Professional Resistance in Social Work: Counterpractice Assemblages

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The goal of this article is to deepen understanding of the concept of professional resistance. Studies show that social workers in various parts of the world are increasingly confronted with regulations, programs, and policies that challenge their ability to carry out their professional mission in an ethical manner. Social workers may also find themselves under the pressure of periodic retrenchment resulting from budgetary constraints and subjected to worsening working conditions and threats of wage or social benefit reduction. Therefore, it is not surprising that social workers are sometimes required to engage in actions to oppose these negative realities or, in other words, to practice professional resistance. However, despite its growing relevance, the term "professional resistance" remains both theoretically obscure and marginal to social work practice. This article traces the presence of the concept in social work history, examines divergent uses of the concept in social work literature, introduces theoretical perspectives that may help practitioners enlarge their professional repertoire, provides concrete cases of resistance in different contexts, and finally proposes some paths to professional resistance.

KEY WORDS: *critical social work; oppression; resistance*

Some of the issues that raise concerns for social workers include mounting national and global inequalities, increasing socioeconomic marginalization of communities, harsh social policies, and the continuous ideological dismantling of social security networks. 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. Many social services organizations are relying more and more on the private sector for their operating costs and often find themselves in competition for increasingly rare government contracts for services provision. Such effects of neoliberal funding strategies require the reevaluation of the role of social work within a diminishing welfare state apparatus (Mullaly, 2007; Pollack, 2010), and in this context professional resistance may be considered as a reasonable action.

The Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development Commitment for Action, defined in March 2012 by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), and the International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW), called on social workers to "advocate for a new world order" (IASSW, ICSW, & IFSW, 2012). The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) encourages social workers to engage in "social and political action that seeks to ensure that all people have equal access to resources" (NASW, 2008, p. 27, sec. 6.04[a]). However, studies show that social workers face serious difficulties in resisting these imposed realities (Gilbert & Powell, 2010; Hare, 2004; Payne, 2014; Rogowsky, 2013). In light of these circumstances, it is vital to encourage resistance as a legitimate practice of the profession (Wallace & Pease, 2011). This article briefly traces the presence of the concept in social work history and reviews current opposing uses of the concept in social work literature. It also suggests a theoretical conceptualization of the term "professional resistance" that integrates different levels and modes of practices, provides specific examples, and discusses possible challenges and opportunities for professional resistance.

TRACING RESISTANCE IN SOCIAL WORK HISTORY

According to Mattaini and Atkinson (2013), social workers must strive to integrate constructive non-cooperation approaches as expressions of resistance into their professional practices, as the seeds of these ideas are deeply rooted in social work history. Two critical historical moments of social work history merit attention: the settlement movement and the rank-and-file movement. From a historical perspective, the

settlement movement can be seen today as a counternarrative movement of resistance that challenged the rigid Victorian social climate of the age. As Jane Addams stated, the settlements were a protest against a restricted view of morality, pedagogy, and social policy, "for action is indeed the sole medium of expression for ethics" (Addams, 1907, p. 273). Addams encouraged social workers to resist actively the existing moral, social, and political orders. This tradition of resistance in social work also manifested itself in the 1930s with the rank-and-file movement, created in the midst of the Great Depression. According to Andrews (2005), the rank-and-file movement started as a small group of New York City dissidents and grew into a social movement that spanned the country. These workers had firsthand experience with the failure of relief programs and felt strong identification with the rest of the struggling working class. The social workers who joined the rank-and-file movement became active in the organization of labor unions, established a professional newspaper called *Social Work Today*, and formed radical and democratic labor unions at relief agencies all over the country. Surely, this same discourse of social work activism motivated the radicalizing social work practice in the 1960s in the United States and Europe that still exists in social workers' activism today (Collins, 2009; Law, 2012; Reisch & Jani, 2012; Rome & Hoechstetter, 2010).

TRACING RESISTANCE IN SOCIAL WORK LITERATURE

Despite its roots in the history of the profession, the presence of the resistance concept in current social work literature is scarce and inconsistent and reveals contrasting theoretical perspectives. One common use of the term relates to its psychological, clinical, and individualized sense, in other words, resistance to treatment (Taylor, 2011). Resistance is usually framed in social work literature as antagonism or even hostility to treatment (Forrester, Westlake, & Glynn, 2012). The terminology used in the literature has negative connotations attached to the concept. Resistance is always addressed as something to be reduced, decreased, neutralized, or—in a less derogative sense—resolved. In its more common conception, resistance seems to range from intellectualizing, missing sessions, obsessively turning up on time, discounting the analytic relationship, eroticizing the relationship, or developing new symptoms (Bateman & Holmes, 1995). Resistance can be expressed in

myriad ways, such as struggles over the accuracy of social workers' interpretations of clients' issues, clients' refusal to participate in intervention programs, ambivalence in complying with social services regulations, passive aggression, reluctance to change behavior, or unwillingness to recognize risk behaviors (Arkowitz, 2002; Messer, 2002).

According to Beutler, Rocco, Moleiro, and Talebi (2001), theories differ widely in both the assumed causes of resistance and the methods of dealing with resistant patients. In classical psychoanalysis, resistance is seen as an intrapsychic force that exists within the patient. It is not a product of the analytic process; rather, the analytic situation becomes the venue wherein the patients' resistances reveal themselves (Greenson, cited in Worrell, 1997). Cognitive–behavioral therapy, on the other hand, as a psychoeducational approach, conceptualizes resistance in terms of noncompliance to therapeutic instructions or tasks, designed to assist the client in achieving preset goals. The cognitive–behavioral therapist's task is to teach the client to identify, dispute, and change these irrational beliefs (Worrell, 1997). In this manner, resistance is linked to intrapsychic mechanisms and is detached from contextual aspects of the social worker–client and social system–client relations.

By interpreting their resistance in pathological terms, social workers may inadvertently contribute to the power arrangements in a society that typically excludes individuals and groups who are victims of oppression (Prilleltensky & Fox, 1997; Richardson, 2005; Slife, Yanchar, & Reber, 2005).

Social work literature also presents an alternative view of resistance, grounded on sociological conceptions. Resistance is viewed as an act that counters coercive practices of social control and oppressive ways in which power relations are exerted. Singh and Cowden (2009) even suggested that resistance in social work is a way to revitalize professionalism. Resistance is a constitutive component of critical and radical social work, as defined by a structural, contextualized analysis of personal problems and by the desire to support personal and collective liberation and social change (Fook, 1993). The idea that resistance is a cornerstone of social work as a profession of change inspired Ferguson and Lavalette (2006) to formulate four sources for what they call a "social work of resistance": (1) internal contradictions of social work practice, (2) resistance within the profession (professional unrest of frontline workers), (3) the contribution of service users (resistance

from social welfare client movements), and (4) the broader anticapitalist and antiwar movements.

Studies illustrate different ways in which social workers all over the world engage in overt or covert; micro, mezzo, or macro; and individual or collective resistance. Cheung and Ngai (2009) described the resistance activities of social workers in Hong Kong against government policies concerning youths. These acts of resistance were channeled through three main paths of dissent. First, they resisted government policies by challenging their effectiveness and accountability and by pointing out the disproportionate social control inherent in these policies. Second, they made use of a discourse of resistance by highlighting the incompatibility of these policies with the needs and characteristics of their clients. Third, they stressed aspects of their own professional identity such as self-determination, the centrality of relationship building with the youths, and the importance of unionization to oppose hegemonic new policies. Similarly, O'Brien (2010) showed the multiple ways in which social workers in New Zealand perform resistance practices in their daily work with clients. These practices include challenging institutional policies of their own agencies, denouncing discriminatory behaviors of authorities, or using data from practice to lobby against governmental decisions. Likewise, Carey and Foster (2011) described how social workers engage in "positive deviant practices" to resist policies and regulations that jeopardize the well-being of their clients (Carey & Foster, 2011, p. 576). These practices, which may be in conflict with ethical codes of professional behavior, include rule bending, concealing information to help clients conform to preset criteria, spending more time with clients than permitted by norms and regulations, and exaggerating clients' needs to increase budgetary support. Further resistance practices include confronting midmanagement organizational policies, anonymous whistleblowing to the local media to stop planned cutbacks, or refusing to adopt punitive interventions and other "deviant" practices. K. Smith (2007) presented further examples of subtle ways in which Canadian social workers in highly regulated institutional workplaces express minor forms of resistance. She defined these practices as "stealth social work," a set of practices that is beyond the scope of managerial surveillance such as "feigning ignorance," "playing dumb," "purposive forgetting," or simply refusing to report services they have secretly provided to clients—services that were formerly cut back by their agencies (K. Smith, 2007, p. 152). K. Smith (2011) later called on social workers to use the technique of "unmapping." Unmapping involves unraveling the ways in which socially produced institutional spaces and practices contain hidden raced, gendered, and classed social hierarchies that operate through practitioners' professional routines. Floersch (2002) offered another example of professional resistance by documenting how case managers in mental health find ways to work around the limitations and incongruities of practice models. On the macro level, Sangha (2004) and Williams (2002) both documented examples of counterpractices in Canada against discriminatory and racist policies. These counterpractices include opposing systemic efforts to implement Eurocentric interventions for local populations, by documenting multiple modes of discrimination or assembling evidence to provide the rationale for alternative policies. Moth, Greener, and Stoll (2015) reported the rising levels of resistance of practitioners and service users against government policies of austerity and neoliberal restructuring of mental health services in England. Calhoun, Wilson, and Whitmore (2014) highlighted stories of professional resistance at nongovernmental organizations against neoliberal policies on issues of disability in Canada. Dreikosen (2009) made explicit the need to resist and called on social workers to join forces by refusing collectively to provide diagnoses to their clients that reference the pathologically ridden categories of the DSM-V, and instead to use their own dialect and to demand that their own culture be recognized. Ferguson and Lavalette (2006) commented that in 2004 in Liverpool, England, "due to erosion of the profession of social work" (p. 313) social workers went on strike for three months. This was not for better pay as in the case of most strikes, but "to defend their vision of what social work should be like" (p. 314).

However, despite the growing number of studies that report professional acts of opposition, the concept of resistance in social work literature remains theoretically obscure. In the following section, theoretical perspectives of the resistance concept are discussed to provide a more integrated contextualized micro–macro understanding of the concept.

RESISTANCE IN SOCIAL WORK: ASSEMBLING MINOR AND MAJOR PRACTICES

Resistance is a concept loosely defined in social theory. According to Brighenti (2011) the concept

remains insufficiently theorized and has been linked to transgression and subversion. Scholars have used the term "resistance" to describe a wide variety of actions and behaviors at all levels of human social life and in a number of different settings, including economic, social, and political systems (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004). The core elements of resistance, which are common to nearly all uses of the term, relate to two main components. First, most definitions imply an active element; in other words, resistance is usually expressed in actions, whether verbal or physical. Second, resistance involves opposition; it is aimed at countering unjust measures, regulations, or policies that might adversely affect the well-being, freedom, or basic rights of the people who resist. Hollander and Einwohner also pointed to the question of recognition, which raises debate concerning whether resistance needs to be readily apparent to others, in that it is recognized by them as resistance, to be deserving of its name. Rubin (1996) affirmed the conjecture that the term should be reserved for visible, collective acts that result in social change and rejected what he called the minimalist view of resistance, namely acts that do not affect power relations. Scott (2009) pointed to everyday-life acts of resistance as "thin" resistance, whereas overt, manifest, collective actions he defined as "thick" resistance. In a similar way, Hynes (2013) pointed to the two dominant modes of the resistance analyzed in sociology: the macropolitical forms and the micropolitics of everyday resistance. The study of macropolitics includes highly visible, collective struggles against structures of power, associated with social movements and identity politics, whereas the microsociological analyses of resistance take seriously the smaller-scale dynamics of power and resistance. Scott (1985) argued that small-scale struggles to resist oppression and exploitation are the weapons of vulnerable individuals. These weapons may take the form of subtle, even unrecognized activities, such as foot dragging, dissimulation, desertion, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so on. To avoid the risks associated with collective rebellion, people in vulnerable situations may adopt forms of personal and informal resistance (Scott, 1985). Nevertheless, the still prevalent assumption in much of the literature is that the everyday struggles of individuals are necessarily of lesser significance than collective struggles aimed at structural change (Hynes, 2013).

Postmodern and poststructural theoreticians challenged the above two-dimensional, binary conception of resistance (thin or thick, micro or macro, oppression or liberation) and presented resistance as an assemblage of practices that interact with restricting regimes of governance. In particular, micro, therapeutic forms of resistance can actually be sites for macro sociological change. According to Foucault's work, society operates on individuals, groups, or communities through social, economic, political, and symbolic systems of oppression, instilling into them conceptions, norms, and expectations, in ways by which people internalize those hierarchies of power and become compliant with them. By implication, resistance at the microtherapeutic level is to be promoted rather than denigrated if it is self-consciously conducted in the name of challenging established power relations. Although the individual is never free, people have the ability to rework their relationships in established networks of power, thereby creating more flexible social arrangements, and in this process, shape spaces of movement and legitimize multiple personal and professional options (Foucault, 1980). Foucault tried to identify the resources that might enable individuals to contest the prevalent disposition toward compliance in the face of disciplinary pressures that arise from being enmeshed in established power relations. In fact, the means to resist and gain new forms of subjectivity (new kinds of agency) are precisely the techniques and disciplines that are currently at work shaping us as compliant governable subjects. Thus, those practices must not only be forums for contestation, they must also become the creative means for resistance, for forging destinies, and for creating alternative paths of self-expression (Thompson, 2003). According to Foucault, the work of self-formation is embedded in the project of critique. The project of critique must operate consistently on two fronts. People must discern features within the present techniques of governance that would permit, and even enable, reflective resistance. This means transferring people's attention from the oppressed to the oppressor, delineating the generative core of the practices that shape current modes of existence, and testing their limits. Second, people must use the same procedures, ceremonies, arenas, and public forums exploited in the execution of these practices, together with the various kinds of knowledge that they imbue, to thwart the process of instilling compliant identities and taxonomies (Thompson, 2003). Foucault's project of critique is expressed in the deconstruction of the canonically established assumptions of truth and in the critical analysis of

binary oppositions. Accordingly, oppression and resistance, which are usually portrayed as antonymous and exclusive terms, may interact, coexist, and even nurture each other. Deleuze and Guattari's (1975, 1987) concept of "becoming minority" is a core element in the acts of resistance that Foucault heralded. In their opinion, minorities are not specific groups of people; rather, they are fluid movements of creativity that subvert the dominant—that is, majoritarian—identities that our current arrangements bestow on us, movements as creative action that undermine established power relationships from within (May, 2003). Thus, according to Deleuze and Guattari (1975, 1987), to resist power relations, one should become minority, should push himself or herself to the margins. Micropolitical action, therefore, has the ability to express another potential community, to force the means for another consciousness and sensibility that produces an entirely different narrative (Deleuze & Guattari, 1975, 1987).

Accordingly, resistance may differ in its level of visibility and recognition. It may be carried in subtle, indirect ways or in overt, articulated actions. These acts of opposition may be individual or collective, material or symbolic, conscious or unconscious, spontaneous or well orchestrated, local or global, grounded in everyday professional life or other relevant spheres of professional participation. These professional actions can be targeted against both the practical and discursive aspects of the oppressive reality to be resisted.

DISCUSSION

This article challenges essentialist views of resistance and draws attention to resistance as a constructed reality affected by gender, cultural, and social context. This position, also associated with cultural relativism, emphasizes how the presence of power relations and the discursive dimension of social reality suggest that there are a variety of legitimate ways to express resistance. Social work is one of the areas in which the complexity and contradictions of the resistance concept becomes clearly evident. This article suggests a more integrated view of resistance that reflects the plurality of modes and levels of resistance in social work. By widening the definition of resistance and recognizing its situated construction, the subtle, routine, micro, and discursive forms of resistance, usually overlooked in more sweeping "all or nothing" definitions, can be appreciated. However, the challenges for professional resistance in social work still remain

numerous and can be arranged into three categories: institutional, professional, and personal.

First, institutional challenges include confronting the consolidation of managerialism and market-oriented institutional cultures in social work organizational settings today. This trend has had profound implications for the subjectivities of social work professionals, with a shift in emphasis from trust and personal qualities to one of audits and external regulation, "customer rights," greater cost and output control, improved accountability, and performance monitoring (Thomas & Davies, 2005). These institutional challenges includes dealing with institutional cultures characterized by rigid, highly hierarchical, authoritative organizations. Institutional cultures restrict bottom-up social workers' self-organization and public, mandatory social work, which responds to governmental policies that impose compliance to top-down decisions and restrict discretionary space for professional resistance. These institutional cultures are commonly based on managerialism, which is characterized by the application of business management principles and market-centered ideologies. Managerialism frames resistance as unproductive, unprofessional behavior.

Second, in addition to institutional challenges, social workers' paths to resistance may be hampered by professional socialization. In many cases, social work professional training is deeply embedded in therapeutic cultures, which overlook social workers' capacity to identify, support, or stimulate clients' resistance to oppression (George, Silver, & Preston, 2013). The clinical training may prompt workers to interpret resistance in a decontextualized, apolitical manner and reduce it to psychological resistance to treatment (Baines, 2007). Social workers' training, which stresses individual practice over community and policy practice training, does not always provide social workers with the knowledge, awareness, and skills to identify, support, or motivate resistance. These professional preferences reflect a wider neoliberal attitude, another challenge to resistance that is deeply embedded in clear differences in the power and prestige of the helping professions (Gilbert & Powell, 2010).

Third, social workers may face personal challenges related to the intersections between gender and class identities. Social work is seen as a female profession, which takes care of disempowered communities in terms of class, ethnicity, age (children and elderly), and other identities. Despite social changes following the feminist revolution, women are still perceived as

workers that belong to the private sphere, within interpersonal relationships, and less located in the public space—space in which macro-scale resistance seems to take place. In other words, societal common views of resistance that portray resistance as a male domain represent a challenge for social work resistance. The interlocked relationship between gendered conceptions of social work and colonized views of social work oppressed communities constitutes a major challenge for professional resistance (Abramovitz, 2005, 2012).

If social work's mission is to emancipate, empower, and enable people in vulnerable situations, then it must acknowledge resistance as a legitimate part of its professional repertoire. Therefore, rather than viewing the profession as a compliant body, the article focuses on how to rewrite dominant therapeutic, organizational, and social discourses, and how to foster an assemblage of resistance modes that challenge oppressive realities and their enactments within organizations, communities, and political systems.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE, TRAINING, AND RESEARCH

At the practice level, resistance may take three main interrelated paths. First, social workers may emphasize individual or collective opposition to institutional or social policies that contradict core values of the profession. These actions can be carried out at the workplace level as well as on a broader scale. Their opposing acts can range from not writing memos; refusing to cooperate with managerial dictates; refusing to be dispassionate about client and team members; or challenging meanings of certain actions, values, and commitments. In doing so, they render discourse less robust and unified, thus creating space for further challenge and reinscription, and enabling others to begin to think and behave differently. Although the examples of resistance might seem minor and constrained, they play a part in the social worker becoming more autonomous and empowered. Further actions may include personal meetings with directors to voice professional concerns regarding the social costs or unethical character of new policies, organizing expert round tables to counter the consequences of those policies; assembling client testimonies; writing policy papers that offer alternative options to socially damaging policies; mobilizing social work associations to support collective professional disobedience; and a myriad of other legitimate professional actions that are well documented in social work literature (Forde & Lynch, 2014; Gregory, 2010; Ungar, 2004).

The second course of practice consists of actions aimed at identifying and assisting clients, groups, and communities in their resistance to oppression. These actions may include promoting activities and programs that provide information; mobilizing community attention; raising awareness; increasing clients' self-organization; offering training for advocacy; creating room for collaboration among different constituencies with similar interests; and enhancing potential cooperation efforts with local, national, or global coalitions. All these actions belong to the social work professional and historical heritage of resistance (Reisch & Garvin, 2015).

A third path for professional resistance includes challenging hegemonies, confronting dominant professional and social discourse, and the deconstruction of established truths deeply rooted in maintaining unequal power relations at the institutional and social level. This deconstruction process connotes a critical search to discuss the psychosocial political validity of social services and policies by challenging the legitimacy of hierarchies of significance, opening the door for alternative recognition of multiple professional and social options (J.K.A. Smith, 2005). Social workers can document and publish critical accounts of social work daily practice and clients' lived experiences in ways that destabilize institutionalized truths that justify ethical and social violations (Garrett, 2015). At the training level, professional training may help workers to interpret resistance in a more contextualized, political way. Social work training and education should provide social workers with the values, knowledge, awareness, and skills to identify, support, and motivate both their own and their clients' resistance. At the research level, a critical discussion on this topic raises the need to validate these practices through empirical research, that is, focusing on the different types of resistance and evaluating the efficiency of these various resistance modes in promoting the values and goals of the profession. Research should address the impact of these practices on different issues such as professional identity, job satisfaction, client–worker relationships, and other important variables. **SW**

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