Deconstructing the Romanticization of Solidarity:
Reflections on Social Worker Performativity and Resistance
During COVID-19

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Abstract

This article explores how COVID-19 has impacted our understanding of our frontline practice and professional identity as four doctoral social work students. When the pandemic unfolded, we were completing a collaborative autoethnographic research project that revealed how our professional practices were shaped by both performativity and resistance. Because of COVID-19, this project was paused. When we reconvened to draft our research paper, we noted a collective change in our perceptions of performativity and resistance in our practice. In this article we share the insights that arose in the context of our roles as frontline workers. We consider the "romanticizing" of discourses related to frontline workers during the pandemic. We also reflect on the heightened pressure that the four of us have felt to "perform" these discourses in our work. We argue that, while outwardly positive, such discourses have their roots in capitalist neo-liberal ideals, and thus they occlude spaces of resistance in already prescriptive practice environments and ultimately maintain oppression for service users.

Keywords: resistance, performativity, doctoral students, frontline workers, COVID-19

Introduction

As part of a doctoral social work course on qualitative research methods, the four of us carried out a collaborative autoethnographic (CAE) study from January to March 2020. Our conceptualization of this project arose organically out of a discussion in class related to our shared concern around the growing constraints of neo-liberal practice within our respective workplaces: as four social work and mental health professionals, two of us work in hospital settings, one in child welfare, and one of us is employed in the criminal-justice sector.

Neo-liberalism in social work practice can be broadly observed in various forms of austerity, efficiency, and deregulation of social services and welfare support at a local level (Braedley & Luxton, 2010; Dean, 2019; Pollack & Rossiter, 2010). Examples of increased neo-liberal practices in social work and social services have included increasingly standardized and prescriptive practice and assessments; emphasis on "efficient," cost-saving service provision, at the expense of building relationships; and discourses and practices that predominantly place the burden of responsibility upon individuals to be mentally and physically well, instead of strengthening social systems that support equity and access to mental and physical health (Braedley & Luxton, 2010; Dean, 2019; Pollack & Rossiter, 2010). Through our CAE research project, we wished to explore the dissonance, or what we refer to in the study as "internal values-based conflict," that we acknowledged feeling in our practice at times. We speculated

that this internal conflict had its roots in the tension between the social work we wish to engage in (which is relationship-based and justice- and equity-focused) and the work that we are often actually able to carry out in the face of increasing program cuts and standardized practice.

Through our individual and collaborative CAE analysis processes, we identified two major themes: the simultaneous performativity and resistance that we engaged in and embodied in our practice, and the connection of these experiences to the larger neo-liberal agendas at play within our respective workplaces. For the purpose of our group writing, we mutually understood performativity as the various ways in which we both embodied and enacted our roles as frontline workers (McKinlay, 2010). We found ourselves "performing" the social norms of workplace cultures that shaped and influenced our daily employment functions while also holding internal tension about the values we wished to practice by. We therefore collectively understood resistance as the pivotal tension between performing our frontline roles and our commitment to working against systems of oppression. We examined our understanding of such forces of oppression through the lens of neo-liberalism within our joint corporate working environments.

When the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded in March 2020, we were in the midst of drafting a research paper on our study. This was put on hold as our lives—like everyone else's—were upended in light of the pandemic. When we reconvened in May 2020 to begin drafting this article, we noted an evident and collective shift in our perceptions of performativity and resistance in our practice.

While recognizing that the four of us inhabit spaces of considerable privilege in a number of ways, being regulated professionals and doctoral students, our work and academic lives were significantly transformed following the onset of the pandemic. In this article, we share our separate, but related, personal reflections about how this pandemic has impacted our work and how our prior critical research on social work practice has informed our understanding of current frontline work.

Methodology

The conceptualization of our CAE project arose out of a group discussion in a qualitative methods course related to our shared concern about the growing influence of neo-liberalism within our respective workplaces. For a research assignment as part of this class, we decided to explore the internal dissonance that we acknowledged feeling in our practice at times by using a CAE project.

Autoethnography can be understood as an approach to qualitative research that includes a reflexive discussion and analysis of the researcher's own thoughts, subjectivity, and experiences and links the resultant insights to the larger social, political, and cultural phenomenon being studied (Chang, 2016; Lapadat, 2017; Taber, 2010; Winkler, 2018). Carolyn Ellis (2004), a well-known scholar and pioneer in the field of autoethnography, described this methodology as "research, writing, story and method that connect the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social and political" (p. 19). Autoethnography is often taken up as a methodology by those who believe that research is not an objective endeavour and that the researcher's own experiences and emotions are not only unavoidably intertwined with the research, but that these personal feelings and insights are important data (Chang, 2016; Ellis, 1999; Lapadat, 2017).

Collaborative autoethnography developed out of the critique that autoethnography lacks rigour and that its autobiographical nature results in the researcher being too immersed in their subjective experience to interpret and analyze the data in a comprehensive manner (Lapadat, 2017). A CAE methodology combines an autobiographic study of the self with ethnographic analysis and collaborative interactions and analyses between co-researchers to understand and interpret the autobiographic data collected (Chang et al., 2012). Like autoethnography, a cornerstone of CAE is the inclusion of ongoing critical self-reflexivity; however, this is done alongside a multi-voice, collaborative analysis and reflexive practice (Ellis et al., 2018; Lapadat, 2017). This is thought to increase rigour and researcher accountability as no single perspective is privileged (Chang, 2016; Chang et al., 2012; Lapadat, 2017).

For our CAE study, we agreed to monitor our physical, cognitive, emotional, and behavioural reactions during work over the course of three days. This took place in February of 2020. On each day, we completed a reflexive journal entry pre-, mid-, and post-workday using agreed-upon prompts. Once these data were compiled, we each conducted an individual thematic analysis of our journal entries. We then came together and analyzed and reflected on the data collaboratively to compile common themes across all our journals. To complete a group thematic analysis of our individual data, we started by first allowing each member to take turns sharing components of their respective reflective journal in a repeating circular fashion. Following every opportunity for individual sharing, we each documented common themes heard. We continued sharing until a mutually agreed-upon saturation point was reached, whereby no novel individual experiences were thought to remain for sharing. We then compiled our uniquely documented themes and summarized content into a group analysis of dominant themes.

Because of the sudden onset of the global pandemic in the winter of 2020, we had paused in our CAE project as we navigated the shock of a changing world while also dealing with our sudden added practice demands as frontline workers. When we regrouped several months later, we recognized that our perceptions of the dual roles of performativity and resistance in our practices had both shifted and amplified significantly due to the pandemic. In the following sections we provide our separate but related reflections about this shift. These personal narratives reflect our autoethnographic data from our CAE study.

Ali's Section: Norms Change Along With Forms

As an individual who is employed by the criminal-justice sector, I have become a close witness to the systemic challenges that individuals experience while trying to reintegrate into the community. One can draw connections between an individual's involvement with the justice system and experiences of gender-based violence, poverty, and homelessness (Balfour & Comack, 2014). Working directly with this population to overcome these challenges and unjust systemic barriers evokes significant internal conflict within myself. Through participation in the CAE study, I discovered how I choose to resist neo-liberal practices and ideologies to resolve inner conflict experienced within the workplace. I take respite in building initiatives such as community gardens and trauma-informed, community-based social enterprise programs. These initiatives permit me to remain aligned with the needs of reintegrating groups and to reach beyond myself to co-create meaningful relationships, processes, and systems.

By participating in our CAE study, I was able to decisively draw a parallel between my frontline-work approach and my identity as a doctoral student. As a doctoral student, I actively

engage in the creation and theorization of ideas. My idea-generation skills are also extensively exercised in my community work, where I am conceptualizing new ideas for policies, programs, or interventions. These identities have become intricately intertwined, with one informing, developing, and leading the other. Deconstructing this realization during the research project reinforced how collaborative projects can cultivate a rich environment for reflexivity during times of adversity. Collaborative projects permit an avenue for development, where multiple ideas can converge and take root, both in academic and in frontline work (Chang et al., 2012).

Based on my professional experiences as a frontline worker, system development requires significant collaboration. Fundamentally, from my perspective it requires building an inclusive and non-judgmental space where critical examination of each part of the system can occur, building shared goals, and then inspiring collaborators to turn these goals into reality. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I have watched as previously unshakable social systems have unravelled and as interdisciplinary teams have emerged as the loom where these threads are being rewoven to create reconfigured systems. Where there were once silos, new communication strategies or partnerships exist. Where rigid or politically motivated processes prevailed, non-partisan approaches have been readily adopted. As Read (2016) said, "with new life comes new ways of knowing" (p. 664). Along with these changes, endorsement of increased solidarity between members of my frontline team manifested and subsequently became normalized as a commonplace attitude. This attitudinal shift, reflecting a desire for interdisciplinary work and collaborative decision-making, has created a new performative norm, one where an individual dissenting voice may be more easily dismissed or rejected.

This pandemic will no doubt reshape our practices, and as new forms begin to emerge, careful assessment of the associated norms is necessary to ensure that the inequalities we seek to reconcile are not perpetuated (Kumsa, 2016). Social work professionals endeavour to critically examine neo-liberal systems and disentangle structures of inequality experienced by vulnerable populations. As solidarity between practitioners grows, it is of crucial importance that social workers remain reflexive, attuned, and connected to all members of their team. Working to develop systems that allow service users to gain access to what they need is essential, not only during a pandemic but far beyond it, as this will establish norms that challenge neo-liberal ideologies.

Sarah's Section: Performing Heroism

Throughout the pandemic, I have recognized the pull toward and the resistance against being called a "hero." I am a member of the spiritual-care team of a local hospital, and I had sought out doctoral studies in part to get space from my hospital work. Before the pandemic, I was a burnt-out frontline worker. Now I am a hero. This new identity brings feelings of solidarity with the hospital, but it also gives me unease as I question the implications of this solidarity. I wonder where there is room for resistance.

In writing this article, my colleagues and I discussed at length the notion of performativity of our professional roles. And in the early days of the pandemic, "frontline worker" is a new role I embody and perform. I roll up my sleeves, don my PPE [personal protective equipment]. Every night the kids on the street bang their pots and pans to thank us heroes. Most days I get free treats, free lunch, free coffee, thanks to the generous donations from community members.

As I move through the hospital meeting patients and connecting with staff, there is a sense of novelty and fragility of our system that binds us together. This connectivity is what social workers long for. The thrill of being a frontline worker during a global crisis floods me with gratitude, as well as with the dangerous euphoria of feeling needed. With my body, I perform the role of health-care worker in the midst of a pandemic: masked, shielded, buzzing with free coffee, there to help.

On principle, I reject the title of hero, and insist that I am no hero but am simply doing my job. Yet something compels me to re-download the Instagram app on my phone years after deleting it. I post selfies with my new scrub cap to thank the volunteers who made them. When I get fit-tested for an N95 protective mask, I post a selfie to educate my followers on the importance of fit-testing N95s, and I dissuade the hoarding and misuse of PPE. On Facebook, I fundraise to send lunches to less-heroized frontline workers at my local grocery store, the ones who earn a third of what I do and get no PPE. I notice a new sense of moral nobility in my mannerisms, perhaps the hero identity sinking in.

I learn over time that there is no room for resistance in a pandemic. I tell myself what a soggy, miserable, self-pitying frontline worker I was until this COVID-19 business started. Now, I just feel enormously lucky to have a job. The hospital has kicked out everyone they deem non-essential, and I have made the cut. I should be grateful. This is not the time to question if my work is valued.

Then comes the crash. I get the occasional day off, spent at home, wearing pyjamas like the rest of Instagram, and I am finally able to slow down. No mask on my face. As I inch away from the spaces that call me a hero, resistance returns. I question decisions being made by leadership, and I notice inequities showing up. I ask myself, What is the cost of being a hero? Who is benefiting from calling us heroes? In heroizing some people, whose stories are being silenced?

David's Section: On Being the Voice of Transformation

In the climate of the COVID-19 pandemic, I have had to resituate myself to what it means to pursue social-justice work in a hospital employment setting during a global community-health threat. Never in my lifetime has it been so integral that we work together across disciplines to maintain the safety of our clients and protect the broader community. While I appreciate the opportunity to develop a greater sense of solidarity and camaraderie across various community and health-care disciplines, I cannot help but recognize the enduring dominance of certain professionalized and state-situated discourses. Such discourses of power tend to greatly influence, if not define, the collective movement and direction that we are pursuing in an attempt to create a coordinated response to the public-health crisis.

Many social work theorists have already written about the role of social workers in community-based settings in resisting and abating the dominance of certain structures that, left unchecked, risk impeding the rights of particular groups. Social workers are trained to recognize systems of inequality, identifying where an increased surveillance of outgroups and unfair monitoring for deviancies are based in conflicts with social norms and expectations (Guo & Tsui, 2010). As social workers, we are tasked with elucidating and contextualizing structural powers that produce social stigma and discourses of pathology for nonconforming intersectional identities. We have the tools to address such issues through a process of societal

transformation. The process of establishing societal transformation is often embedded within a resistance to the policies, actions, and cultural practices that produce disparity.

In an age of increasing surveillance, government intervention into realms of daily social life, and encouragement of collective social-distancing measures, we see and hear the common slogan, "We are all in this together." I have been left conflicted about when it is appropriate to express resistance while balancing a recognition that the expansion of collectively coordinated practices plays a part in public health and safety in this moment. As Strier and Bershtling (2016) have noted, "social workers have been increasingly called on to function as 'translators' of state power—a practice that undermines the social justice roots of the profession" (p. 111). As social workers, we hold a space of tension between balancing our ability to identify structures of inequality with external expectations of being key operatives in the delivery of state policy. In the age of the pandemic, I would argue that it is imperative that social workers are more attuned to dominant structural systems that risk producing further inequality in our society. This is a more challenging time than ever to be an advocate, but there also coexists an opportunity to shift and change systems that have been so evidently unveiled as malfunctional. I believe that we can work in solidarity with other professionals while seeking opportunities to highlight where weak and fractured areas of our system maintain systemically situated hierarchies of oppression.

Meredith's Section: Hope and Uncertainty as Catalysts for Resistance and Change

Practising within child welfare has always felt to me like navigating a sort of complicated, uncomfortable, and often infuriating dance between performativity and resistance; that is, performing the role of efficient child-welfare worker, while quietly and creatively resisting this role and many of the practices and discourses within this field. The pressure to perform within my job as a child-welfare worker was amplified in light of (neo-liberal) pandemic discourses espousing the heroism and solidarity of frontline and essential workers. With this, however, and facilitated through the reflexive CAE process, came a personal realization of the true necessity of resistance within social work practice and the duty of those within these realms to take up a sort of continual ethic of resistance.

In their critique of the influence of neo-liberalism within social work, Pollack and Rossiter (2010) stated that "the co-option and appropriation of liberal feminist discourse by neoliberal state institutions has depoliticized the language of gender equality, employing it to perpetuate neoliberal aims" (p. 156). The authors further argued that neo-liberalism's adaptions of positive and progressive sounding concepts are often "individualistic rather than systemic in order to dissuade resistance and enforce obedience" (p. 165). I would argue that these critiques apply to discourses of solidarity and heroism when they are taken up within neo-liberal contexts. Because "neoliberalism entails the erosion of oppositional political, moral, or subjective claims located outside capitalist rationality," discourses of solidarity and heroism taken up within neo-liberal systems will inevitably and ultimately be neo-liberal in character and consequence (Brown, 2005, p. 45). There is no space for a truly dissenting voice, and progressive or transformative language and actions are acceptable as long as they do not result in the genuine collective troubling of neo-liberal aims and ideals.

How, then, do we engage in collaborative social work practice, particularly within neo-liberal contexts, while simultaneously troubling and resisting the discourses related to heroism

and solidarity that have rung loudly and continuously during the pandemic and that, though outwardly positive, arguably function to further entrench neo-liberalism within our work? Admittedly, I do not yet have a clear answer to this question, and reflecting on this has led to a frustrating mental stalemate at times.

Of late, however, I have been re-reading Rebecca Solnit's (2016) aptly titled book, *Hope in the Dark*. Perhaps because emotions of uncertainty and vulnerability have intensified tenfold for everyone since the pandemic began—and personally, I have been finding it quite easy to get stuck in these feelings at times—I was drawn to a particular concept in this book, as a reassuring guide of sorts. Solnit (2016) talked about how "grief and hope can coexist" (p. 4). She presented hope and uncertainty as intertwined and argued that these emotions can serve as a catalyst in times of upheaval:

> Hope locates itself in the premises that we don't know what will happen and that in the spaciousness of uncertainty is room to act. When you recognize uncertainty, you recognize that you may be able to influence the outcomes.… hope is … an alternative to the certainty of both optimists and pessimists. Optimists think it will all be fine without our involvement; pessimists take the opposite position; both excuse themselves from acting. It's the belief that what we do matters even though how and when it may matter, who and what it may impact, are not things we can know beforehand. (p. 4)

Recognizing that it is from a place of fairly abundant privilege that I am able to say this, I have been wondering if perhaps those of us who are able to can harness what I am sure is a collective sense of uncertainty right now, and in the "spaciousness" of this agree, rather paradoxically, that while we may be uncertain as to what the future will look like, we are certain that things need to change. That we must continue to criticize and resist certain dominant discourses—namely prevalent "pandemic discourses" related to solidarity and heroism—that, while seemingly supportive of frontline and essential workers, ultimately serve to further entrench neo-liberal objectives. What this outcome will look like exactly, or how we can collectively manifest and achieve it, may remain murky at times. However, as Solnit (2016) stated, "to embrace … the unknown and the unknowable," to continue to exist, work and resist within this space of uncertainty, is not only necessary, but is, in essence, hope in action (p. 4).

Discussion

This article represents a collective commentary on the tension that exists for many social workers who are experiencing a sense of increased solidarity and heroism in the workplace since the pandemic. COVID-19 has presented an opportunity to apply theory to practice and to bring more of a social-justice perspective to both of those roles. Our initial CAE project was born out of this need for collaboration and as a means of exploring the tensions that arise within our hybrid roles. We recognize that, traditionally, doctoral work is often done away from the front lines of work. As working doctoral students with demanding frontline jobs in the midst of the pandemic, we believe our experience is rather unusual.

In reading through our reflections, we recognize a fine line between a rising interdisciplinary focus within the workplace, with more expectation than ever to work together during the pandemic, and the rogue voice of social justice that as social workers we are ethically responsible for upholding. While we do not want these values to be co-opted by neo-

liberal practices, we often find ourselves performing and embodying the expectations of our workplaces while trying to simultaneously resist them.

We all are committed to shifting the gaze from the perception of the workplace hero toward those who are most marginalized and inequitably impacted by the pandemic. Yet we are equally as responsible for upholding the integrity of our social work values of social justice in a shifting ground of uncharted territories in our various workplace roles. Just as grief and hope can coexist, so can our ability to work together to make space for problematizing the aspects of "we-ness" that exclude others in the evolving narrative of our collective solidarity. We cannot let the urgency of the pandemic eclipse the duty of social workers to always work with a social-justice and systemic framework in mind.

Conclusion

In this article, we have discussed the unanticipated epistemological shifts and the separate, but related, reflexive insights that arose for each of us in the context of our individual practice in the midst of COVID-19. We considered what we conceptualized as the romanticizing of discourses and practices related to solidarity and heroism with regard to the roles of frontline and essential workers during the pandemic. We reflected on the increased pressure that the four of us have felt in terms of performing these discourses in our work.

COVID-19 has exposed the immense fractures that exist in the systems in which we work and live. For this reason, we argue that the role of critical thinking and resistance to neo-liberalism in social work practice is of more importance than ever. We encourage practitioners, students, and educators in the field of social work to continue to trouble the sources of and intent behind practices and discourses that exist in their respective areas of practice and education. We acknowledge that, while perhaps seemingly positive and supportive, unquestioned practices and discourses such as those discussed in this article occlude spaces of resistance in often already limiting and prescriptive neo-liberal environments. We believe that this ultimately maintains the harmful status quo of inequity and oppression.

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