of the story (81-104). This research will draw on both of these styles of narrative analysis to examine the focus group transcripts.

The transcripts were first scanned for themes; recurring themes, and those that garnered heightened attention, or prolonged time were identified as central themes. Attention was then turned to how the themes were understood and discussed. Points of agreement and disagreement were also noted to identify commonalities between participants, and cohesion within the group. If a central theme was largely contested amongst the participants, the theme was re-evaluated. Structural analysis required a much closer look; how topics were discussed, and why were considered, paying specific attention to central themes. For the purposes of this project, a select few points of analysis were included in the report, however there are many other opportunities for analysis in the focus group transcripts.

Recruitment/Participants:

Social workers, as defined by holding either a Bachelor, Masters, or Doctoral degree in Social Work, who self-identified as interested in "alternative" social work were sought out to participate in this research. Registration with a professional social work regulatory body was not a requirement in order to accommodate social workers who may not be currently working in social work fields, social workers from other provinces (registration is not a requirement in all provinces), and/or those who chose not to register.

I deliberately did not offer a precise definition of alternative social work in recruitment documents. Rather, I wrote this:

> "Alternative" social work is loosely described in this research as social work that is other than "mainstream" social work; this could be understood based on social work role, skill, client base, theory, agency, perspective, etc. (Letter of Information)

The purpose of the research itself was to identify practitioner's understanding of "alternative"/"mainstream" social work for themselves, therefore, a fixed definition of "alternative" social work would likely have shaped how participants defined the concept. Furthermore, how practitioners were to represent their vision of "alternative" social work was minimally restricted. I encouraged submissions of image, video, music, etc., as examples of possible mediums, however, participants were told to submit in whatever form appealed most to them. The decision to exclude original art was primarily to prevent the potential critique and

discussion of original art that may have created dynamics that distracted from the research purpose.

Using the snowball method of recruitment, emails were distributed to McMaster Social Work faculty who were asked to forward the email on to practitioners in the community who may be interested in participating, or who know of someone who may be interested. The recruitment email asked all potential participants to respond directly to the primary researcher, not the referring party, in hopes of reducing the possibility of coercion between participants and potential participants. Recruitment continued in this fashion until a desirable number of participants were reached.

A total of six participants responded to the recruitment email. Only three were able to attend the focus group due to scheduling conflicts. Each participant had a different area of practice (mental health, social work research, and child protection), each having more than 20 years of social work experience.

Focus Group:

Participants were asked to attend a focus group to discuss the representations in the context of "alternative" social work. A focus group was selected as means to collectively analyze the research data. While an in depth analysis of the representations from my point of view - the researcher's point of view - may have been more efficient, and certainly more direct, facilitating discussion around what "alternative" social work means for the participants, was

very much at the root of this methodological choice. Giving space for practitioners to share and discuss thoughts around mainstream/alternative social work adds texture to the research in a way that a singular analyst could not offer.

I opened the group by asking each participant to discuss their "representation" of "alternative" social work. The focus group was loosely based on a focus group discussion guide, however, the discussion was participant driven, requiring only intermittent prompts and clarification by the researcher. After the discussion, the participants were asked to fill out a brief "Post-Focus Group Questionnaire" used to add some context to the members of the focus group. The focus group was digitally recorded and notes were also hand written during the group to draw out further points of discussion. I transcribed the recording within two days of the focus group.

Confidentiality:

Confidentially was addressed in the letter of information and in the focus group, specifically that it could not be guaranteed, as confidentially relied on the participants beyond the scope of the research setting. Participants were cautioned to consider the possibility of being identified through the comments and stories they may contribute to the research. The "Post Focus Group Questionnaire", asked participants to select a pseudonym to be used in research or chose to be referred to by their first names only.

The research was designed in such a way to respect the confidentiality of the

participants to the extent possible, however the research also gave participants the opportunity to be identified by their real names if they explicitly chose this. The option for participants to use their first names was offered for reasons including a desire to share their point of view about "alternative" social work (which can be a point of pride), to demonstrate their involvement in social work research, and to be personally associated with this, and future research. The audio and transcribed data from the focus group and the participant's representations were handled in confidence, stored on a password protected laptop and backed-up on a password protected flash drive.

Member Checking/Follow-Up:

A form of member checking was incorporated after the focus group, not as a means to corroborate the 'truth' of the research, but rather to offer a designated time to raise any additional points that participants may not have had the opportunity to share during the focus group/interview, and/or to share any reflections on "alternative" social work that may have discovered after the focus group/interview. This was also the appropriate time for the participants to reflect on the process of the research. An email was sent one week after the focus group thanking the participants for their participation, and asking if there was any additional information they would like to be considered in the research. None of the participants reported having any questions, concerns, or additional comments about the research after the initial follow-up email.

A second email was sent one month after the focus group asking participants for the final time if they there was any feed back or additional content to be added to the research, in addition, participants were invited to attend my MSW oral examination. At the time of writing this report, two participants responded that they were unable to attend due to work requirements, and one participant had not yet responded. The participants who responded, however, were both interested in receiving a copy of the research findings, which will be distributed after the oral defense process.

Also included in the second email was a poem I had written after the transcription of the focus group. The poem, "Living in the Grey" (Appendix 1), includes images and metaphors used in the focus group to discuss "mainstream" and "alternative" social work, and was included as a "thank you" to the participants. The two participants who responded expressed appreciation for the poem, and one participant asked to use the poem in practice with coworkers who may also be struggling to "live in the grey". Genuinely thanking participants, and offering the opportunity to provide additional comments and ask question about the process is an important quality of this research and supports my belief that the participants are active creators of knowledge in this project.

FINDINGS:

Similar to Catherine Kohler Riessman's (2008) work, I have combined thematic and structural analysis in this project, aiming to identify and analyze specific themes, and compare how they are taken-up differently by the participants (91). The three arts-based representations will be examined, how the participants talk about "mainstream and "alternative" social work will be analyzed, as will an exploration of dissonance with the term "alternative" social work. In many ways this research was designed to contrast alternative to mainstream social work. While there is considerable tension with this artificial boundary, the line was helpful in honing in on some specifics of the discussion. While the topic of "alternative" social work was somewhat difficult to concretize, the subject of "mainstream" social work proved easier to pin down. To set the scene, and to find an entry point into "alternative" social work, an exploration of "mainstream" social work will open this analysis.

To begin the focus group, what we were *not* formally addressing in the focus group, the question, "what do we consider "mainstream" social work?" was explored. It was agreed early on that agencies like Children's Aid Society and hospitals represented "mainstream" social work; similarly, administration and much research were identified as largely mainstream activities. It was also discussed, however, that any social work role could be done in a "mainstream" way. Further exploration brought out visual descriptions; one participants offered, "buildings and offices and structures and all those images of ties and suits

and dresses and high heals and earrings". These images led to the discussion of "mainstream" social work as being the voice of power, frequently stifling other ways of knowing and practicing. Descriptors like custodial, uncreative, impersonal, routine were used. A lack of diversity was highlighted as a "mainstream" quality; hierarchical and dominant, tending to exclude 'others'. The group described a prescriptive, inflexible "mainstream" social work, developed and imposed from the outside-in. It was against this backdrop, that "alternative" social work was explored.

Arts-Based Representations of "Alternative" Social Work:

As an entry point into the discussion of "alternative" social work, participants were asked to share their arts-based representations of "alternative" social work with the group. Each participant spent a few minutes explaining her or his representation, giving insight into their individual view of "alternative" social work. Three fundamentally different representations and points of view provide a baseline for the focus group, and will be explored below.

The first representation shared with the group was a story – an academic fairytale. Jill explains that each participant in her study is represented as a character in the story. Using the metaphor of a Kingdom, Jill prompts people to, "think about a mainstream agency in a very different way". Imagination is a central part of storytelling, and an important component of Jill's vision of "alternative" social work. The representation of "alternative" social work as a

story brings attention to how we think about social work and particular roles within it. Where "mainstream" social work is, "rooted in sickness often instead of health and in fear instead of hope", Jill, through a storytelling lens, continually endorses a "hope filled" social work.

A focus on story also draws attention to the process of writing. Jill speaks of the power behind writing – who is writing whose story. As it appears in social work practice, writing often comes in the form of reporting, court documents, charts, research, and case notes. These forms of writing displace the service user as the author of his/her own story, and put the power in the hands of the professionals. Jill imagines writing in social work practice differently, as a collaborative process. Jill speaks of sharing the power of writing, and resisting the objective nature of writing in social work practice. "For me, [alternative social work] is to make sure we write ourselves into the story not as a neutral force but as a person with specific ideas and thoughts that are going to influence the direction of whatever's happening". Part of the power of storytelling, in this context, is the understanding that all people have the ability to write their own stories, and to contribute to others. Jill's representation of "alternative" social work starkly contrasts the group's expression of "mainstream" in that a story implies the necessity of imagination and hope as opposed to the sterile and formulaic checks-and-balances of "mainstream" social work. Furthermore, Jill implicates herself and service users as characters within the story that actively

influence the process, which is again, much different than "mainstream" social work, where social workers and the clients are acted upon.

In seeming contrast to the hopes and dream filled story representation of "alternative" social work, another participant offered a tool kit. This physical offering includes a blue handled hammer, a red screw driver, a pair of pliers, a wrench, a hand saw, and an assortment of nuts and bolts, all tucked inside a black plastic tool box. Todd adheres somewhat literally to this representation in his practice; "You need to measure things in certain ways, you need to hammer some things sometimes…and pry things up sometimes." The tool kit metaphor is used in many ways in practice; to support service users by creating new opportunities or fixing old ones, the system can be slowed-down or sped-up, and occasionally the tool kit is used to protect the social worker, perhaps by building a barrier or helping to avoid one. Todd speaks of a skill-based expression of "alternative" social work that requires a certain mastery to do successfully. Todd explains that he would have preferred to bring a "foundation" as a representation of "alternative" social work, however he was unable to find a suitable offering. Instead, Todd clarifies, "the tool kit was in fact used to build the foundation, and the foundation was used to move forward." These are central parts of this metaphor that create, "a credible presentation" and allow Todd to engage in his vision of "alternative" social work.

At one level, Todd speaks of a very practical, skill-based model of "alternative" social work; things are built, fixed, constructed, measured and

managed. However, the metaphor of the tool kit is incomplete without the practitioner. It is clear throughout the focus group that simple, basic tools and skills are not what he refers to, and do not reflect his vision of "alternative" social work. Rather, Todd's tool kit is stocked with abstract tools, like "learning to live in the grey" and "standing on jello"; "it's really an experiential thing". Navigating the "grey" of social work requires skill, and knowing how and when to use the tools available is paramount.

Todd's tool kit initially implies that things are to be fixed, that our broken system requires repair. However, beyond this, Todd urges the importance of creativity and a desire to rebuild. Knowledge and creativity are imperative to Todd's vision of "alternative" social work. How the social worker uses the tools available is more important than what resources are available. Todd cautions against literal and uncreative implications of this tool kit representation and links those who, "don't step off the foundation" of formal social work education with the dangers of mainstream social work. The creative use of knowledge and skill in social work practice transforms the experience from an outside-in, to inside-out.

The third, and final representation shared in the focus group was a medicine wheel. Sam shared this visual representation, verbally. Which is to say that the other members of the focus group were not shown a picture of a medicine wheel – Sam spoke about a medicine wheel as his representation of "alternative" social work. In some ways, having the participants recall an image of a medicine

wheel for themselves speaks to Sam's understanding of "alternative" social work as simultaneously true to himself while centering indigenous knowledge. Sam explains, the medicine wheel is, "grounding in terms of what's important…for grounding and settling indigenous knowledge". Sam speaks of "mainstream" social work as prescriptive, as having a lack of diversity, leaving 'other' ways of knowing and practicing off the table. Sam shares experiences of working to include indigenous ways of knowing and practicing into "mainstream" social work, for example, creating a journal honouring aboriginal community-based HIV researcher. Rather than conforming to a "vertically ordered" system that looks down on 'other' ways of research, Sam demonstrates in his example how he was able to make an alternative space for indigenous research.

The medicine wheel represents a different way of doing social work, distinct from the "mainstream". It represents a model that coexists and is valued along with the mainstream system. The struggle in this vision of "alternative" social work is to create and maintain space for 'other' ways of practicing - certainly alternative to the constraining version of "mainstream" social work the group had previously discussed, especially in regards to the lack of diversity the group had attributed to "mainstream" social work. Sam's vision of "alternative" social work embraces the multiplicity of social work practice, and further, that more than one way of practicing social work is necessary. Sam continues on to describe a different way of looking at social work; "for me it's…looking at things horizontally. One way of looking at the world is not necessarily any better than

the next way". Sam speaks in opposition to the predominant voice of "mainstream" social work, and underlines the importance of diversity in his version of "alternative" social work.

In loosely tying these three representations together conceptually, there seem to be two representations of "alternative" social work that exist within current social work systems/roles/agencies, while the third explores the potential of multiple social work systems at play at once – each with equal value. "Alternative" social work as a story seems to focus on how we *think* about social work, and it is through changing how people think and understand a "mainstream" agency/system, that creates the shift from "mainstream" to "alternative". The tool kit metaphor, on the other hand, places weight in the *doing* of social work; in controlling our actions and reactions in our everyday practice, social workers are able to create "alternative" outcomes from "mainstream" systems. The medicine wheel representation, however, illustrates a different way of understanding social work all together. That is, a social work that recognizes and values multiple ways of knowing and practice, as opposed adhering to expected "mainstream" social work, or risking adverse consequences by engaging in "other", or "alternative" social work. In this final representation, all three visions of "alternative" social work, in addition to "mainstream" social work, could coexist. For example, in the focus group Sam explained how, in a fundamentally "mainstream" research project, he had advocated to adopt an indigenous approach in response to the team's aboriginal members saying to the larger group, "Hey, we're different!

You want to shape us into this, and we're not that". The medicine wheel representation of "alternative" social work becomes stronger with each additional model of social work, thereby addressing the difference of service users, much like Sam's community-based research example.

All three of the representations of "alternative" social work demonstrate different sites from which to address concerns with, as we have termed it in this research project, "mainstream" social work. "Mainstream" social work cannot successfully meet the needs of all service uses, social workers, funders, etc., and it is unlikely that any one model has the capacity to do so. However, as Jill, Todd, and Sam have shared, "mainstream" social work offers very limited opportunity to safely make change. It seems that all three participants have responded creatively to establish ways to circumvent the rigidity and routine of "mainstream" social work.

Structural Analysis:

How participants talked about social work, "mainstream" or "alternative", is an interesting site of exploration. Structural analysis narrows in on *how* the message is narrated, in this case, in the focus group. I draw from both Labov and Waletzky, and Gee's styles as outlined by Riessman (2008), and while there are many points of structural analysis from the transcription of the focus group, this study will focus on two main areas: the use of imagery and the use of language to communicate agency/ownership, and powerlessness/lack of control.

Perhaps most striking in the focus group, was the recurring use of imagery in the discussion of both "mainstream" and "alternative" social work. It is likely that using arts-based representations as an entry point to "alternative" social work encouraged the use of this kind of language. However, the participants showed no apprehension in using images to describe social work realities. The participants talked of using several of these images in their everyday social work practice indicating that using imagery to discuss everyday social work practice occurs outside of this research setting.

"Mainstream" social work was defined by images of perceived power like buildings, and professional 'uniforms', in addition to language that evoked feelings of constraint, and detachment like, "warehousing" individuals. In opposition to the inflexible and rigid style of "mainstream" social work, the participants used descriptive language, simile and metaphor to talk about moments in social work practice. The group was clear in defining the prescriptive and uncreative nature of "mainstream" social work, and further pushed against it's uncreative nature by using language that evoked images and feelings. In discussing social work practice realities, the group explained:

S: There's this whole machinery behind how and what we do…

J: Yes, absolutely

S: …you really have to be careful in how you advocate, because you can get tossed out along with…you know?

T: And "tossed out" is a nice way to put it. I'm trying to think of a politically appropriate way to put it. You can get beaten. You can get… ostracized, you can get excommunicated, you know [laughter]…going too close to the sun, you can get burned.

J: A little too far left as opposed to the middle, or the right.

T: Yeah, absolutely. So going back to your question of what's "alternative"…it's playing with that, it's getting as close to that as possible.

All three of the members use imagery in this excerpt to talk about practice: images of danger, of harm, and of teetering on the edge evoke feelings of tension and risk.

Discussing "alternative" social work brought up a different set of images: "living in the grey", "walking the line", and "standing on jello", for example, were used to talk about everyday "alternative" social work practice. Participants agreed that "alternative" social work felt uncomfortable and unclear; the term "living in the grey" was embraced as an appropriate way to describe how it feels to practice "alternative" social work. Jill elaborates, "how do you live in the grey area? …it's about being okay, and not hiding behind the black and white words in the policies and procedures." Here the creative depictions of practice are more congruent with what the group reveals as "alternative" social work, meaning that the group matches the creativity of "alternative" social work practice with creative language. In a way, the focus group engages in an activity that Jill discusses as an

emancipatory "alternative" social work practice - to "put language around it and make it okay to speak out loud". Jill was referring to supporting a family to see a challenging situation differently, however, using this quote in the context of the discussion, "putting language around it" describes what the participants were in fact doing in the focus group.

Putting language around "alternative" social work allowed the members to corroborate a language that made sense to them, and provides the second site of analysis – *how* the participants communicated attachment to "alternative" social work, and detachment from "mainstream" social work. Creating a discourse, I believe, encouraged the participants to identify, not only with their own representation, but also with the discussion of "alternative" social work as a whole. The connection felt to "alternative" social work is captured in the language of each participant; looking at active and passive voice, in addition to the use of the possessive nouns and pronouns, for example, sheds light on the participants' feelings of having agency over or being subjugated by "mainstream" social work.

Following the voice shift throughout the focus group between tones of powerlessness and having power provided interesting insight into how participants related to certain topics, and how others were understood. For example, when discussing "mainstream" social work, participants often adopted a passive voice, indicating that they were being acted on, that "mainstream" social work happens *to* them. "You can be tossed out"; "So it does throw you for a

loop". These examples express being acted on, indicating that "mainstream" social work is doing the tossing and throwing. In discussion, the participants did not speak of having agency over the "mainstream" social work rather, the participants expressed feelings of constraint, and typically placed themselves outside of "the machinery".

Dialogue around "alternative" social work was dominated by action and ownership. Perhaps most clearly, the possessive form was used as participants introduced their representations of "alternative" social work to the group, indicating a strong connection to their representation. Participants shared experiences of doing "alternative" social work in a "mainstream" setting, for example, "owning my role in it, without owning the piece that goes along with it". Here the participant begins to distinguish between the social work role, and how the role is performed, meaning that it is how the job is done that is "alternative". "A lot of the alternative is not what I do but what I don't do"; owing the behavior – "I" - as "alternative" and separate from the "mainstream" is a significant contrast to the non-specific "you" in the previous examples.

The shift likely happens naturally, without conscious choice. The dynamic runs throughout the focus group, here, the shift occurs in a single sentence; "When someone asks you to do something, it doesn't mean you have to give it to them." This excerpt represents the participants feeling of subjugation, which is then countered with the possibility of action. The phrase denotes a distancing from "mainstream" social work, while choosing to engage in a practice that is

'other' than expected. The participant expresses how "mainstream" social work acts by asking you to do something, however in the second half of the sentence, "alternative" social work is signified through choice and action; the social worker gives (or not) to "mainstream" social work. In following these shifts, we can ascertain that the participants in this particular study felt disconnected, and further, that they communicated feelings of powerlessness in "mainstream" social work. Conversely, participants expressed connection on a personal level with the overall concept of "alternative" social work. Revealing that it is, "how I go about doing my job, I think, that might be alternative".

Apprehension With "Alternative" Social Work:

The term "alternative" social work proved to be a point of friction for the participants at different points throughout the group and is explored here in three ways: "alternative" as a personal quality, if "alternative" is an accurate way to describe practice, and how "alternative" social work is framed ideologically. Conceptually, as mentioned above, the group took up the idea of "alternative" social work, agreeing that there was a difference between how they understood and performed their jobs, and their actual job expectations. How they labeled this gap did not necessarily include the terms "alternative" and "mainstream", however.

Owning the specific label of "alternative" social work was a particularly tricky stumbling block; "I just did not put myself in that category for sure…and in

hindsight I can see it. And if fact, I'm equally surprised, 'how didn't I see it?'". On participant discusses his initial reaction to receiving a research recruitment email for social workers who are interested in, or identify with "alternative" social work. He shares how he can identify in his work what could be considered "alternative", but does not identify himself as an "alternative" social worker. Similarly, another participant states, "How I go about doing my job, I think, might be alternative, I guess, if that's the sort of word for it. I'm not sure that's the right word". Again, the apprehension with the binary of "alternative" and "mainstream" is evident.

Following this apprehension with naming "alternative" social work, it is revealed that the participants experience a significant amount of distress and fear in practicing what they loosely recognize as "alternative" social work. "You can become kind of paranoid. I think that's what happens…they get afraid, truly afraid to step out". When paired with the rigid requirements of "mainstream" system, as defined in the focus group, owning the label of "alternative" social worker may be detrimental - some of what was expressed in the focus group as "alternative" social work practice got in the way of "mainstream" efficiencies and successes.

In addition to discomfort with labels, as it might be applied to them personally, the group voiced concerns with the accuracy of the term "alternative" social work to describe what is actually happening in practice. While the participants adopted the binary "alternative"/"mainstream" in discussion, it was

with tension. Statements were often bookended with explanatory bits - "if you're going to use that term", "I struggle with that", "that's what I'm wrestling with", "if you can say that", "is that alternative?" – as if agreeing to the terms of the discussion but never fully committing. Other ways of talking about social work outside of "mainstream" were tried on as well; "social work 'other' than…", "creative thinking", and "being strategic", none of which fully satisfied the scope of what the group was discussing. It was agreed that much of what was peripherally identified as "alternative" may more closely fit the definition of "critical thinking".

S: I think that alternative is really about being critical about what you do, and how you're being asked to do it.

J: Yeah, right.

T: Yes.

S: Under what timeframe, and if that's reasonable…I'm hung up on this 'alternative' word, sorry.

T: But the phrase is nicely put. That's what it is.

The idea of navigating the rigid system of "mainstream" social work has led some social workers to make practices decisions that are sometimes "other" than what is expected – this phenomenon is not entirely "alternative", but it does require critical thinking to successfully "walk the line".

The balancing act is becoming more difficult for these social workers, and as one of participants spoke about everyday practice, "social work is

changing…it's not alternative, but it looks that way because of where we are now". At the core of the tension with what has been termed "alternative" social work in this study, is a fundamental ideological shift in how social work is understood. The gap between a job description and how the job is performed, is not necessarily perceived as an act of resistance as one might assume, rather, the participants express these acts as *doing* social work. "Mainstream" social work, as defined by the participants, is filled with deadlines, thresholds and budgets and has been bureaucratized to the point where priorities have shifted, "away from the issue of social justice…we've lost some of our foundations and roots". The focus group discussed "mainstream" social work as having a financial undercurrent that determined the direction of practice; "that's what large corporations do, I get it…that's their job…and their focus is different mine, but I don't have to do that". Disingenuously abiding by rules and standards imposed by a "mainstream" social work system, while feeling an internal obligation to meet personal standards of practice, brought palpable feelings of conflict. This is not to say that "mainstream" and "alternative" standards do not overlap, but that the participants believe that social work from the outside-in carries different values than social work from the outside-in.

> S: I don't know if alternative is the right word…because what I do doesn't feel alternative, it feels like…
>
> T: Social Work!

Precisely that. *How* the participants do their jobs, what they can recognize as potentially "alternative", is really doing what they believe *is* essentially social work – there is nothing "alternative" about it.

"That's the alternative thing - that it should be the standard"

DISCUSSION

If "alternative" social work is not actually alternative, but fundamental to social work, what does this mean to practice? The focus group revealed that "alternative" social work, actually feels more like 'good' social work rather than a form of resistance to "mainstream" social work. It is troubling that 'good' social work is being perceived as "alternative"; that engaging in practice that was once respected as "standard" social work, is now considered outside of the role, no longer a part of the social worker's mandate, or unnecessary. Given the building evidence that neoliberalism is strongly shaping social work today, it is entirely possible that the shifting perception of "good" social work to "alternative" social work is an effect of a neoliberal framework.

The three participants have demonstrated that there are multiple ways to practice social work; as one participants shared, it's about "honouring diversity". Each participant shared a way of understanding social work that had fundamental differences from one another, and yet, each of the participants is a successful social worker as evidenced by their history of commitment to social work, their senior positions, and their professional accomplishments. The participants demonstrate that one model of social work cannot support the needs of our agencies, service users, or the needs of social workers themselves.

The participants have corroborated the findings of many researchers who warn of the effects of neoliberalism on social services.

Increasing scrutiny and pressure from agency administrators, insurance

> providers, and consumers to prove that we know what we are doing and that what we are doing really works, make us susceptible to the clarion call of the empirical practice and evidence-based practice movements (Sellick, Delaney, & Brownlee, 2002, 493).

Unfortunately, neoliberalism continues to try to concretize social work to fit its requirements. One example of this is the Competency Profile forwarded by the CCSWR. In a clear attempt to legitimize and measure the social work profession, the CCSWR has taken to extreme neoliberal measures to create "evidence" of social work value. Working to irrefutably define what social work is by outlining "competencies" runs in direct opposition to what the participants in this study have shown. The value of performing social work is in the multitude of tools in the tool kit, it is in the imagination of our stories, and in embracing the coexistence of many ways to practice.

Gregory & Holloway (2005) remind us that the construction of social work is not static, it is fluid, and will continue to shape and adapt. The CCSWR's competency profile, however, stands to drastically and concretely change the way the profession of social work is regulated, practiced, defined, discussed, and ultimately understood. Campbell (2002), draws on Dominelli (1996) to discuss the effects of a competency based profile; "competencies separate out various elements of complex social interactions and take frozen snapshots of dynamic processes, they fragment the qualitative nature of social intercourse and abstract it out of existence" (5). The participants in the focus group demonstrate three

different visions of practice "alternative" to the CCSWR's understanding of social work. These three examples, while "alternative", are also professional, effective, and as the participants reveal, necessary to the success of service users, the agencies, and the social workers themselves.

Unintentionally, it seems that the discussion of "alternative" social work adhered to Karen Healy's (2000) tenants of "activist" social work. None of the participants identified as "activists", and with the level of discomfort with the term, "alternative", I am not certain "activist" would be any more fitting to describe the dynamics of everyday social work in a neoliberal setting. However, "the critique of the individualist focus of orthodox social work; emphasizing the inequities that underlie the worker-client relationship; and the critique of professionalism" were central topics of the discussion (Healy, 2000, 22). The participants denounced the compartmentalization of social work, called for greater service user involvement, and struggled with the perceived professional power of the "social worker". On paper, it seems that the "activist" social work model is a fit for the experiences and understanding of the participants of this study, however, without their input I am reluctant to use this term - uncertain as to their acceptance of this language for their individual experiences.

While the essential framework of Healy's (2000) conceptualization of "activist" social work seem to parallel the focus group's discussion of "alternative" social work, the focus group brought up an interesting dynamic not included in Healy's argument. Healy's (2000) treatment of "activist" social work

fails to include the emotional component of participating in such "alternative" practices that proved to be a central component in the focus group discussion. The focus group pivoted on how it feels to practice "alternative" social work drawing on images of danger and risk to evoke feelings of fear and apprehension in straying from "mainstream" expectations of social work. The choice to act against the neoliberal conceptualization of social work carries strong tensions making these practice decisions increasingly difficult to perform.

Drawing on the creativity of social work by using arts-based representations as a means to discuss "alternative" and "mainstream" social work, highlights the many possibilities of practice outside of "mainstream" expectations. Leading the focus group with the participants' representations opened the door to creativity in our discussion. I did not foresee, however, the fervor with which creative language was used in the focus group. This signals to me a need for similar encounters, opportunities to discuss practice and compare notes in a forum that is outside of the rigid walls of 'mainstream' social work. Perhaps it was how the participants engaged with the discussion, genuinely sharing difficult realities and exciting possibilities. Perhaps it was that there seemed to be no language to accurately describe how social workers feel in everyday practice, or what they do to sustain their own integrity as social workers – or rather that each participant had her or his own language to express these tensions. Perhaps it was how the focus group developed to include a process of creating a shared language and meaning.

It was surely a combination of all of the above that convinces me that constraints of everyday social work practice have an impact on social workers which seems to quiet their voice and censor their narrative. Gregory & Holloway (2005) contend, "it is imperative that social workers adopt a position of reflexivity – i.e. a complete self-consciousness of the effect of the social context upon them, and vice versa" (49). Without the opportunity to express and explore the tensions in our current neoliberal context, particularly in the face of developments such as the Competency Profile, social work is sure to loose the flexibility and the broad range of skills necessary to fill the many roles and to navigate the continuously changing environments we are charged to maintain. This is not just griping about work…it is different. It is allowing social workers to access a different part of themselves that is often shut off at work – accessing the creative parts, 'putting words around' the feeling bits, and giving voice to these areas of our practice that are devalued and need to remain hidden in our "mainstream" work.

Limitations:

The sample size of three participants is admittedly small. While it may be suitable for a thesis project, enlisting the input from a greater number of participants would add texture and further diversity to the research. The recruitment process, particularly in using the snowball method, required more time to gather participants, and further, to schedule a mutually available time to meet. Perhaps a secondary finding of this research is that social workers who

identify with, or are interested in "alternative" social work are extremely busy people. The primary reason for a potential participant to have not participated was the inability to attend the focus group. In future research, greater time should be allocated for recruitment, and multiple focus groups should be offered to accommodate busy schedules.

There are many professionals who work in social service settings who also experience the tensions of working in a neoliberal context. Professionals including nurses, counselors, psychologists, and human services workers perform many duties that overlap with social work. The knowledge and experience of these professionals could be useful and work in support of a mutual goal to express concern with the neoliberal agenda. Service users were secondarily included in this research through the voices of social workers, however, direct input from service users is a necessary component to sharing the experience of social work and social services in a neoliberal era. Multi-disciplinary research, as well as research that incorporates the experience of service users would be recommended in continuing research.

Language, while at the heart of the important findings of this research, is also at the root of some of the project's limitations. The research was designed to allow participants to define "alternative" social work for themselves, and further, to demonstrate this understanding through a representation of their choosing. It became clear once in the focus group that the intention to provide flexibility may have been perceived as ambiguity to the participants. The lack of clarity may

have been a deterrent to potential participants, and the apprehension with the term "alternative" may also have turned prospective participants away. As discussed in the focus group, the term "alternative" social work did not fit the experience of the participants, and may also have carried negative connotations that were not considered in the design of the research. Future research in this area may consider conducting focus groups early in the project, strictly around finding the most appropriate language to use in the research itself.

Looking Forward:

Given the scope of this project, there was much that could be explored from this research that was unable to be included. The use of imagery in the focus group is a rich source of analysis, and was a large part of the analysis of this research, however, it could be studied further. The presence of humour and laughter in the project was more abundant than I had expected. It is likely that the people in the group itself had significant influence on the incidents of humour, but it also seemed to have a genuine role in the focus group. Laughter seemed to follow the telling of a practice reality, specifically when a participant was sharing feelings. The discussion of difficult feelings incited laughter on several occasions. The use of humour and laugher oscillated between uncomfortable laughter, testing and checking-in with the other members, and the laughter that marked 'joining in', recognition and validation. Further exploration beyond these preliminary findings could lead to interesting outcomes.

In future practice, continuing to draw from arts-based research is likely to uncover new findings pertinent to social work knowledge, as it offers the researcher and participants a certain freedom in research outside of 'mainstream' traditions. In this project, similar to Walmsley's (2004) research, arts-based research allowed participants to act as "social actors" who engage in, "creating and re-creating reality through the medium of social representations" (43). Participants gave voice in the focus group to the marginal discourse of "alternative" social work; arts-based research was used to explore "ways of thinking about and acting upon", the dominant discourse of social work (Cox, Geisen & Green, 2008, 61). Further incorporating art in research holds great potential to deepen our understanding of practice-based experiences in social work.

In continuing my own research, I aim to work toward giving space and language to "different" ways of knowing, "other" forms of evidence/research, and "alternative" models of social work. In the continued practice of questioning and reflecting, of working within tension and toward finding a language from which to (re)construct social work practice, is where I position this project. This research could be interpreted as my own representation of "alternative" social work; pushing the boundaries of legitimate social work research, encouraging discussion across social work roles, giving space to explore "alternative" ways of practicing and knowing.

In fact, this research represents an exploration. In part, as you might expect,

it represents an academic exploration into existing research following a long-standing tradition of knowledge creation and dissemination. In part it represents my own exploration to solve the puzzles I have about social work practice. This research represents an opportunity to test my theoretical grounding, to take postmodern theory off of the page. It represents a trying-on of methodology, a chance to cross the boundaries of traditional research into arts-based methods. Perhaps most significantly, this research has allowed me to explore beyond my own point of view, to peek into the knowledge and experience of others, and to settle my own practice-based tensions into a larger context. As much about me as it is about social work, as much a personal process as an academic one, this research indulges the possibility of a language that can communicate what it is social workers do, how they do it, and why.

REFERENCES

Abele, F. & Graham, K. (2011). What now? Future federal responsibilities towards aboriginal people living in cities. *Aboriginal Policy Studies.* 8(2). 282-295.

Applegate, J.S. (2000). Theory as story: A postmodern tale. *Clinical Social Work Journal*. 28(2): 141-153.

Aronson, J. & Neysmith, S.M., (2006). Obscuring the costs of home care: Restructuring at work. *Work, employment and society.* 20(1): 27-45.

Aronson, J. & Sammon, S. (2011). Social work competency profile: A critique. Email.

Aronson, J. & Smith, K. (2010). Managing Restructured Social Services: Expanding the Social?. *British Journal of Social Work*. 40: 530-547.

Bains, D. (2010). Neoliberal restructuring, activism/participation, and social unionism in the nonprofit social services. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly.* 30(1): 10-28.

Barber, J.G. (1996). Science and social work: Are they compatible? *Research on Social Work Practice*. 6(3). 379-388.

Beals, H. (2003). The need for a social work profile to regulate and promote the profession in Nova Scotia. Retrieved March 20th, 2012, from http://socialwork.dal.ca/News%20and%20Events/Carolyn's_Introducti.php

Blackburn, M.V. (2010). Queer girls and popular culture: Reading, Resisting, and Creating Media. *Journal of LGBT Youth*. 7: 74-79.

Bochner, A. P. (2000). Criteria against ourselves. *Qualitiative Inquiry*. 6(2). 266-272.

Brodie, J. (1999). The politics of social policy in the twenty-first century. *Citizens or Consumers? Social Policy in a Market Society.* Chap. 2: 37-45

Burr, V. (2003). What is social constructionalism?. *Social Constructionalism*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge.

Campbell, C. (2002). Competency profiles: A discussion paper. Retrieved March 20th, 2012, from http://socialwork.dal.ca/News%20and%20Events/Carolyn's_Introducti.php

Campbell, C. (2010). Competency based social work: Implications for anti-oppressive social work education and practice. Presented at the CASWE Annual Conference, May 2010. Retrieved March 20th, 2012, from: http://socialwork.dal.ca/News%20and%20Events/Carolyn's_Introducti.php

Campbell, C. (2012). Dalhousie University: Faculty of Health Professions - School of Social Work. Retrieved March 20th, 2012, from: http://socialwork.dal.ca/News%20and%20Events/Carolyn's_Introducti.php

Canadian Association of Social Workers. "CASW Code of Ethics". Retrieved June 12th, 2012 from http://www.casw-acts.ca/en/what-social-work/casw-code-ethics

Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives. (2011). "Rethink, Rebuild, Renew: 10 Solutions for the federal budget." (Sourced on Nov. 16th, 2011 from www.policyalternatives.ca)

Canadian Council for Social Work Regulators. (2011). *Development of a competency profile for the social work profession in Canada.* Preliminary edition.

Canadian Council for Social Work Regulators. (2010). Development of a competency profile for the social work profession in Canada. Retrieved March 20th, 2012, from http://socialwork.dal.ca/News%20and%20Events/Carolyn's_Introducti.php

Carey, M & Foster, V. (2011). Introducing 'deviant' social work: Contextualizing the limits of radical social work whilst understanding (fragmented) resistance within the social work labour process. *British Journal of Social Work.* (41) 576-593.

Chambon, A. (2008). Social work and the arts: Critical imagination. In Knowles, J. G. & Cole, A. L.. *Handbook of the Arts in Qualitative Research: Perspectives, Methodologies, Examples and Issues.* 591-602. Los Angeles: Sage Publications.

Carter, S. M. & Little, M. (2007). Justifying knowledge, justifying method, taking action: Epistemologies, methodologies, and methods in qualitative research. *Qualitative Health Research.* 17(11). 1316-1328.

Chang, J. (2010). Hermeneutic inquiry: A research approach for postmodern therapists. *Journal of Systematic Therapies.* 29(1): 19-32.

Community Council. (2005). *The Caring Community: Accounting for the impacts of provincial government changes.* British Columbia: Victoria.

Cox, P., Geisen, T., & Green, R. (2008). *Qualitative Research and Social Change: European Contexts*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

Danto, E.A. (2008) Same words, different meanings: Notes toward a typology of postmodern social work education. *Social Work Education*. 27(7): 710-722.

Drisko, J.W. (2005). Writing Up Qualitative Research. *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Social Services.* 86(4): 589-593.

Driver, S. (2007). *Queer Girls and Popular Culture: Reading, Resisting, and Creating.* New York: Peter Lang Publishing.

Fargion, S. (2008). Reflections on social work's identity: International themes in Italian practitioners' representation of social work. *International Social Work*. 51(2). 206-219.

Fook, J. (2000). The lone crusader: Constructing enemies and allies in the workplace. *Breakthroughs in Practice: Theorizing critical moments in social work*. Napier, L. & Fook, J. (eds.) Chap 14: 186-200.

Fook, J. (2002). Theorizing from practice: Towards an inclusive approach for social work research. *Qualitative Social Work.* 1(1): 79-95.

Freeman, M.L. & Valentine, D.P. (2004). Through the eyes of Hollywood: Images of social workers in film. *Social Work*. 49(2): 151-161.

Gibelman, M. (2000). Say it ain't so, Norm! Reflections on who we are. *Social Work*. 45(5): 463-466.

Gregory, M. & Holloway, M. (2005). Language and the shaping of social work. *British Journal of Social Work.* 35: 37-53.

Gross, G. D. (2007). Social work: A profession in search of sign value or positively Queen Jane? *Journal of Progressive Human Services*. 18(1). 5-23.

Haynes, D.T. & White, B.W. (1999). Will the 'real' social work please stand up? A call to stand for professional unity. *Social Work.* 44(4). 385+. Retrieved January 25th, 2012: http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA55397642&v=2.1&u=ocul_mcmaster&it=r&p=AONE&sw=w

Healy, K. (2000). *Social work practices: Contemporary perspectives on change*. Sage Publications: Thousand Oaks, CA

Heron, B. (2011). Re: Expert panel response development of a competency profile for the social work profession in Canada, HRSDC-funded project. Letter to Directions Evidence and Policy Research Group, Canadian Council of Social Work Regulators, and Human Resources and Skills Development Canada.

Hodge, D. R. (2004). Who we are, where we come from, and some of our perceptions: Comparison of social workers and the general population. *Social Work*. 49(2). 261-268.

Hruby, G.G. (2001). Sociological, Postmodern, and New Realism Perspectives in Social Constructionism; Implications for literacy research. *Reading Research Quarterly*. 36(1): 48-62.

King, N & Ross, A. (2003). Professional identities and interprofessional relationships: Evaluation of collaborative community schemes. *Social Work in Health Care*. 38(2). 51-72.

Lawler, J. & Bilson, A. (2004). Towards a more reflexive research aware practice: The influence and potential of professional and team culture. *Social Work & Social Sciences Review*. 11(1):52-69.

LeCroy, C. W. and Stinson, E. L. (2004). The public's perception of social work: Is it what we think it is? *Social Work.* 49(2). 164-174.

McKeen, W. (2006). Diminishing the concept of social policy: The shifting conceptual ground of social policy debate in Canada. *Critical Social Policy*. 26(4). 865-887.

Mahon, R. (2008). Varieties of liberalism: Canadian social policy from the "Golden Age" to the present". *Social Policy and Administration.* 42(4). 342-361.

Margolin, L. (1997). *Under the cover of kindness: The invention of social work.* Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia.

Miller, P. (2011). Letter to Claude LeBonde of the CCSWR. Retrieved March 20th, 2012, from http://socialwork.dal.ca/News%20and%20Events/Carolyn's_Introducti.php

Mosley, J.E., (2010). Organizational resources and environmental incentives: understanding the policy advocacy involvement of human service nonprofits. *Social Service Review*. 84(1): 57-76.

Munroe, E. (2004). The impact of audit on social work practice. *The British Journal of Social Work.* 43(8). 1075-1095.

Murdach, A.D. (2006). Social work in the movies: Another look. *Social Work.* 51(3): 269-272.

Neilson, L. (2008). Lyric Inquiry. In Knowles, J. G. & Cole, A. L.. *Handbook of the Arts in Qualitative Research: Perspectives, Methodologies, Examples and Issues.* 93-102. Los Angeles: Sage Publications.

Neuman, W. (1997). *Social Research Methods: Qualitative & Quantitative Approaches.* 3rd Ed. Pearson Education.

Nova Scotia Association of Social Workers. (2010). Canadian Council of Social Work Regulators. *Connection.* 16(4). 1-4. Retrieved March 20th, 2012, from http://www.nsasw.org/files/File/Connection/Jul-2010.pdf

Parton, N. (2008). Changes in the form of knowledge in social work: From the 'social' to the 'informational'. *British Journal of Social Work.* 38: 253-269.

Riessman, C. K., (2008). *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences*. Sage Publications: Thousand Oaks, CA

Rose, G. (2012). *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Researching with Visual Methodologies*. 3rd Edition. Sage Publications: London.

Rossiter, A. (2011). Unsettled social work: the challenge of Levinas's ethics. *British Journal of Social Work.* 41: 980-995.

Schmid, H. (2004). The role of nonprofit human service organizations in providing social services. *Administration in Social Work*. 28: 1-21.

Scott, D. (1990). Practice wisdom: The neglected source of practice research. *Social Work*. 35(6): 564-568.

Scott, K. (2003). *Funding Matters: The impact of Canada's new funding regime on nonprofit and voluntary organizations.* The Canadian Council for Social Development.

Sellick, M. M., Delaney, R., & Brownlee, K. (2002). The deconstruction of professional knowledge: Accountability without authority. *Families In Society: The Journal of Contemporary Human Services*. 83(5/6). 493-498.

Tsui, M. & Cheung, F. C. H. (2004). Gone with the wind: The impacts of managerialism on human services. *British Journal of Social Work.* 34. 437-442.

Ungar, M. (2004). Surviving as a postmodern social worker: Two Ps and three Rs of direct practice. *Social Work*. 49(3): 488-496.

Valentine, D.P. & Freeman, M. (2002). Film portrayals of social workers doing child welfare work. *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal.* 19(6): 455-471.

Walker, S. (2001). Tracing the contours of postmodern social work. *British Journal of Social Work*. 31: 29-39.

Walmsley, C. (2004). Social representations and the study of professional practice. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*. 3(4). 40-55.

Walter, U. (2003). Toward a third space: Improvisation and professionalism in social work. *Families in Social Work: The Journal of Contemporary Human Services.* 317-322.

Weber, S. (2008). Visual Images in Research. In Knowles, J. G. & Cole, A. L.. *Handbook of the Arts in Qualitative Research: Perspectives, Methodologies, Examples and Issues.* 41-53. Los Angeles: Sage Publications.

Westhues, A. (2005). Social work education in Canada: Inching toward the progressive. *Portularia*. (5) 7-25.

APPENDIX 1

Living in the Grey

Walking the line between left and right, alternative and mainstream, black and white, carries risk.

Of looming danger, of excommunication, of being tossed-out.

We are flying too close to the sun.

Getting burned, is neither good nor bad, we are told; it's an experiential thing.

But we know better.

It sneaks up on you, uncomfortable, an impossible collision of black and white.

Grey. Like ash, murky, muddy, unclear, and thick. Grey. Boundless, vast, and mixed, a collaboration.

It's like standing on Jello, and Jello is hardly a sturdy foundation.

Jello. Not liquid, not solid. But then again, neither is social work.

Jennifer Dustin;
Content sourced from research focus group.
June 25th, 2012