

Exposing Gender Representation: a Critical Study of Canadian Social Work

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the social work profession in Canada and the gender representation in managerial roles across the country. Reviewing professional literature on gender representation in the workplace, specifically in managerial or supervisory positions of power. By critically exploring the unequal distribution of power to male presenting individuals in a mostly female-dominated profession, we challenge the dominant paradigm of male power and privilege in social work. Recommendations are made to create better gender diversity and representation in power positions in a profession that seeks to empower others and break down gender stereotypes in front line work. A theoretical perspective was undertaken navigating sexism, internal segregation, and collective bias and stereotypes. Although social work applies anti-oppressive practice, the imbalance of policy versus expectation and practice versus reality is stark.

Keywords: Social work, managerialism, sexism, internal segregation, collective bias/ stereotypes, policy versus reality.

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Traditionally, leadership positions have been viewed as masculine and the notion that male presenting individuals are better equipped to handle leading has excluded female presenting individuals even in female dominated professions, such as social work in Canada. Using a critical anti-oppressive lens to examine the under-representation of female presenting leaders inside the sphere of top-level leadership and management inside social work, it has become clear that barriers still exist. In addition these barriers are encouraged through the utilization of structural and gender norms developed through a neo sexism perspective.

The Double Bind

Through gender norms and expectations female presenting individuals face what is known as the double bind when approaching leadership. The double bind is described as the more intense pressures and expectations that female presenting people face when assimilating to an occupational role, particularly one of power. Shen-Miller and Smiler (2015) describe that “men lack competence to perform the more stereotypically feminine qualities of a job (e.g. emotional labor) may belie (and/or impair) their true abilities to be successful.” Male presenting individuals are perceived as not possessing the same stereotypical traits as those female presenting, such as emotional capabilities which leads to those more masculine people being placed in a more favourable position, such as management that requires emotional stability. Stereotypically, male presenting individuals are viewed as incompetent within female dominant roles, however, as described in FitzGerald and Hurst (2017) male presenting individuals possess invisible advantages such as better pay, more respect and political power. These advantages allow them to succeed in these fields. Further, public ideas of masculinity may affect beliefs about the quality of care that male presenting people are capable of providing; as well as, the practices and policies in which human resources undertake within

agencies. Male succession within human service professions projects males within roles of managerialism and not front line work. As described, male presenting individuals in human services positions could affect the capacity of care provided however these same traits that affect care negatively also benefit perceptions in positions of power. According to Shen-Miller & Smiler (2015) stereotypical male traits restrict the level of professionalism due to societal perspective; however, these traits make them desirable members in managerial positions. “Men, therefore, may enter female-dominated jobs if they perceive an easier path to leadership since competition with other men is minimized” (Yavorsky & Cohen & Qian, 2016, pg 735).

Referred to as the invisible hand or glass elevator male presenting people possess unearned advantages. Behaviour, reward, and result lead male presenting people into positions of power within female dominated fields. Yavorsky, Cohen and Qian (2016) concluding that masculine individuals entering female dominated fields is inevitable “since many of the jobs with the highest future occupational growth (e.g. healthcare and service-sector jobs) are female-dominated; and, women as a group may not be able to meet the total demand” of the occupation. As well, the “increased demand may incentivize more men to enter these jobs.” (Yavorsky, Cohen & Qian, 2016, pg 754). This raises a social issue identifiable as societal regression of gender equality in a radical feminist perspective.

Gender Representation Inside the Social Work profession

According to authors, social work is one profession leading the fight in gender equality, but looking closer into the institutions and governing bodies, that does not appear to be the case. With very little research being done in this field, particularly in Canada, it is difficult to find accurate information regarding gender representation in leadership across the country. Currently there is no exact number of registered social workers in Canada, however

The Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) estimated there to be over 50,000 as recently as 2016 (CASW, 2016). Of these it is estimated that nearly eighty-three percent of registered social workers are female presenting and of those individuals holding a degree (MSW) or higher (PHD) over eighty-six percent are female presenting (Social Work Workforce, 2017). These numbers are startling in comparison to the percentages seen in managerial and leadership positions across the country. With around only seventeen percent of social workers in Canada presenting as male, they occupy an estimated eighty-six percent of power positions (Hicks, 2015). With social work being often described as a female-dominated profession it is still one in which men disproportionately occupy senior roles. This over representation of male presenting individuals highlights the complex roles and power dynamics throughout the profession and the need for more qualitative research into critical structural social work practice in Canada.

Responsive Critical Social Work Practice

The responsible means of applying critical social work practice to these disparities, is to recognize a number of social needs experienced by female presenting social workers. The Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW, 2005) and the Canadian Association of Social Work Education (CASWE, 2014) both include gender representation and expression in their standards of practice, but appear to be inconsistent in field practice as we continue to see under representation of female presenting individuals in positions of power and formal leadership. There is a paradox that comes to surface where the governing bodies of social work, a practice which seeks social justice, in itself shows signs of sexist oppression. For example in Alberta, the Alberta College of Social Workers regulates and maintains policy through the standards of practice to be used as a guiding document for ethical practice. Section G titled professional accountability transcripts that “Social workers will act to

promote excellence in the social work profession.” (ACSW, 2015). The paradox is that if exo level factors or policy claims to promote excellence then the inequality of gender representation in managerial positions is a form of this excellence. It is this concept that requires attention and clearly needs to be addressed.

Masculine Norms

Inequality and gender norms are closely tied to one another creating a divide inside professions and households across the world. Masculine norms are traits traditionally viewed as masculine in Western society including strength, courage, independence, leadership, and assertiveness. The idea that these traits often associated with leadership, are considered masculine, is inherently wrong and perpetuates the notion that female presenting individuals do not belong and will not be accepted in powerful positions. While some individual female presenting people may adhere to these masculine norms to succeed, changes to these underlying structures continue to be limited and limiting for diverse staff and female presenting individuals (Gander, 2018). Inequity has previously been attributed to various factors such as homophily or the “love of sameness” which does not like to accept change in a uniform or status quo, pipeline issues, individual career decision-making, lack of confidence, lack of work-life flexibility policies, supervisor relationships, organizational/workplace culture, the glass ceiling, recruitment practices, unconscious bias, micro-politics, lack of mentoring support, culture, networks and so on. However, by using a critical theory these factors become explicit as areas of symbolic violence which is created by and spread throughout the profession while it entrenches and reproduces inequity (Gander, 2018). Further investigation into career capital and social capital means looking at all the independent variables that could enhance career success in a society ruled by masculine norms. The idea that an individual only needs to invest in their own productive skills through

developing competencies in order to create a more successful career outcome and opportunities for employment, is insulting to those facing barriers that no amount of personal drive can address. The accumulation of these and other types of capitals, is seen as important by senior staff for junior colleagues to accumulate in order to gain those promotions and respect from those in more powerful positions that place a high value on meritocracy. In “Men in Female-Dominated Vocations: a Rationale for Academic Study and Introduction to the Special Issue” (Shen-Miller & Smiler, 2015) implies that males have the tendency to utilize introspective occupation masculinity to shape to quotidian behaviour. Hegemonic masculinity as well as other gender concepts, such as gender roles, have provided substantive footing to examine the ways in which men use occupations to construct and maintain masculinity within the perceived gendered demands of their work (Shen-Miller & Smiler, 2015). Due to these factors, when male presenting people enter a female dominated profession they carry a sense of identity that cognitively directs toxic masculine behaviours and they often rely on gender stereotypes that are consistent within societal conceptualizations to reinforce these behaviours.

Conclusion

Worldwide issue of gender disparities has gained increased momentum as the recognition of societal barriers and masculine norms grows with more female presenting people entering the paid workforce annually (STATSCAN, 2014). As we continue to build a more culturally aware and diverse country, the role of social workers cannot be overstated. In a profession so focused on equity and anti-oppressive practice, we can no longer turn a blind eye to the blatant perpetuation of masculine norms and gender norms in positions of power inside the social work profession across Canada. The production of a qualitative study focused on surveying professionals in the working field could assist in creating a more

accurate description of gender biases commonly found in these institutions and pave the way to better address the disparities discovered, creating a more equitable industry for marginalized peoples of all walks of life.

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