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**“You probably shouldn't trust me”: Exploring Socialist and/or Abolitionist Social Worker  
Resistance in the Workplace**

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## Abstract

Social work is a profession deeply entrenched in sustaining settler-colonial and capitalist hegemony (de Montigny, 2022; Fortier & Hon-Sing Wong, 2019; Jeffery, 2002; Thobani, 2007). This contradictory positioning has led to ongoing tensions between enacting care and exerting control within social work practice (Chambon, 1999). This research explored how socialist and/or abolitionist social workers use their political worldviews and values when engaging in social work practice, and more specifically in resistance strategies in the workplace. Specific emphasis was placed on exploring how these social workers engage with institutional processes that are carceral in nature, alongside how they conceptualize their organizing/activism efforts within their own social work practice. Using in-depth semi-structured interviews, it was found that social workers utilize various strategies and tactics to negotiate their professionalized power. This active process of negotiation was best described through the notion of a “dance” between the client and social worker to mitigate the risk of a breach in confidentiality. Among socialist and/or abolitionist practitioners in private practice, resistance was more reflective through the incorporation of political commitments within individualized client care. This was presented through modalities oriented towards somatic processing and self-discovery, as opposed to skills-based approaches found within Evidence-Based Practice. Participants also shared how politicizing therapy operates through orienting clients to build community and engage in organizing/activism work. Lastly, participants displayed a tendency to compartmentalize responsibility when trespassing their ethics, which is attributed to the contradictory terrain of socialist and/or abolitionist social work under a settler-colonial and capitalist system.

*Keywords:* Socialism, Abolitionism, Resistance, Negotiation, Organizing, Activism, Carceral.

خوش آنکه در طریق عدالت قدم زنیم  
 با این مرام در همه عالم، علم زنیم  
 این شکل زندگی نبود قابل دوام  
 خوب است این طریقه بد را به هم زنیم  
 قانون عادلانه‌تر از این کنیم وضع  
 آنگاه بر تمام قوانین قلم زنیم  
 دست صفا دهیم به معمار عدل و داد  
 پا بر سر عوالم جور و ستم زنیم (...)  
 — فرخی یزدی، سوسیالیست ایرانی

It is pleasant to walk on the path of justice

As with this manner, we can raise our own flag—in the universe.

This way of living is not enduring,

Therefore, it would be beneficial to destroy this ill system.

We should constitute laws more just,

We can then abrogate all the other existing laws—we must.

We should shake hands with the architect of justice and equity

We should step on worlds of tyranny and oppression (...)

— *Farrokhi Yazdi, Iranian Socialist, 1921*

(Shahnahpur, 2022, pp. 146, 157).

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There is so much more to come.

With Love and in Solidarity,

Hiva

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

While studying my Bachelor of Social Work, I found myself aligning with socialist and abolitionist politics and soon became involved in a pan-Canadian revolutionary socialist organization. Upon graduating, I received a job working in an outpatient hospital program which led to deep feelings of discomfort for the ways I was complicit in covert, and overt, harm when operating within dominant pathologizing medical models alongside carceral systems. This includes the ways clinicians were instructed to corroborate with emergency services for mental health support. I wished to learn from experienced socialist and/or abolitionist social workers to see how they negotiated the power, coercion, and control inherent to social work practice through resistance strategies (Bonia, 2012; Joseph, 2013; Mckeown et al., 2019; Scheyett, 2006).

### Situating the Research

While existing literature exploring critical social work in practice exists (Asakura et al., 2023), its focus was primarily on the specific clinical strategies and social theories used during a simulated individual therapy session. This study did not explore the specific political positioning of these clinicians (i.e., socialist and/or abolitionist). As well, it did not examine the structural barriers that would limit a clinician to practice in line with their political beliefs and commitments, or the ways this would therefore require resistance. This is especially relevant in clinical settings which predetermine the modalities and approaches to be used. Moreover, the study did not explore how the clinicians would respond if “imminent risk” were present in the scenario. Meaning, how would the clinicians navigate the various institutional expectations present within their college’s<sup>1</sup> “duty to report,” subsequent involvement with Children’s Aid, as

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<sup>1</sup> The term “College” will be referenced throughout this PRP and is in reference to the Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Service Workers (OCSWSSW).

well as expectations to contact police. This study also did not engage with an abolitionist perspective that encourages “criminal” social work; that is, to engage in “ignoring, breaking, and directly challenging harmful, racist, sexist, and antipoor rules and laws” (Gallant, 2024, p. 126).

The academic abolitionist literature was largely limited to recent book publications from 2024, one based in Canada and one based in the United States of America. Within this work resistance is identified in various capacities, namely by avoiding working with state authorities such as the police (Gallant, 2024; The Network to Advance Abolitionist Social Work [NAASW], 2024), being transparent regarding reporting procedures (Jones & Jacobs, 2024) and being creative to provide clients with material support (Gallant, 2024). This includes providing access to a service when a client would otherwise be ineligible or finding ways to redistribute institutional funds to a client (Gallant, 2024). This critical literature generally called for practitioners to be in solidarity with clients and to engage in collective action for larger movement building towards structural change (Ferguson & Lavalette, 2004; Gallant, 2024; Garrett, 2018; Hon-Sing Wong et al., 2022; NAASW, 2024).

While the abolitionist literature held a consistent anti-capitalist perspective, it did not explicitly explore the role of additional political frameworks—such as being a socialist—within social work resistance strategies. The implications of these two political identities are of interest to see how they complement or contradict one another within a critical social work praxis and the subsequent implication this may have for resistance. This research sought to address this specific gap, as well as explored if the literature’s proposed strategies of resistance are consistent with the practice of socialist and/or abolitionist social workers in Ontario. As well, this research will explore the internal experience of working within these carceral systems and negotiating between care and control in daily practice.

## **Research Question and Significance**

This research explores how socialist and/or abolitionist social workers use their political worldviews and values when engaging in social work practice, and more specifically in resistance strategies in the workplace. This research has a particular focus in how these social workers engage with institutional processes that are carceral in nature such as breaching confidentiality by contacting the police. In this, I explore how these social workers manage moments when their practice decisions run counter to their political commitments and beliefs. There is also an inquiry as to how participants conceptualize their personal organizing/activism work alongside their social work practice. This qualitative study undertakes this question through in-depth semi-structured interviews.

A socialist political framing was decided for this study based on this researcher's personal experience in organizing spaces which value both socialism and abolitionism. It was also of interest to explore how an explicitly socialist orientation would overlap with, and potentially vary from, an abolitionist framework. While having a staunch anti-capitalist lens, the current abolitionist social work literature does not make mention of socialism as an alternative economy nor is there mention of Marxist economic or political thought.

## **Overview of Practice-Based Research Paper (PRP)**

The next section, *Chapter 2: Literature Review*, will provide a critical account on the current state of knowledge relating to socialist, abolitionist, and critical approaches to social work practice and provide an explanation for the direction that was eventually undertaken for this research. *Chapter 3: Research Design* will provide a deeper explanation for my chosen theoretical frameworks, these being Interlocking Oppressions, Marxism, Abolitionism, and a Desire-Based Framework as per Eve Tuck. My subsequent research design, ethical

considerations, and recommendations for future research will then be outlined. *Chapter 4: Findings and Discussion* will discuss and analyze my developed themes. These being, Theme 1: Complex Negotiation of Power; with the following subthemes: (a) Conceptions of Power; (b) The “Dance” to Access Dignified Care; (c) Documentation as a Means for Power. Theme 2: Socialist and/or Abolitionist Praxis includes the following subthemes: (a) Organizing/Activism Efforts Within Social Work Practice; (b) Modalities and Approaches Used in Practice; (c) The Complexities of Resistance. Following this, *Chapter 5: Conclusion* will provide a summary with final remarks, including my personal reflections and insights for critical social work practice.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this review of the literature, I explored the state of knowledge relating to critical, socialist, and abolitionist social work in practice. As a result, I sought literature that explored the origins of social work and present-day coercive practices that are often taken for granted as ‘best practice’ in clinical social work. Many studies challenge this notion and urge towards alternative practices that seek to explore how power is distributed and how social workers can engage in resistance and towards a liberatory future. This literature mostly consists of qualitative studies published as journal articles, alongside emerging abolitionist literature that was largely discovered through recent book publications. The identified themes include: Problematizing Social Work, Critical vs. Clinical Social Work: Tensions for Praxis; Critical Social Work in Practice; and Working With(in) the System? In doing so, this critical review identified critiques and gaps among the literature which have implications on the direction of this research.

Within its initial iteration, this literature review focused on critical and/or abolitionist approaches to social work. However, upon further development of this research, critical was changed to “socialist” to both specify and strengthen my area of inquiry and subsequent political analysis. This was decided as socialism was of particular interest when initially researching critical social work. In spite of this change, this review of the literature continues to reference “critical social work” to access a wider amount of data which has relevance to, and overlaps with, socialist and/or abolitionist approaches. The inclusion of a socialist and Marxist approach were additions in the later stage of research.

### **Problematizing Social Work**

When sharing that I am a social worker, I am often met with vehement responses saying I am a “great person” who must be doing incredible, but hard, work. This often leads to feelings of

discomfort as I reflect upon the historical construction of social work, its continuation in the legitimacy of the State, and my personal feelings of failure in day-to-day practice. Social work's origins can be attributed to the development of the welfare state following the State's transition to laissez-faire capitalism which exacerbated existing class disparities (Thobani, 2007). Thobani conceptualizes this State intervention as stabilizing the crisis inherent to the capitalist system, therefore legitimizing the State and undermining class solidarity. Jeffery (2002) and Thobani (2007) identify the role of the welfare state in reinforcing a national identity through constructions of 'difference' to uphold white, bourgeois ideals through state surveillance and control. This historical account is clear through the violent subjugation of Indigenous populations (Fortier & Hon-Sing Wong, 2019; Hoselton, 2024; Jeffery, 2002; Thobani, 2007), alongside others on the basis of race, class, and gender (Gallant, 2024; Joseph, 2013). This notion is contradictory to a larger assumption amongst much of the literature (Asakura et al., 2023; Brown, 2021; Butler-Warke et al., 2020; Ferguson & Lavalette, 2004; Hill et al., 2024) that social work was a profession rooted in care and social justice, which has now been negatively influenced by neoliberalism and subsequent managerialism.

The assumption that present-day mental health techniques—such as involuntary admissions, restraints, seclusion—are more humane 'treatments' for madness is problematized amongst the literature often through a Foucauldian lens (Bonia, 2006; Joseph, 2013; Mckeown et al., 2019). In a study exploring mental health legislation in Newfoundland and Labrador, Bonia (2006) identifies the ways "rights-based [...] [legislation] considers the patient's right to health and safety and the health care system's *obligation to provide interventions* [emphasis added] and support services" (p. 2). This assumption is predicated on service providers knowing what is best

for clients<sup>2</sup>, and implementing ‘violent but necessary’ practices (Mckeown et al., 2019) that employ surveillance reminiscent of a panopticon prison (Bonia, 2006). Through a similar analysis, Chapman (2014) provides an autoethnography of his experience, and subsequent reflections, of restraining Indigenous children. Chapman explained that this institutionalized violence is normalized through processes such as ‘debriefing’ to ultimately provide psychological comfort and justify this form of violence as necessary. The author went on to identify that practitioners who objected to, or were distressed by, this form of violence were ‘psycho-pathologized’ as needing to work on themselves (Chapman, 2014, p. 30).

### **Critical vs. Clinical Social Work: Tensions for Praxis**

#### ***Socialism and Marxist Social Work***

Socialism is a political theory posed as an alternative to our current economic structure bound by private ownership and profit from surplus value (Mullaly & Dupré, 2019). Socialism can be identified as,

- (1) a planned economy geared toward the fulfillment of the human need of all rather than a free market geared to profits for a few;
- (2) public ownership (or control by regulation) of productive property for the benefit of all rather than private ownership for the benefit of a restricted circle of private owners;
- (3) equality of condition, or at least a serious effort to reduce, as much as possible, major inequalities of wealth, income, social status, and political influence;
- and (4) a belief that selfishness is the result of living in our

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<sup>2</sup> The term “clients” is used in place of the commonly used “service user” due to the latter term emphasizing free will in accessing services, which I argue can be fairly contested within the context of involuntary, or coerced, care. As well, the term “service user” is not commonly used in my own vocabulary, nor was it used by any participant in this study.

present flawed social institutions and that social change can produce less selfish people who are concerned with the welfare of others. (Dickerson & Flanagan, 1986, as cited in Mullaly & Dupré, 2019, p. 118).

While socialism can be associated with varying theoretical positions, a Marxist lens will be discussed further for the purpose of this research. A Marxist perspective calls for social workers to hold insight regarding the ways they are subject to, and implicated in, the reproduction of social relations and social order; in turn, a Marxist social work praxis calls for solidarity with clients through direct political action to work towards a world based on freedom, solidarity, and care (de Montigny, 2022).

Mullaly and Dupré (2019) identify two approaches to Marxist social work, that is *evolutionary* and *revolutionary*. While both approaches are working towards a socialist alternative, an evolutionary approach believes this alternative economy can be worked towards from within capitalism's existing institutions such as the welfare state and trade unions. This approach is noted to be more closely aligned to a social democratic approach seeking to 'transform' capitalism, while noting evolutionary socialism would be more inclined to work towards restructuring the economic system (Mullaly & Dupré, 2019). In contrast, revolutionary Marxist social work rejects socialist potential within the pre-existing institutions under capitalism, excluding trade unions (Mullaly & Dupré, 2019). This approach rejects reformist approaches to socialism and builds off ongoing critique (Thobani, 2007) that the welfare state reinforces capitalism as a viable economic system and therefore minimizes the potential for "social revolt" (Pritchard & Taylor, 1978, pp. 89-90, as cited in Mullaly & Dupré, 2019). Mullaly and Dupré explain a revolutionary approach to social work is limited in its practice opportunities, due to its rejection of working within these institutions, but note potential roles

may include being “self-supporting or employed by a radical union” (p. 159). The framing of evolutionary and revolutionary social work parallels ongoing tensions within the abolitionist (Rasmussen, 2024) and critical (McLaughlin, 2011; Mckeown et al., 2019) literature which seek to explore what is possible within reformist and transformative approaches to care.

de Montigny (2022) similarly identifies a Marxist social work praxis would prioritize solidarity, whether it be among colleagues through union organizing or alongside clients to lobby for better supports and protections. In this, Marxist social workers aim to change people’s thoughts regarding settler-colonial hegemony, while also encouraging political action through a diversity of tactics to support other community organizations and connected struggles (de Montigny, 2022).

**Marxism and Post-Modernism.** Ferguson and Lavalette (2004) are two Marxist theorists who argue post-modern conceptions of power “avoids focusing on those who wield real economic and political power within society” (p. 304). The authors propose that Marx’s theory of alienation—referring to a process in which a person feels alienated from the production of their labour, product of their labour, as well as alienation from those around them—as a viable alternative to power discourse for emancipatory social work practice (Ferguson & Lavalette, 2004). To illustrate this point, the authors provide an example based in Burnley, England in which a series of racist hate crimes took place against Asian community members. They situate these racist attacks within the context of 20 years of neoliberal disenfranchisement which scapegoated the Asian community for the plight of the white working class. The authors position the perpetrators of these attacks as wholly powerless due to alienation. While this critique of economic disenfranchisement and dividing tactic holds merit, I contest this ultimate class reductionist approach that does not view power and oppression as interlocking. Racial and class-

based oppression should be analyzed for the complex ways they reinforce one another along the matrix of domination (Collins, 2000).

### ***Abolitionist Social Work***

Within an abolitionist framework, “carceral systems and ideologies of domination are sustained by control of, *power over* [emphasis added], and exploitation of people and communities” (NAASW, 2024, p. 17). Through this lens, power is conceptualized as being dispersed through the top-down, by carceral systems, while positioning social work as a direct agent in exercising this form of oppression on behalf of the State.

An ideal abolitionist praxis is framed as taking place outside of institutionalized supports—such as non-profits—as to not be “constrained by arbitrary rules made to protect organizations from liability” as well as responsibility to funders (Skeete & Bergen, 2024, p. 86). Therefore, community members can meaningfully engage in support that would otherwise be deemed as unprofessional, while still setting boundaries as necessary. However, the authors acknowledge an ongoing tension between seeking funding and remaining grassroots due to the material impact funding can have on their community efforts (Skeete & Bergen, 2024). The abolitionist literature is ultimately forgiving with respect to the complex positioning of social workers who are bound to legal and political structures, while urging them to engage in disobedience whenever possible. As per the works of Gallant (2024), they urge social workers to put the risk of disobedience within the context of the harms experienced by subjugated communities, noting that clients are often more harshly punished for breaking the rules as opposed to social workers.

Ultimately, abolitionist social work positions practitioners to “dismantle structures of harm and death while imagining and building life affirming structures anew and transforming

people's material conditions today" (Rasmussen, 2024, p. 23). This positioning is compatible with Marxist conceptions of ruling class power and subsequent calls for resistance. In this, we are urged to act in solidarity with clients to engage in larger movement building; as opposed to operating from a charity framework which legitimizes the State and is "rooted in maintaining inequality" (NAASW, 2024, p. 17). There is a lack of clarification among the abolitionist literature as to how a position of solidarity is possible within the professional positioning of social work. However, the abolitionist literature identifies certain solidarity efforts, such as mutual aid, as taking place outside of the State (Rasmussen, 2024).

### ***Critical Social Work***

The critical social work tradition is largely identified as being rooted in radical social movements from the 1960s-1970s which have progressed to incorporate various theoretical frameworks such as Marxist, feminist, critical race, queer, and post-structural among others (Asakura et al., 2023; Healy, 2018). The scholarship exploring critical social work in practice is limited. Of the qualitative studies identified, only one (Asakura et al., 2023) utilizes the concept of 'critical social work' that aligns with the general understandings of this literature review. The works of McLaughlin (2011), Rice (2023) and Slater (2020) explore how social justice is conceptualized and implemented by social workers in their clinical practice. However, this framework of social justice is often positioned within liberal notions of needing equality and empowerment. Within the work of Slater (2020) exploring how private practice clinicians commit to social justice, the study concludes by stating clinicians would "do more social justice work if provided with specific education and training that would enhance clinical advocacy *competency* [emphasis added]" (p. 367). Within the critical literature, this notion of 'competency' is problematized as being reductive and reinforcing Eurocentric perspectives of

‘truth’ as objective knowledge to be known by a social worker (Heron, 2019). Similarly, abolitionist perspectives posit that social justice within social work practice is “diminished” due to institutionalized support relying on practices of “coercion and control” (Skeete & Bergen, 2024, p. 89), a perspective that is not identified within Slater’s work.

**Ethical Trespass: Post-Modern Conceptions of Power.** In an article titled “Innocence Lost and Suspicion Found: Do we Educate for or Against Social Work?” Rossiter (2001) provides a critical framework to re-contextualize power through Foucault’s concept of governmentality. Therefore, seemingly mundane acts of ‘helping’ are positioned for the ways in which they subtly reinforce hierarchies, knowledge systems, and the State (Rossiter, 2001). Rossiter urges a shift from a position of ‘innocence’ to ‘suspicion’ in order to critically engage with moments of trespass and “evaluate consequences ... and minimize risks,” ultimately advocating this is “an ethics that is a practice of freedom” (p. 4). In 2019, Rossiter went on to position the practice of a discourse analysis as a tangible means to reflect on power and subsequent possibilities within practice. Rossiter’s 2001 and 2019 works hold implications for how critical or abolitionist social workers, providing pragmatic support in the interim, can navigate the contradictory terrain inherent to a critical praxis within a capitalist and colonial system.

### ***Clinical Social Work***

According to the National Association of Social Workers (2005, p. 8), clinical social work “addresses the needs of individuals, families, couples, and groups affected by life changes and challenges, including mental disorders and other behavioral disturbances” (as cited in Asakura et al., 2020). While clinical social work has made efforts to incorporate so-called progressive measures such as client-centered care or anti-oppressive practice, there is a

documented disconnect in perspectives between critical and clinical social workers. In a qualitative study conducted by McLaughlin (2011) exploring how clinical social workers perceived the concept of social justice in their work, some clinicians noted the very existence of a welfare state, among other social services such as child welfare and the hospital system, as indicative of social justice being present in the field. Within this same study, other practitioners problematized this notion and felt as though social justice was limited, if not impossible, within our current institutionalized structures; some practitioners conceptualized their contributions to social justice as taking place outside of their professional position (McLaughlin, 2011). This speaks to a larger discussion about whether a revolutionary praxis is possible within the confines of social work professionalism and its complementary institutions.

**Competence and Evidence-Based Practice (EBP).** Amongst the literature, there is a consistent theme of identifying ‘competency-based’ social work as a dominant practice implemented following neoliberal expectations of work and production (Aronson & Hemingway, 2011; Asakura et al., 2023; Heron, 2019; Rossiter & Heron, 2011). As a result, there has been an increase in evidence-based practice (EBP) which standardizes treatment in hopes of achieving predictable outcomes (Brown, 2021; Heron, 2019; Scheyett, 2006). EBP is contested for “short-term, and often decontextualizing strategies...which reinforce social injustice through its biomedicalized and depoliticized emphasis on disorders, diagnosis, and mental illness” (Brown, 2021, pp. 645-646). Further, Scheyett (2006) uses a Foucauldian lens to explore how EBP, and the framing of practitioner ‘evidence’ as best practice, can marginalize the knowledge and lived experience of clients should they not be ‘responsive’ to treatment. This article provides a helpful reframing of what is considered a ‘success’ within EBP, with a “consumer” stating “a person who receive[s] services from an ACT team and make[s] no community disturbances is a good

outcome—they are quiet, perhaps leading a life of desperate isolation, but considered a success” (Scheyett & Childers, “submitted for publication,” as cited by Scheyett, 2006, 76). This reframing of success holds implications for how critical or abolitionist social workers—especially those working within standardized EBP programs—assess ‘success’ and respond accordingly. For example, do these practitioners advocate against a standard discharge should a client not view their needs as met and continue to seek treatment? As well, within this literature search, no studies were found exploring how specific evidence-based practices could (or could not) be utilized within the framework of a critical, socialist or abolitionist social work practice. It is of note that Scheyett (2006) does not dismiss the potential efficacy of any EBP, but urges practitioners to critically engage with the aforementioned concerns and ask “at what cost?” (p. 83).

### **Critical Social Work in Practice**

Within the literature, critical practice is conceptualized as taking place through various material and ideological means and varied depending on the theoretical framework. Asakura et al. (2023) interviewed eight social workers across Canada who identified themselves as engaging in critical social work in clinical practice. As a result, four themes were identified: “(1) create and hold a space of safety, (2) take an unassuming position while holding theoretical assumptions, (3) peel off the layers of the presenting problems, and (4) take a non-neutral therapeutic stance” (p. 346). These social workers were found to occupy a “negotiated space” between flexible theoretical perspectives and client subjectivities (Asakura et al., 2023, p. 352). In doing so, it was found the social workers held a “dual focus – remaining attentive to presenting concerns while simultaneously analyzing how they relate to social injustices” (p. 352). Within this study as well as the larger literature, no specific therapeutic modalities were

identified as being well-suited for critical social work practice. However, Johnstone (2021) acknowledges Narrative Therapy as having potential for social justice, noting its documented compatibility with Foucauldian notions of power and knowledge.

### ***Resistance***

Within the abolitionist literature, resistance is identified as taking place through various means. NAASW (2024) notes some social workers are “disengaging from harmful practices like mandated reporting and violating people back to incarceration while working in State-adjacent programs, organizations, or job functions” (p. 18). Gallant (2024) corroborates with this, calling for social workers to resist calling the police or working with State authorities and if unavoidable, withhold information. In both her 2024 and 2025 works, Gallant acknowledges social workers are also balancing the need to protect themselves, their families and livelihood when engaging in disobedience. In turn, Gallant (2025) identifies non-compliance as a practice that requires skill and preparation which is increasingly important in our current sociopolitical climate. Jones and Jacobs (2024) propose alternatives for when these harmful practices cannot be avoided, namely calling for social workers to be wholly transparent with clients regarding internal procedures and decision-making processes that would warrant a duty to report. As well, they go further to recommend social workers disclose their personal values and ethical concerns with respect to these laws, while noting they are “forced to comply” (p. 85). Creativity was identified as an alternative form of resistance to determine ways to subvert institutional bounds such as ‘fudging’ grant applications that would otherwise be rejected, finding ways to redistribute institutional funds into the hands of community members, and ignoring ‘technical disqualifications’ for program eligibility (Gallant, 2024).

### ***Calls for Solidarity***

Solidarity is a common notion amongst the Marxist (de Montigny, 2022; Ferguson & Lavalette, 2004; Garrett, 2018; Mullaly & Dupré, 2019), post-structural (Rossiter, 2001; Mullaly & Dupré, 2019), and abolitionist (Gallant, 2024; Hon-Sing Wong et al., 2022; NAASW, 2024) social work literature that urges practitioners to engage in collective action for larger movement building towards structural change. However, Hill et al. (2024) explicitly sought to develop a theoretical framework of solidarity for radical social work practice and put forward the “support–time–relationship (STR) model” (p. 450). ‘Support’ is identified as direct client support that goes beyond managerialist approaches to care that views clients as outcomes or risks. ‘Time’ refers to clinicians providing solidarity by resisting time restrictions through working additional, or unconventional, hours to provide more quality care. Lastly, an emphasis on ‘Relationship’ meant rejecting the pathologization of clients alongside an ‘objective’ professionalism to allow for more meaningful relationships (Hill et al., 2024). This article provides a structuralist approach to viewing the similarities between clients and service providers and makes a subsequent call for solidarity as a means to resist the contradictory positioning of social work practice. However, this article does not interrogate potential limitations to solidarity within the client-clinician relationship that holds tension between care and control. As well, there is also no larger critique for the ways social work engages in the maintenance of capitalism and reinforces State hegemony.

### **Working With(in) the System?**

Within publicly funded services, clinicians are often bound to bureaucratic processes and organizational standards (Healy, 2018) which can limit their freedoms (whether perceived or material) with respect to critical practice. Managerialism often posits performance targets to

ensure employees meet funding expectations which holds implications for not only the quality of service provided but the surveillance of employees (Heron, 2019). Jones and Jacobs (2024) speak to the trend of social workers entering private practice to avoid working within a ‘broken system,’ specifically in reference to avoiding the forced institutionalization of clients. The authors then identify the importance of a transformative and harm reduction approach as a means for abolitionist social workers to resist neoliberal privatization and support clients accessing public mental health services.

In an article titled “Playing the Game: Reflections on (Intentional) Institutional Capture and Working for Mental Health Justice,” Buckler (2023) shifts the narrative of social workers passively being controlled by institutional capture, to actively playing the game presented by institutional structures through means such as language and paperwork. In their work, Buckler explores a larger dilemma of reinforcing the system by playing along, while simultaneously accessing short-term gains which can have material impacts on individuals and communities. This perspective, reminiscent of a ‘harm reduction’ approach for clients accessing care, is discussed in various capacities amongst the literature. NAASW (2024) acknowledged many social workers are limited to working in proximity to the carceral state and suggests working strategically to offer as non-coercive care as possible, as opposed to absolute divestment. As well, Mckeown et al. (2019) identify a tension between reformist and transformative efforts and situated their work through “pragmatic efforts to minimize the violence that patients are, right now, subject to” (p. 264). These authors go on to propose an “‘Inside-out’ strategy – reforming from inside while simultaneously working towards a transformative ideal, and opening up the system to be receptive to alternative organizational forms articulated externally” (p. 276). This succinct suggestion is not explicitly objected to within the literature. Most of the literature

criticizing social work provide, to some extent, suggestions and implications for critical social work in practice; as opposed to providing critiques and identifying pragmatic efforts in the interim as obsolete. However, it is of note that NAASW identified specific fields in which abolitionist social work practice is not possible; specifically, working for “police, jails, prisons, US Immigration and Customs Enforcement, law enforcement supervision (pretrial, probation, parole), district/prosecuting attorney offices, and child welfare agencies” as they are positioned as agents of the State (NAASW, 2024, p. 18). This source implies there are more or less ‘innocent’ social work practices, a belief that is seemingly antithetical to the works of Rossiter (2001) who understands power as reinforcing governmentality through mundane acts. Despite this, it is difficult to ignore material differences in perpetuated harm within different practice contexts such as working in Children’s Aid vs. a food bank. This consistent tension presented amongst the literature speaks to the need for a desire-based framework as per the works of Tuck (2009) to challenge binaries of “reproduction versus resistance” (p. 419).

### **Critique**

While existing literature exploring implementations of critical social work in practice exists (Asakura et al., 2023), its focus was primarily on the specific clinical strategies and perspectives used during a simulated individual therapy session. While these perspectives are relevant and necessary, I wonder how clinicians within publicly-funded services—especially within a clinical setting that predetermines modalities to be used—go about implementing critical perspectives. As well, this study does not explore how the clinicians would respond if “imminent risk” were present in the scenario. Meaning, how would the clinicians navigate the various institutional expectations present within their college’s “duty to report,” subsequent involvement with Children’s Aid, as well as expectations to contact police. The aforementioned

study did not engage with an abolitionist perspective that encourages “criminal” social work; that is, to engage in “ignoring, breaking, and directly challenging harmful, racist, sexist, and antipoor rules and laws” (Gallant, 2024, p. 126).

The work of Buckler (2023) was instrumental in shifting my perspective and wanting to explore how clinicians navigate and conceptualize the “[...] broader ideological struggle in favour of the immediate needs of a situation” (p. 1829). This has led me to reflect on what revolutionary social work practice means for me, which has included reevaluating what is possible with respect to “wellness” under a capitalist system—among other interlocking oppressions—without revolutionary change. This can have important implications on the political positioning of social workers (such as being a socialist) and how they conceptualize, and make use of, their politics within social work practice.

It is of note, the social work literature did not differentiate between how various theoretical underpinnings (such as Marxism) complements or contradicts abolitionist social work perspectives. Considering various theoretical perspectives can work in congruence with “socialist” or “abolitionist” social work, this literature review does not identify these as synonyms of one another. However, as shown through the literature, various critical and abolitionist perspectives hold similar goals with respect to collective liberation and seek to implement ‘alternative’ approaches to orthodox social work practices. Therefore, this research operated under the assumption that research participants that hold overlapping identities (such as “abolitionist”) may hold different practice values and priorities based on additional theoretical or political perspectives.

While various authors among the socialist, abolitionist, and critical social work literature discussed potential means for resistance and critical praxis, it was of interest to see if these

proposed frameworks and suggestions are congruent with the experience of socialist and/or abolitionist social workers in various practice settings in Southwest Ontario. As well, the examined literature did not directly explore the internal experience of socialist and/or abolitionist social workers, namely how they navigate and cope with the tension and cognitive dissonance of being in the field.

## **Conclusion**

In completing this analysis of the literature, a more comprehensive understanding of critical, socialist, and abolitionist social work practice was assumed. Social work's historical positioning and its subsequent implication in the State's capitalist and colonial project, has positioned the importance of these critical methods. Various critical social work perspectives were explored to see how they complement and contradict with orthodox social work. This led to the exploration of resistance to see how these theoretical understandings can be used in social work practice. Various gaps were identified in the literature and subsequently framed the direction of inquiry taken by this research.

## Chapter 3: Research Design

### Theoretical Frameworks

#### *Interlocking Oppressions*

This research is underpinned by the theoretical framework of “interlocking oppressions” as expressed by the Combahee River Collective (1977/2017) which identified various systems of oppression based on race, class, gender, and sexuality as inextricably linked to create social conditions. Collins (2000) similarly rejects an additive model of oppression and brings forth the paradigm *matrix of domination* to explore how Black women are uniquely positioned in society, stating,

Any specific matrix of domination has (1) a particular arrangement of intersecting systems of oppression, e.g., race, social class, gender, sexuality, citizenship status, ethnicity and age; and (2) a particular organization of its domains of power, e.g., structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal. (p. 299)

According to Collins, the *structural domain of power* refers to the ways social institutions are organized to create subjugation, specifically making reference to the experience of Black women. The *disciplinary domain of power* refers to organizational processes, such as policies and bureaucracies, which are organized to surveil and control both workers and clients. The *interpersonal domain of power* refers to micro-level interactions of marginalization. Lastly, the *hegemonic domain of power* refers to ideologies that justify all other domains of power through ‘commonsense’ ideas. This is noted to be reproduced through ideology, culture, and consciousness (Collins, 2000).

Collins' definition of the various domains of power provides a useful theoretical framework to explore how social workers are implicated in sustaining the capitalist and colonial state, while also resisting these same structures. Collins provides valuable insights regarding the *politics of empowerment* and problematizes simplistic notions of 'oppressor' and 'oppressed' due to their dialectical relationship along the matrix of domination. This analysis poses the possibility for social workers to engage in counter-hegemonic knowledge as a means for resistance, while acknowledging the complexity of this position due to the historical and present-day positioning of social work.

### ***Marxism***

While Marxism covers a wide range of political, social, and economic theories, for the purpose of this research, historical materialism and its understanding of surplus value and exploitation, class struggle, and contradiction, will be utilized. *Historical materialism* is the understanding that human thought and experiences are influenced by past and present social, cultural, and economic forces (de Montigny, 2022). Marx identifies the *base* of a society, its economic structure, impacts the *superstructure*, its social and cultural arrangements (Prasad, 2005). *Surplus value and exploitation* refer to the unpaid wages assumed through profit by those who own the means of production. Under a capitalist system, *exploitation* is at the root of employment relations and worker labour cannot be properly compensated (Prasad, 2005). *Class struggle* thus forms and is a useful lens within research to confront how economic interests shape participant experiences. Lastly, Prasad explains *contradiction* as discrepancies within a system that can threaten its very existence. Within the historical materialist tradition, contradictions are understood to be fundamental to revolutionary change (Prasad, 2005).

## ***Abolitionism***

*Abolitionism* can be understood as both a horizon and a theory of change that aims to transform society with a particular emphasis on the need to abolish carceral structures and practices that are connected to policing, incarceration, punishment, and surveillance (Rasmussen, 2024). While abolitionism remains theoretically ambiguous, according to NAASW (2024) its guiding principles consist of a commitment to: being anti-carceral, anti-oppression, anti-capitalism, decolonization, de-professionalization, centering systems/structures/ideologies as problems, solidarity not charity, building life-affirming institutions and relationships, self-determination and autonomy, and non-punitive approaches to harm and abuse (pp. 17-18).

**Guiding Questions for an Abolitionist Praxis.** Within an abolitionist framework, the work of Dean Spade—which was then adapted by Cameron Rasmussen and Kirk “Jae” James—provides a series of questions to guide towards a liberatory social work praxis (Rasmussen, 2024). As per NAASW (2024, p. 19) the questions are as follows,

- Is the work accountable to the people it proposes to be working for and with? (Does it include their leadership? Is it shifting power? Is it working to reduce and eliminate coercion?)
- Does it provide material relief? If yes, at what cost to one’s agency and at what risk?
- Does it perpetuate dichotomies and ideologies of good versus bad, deserving versus undeserving, violent versus nonviolent, criminal versus innocent?
- Does it legitimate or expand carceral systems? (Does it use, affirm or expand criminalization, incarceration, surveillance and/or punishment?)

- Does it center systems and structures as the cause of the problem (rather than individuals)?
- Does it mobilize those most affected for ongoing struggle? (Is this building power?)

These questions will be used to guide the analysis of participant practice experiences and explore how they interact with abolitionist principles. These questions are posed within the context of pursuing “liberatory reforms” which seek to mitigate the harms caused by State power (i.e., ‘shifting power’) while also engaging in a revolutionary praxis (i.e., ‘building power’) towards an abolitionist future (Rasmussen, 2024).

### ***Desire-Based Framework: Practice of “Thirling”***

A “desire-based framework” as per the work of Tuck (2009, p. 418) is utilized as a theoretical framework within this study. Tuck presents *desire* as an epistemological shift from a damage-centered framework that reproduces binaries of reproduction versus resistance. Desire, thus, engages in a process of *thirling* that allows for the dialectical “both/and” (pp. 419-420) that is more reflective of “the experiences of people who, at different points in a single day, reproduce, resist, are complicit in, rage against, celebrate, throw up hands/fists/towels, and withdraw and participate in uneven social structures—that is, everybody” (p. 420). Through this framework, the practice of socialist and/or abolitionist social workers is not to be oversimplified as an all-knowing, righteous practice. Instead, people are to be acknowledged for their complex personhood and multiplicity of selves which may hold contradictions and contrasting realities (Tuck, 2009).

## Research Design

This research study utilized interviews as its data gathering method (Reid et al., 2017b). Specifically, I utilized semi-structured in-depth interviews which allowed for flexibility in questioning depending on participant responses (Reid et al., 2017b). In-depth individual interviews were also the methodological design of this qualitative study due to the underdeveloped research regarding socialist and/or abolitionist social work resistance. This broad methodological approach was best suited to explore *what* this practice consists of and *how* it is carried out. A Grounded Theory approach was considered as a methodology but ultimately decided against due to time constraints and the limited capacity of this research study. 5 participants were interviewed with 12 semi-structured interview questions. Interviews were expected to be 60-75 minutes long but generally lasted 75-90 minutes in length.

Participants were required to have practiced in a ‘client-facing’ role (i.e., working with individuals or communities) for at least two years. Social workers in a macro-level role, such as policy work, were not eligible due to this study’s emphasis on direct client interactions. Should a prospective participant not currently work in a client-facing role, they must have done this work in the past year to increase the likelihood of gathering information that is relevant to our current socio-political climate. However, all research participants were actively working in the field at the time of the interview. While the ideal research participant would have a notable amount of clinical experience—especially as this could inform a broader range of resistance strategies—an inclusion criteria of two years was determined as to not discredit the potential knowledge of newer practitioners. As well, newer social work graduates may hold distinct and valuable knowledge from their recent studies. The time frame of two years ensures that participants hold a

modest amount of clinical experience they could reference for the interview. All participants had 5-9 years of experience.

Participants were gathered through purposive sampling to ensure they fit the inclusion criteria. This researcher reached out to acquaintances as well as public-facing individuals who presented themselves as fitting the criteria. Three participants were previously known to this researcher. Following this, snowball sampling was utilized and the remaining two participants reached out to this researcher via email indicating they were told about the research and interested in participating.

### ***Thematic Analysis***

This research study utilized a thematic analysis (TA) to analyze the data. TA is used for “systematically identifying, organizing, and offering insight into patterns of meaning (themes) across a data set” (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 57). A TA would seek to interpret this data as guided by my research question (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Within a TA, I used an inductive approach where data analysis and coding was done from the ‘bottom-up’ and driven by the data, as opposed to predetermined concepts (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Consistent with an inductive approach, I utilized an essentialist theoretical framework, “assuming a knowable world and ‘giving voice’ to experiences and meanings of that world, as reported in the data” (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 59). In this case, the knowable world refers to the capitalist, colonial, and carceral structures social workers operate within.

As well, a TA has notable flexibility with respect to sample size, research goals, and data collection methods and therefore aligned with my chosen methodology of in-depth individual interviews with 5 participants (Clarke & Braun, 2017). I employed my TA through a six-phase approach as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2012): Phase 1: Familiarizing Yourself with the Data;

Phase 2: Generating Initial Codes; Phase 3: Searching for Themes; Phase 4: Reviewing Potential Themes; Phase 5: Defining and Naming Themes; Phase 6: Producing the Report (pp. 60-69).

### **Ethical Considerations**

Within this study, participants reviewed and completed an informed consent form which outlines the parameters of the study, risks and benefits, alongside confidentiality and its limits. Participants were given the space to ask questions to ensure they were providing informed consent to move forward. To provide compensation for their labour, participants received a \$20 gift card to a store of their choice once they sign the consent form regardless of the extent of their participation in the study. This monetary amount was not deemed large enough to impact the participant's decision to engage in the study. Three research participants were previously known to this researcher, however there was no noted power imbalance from previous, or present-day, relationships.

Considering the nature of this research topic—socialist and/or abolitionist social work in practice which encourages “criminal” social workers to challenge and break harmful rules and laws (Gallant, 2024, p. 126)—there was initial concern that participant responses may warrant a breach in confidentiality. As per the TCPS 2, “research that probes sensitive topics (e.g., illegal activities) generally depends on strong promises of confidentiality to establish trust with participants” (p. 81). However, according to the TCPS 2, this should also be “balanced against competing ethical considerations or legal or professional requirements that call for disclosure of information obtained or created in a research context” (p. 81). Upon further inquiry, confidentiality would need to be breached if the participant mentioned sexual misconduct perpetrated by an Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Service Workers (OCSWSSW) member, if there is an imminent risk of harm to themselves or another person, or if a child aged

16 or under is at risk of abuse/neglect (OCSWSSW, n.d.). Additionally, information can be extracted via subpoena (TCPS 2, 2022). Prior to engaging in each interview, this researcher reviewed the limits to confidentiality and explicitly identified the specific instances that may warrant a breach. As well, upon writing the findings, particular attention was drawn to removing any identifying information to avoid potential consequences for workplace resistance or ‘disobedience.’

As previously noted, I am operating within the inclusion criteria of this research, that being a self-identified socialist and abolitionist social worker who has at least two years of clinical experience in a client-facing role. While I am technically participating in this research within the “in” group, my ‘outsider’ positioning as the researcher, alongside lines of race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexuality, inform the “ever-shifting and permeable” state of insider/outsider knowledge (Reid et al., 2017a, p. 49). Further, I conducted this research from the position of a queer, Iranian woman with a notable proximity to whiteness and full-time permanent employment in a unionized role. Identifying this is not to locate these as static, objective, identities but to acknowledge the way these perspectives informed my worldview while not essentializing shared identities and assuming “sameness” (Badwall, 2016, p. 9).

This research was inevitably biased to my own positioning. When engaging in data collection, I sought to remain reflexive and aware of how my perspectives impacted my interpretation of participant responses and the subsequent knowledge produced. My first strategy consisted of “bracketing” in which I strived to acknowledge and set aside my prior assumptions to attend to participant contributions with an “open mind” (Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007, p. 1376). The second reflexive strategy I used was a research journal to help me “tease out real-world observations, the complexity of relationships, unspoken theories, political commitments,

affinity to certain methods, growing research interests, frustrations, and reasons to celebrate” (Reid et al., 2017a, p. 52). The journal was used after conducting each interview to attend to, and document, my initial impressions, key takeaways, and internal experience. This was then used as a form of data to be analyzed alongside the interview transcripts.

### **Future Research and Limitations**

Due to time restraints, unfortunately this researcher’s capacity was limited to interviewing 5 participants. As a result, the generalizability of these findings are limited. A larger sample size would support a more nuanced exploration of how various practice settings would influence resistance strategies and/or approaches. Among this study, there was an overrepresentation of participants in private practice, with 4/5 doing so, and 3/5 of them completing this as their primary source of income. Only 2/5 participants were currently working within the public sector, with many private practice clinicians reflecting on their past experiences in the public and/or non-profit sector to supplement their interview answers.

A large limitation within this study was an overrepresentation of white participants, 4/5, as well as no participants identifying as Indigenous. An additional limitation is the way Western theoretical frameworks, such as socialism and abolitionism, receive rightful critique for the ways they subjugate Indigenous knowledge while making moves towards innocence, all under the guise of solidarity (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Indigenous-specific approaches to resistance were unfortunately not explored in this study. As well, an explicit anti-colonial and de-colonial lens would provide a valuable analysis to future research related to this topic.

## Chapter 4: Findings and Discussion

### Interview Participant Descriptions

The following participant descriptions were created in collaboration with the research participants involved in this study. All participants chose a pseudonym to be used for the purpose of this research alongside personal identifiers they noted as relevant context to the knowledge and insight they shared throughout this study.

#### *Hind*

Hind (they/them) is a queer and non-binary social worker who works in private practice mostly supporting racialized, Muslim, queer, and transgender, clients. They are second-generation settler in so-called "Canada" with partially lost ancestry as a result of the colonial history of indentured servitude. Hind also works as an external independent contractor in a health care setting, predominantly supporting queer and transgender clients. Prior to private practice, Hind noted working in the non-profit sector. Hind identified as “very abolitionist,” and also went on to confirm resonating with socialist ideals while sometimes hesitating to call themselves a socialist due to a fear of the term eventually being watered down and becoming more associated with liberalism. Hind has a Master of Social Work and has been practicing for 8 years.

#### *Gene*

Gene (he/him) is a white, straight, cis-gender, settler social worker with class-privilege who works in private practice. Gene is also a contract clinician for a non-profit which processes youth justice referrals for court-mandated therapy. This treatment is often a requirement of being on probation or having charges dropped. Gene identifies as a prison abolitionist, noting he can also “embrace abolition as a broad term that would look at the ways that institutions in general

cause harm and kind of maintain the political and economic systems that we have.” Gene noted that while he has an affinity for socialism, he is also drawn to potentially opposing thought such as anarchism and therefore does not identify as a socialist. Gene has a Master of Social Work and has been practicing for 5 years.

### ***Nicole***

Nicole (she/they) is a white queer femme who works in a short-term outpatient hospital program for clients experiencing suicide and self-harm behaviour, as well as general difficulty with emotion regulation. Nicole also works part-time in private practice with clients with similar presenting concerns. Nicole completes both in-person and virtual appointments. Nicole self-identified as an abolitionist and anti-capitalist, noting our current systems and their various institutions were built to exert power and control onto people, especially marginalized people. Nicole has a Master of Social Work and has been practicing for 5 years.

### ***Jay***

Jay (they/them) is a white, queer, transmasculine therapist who works in private practice, primarily supporting queer and transgender clients. Prior to private practice, Jay had experience working in the non-profit sector. Jay identifies as a socialist and abolitionist and is involved in socialist organizing in their community. Jay has a Master of Social Work and has been practicing for 9 years.

### ***Sandra***

Sandra (she/her) is a white, working-class woman who grew up in rural Ontario and is currently working as a case worker in the GTA. Sandra has experience working in Supervised Consumption Sites and is currently working in a Community Health Centre as a “high needs”

case worker, working with unhoused individuals with substance use concerns, complex mental health, and involvement with the legal system. She identifies as a socialist and/or communist as well as believes in prison abolition. Sandra engages in socialist organizing in her community and is also engaged with various other grassroots coalitions alongside organizing through her union. Sandra has a Bachelor of Social Work (since 2018) and is currently working towards a Master of Social Work. She is not registered with the OCSWSSW and identified not yet being registered due to financial reasons. Sandra denied not currently being registered due to political and/or ethical differences with the College. For this reason, Sandra is not a social worker, but a case worker with a social work education. *It is of note that Sandra's interview responses may vary compared to other participants due to not being registered with the College and not being subject to its various rules and regulations. However, Sandra is still bound to workplace rules and policies.*

## **Research Findings**

### **Theme 1: Complex Negotiation of Power**

The first identified theme is power as a tool that is constantly being negotiated by the socialist and/or abolitionist participants. Through trial and error and ongoing consultation with likeminded peers, these participants developed approaches to manage their professional positioning while using various strategies and tactics to mitigate harm and strive for more dignified care within carceral structures.

#### ***Conceptions of Power and the Notion of Choice***

Within the literature, there was a noted trend of critical practitioners shifting to private practice to avoid working within a 'broken system' (Jones & Jacobs, 2024). All participants

working in private practice as their primary source of income identified making this shift in order to practice in ways more aligned with their values and political beliefs. Although these participants sought private practice for this noted flexibility, they all explicitly identified the ways in which they are imbued with power, regardless of their political positioning or praxis efforts. In an attempt to negotiate this power, all participants practicing psychotherapy identified striving to be wholly transparent during the informed consent process at the beginning of the therapeutic relationship, explaining their institutional positioning as a social worker whether it be in reference to their college membership or workplace policies. In this, these participants made note of differentiating themselves and their personal ethics to those that are institutionally imposed upon them, whether it be through the hospital system or the College. As well, these clinicians simultaneously acknowledged their implication in this violence.

Gene identified himself as an “arm of the State” and wanted to be transparent with clients of the way he is connected to other institutions; as such, he clearly outlines what would constitute a breach in confidentiality. He stated telling clients,

So, if this happens, I have to call the cops and it's even if you say that that's not going to help ... or I don't think it's going to help. Like once I know that information, I have to do that.

In this, Gene virtually identifies himself as being powerless within these institutionally imposed limits to confidentiality. Most participants providing psychotherapy engaged in a similar framing of powerlessness while discussing the limits to confidentiality with clients. However, Gene later went on to problematize this notion of not having a choice to report, stating it is “true but also, like not true because everybody has a choice. You know? The consequences might not be what I want to accept, but I do make that choice.” Gene is suggesting that social workers can engage in

non-compliance, as conceptualized by Gallant (2024) who encourages social workers to balance the risk of disobedience within the context of harm experienced by clients when accessing care.

Within the lens of interlocking oppression, not all individuals are afforded the same choices. While all participants identified a fear of repercussion as influencing their decision making, the social workers who are most likely to be reprimanded and face greater punishments are low-paid precarious workers, many of whom are marginalized along the lines of race, class, gender, or immigration status (Gallant, 2024). Social workers with greater privileges, whether it be full-time permanent employment, being white, unionized, are encouraged to consider breaking or challenging the rules (Gallant, 2024). Even so, Gallant (2025) went on to reflect on the importance of social workers being skillful and developing practices for resistance. de Montigny (2022) similarly emphasized the need for sustainable resistance by means of social workers seeking greater protections through union organizing or community activism. These two sentiments speak to the importance of employing resistance that is rooted in strategy and skill-building, as opposed to impulsive or reactive efforts that, while effective at times, may not be most sustainable, especially for social workers (and clients) in precarious positions.

### ***The “Dance” to Access Dignified Care***

While seeking to navigate limits to confidentiality and a duty to report, Gene, a clinician working with youth accessing court-mandated therapy, invites youth to opt in to “playing the game” or “dancing with me.” In this, Gene hopes that Youth would think carefully about their words and ask for reminders on whether something is reportable or not. Gene shared this dance has allowed for him and Youth to engage in meaningful conversations without avoiding sensitive topics; in one example, he was able to circumvent a breach as the Youth would check-in regarding what is “reportable” to avoid certain language and subsequent disclosures. This

expectation for clients to “play the game” or “dance” is not directly addressed in the literature. However, other participants alluded to this same concept without explicitly naming it as such.

Hind stated telling clients,

Here are the things the College wants from me, let's figure out the words and the limits that make sense for you. And here are the things I'm going to do, to do my best to keep you (and me) protected.

Similarly, Nicole, a social worker in an outpatient hospital program, explained she explicitly tells clients what she needs to know in order to avoid a breach in confidentiality, such as client's saying they can keep themselves safe should they leave a voicemail asking for support with suicidal thoughts. They went on to say, “I'm strongly implying that like they're welcome to tell me that whether or not it's the truth.” Nicole also outlined how she will preface certain questions related to CAS by reminding clients they can choose not to respond or say “I don't know” which limits the risk of a mandatory report.

Through a series of ongoing consultation and supervision, Hind explained developing a process in which they will pause clients if they start sharing something that could potentially become reportable. They explained telling clients,

So I'm not your investigator ... I'm not a CAS worker. I do not want to call emergency services, whatever it might be, and just be like: “If you continue this conversation, we could end up here. Do you want to continue?”

In this, Hind clearly outlines their personal and political belief of not wanting to corroborate with other institutional forces, even distancing themselves from other social work positions that were identified in the literature as being direct “agents of the State” (NAASW, 2024, p. 18). This

strategy of prefacing legal responsibilities with personal values and ethical tensions is recommended in the literature by Jones and Jacobs (2024). This approach to self-disclosure was discussed and used by all participants. All of the clinician's conducting psychotherapy similarly paused clients as they began to discuss something which could constitute a duty to report, often re-explaining the limits to confidentiality in case this was forgotten or unclear. This was identified by Nicole as being "fair" with respect to informed consent and doing justice to the therapeutic alliance. Here we see clear practice strategies that boldly name power and the possible outcomes of power being exercised. Options are offered to clients to make decisions based on these deliberations and explanations—the message to social workers being: be explicit, and offer options to pause when necessary.

Similarly, all the clinicians practicing Psychotherapy explained being transparent with clients about the circumstances that warrant a breach in confidentiality with respect to suicidality. All these respondents explained a breach would require clients to have a means or method for suicide, a specific plan, and a statement that they will immediately follow this plan without being responsive to, or having capacity for, safety planning. As stated by Jay, "willingness to do something other than die right now is enough for me to be like, well, I'm not going to call the cops then." Most participants explained in the case of a breach in confidentiality, they opt to contact identified 'safe people' or emergency contacts, then contact non-carceral crisis supports (when available) and contact emergency services when all other options are exhausted.

Within these noted examples and circumstances, these participants 'invite' clients to play a part, in order for the social worker to manage the tension between providing care and exerting control. This aforementioned game is intimately tied to legal systems and notions of liability,

which permeate mental health care under a capitalist system. While this abolitionist resistance strategy was identified as being successful in various instances to avoid a breach in confidentiality, it is unclear how this might otherwise impact the client being expected to ‘dance.’ Underpinning this dance is a looming threat of a breach in confidentiality which may lead to subsequent surveillance, policing, institutionalization, and incarceration. Clients are virtually stripped of their ability to be forthcoming and honest when accessing care during this dance. As well, Gene notes how this dance is predicated on the assumption that clients grasp this nuance, while also “being up for that, which is not a simple thing at all.” These challenges point to the various forms of power that Collins (2000) outlines: structural, disciplinary, hegemonic and interpersonal.

**The Varying Stronghold of Institutional Power(s).** Among the participants, this negotiation of power varied depending on their practice setting. Social workers operating within more carceral environments such as the hospital and so-called justice system, were very cognizant of these dynamics at play. In turn, they presented as making active efforts to minimize structural exertions of power (Collins, 2000) such as breaching confidentiality which may lead to incarceration or forced institutionalization. However, the institutional policies these social workers are ultimately adhering to are sustained by features of control and surveillance, as explained through the expressions of disciplinary power by Collins. Therefore, while utilizing this dance to minimize harm, participants engage in coercive approaches, such as the looming threat of a breach in confidentiality, to avoid certain disclosures. These clinicians presented as accepting this ‘give and take.’ For example, Gene discussed how he is not deeply disappointed when the therapeutic relationship is impacted by this ‘dance’ as he is then reassured that he will not breach confidentiality. He states,

I think that's almost easier for me because it's like, yeah, like *you probably shouldn't trust me* [laughs]. I think maybe what's harder for me is when ... they're not getting the nuance, and they maybe wouldn't want me to report something ... Like that's harder, I think, than someone who's just like, I'm not going to say shit. And I'm like, okay, good call [laughs].

It is of note that Gene did not follow these same approaches to confidentiality within his own private practice—that is, working with clients who are not operating within the justice system. This, alongside the experiences of the other private practice clinicians, speaks to the reduced surveillance and stronghold of institutional power within private practice.

While the impacts of carceral structures were not viewed as obsolete within private practice—with the College being identified as a source of anxiety and stress—these clinicians expressed more confidence to avoid trespassing their ethics by virtue of having more autonomy. This is consistent with participants who were instructed to corroborate with carceral services while working under an organization or institution, often to relieve the risk of liability. This reduced stronghold of carcerality within private practice seemed to allow for the prioritization of relationship building with clients. In this way, all participants working in private practice endorsed finding ways to incorporate their political beliefs, and even organizing efforts, within individualized practice. Many attributed this success to building ongoing networks of skilled socialist and/or abolitionist practitioners who provide practice recommendations, as well as support and care for those operating within this contradictory terrain. As well, the clients who have access to private practice may present as having less ‘risk’ by virtue of the increased material comforts associated with access to private practice, as noted by Jay. Many private practice therapists also have control over the clients they take on based on their own capacity,

which is often not afforded to those in the public sector. However, it is of note that participants who also worked outside of private practice were similarly able to build relationships and politicize treatment, while having more notable barriers in doing so as stated above.

### ***Documentation as a Means for Power***

Documentation was a recurring topic discussed by all the participants providing Psychotherapy; however, it was not explicitly discussed in the socialist and/or abolitionist literature. Buckler (2023) discussed the idea of social workers “playing the game” to navigate institutional structures by using insider knowledge (such as language and paperwork) to access resources in the interim. Similarly, Hind explained striving to take notes in a “protective way” that allows clients to choose what they would like to remain in, and be kept out of, their file. They explained prioritizing vagueness in day-to-day documentation unless a client is seeking to make a formal complaint where detailed documentation would be legally helpful, stating this is a collaborative process which the client can edit as they see fit. Gene also identified advising clients they can tell him to omit something from his documentation, while noting limitations to this such as a mandatory report. The goal of vague documentation was shared by all participants practicing psychotherapy. Hind also explained keeping an additional notebook for personal notes that have no connection to their computer or the client’s file, this way they can make relevant notes for clinical use without jeopardizing the client’s privacy in the case of a subpoena. In ensuring vague documentation, there is an acknowledgment of how power circulates and can be used by State apparatuses along the lines of race, class, gender, ability, sexuality, etc.

The strategy of vague documentation reflected a tendency to focus on the overall theme of the topics discussed, alongside skills or approaches used in session, as opposed to sharing specific details. For example, Hind explained discussions about community organizing could be

documented as “interpersonal communications were discussed in this session.” Clinicians identified prioritizing the most vague documentation for clients engaging in organizing work, those involved with the criminal justice system, newcomers, and mention of trauma. Nicole, a hospital social worker, explained being cognizant of documenting instances of trauma in a vague manner to avoid other clinicians from reading this and feeling inclined to inquire further for a potential breach in confidentiality.

## **Theme 2: Socialist and/or Abolitionist Praxis**

The second theme that emerged from the data is the exploration of how socialist and/or abolitionist social work was practiced among the participants. Hind explained a revolutionary praxis to be:

Chipping away at the structures that are happening while making sure that the whole building doesn't collapse on me. And also making sure that there's shelter being built over there for when the building does collapse. I think that's the easiest metaphor I could offer is, yeah, weakening this, while staying safe, and also working towards the dream.

Here, praxis is conceptualized as requiring strategic, and thus sustainable, efforts while being attuned to building power outside of social work through organizing/activism work. The navigation of this liminal space will be discussed in the following subsections:

Organizing/Activism Efforts Within Social Work Practice, Modalities and Approaches to Care, and The Complexities of Resistance.

### ***Organizing/Activism Efforts Within Social Work Practice***

Among the participants, there was a clear identification of the ways social work is implicated in carceral logics and the maintenance of capitalism, white supremacy, and

colonialism. In spite of this, all participants identified some degree of connection between their revolutionary politics and social work practice while noting limitations. Jay explained previously conceptualizing their political and social work self as separate entities which occasionally impacted each other, such as a commitment to not contacting the police. However, they identified actively seeking to connect these two identities since becoming an organized socialist four years ago. In particular, Jay explained supporting clients through providing an analysis on structural and capitalist oppression and in turn, helping them navigate what they want to do with this, whether it be heal, reckon with, or fight against it. Jay noted this work can also resemble pushing back against individuality and encouraging clients to get involved in their union, find community, alongside sharing information regarding local organizing groups should they be interested. Hind identified holding a similar approach, stating “If you ask any of my clients, community is the first word that comes out of my mouth, and then it's fuck capitalism [laughs].”

Sandra, a “high needs” case worker working in a community health centre identified experiencing a large dissonance between her socialist politics calling for structural change while providing individualistic support to clients. However, she explained her unique position in a role that *technically* incorporates “advocacy” within the job description as important for her mental health. While Sandra’s advocacy would have previously consisted of actions such as attending organizing meetings, protests, press conferences and pressuring government agencies, this work has been put on hold by senior management to “review the policy” without additional reasoning. Sandra explained continuing this advocacy when needed by using her involvement in her union to justify this work; in turn, Sandra clarifies “we’re representing the workers on behalf of the union, not [the workplace].” By doing so, Sandra is challenging disciplinary and structural inequalities. Sandra expressed the taxing nature of her job, alongside the impacts of

managerialism, as motivating factors to seek further separation in her professionalized care work and organizing efforts. However, Sandra identified currently negotiating a space in which she incorporates her political beliefs into her individual work with clients, whether it be providing a similar structural analysis to their concerns or encouraging them to advocate for their own rights.

Both Nicole and Hind identified an overlap between their organizing/activism and social work practice by nature of their organizing/activism either happening alongside clients or relating to their client's concerns. For example, Hind mentioned being at the same rallies as clients. Meanwhile, Nicole shared attending protests that correlate with the struggles faced by their clients, such as Take Back the Night. For Nicole, being engaged in political action is important to show solidarity with clients, especially while making active efforts to politicize therapy and contextualize concerns such as suicidal thoughts, anxiety, grief, or loss.

**Sustaining the Movement.** A noted area of overlap between organizing/activism efforts and social work practice was the role that clinicians held in supporting community organizers and activists within a therapeutic setting. Hind, a private practice social worker who primarily works with people in their own community, shared supporting clients "dealing with some of the harder impacts of organizing work" such as having a space to talk about experiences of police violence. Hind identified their goal to be providing their community more capacity to take care of each other. In this, Hind emphasized the interconnected nature of their professional and personal life as someone who is working within their own community.

Gene similarly explained supporting community organizers and activists as a social worker. However, he identified his own community organizing as being separate from his social work practice, while acknowledging it was "supported" by his social work education which held a more critical orientation. Gene shared engaging in transformative justice work within his own

neighbourhood, in which he will address someone in the community who was named as causing harm, as an alternative to someone contacting the police. He notes viewing this work as separate by virtue of responding as a community member, and not as a social worker who would follow College requirements. Gene identified this work as valuable due to shifting community perspectives, and reliance, on carceral structures.

**Solidarity and Social Work Practice.** Among some participants, solidarity was identified as a concept discussed with clients, whether it be during consciousness building, discussions around organizing, or encouraging clients to find community. However, there was a shared sentiment that while individual, micro interactions may be oriented towards liberation and solidarity, the field of social work is not, and never will be under our current structures. Gene explained that while he strives to be in solidarity with prison abolition with clients undergoing court-mandated therapy, it fundamentally cannot be a prison abolitionist space as his work is not transforming the justice system, rather “coping” with it and trying to be one less point of harm. Gene identified this as operating in “parallel” to solidarity, as something he is striving for but cannot be fully actualized.

Sandra described solidarity as being antithetical to social work under capitalism. She explained how the very act of ‘fighting’ for your client to get housing virtually takes this resource away from another person as opposed to building collective power against inadequate structures themselves. Among other participants, solidarity was conceptualized as being stifled due to the transactional nature of the therapeutic relationship. Jay noted needing to make an active effort to check their own “internalized growth imperative” as someone who is self-employed in private practice; they want to remain accessible to support the working class and people who experience marginalization. However, the contradictions of capitalism, profit vs.

decent wage, may reinforce someone to work against being in solidarity with working class clients. As well, some participants described solidarity as being practiced among their colleagues whether it be as a union steward or meeting with like-minded practitioners to discuss abolitionist social work and practice strategies.

### *Modalities and Approaches Used in Practice*

The therapeutic modality participants used varied depending on their workplace and the level of flexibility afforded to them, alongside the extent to which they were surveilled. Within the hospital system and in a post-secondary social work position, participants were required to use ‘evidence-based practices’ such as CBT and DBT to “churn [clients] out like cattle.” Specifically, Nicole who works in an outpatient hospital program that applies DBT skills, felt confident employing alternative approaches and being flexible to client needs, insofar as they are considered an ‘evidence-based’ approach seen as “valid” by the hospital, such as, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT). This was attributed to the surveilled nature of the hospital system which includes ongoing case consultation with the team regarding client care. Jay similarly identified utilizing this approach while working in a non-profit, using DBT and ACT, when meant to be using CBT and justifying this by its “CBT roots.”

While working in the non-profit sector, two participants identified CBT as being a ‘light recommendation’ that could be strayed from. One of these participants was told by management that having CBT training and being able to document as though you are following a CBT protocol was sufficient to satisfy Ministry funding requirements. Most participants practicing psychotherapy shared disliking CBT. Hind states,

[CBT] in its most general understanding a lot of it seems to relay the message of: “there's something wrong with how you think, let's change that.” Which completely ignores the

systems and structures that have caused folks to think the way they have ... It is very different to tell somebody to breathe through or structurally reframe like being anxious at the library than it is to tell somebody that being afraid that you're going to get sexually harassed on the TTC [Toronto Transit Commission] is just like an anxious thought that's not real because it's never happened to you.

In this, Hind reflects on the ways CBT can become dismissive and discount thinking as being irrational, removing political and social context from anxieties. Even more, Jay noted the ways CBT skills such as “Mind vs. Mood” function to bandage people up to operate within a capitalist society. This perspective corroborates with the work of Scheyett (2006) who problematizes what constitutes ‘success’ within an Evidence-Based Practice (EBP); an individual completing Mind vs. Mood may be able to go back to work, but underlying concerns may remain unaddressed. Within this approach, class consciousness, and subsequent calls to organize, are suppressed while capitalist hegemony is reinforced as normal (Collins, 2000; Mullaly & Dupré, 2019; Thobani, 2007).

Among the preferred modalities and approaches used by the participants—that is Internal Family Systems (IFS), Narrative Therapy and Invitational Practice, Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR), Sensorimotor Psychotherapy, and Trauma-Informed Stabilization Treatment (TIST)—contain values that de-pathologize concerns and place them within their political, social, and cultural contexts. In turn, all social workers identified politicizing therapy, and problematizing structures as problems, which is in alignment with an abolitionist praxis as per NAASW (2024). Participants thus engage in counter-hegemonic knowledge through consciousness building with clients (Collins, 2000). As well, many of these preferred modalities focus on the somatic processing of trauma alongside self-exploration, as

opposed to using cognitive strategies to address concerns. Some of these modalities can also be differentiated from previously mentioned EBP for their longer-term delivery, which is consistent with their prevalence in private practice as opposed to public services which often rely on standardization due to funding structures.

Hind and Jay both identified taking an eclectic approach to therapy, using modalities insofar as their client's find them helpful. Specifically, Hind spoke to the importance of being intentional with any modality or approach warning that if not done carefully, they can continue pathologizing or invalidating clients. For example, Narrative Therapy can be used to perpetuate "toxic positivity." Jay noted guiding questions for their own practice to be, "What am I doing this for? What am I doing this toward?" as a means to connect their larger political commitments amongst their individual practice with clients. This strategy parallels the findings of Asakura et al. (2023) who found critical social workers engage in a "negotiated space" between theoretical perspectives and client subjectivities (p. 352). Jay's conception of this negotiated space extends beyond the confines of the therapeutic relationship and reckons with their larger contribution to counter-hegemonic knowledge. They are seeking to shift power and mobilize those most affected for struggle, as per the NAASW (2024) guiding questions for an abolitionist praxis.

Gene identified his chosen approach to practice, Narrative Therapy and Invitational Practice for people (primarily men) who have "used abuse," as aligning with his abolitionist values. He noted these modalities attempt to shift dynamics related to power and control; for example, demanding that individuals who use abuse make changes would simply reproduce what you are asking them to do differently. As well, within approaches such as Narrative Therapy and EMDR, clinicians shared a pull towards decentering the professional and shifting towards the expertise of the client.

All participants identified being comfortable disclosing their political views and perspectives to clients. Some noted being less explicit at times depending on the person, such as not using the word “socialist” but rather explaining what this would constitute. Nicole noted she tends to self-disclose her political views more often within private practice as client’s will seek her support due to her self-advertised perspectives. Whereas within the hospital system, self-disclosure is less common as she is randomly assigned clients who may be less inclined to have political conversations.

**Approaches to “Imminent Risk.”** Hind identified the exploitative nature of the non-profit sector reinforces clinicians to contact emergency services as opposed to addressing higher risk situations with the time and care they require to avoid carceral services. Almost all participants described their ‘threshold’ for a breach in confidentiality varied depending on the specific program and/or Manager they worked under. In some instances, participants were told how to respond to ‘high-risk’ situations, whether it was to contact emergency services, CAS, or be involved in a client’s involuntary admission. Among the hospital system, Nicole pointed to a lack of tolerance for ambiguous or “grey” risk situations; clinicians are instructed to contact crisis services or the police so the hospital can present as covering their bases.

Nicole addresses ‘imminent risk,’ that being active suicidal thoughts with intent and a plan, through therapeutic techniques. This consists of exploring drivers behind suicide, providing validation, and DBT skills to reduce the intensity of the emotion. Following this, she will re-engage them in the “dance” and remind them of the limits to confidentiality. She states,

Sometimes that has been a turning point for people. Of being like, “okay, well, I don't want that, so like, let's try to work on something else.” And like trying to remember as well that like, if someone's telling me that, it's because there's a part of their brain that

doesn't want... like not 100% of them want suicide. And so, trying to find a way into that part.

Nicole speaks to the reality of feeling powerless while also utilizing this structural power to avoid a breach. From my personal experience within a hospital setting, this rhetoric (“if someone’s telling me that ... not 100% of them want suicide”) was often shared to presume a client’s underlying needs and therefore justify the use of clinical interventions. In other words, clinicians, often entrenched within hospital policies, engage in ideological exertions of power by justifying the need and appropriateness of interventions. This justification previously provided me with a degree of comfort where there was virtually none.

Gene shared during instances of ‘imminent risk’ he tries to remain “present” with clients and what they are sharing, while also looking for future oriented comments that may arise without overtly prompting for this. Gene utilizes this approach as to not treat clients as a “checklist to cover my ass.” Jay explained approaching ‘imminent risk’ from a place of care for the people they work with. They go on to state, “I don't want the, you know, the forces of white supremacy and transphobia and capitalism to be these annihilating forces.” They noted often having contingency plans in place such as a follow up the next day, or the client saying they will go visit a friend in the meantime. However, Jay, among the other participants practicing psychotherapy, also identified ethical tension between a deep care for clients while also believing in their “right to die.” This is only further complicated by legal responsibilities as a social worker which are antithetical to this, apart from Medical Assistance in Dying (MAiD) which is completed under strict professional and legal guidelines (OCSWSSW, 2025).

### *The Complexities of Resistance*

Desire is a thirding of the dichotomized categories of reproduction and resistance ... This is important because it more closely matches the experiences of people who, at different points in a single day, reproduce, resist, are complicit in, rage against, celebrate, throw up hands/fists/towels, and withdraw and participate in uneven social structures—that is, everybody. (Tuck, 2009, pp. 419-420)

Within the abolitionist literature, NAASW (2024) acknowledged that some practitioners are disengaging from harmful practices such as mandated reporting and avoiding practices that “violat[e] people back to incarceration while working in State-adjacent programs, organizations, or job functions” (p.18). While research participants similarly identified engaging in these resistance practices, participants made note of instances when their resistance efforts were insufficient, whether it be due to their personal decision making or factors beyond their control. When reflecting on a practice experience of resistance, Gene explained a scenario in which a Youth expressed plans to harm another individual who was implicated in his current charge of “uttering threats.” Gene explained inviting this Youth to ‘dance’ with him, reminding him of the limits to confidentiality, which the Youth did not wish to engage with and expressed not caring about potential consequences of a breach as he would rather be in jail. Gene explained,

And then I reminded him and he kept going. But there was something about it that just felt like, I don't think that this person is like able to stop. Like, I feel like he was like worked up and like really processing this stuff aloud.

Gene explained making the decision not to document this or make a subsequent report.

Following this instance, the Youth did not open up to Gene again.

When reflecting upon this scenario, Gene expressed regret for not ‘committing to’ engage in a meaningful, and potentially transformative, conversation which would seek to address the potential harm through an abolitionist and non-carceral lens. Gene identified not doing so in fear the client would say something “undeniably reportable” while operating within the surveilled work environment of the criminal justice system. In turn, Gene noted his decision to not report as “the worst of all worlds” that was driven by protecting his own sense of identity and to not see himself as a “fucking cop.” While this decision can be identified as a form of resistance by reducing the risk of further incarceration or criminalization, Gene did not meaningfully shift power as he used the threat of further carceral involvement, as a means to avoid a conversation and in turn, protect his sense of self and membership with the College.

Jay similarly identified seeking to protect their political commitment while supporting suicidal clients. They state,

It feels vulnerable to say this, but like I think there's a way in which I worry that sometimes I under assess. Or I don't have those like really like frank conversations always. From a sort of place of like, if I don't go there, I don't have to report it and I also don't have to do, you know, sort of compromise my politics.

This dilemma both protects clients from further association with carceral systems such as institutionalization and surveillance, however, similar to Gene, this approach can also reduce the chance of having meaningful conversations and risk clients feeling further isolated from talking about these stigmatized topics. These stories demonstrate how our efforts to resist can be bound up with our sense of self, sometimes at the cost of neglecting additional considerations. At the same time, these remain brave and often hidden conversations about practice and the tensions of upholding personal, legal and institutional power in a therapeutic setting.

Sandra, a case worker<sup>3</sup> in a Community Health Centre commonly withheld information from police officers and other agents of the State, such as, paramedics, should they ask for information which is not medically necessary and could be weaponized against a client. Sandra explained the team she works with will intentionally identify individuals who can mediate police interactions; meaning, implementing clear boundaries for police to stay out of the space and not bother clients, while not being too confrontational as to avoid provoking further harm. Sandra reflected upon an instance in which her client was being arrested for “drug trafficking” for having his own drugs outside of a supervised consumption site. She explained intervening during the arrest to advocate for her client, stating these were his prescription drugs from the program. She states,

The cop just didn't care. And then I kept, you know, pushing. And he was like, “If you don't stop interfering, I'm going to arrest you for obstruction of justice.” And I actually laughed at his face because I knew it was a bluff. Because I've interacted with them enough to know what they fucking do ... And he, like, took my client a little bit further away. So I was like, standing away and couldn't be there. But that was one of the instances I started filming, just in case. But, um, yeah, I don't always recommend that.

Sandra endorsed experiencing a lot of fear when interacting with police but noted her whiteness as well as additional protection as a unionized worker, compels her to interact with them when needed. Despite her efforts, Sandra's client was still subject to arrest alongside herself being threatened with such. In spite of the protection Sandra identifies, these moments of confronting the police remain frightening encounters.

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<sup>3</sup> Sandra is not a registered social worker at the time of interview, noting this is for financial reasons. However, she has had a Bachelor of Social Work since 2018 and is currently working toward a Master of Social Work.

**Compartmentalizing Responsibility.** Among the participants, many shared the personal narratives that arose following instances that compromised their political commitments or ethical beliefs. Two of the participants blamed the system for being put into these compromising positions. Within the context of management making the decision to contact the police, Sandra states,

I also have to remind myself that, you know, especially if it's me having to call, you do the best you can to mediate any risk. And, you know, sometimes you have to just be like, it's the system and there's nothing really I can do ... feels like a cop out sometimes, but at the same time you're like, no, you have to do that, or else you're not going to be able to do the job.

Sandra identified this as an approach to cope with dissonant feelings regarding her frontline care work as well as the broader field of social work. Nicole similarly stated that the hospital structure alleviated some of her responsibility during instances of institutionalization, stating “not that it's easy, but perhaps a little bit easier is to feel like my hands are tied.” Nicole also identified some relief in the hospital’s policies due to their conflicting feelings around “life and death” as they wished people stayed alive while also believing in their “right to die.” She went on to explain this ethical tension would likely be addressed under a larger system change.

Within the context of a breach in confidentiality, there was a shared sentiment among two participants that once the limits to confidentiality were outlined in detail, a client deciding to share reportable information consented to this breach. While reenacting his preemptive script discussing the limits to confidentiality with clients, Gene states “So, like, you telling me this information means you're consenting to me calling the cops.” Even so, Gene presented as ambivalent regarding this line of reasoning as he later shared a practice experience in which he

chose not to report someone who knew of the consequences, yet, nonetheless, the client continued to share information that could constitute a breach (see Gene's example above in *The Complexities of Resistance*).

The two narratives shared by Nicole and Gene hold contradictions within themselves. These reflect the complex position of holding critical orientations within rigid carceral structures. Mihai (2019) conceptualizes resistance and complicity as “a continuum of positions individuals can occupy” as opposed to these being static, dichotomous locations (p. 505). The positionality of each participant—their workplace, politics, class, race, gender, lived experiences—impacts how they interact, resist, and are complicit, within repressive institutional structures. This positionality also impacts their temporal horizon, that being their perception and hope for the future, which in turn impacts their capacity for resistance (Mihai, 2019).

By compartmentalizing responsibility, these practitioners present as more equipped to come to face with, and be complicit in, the professional responsibilities they signed up for (as well as rely on to support their livelihood). However, the examples shown throughout this PRP also demonstrates the complex ways they resist and negotiate power with themselves, their clients, and institutional structures. Thus, complicity is not presented as a passive process. Gene's ambivalence invites nuance for alternative explanations as to why a client would continue to disclose information without consenting to a breach; this is displayed through Gene's previously explained example in the section above, *The Complexities of Resistance*, in which he felt the client was “worked up and like really processing this stuff aloud.” These participants engage with these contradictions in an ever-present, active, negotiation, in which they hold multiple subject positions along the axis of complicity/resistance and engage in decision making based on these competing factors. This is also reflective of a “thirthing” practice between binaries of

reproduction vs. resistance, which holds room for contradictions that may arise when navigating socialist and/or abolitionist social work practice (Tuck, 2009).

During experiences of ethical trespass, a few participants expressed a larger reckoning with their decision to pursue social work. Participants noted relying on loved ones, their community, and likeminded practitioners to process these difficult moments. At the same time, desire and hope are evident during these practice experiences as many participants simultaneously identified using this to re-evaluate their decision to further develop their practice strategies.

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

### Overview and Key Takeaways

The participants in this study displayed that while resistance is possible within social work practice, it is not a means for liberation by virtue of corroborating with, and sustaining, the capitalist and colonial state. Almost all participants emphasized grassroots organizing/activism as being most important for our continued struggle. The organized socialists also viewed union organizing as an important tool which aligns with a *revolutionary Marxist social work* approach; this rejects the notion that capitalism can be transformed from within its existing institutions, apart from trade unions (Mullaly and Dupré, 2019). Even so, all participants spoke to practice approaches that successfully incorporated their political beliefs into client interactions. Most notably, all participants engaged in a form of consciousness building and contributed to counter-hegemonic knowledge with clients (Collins, 2000). Others went further and oriented clients to engage in organizing and community building to push against capitalist individualism. Within this, we can see how individual client interactions—which operate within violent, carceral systems—can go beyond this domain and have an impact outside of, and even against, the State. This displays how social work has potential to deviate from its liberal orientation that does not seek to build power against the State, but live more comfortably within it.

Participant political orientations had a slight variance—everyone identified as an abolitionist but only a few explicitly identified with socialism. Self-identified socialists were more engaged in grassroots organizing/activism, either in their community or within trade unions. These participants were also more inclined to engage clients in movement building and emphasize the importance of collective power. This research also displayed the practice modalities preferred by socialist and/or abolitionist social workers which valued de-

pathologizing approaches and shifting blame onto structures, not people. Additional developments, such as the notion of the “dance” to mitigate carceral violence was an important theme that revealed resistance often included elements of coercion to avoid a breach in confidentiality. As a result, socialist and/or abolitionist social work is not to be deemed as an all-knowing, righteous practice, but is to display the often brave and creative ways participants balance competing ethical, political, and legal responsibilities. The phrase “you probably shouldn’t trust me” succinctly summarizes the “in-between” state many of these socialist and/or abolitionist social workers operate within. They are not naive about their institutional positioning as a social worker, and simultaneously strive to be in solidarity with clients however possible.

### **Relevance to Critical Social Work**

The results of this study provide a counterargument for longstanding critiques that critical social work approaches do not hold practical applications within individual social work practice (Healy, 2018). Many social workers with critical orientations are often left to feel isolated and internalize structural shortcomings (Rossiter, 2019). Within my personal experience, a potential breach in confidentiality due to notions of ‘risk’ are common causes for concern. The findings of this study frame the informed consent process as a political discussion and ongoing negotiation. This is a supportive framework that goes beyond mainstream social work epistemologies which often posit practice strategies as static processes to either be used correctly or incorrectly. As well, additional recommendations for therapy modalities and politicized approaches to care, alongside creative instances of resistance, are identified within this work.

## **Personal Reflections on Research Findings**

This research was validating to my past experience as a newly graduated socialist and abolitionist social worker who felt isolated and unsure of herself. The rich data provided by these participants displays the social work subculture of sorts taking place. There was a shared sentiment among participants of the importance for this communal knowledge to be readily known and shared with others. This work has led me to shift away from previous feelings of ‘institutional capture,’ and its associated feeling of helplessness, and towards what Buckler (2023) identified as ‘(intentional) institutional capture.’ This approach feels more reflective of the conscious decision to engage in this contradictory terrain while utilizing your political beliefs and commitments as a strategic tool.

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## Appendix A

### Interview Questions

1. Can you please describe the setting(s) you work in and the general population(s) you see?
  - a. Can you share your reasoning for working in this/these setting(s)?
2. Can you please describe to me your political views in relation to abolitionism and/or socialism?
  - a. Do you openly share these views in the workplace?
    - i. If yes, how have co-workers responded?
      1. Are there specific people you are more comfortable sharing this with?
      2. Are there specific issues you are more hesitant to speak about?  
Such as Palestine solidarity?
    - ii. If no, why not?
3. How do these views and political commitments shape your social work practice?
4. Without providing any identifying information, can you tell me about a practice experience in which you rejected or engaged in resistance to institutional processes or expectations?
  - a. How did it turn out? How did you feel?
  - b. Can you speak to the specific strategies used in this instance?
5. Have you experienced any negative responses or disciplinary action for engaging in resistance? Such as being reported at work, being involved in an OCSWSSW process for a transgression, etc.
  - a. If yes, can you share more about this and the outcome of this process?

- b. If no, have you refrained from engaging in resistance in fear of a negative response or disciplinary action? If yes, can you tell me more about this?
6. Does your workplace standardize or mandate the protocols or therapy modalities you use?
  - a. If yes, what are they? Do you incorporate other approaches and how?
  - b. If no, do you utilize specific modalities and why? Are there aspects of this approach that are congruent with, or run counter to, your political beliefs or commitments?
7. Without providing any identifying information, can you tell me about a practice experience where your practice decisions ran counter to your political views and commitments? (Such as breaching confidentiality, contacting the police, etc.)
  - a. How did you manage this moment? What did you do, what was the outcome?
  - b. Can you speak to your internal experience of navigating this conflict?
8. Can you speak to the procedures you would use should a service user present as being actively suicidal or an “imminent risk to themselves”?
  - a. Are there instances in which you will and/or have called the police? If so, how do you navigate this? Do you use specific strategies or approaches? How does this impact you?
  - b. Are there other institutional processes that counter your political commitments or beliefs? (Such as forced hospitalization)
9. Do you engage in community organizing?
  - a. If so, do you identify this work as being connected to, or separate from, your social work practice? Can you tell me more about this?

10. Can you please define what solidarity means to you? Do you conceptualize solidarity as being connected to your social work practice?
  - a. If yes, how? Are there limitations to this?
  - b. If no, why not?
11. In the literature there is this noted tension between reformist and transformative efforts in social work. What or how do you feel about this tension of reforming from the inside vs. transformation?
  - a. How does this show up in your work?
12. Can you speak to any other day to day practice strategies that are aligned with your socialist and/or abolitionist views that you have not yet discussed?

## Appendix B

### Outreach Materials: Poster

# Are you a socialist and/or abolitionist social worker?

We're recruiting **socialist and/or abolitionist social workers** to participate in a research study exploring **how they use their political worldviews and values when engaging in social work practice, and more specifically in resistance strategies in the workplace.**

We ask that participants have at least two years of practice experience in a client-facing role. If not currently seeing clients in this capacity, we ask that you have this experience within the past year.

Participants will be asked to engage in an individual semi-structured interview. The approximate time commitment is 60-75 minutes.

Participants will be compensated with a \$20 gift card for their participation.

To participate or ask questions, please contact  
[hnematol@yorku.ca](mailto:hnematol@yorku.ca)

## Appendix C

### Outreach Materials: Recruitment Script

Hello [Name],

My name is Hiva Nematollahi and I am a Master of Social Work student at York University. I am conducting a qualitative research study under the supervision of Dr. Anne O'Connell for the completion of a Practice-based Research Paper (PRP). I am reaching out to share what my research is about in hopes that you may be interested in participating.

This research aims to explore how socialist and/or abolitionist social workers use their political worldviews and values when engaging in social work practice, and more specifically in resistance strategies in the workplace. I also aim to explore how these social workers manage moments when their practice decisions run counter to their political commitments and beliefs. This research has a particular interest in how these social workers *do or do not* engage with institutional processes that are carceral in nature such as contacting the police or forced hospitalization.

To be eligible for this study, you must be a self-identified socialist and/or abolitionist social worker in Ontario. You must have been working in the field for at least two years and be in a 'client facing' role whether it be working with individuals or communities. Should you not currently be in a client-facing role, we ask that you have completed this work in the past year.

This research would consist of a one-time individual semi-structured interview that is approximately 60-75 minutes in length. This interview can take place virtually or in-person depending on participant preference and if the distance is feasible for this researcher to travel to.

For participating in this study, you will be compensated with a \$20 gift card.

Should you have any questions, please do not hesitate to ask.

Approved by the Social Work Ethics Panel at York University January 2025.

In solidarity,

Hiva Nematollahi (she/her)

## Appendix D

## Ethics Tutorial Certificate

**PANEL ON  
RESEARCH ETHICS**  
*Navigating the ethics of human research*

**TCPS 2: CORE**



***Certificate of Completion***

*This document certifies that*

**Hiva Nematollahi**

*has completed the Tri-Council Policy Statement:  
Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans  
Course on Research Ethics (TCPS 2: CORE)*

**180557160** **Date of Issue: 14 October, 2021**