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PATHWAYS TO POLITICAL ENGAGEMENT Interviews with Social Workers in Elected Office

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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

In 2015, in an unexpected political upset, Alberta's New Democratic Party was elected to govern for the first time in the province's history. There were eight social workers amongst those elected, all of whom were interviewed for this research. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the motivations that led these social workers to seek political office, to identify factors in their personal and professional histories that explained their high level of political engagement, and to explore how the profession can increase the numbers of social workers pursuing political practice in the future. A standard qualitative thematic analysis of these interviews revealed that families of origin were influential motivators, and that social work education also played a significant role, as did professional experience and networks. Recommendations for change emerged from our findings. We discuss these with an emphasis on professional education and on what the academy can do to heighten levels of political engagement among future graduates.

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Keywords: political engagement, politics, social justice, Alberta, qualitative research

Résumé : Dans le contexte d'un bouleversement politique inattendu, le Nouveau Parti démocratique de l'Alberta est arrivé au pouvoir pour la

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première fois de l'histoire de la province en 2015. Les huit travailleurs sociaux qui se trouvaient au nombre des élus ont été interviewés aux fins de la présente recherche. L'objectif de cette étude qualitative était de dégager les motivations qui ont poussé ces travailleurs sociaux à briguer un mandat, d'identifier les facteurs dans leurs trajectoires personnelles et professionnelles qui expliquent leur niveau d'engagement politique, et d'explorer les stratégies pouvant permettre à plus de travailleurs sociaux de solliciter des mandats électifs à l'avenir. Une analyse qualitative thématique classique de ces entrevues a révélé que la famille d'origine est une source de motivation considérable et que l'enseignement en travail social, ainsi que l'expérience et les réseaux professionnels, y jouent également un rôle important. Nos résultats ont donné lieu à la formulation de recommandations pour en vue d'un changement. Nous les abordons en mettant l'emphase sur la formation professionnelle et sur les démarches que les établissements d'enseignement peuvent entreprendre pour stimuler le niveau d'engagement politique parmi les futurs diplômés.

Mots-clés : engagement politique, politique, justice sociale, Alberta, recherche qualitative

Background

MAY 5, 2015 REPRESENTED A REMARKABLE change in Alberta's political landscape when nearly 44 years of Progressive Conservative governance came to an end and The New Democratic Party (NDP) came to power for the first time in the province's history (Sharp & Braid, 2016). Equally surprising was that the 54 elected New Democrats included nearly equal numbers of women and men, the first openly gay members, unprecedented ethno-cultural diversity, and eight social workers. For the first time in their 110-year history, Albertans had defied all expectations by electing a socially progressive political party (McGregor, 2015; Menon, 2015).

Explanations for this decisive change varied but contributing factors included a skillful leader with a committed party membership, who recruited socially progressive candidates, deliberately balancing the number of women and men and attracting candidates from ethnically and sexually diverse groups. Many of the candidates the new premier, Rachel Notley, attracted were young and new to politics, and eager to participate and to help bring about change. Together they represented the current makeup of Alberta, especially the youthfulness and diversity of the two major cities.

Our interest in the experiences of newly-elected politicians with a social work background arose in part as a result of the unusually high number who won seats in the 2015 Alberta election. Of a total of 87

available seats, eight (nearly 10%) were taken by members who identified as social workers. Four of those eight held key cabinet positions at the time we gathered data for this research.

These numbers are historic and significant. Through their code of ethics Canadian social workers are called on to be active in the development, implementation, and critique of social policy to ensure “fair and equitable access to public services and benefits” (CASW, 2005, p. 5). In Alberta, social workers are regulated under the Health Professions Act (Government of Alberta, 2017), which defines as part of their scope of practice “contribution to the development and improvement of social policy” (p. 286). However, in the past, few social workers have translated these calls into bids for elected office (Lane & Humphries, 2011), and we were curious to understand why that had suddenly changed.

Literature Review: Social Workers and Political Engagement

Social work has a long history of activism and political engagement in the pursuit of social justice and human rights. Early social workers engaged in the struggle for fairness in the distribution of the wealth that came with social and economic progress (Abramovitz, 1998). Influential social workers, Alice Salomon and Jane Addams, held major roles in the International Congress of Women, launched in 1915. Jane Addams chaired the inaugural meeting of the Women’s Peace Congress, comprised of social activists promoting a peaceful end to WWI (Jacobs, 1996; Jennissen & Lundy 2011).

The Social Gospel, a progressive Christian movement in Europe and Canada, significantly influenced the development of social workers concerned with social reform. The creation of the Moral and Social Reform Council of Canada in 1907 led to the Social Services Council of Canada in 1914, representing a variety of social welfare and social work organizations lobbying for social programs (Jennissen & Lundy, 2011). By 1928, the lengthy process of creating the Canadian Association of Social Work culminated in a Conference in Montreal with representation from all provinces.

The debate regarding settlement work or casework (epitomized by Jane Addams and Mary Richmond) contributed to controversies within the social work academy and exposed “divisions, on whether to concentrate on social advocacy or casework practice” (Jennissen & Lundy, 2011, p. 25). In Canada, social workers were divided on the role of activism in the professions. While many resisted, others adopted political strategies to address the pressing social issues of the day, including unemployment insurance, mother’s allowance, and child poverty. Harry Cassidy presented social workers with the stark choice of becoming either “stretcher bearers of society,” or fighting “the social crime of poverty” (cited in Jennissen & Lundy, 2011).

Social work activism had diminished substantially prior to the 1960s as the focus had turned to professionalism and psychotherapy (Goldstein, 1996). Some believed the profession had “abandoned its intellectual roots, and ... relinquished the utopian visions that guided early reformers” (Karger & Hernández, 2004, p. 57). A growing interest among social workers was to identify as ‘clinical social workers’ and to distinguish their practice from that of workers engaged in community organizing, policy design, and social action (Goldstein, 1996). Activism however began a resurgence with the civil and human rights movements of the 1960s. Community organizing and social action grew steadily within the profession throughout the 1970s, influenced heavily by Saul Alinsky and political idealism. Although no more than 10% of MSW students enrolled in this concentration at any given time, community organizing made a significant impact on the profession, pushing social workers to question the value of clinical and political neutrality in the face of calls for social justice (Reisch & Wencour, 1986).

In recent decades, social work has begun to reconcile the perceived micro/macro divide and embrace its dual purpose in the pursuit of social justice (McLaughlin, 2002). Social work activism pushed the profession beyond economic and social justice to include ecological justice for a sustainable world (Besthorn & Saleeby, 2003; Mason, Shires, Arwood, & Borst, 2017). Social work’s structural analysis when addressing individual need makes explicit the link between social justice, human rights, and the environmental crisis (Noble, 2016). Social work research is an expanding tool for activists seeking to leverage movement toward greater social justice (Lorenzetti, 2013). The profession’s concern with human well-being, when connected to global well-being, requires what Reisch and Jani (2012) identify as a revitalized political perspective.

Political activism

Research confirms that many social workers do have an affinity for and interest in politics, with a higher level of political engagement than the general public (Ezell, 1993; Ritter, 2007; Wolk, 1996; Rome & Hoehstetter, 2010). However, this engagement may reflect higher levels of voting but not necessarily things such as campaigning and running for office (Pritzker & Burwell, 2016). Hamilton and Fauri (2001) randomly sampled 500 of the 32,000 certified social workers from New York State and asked them about their political engagement. Their respondents, with a return rate of 48% ($n = 242$), reported that their most frequent political engagement strategies were voting and contacting a member of government by phone. Rome and Hoehstetter (2010) found similar results when they surveyed members of the National Association of Social Workers ($n = 3,000$). With a 43% return rate ($n = 1274$) they also reported high levels of voting among respondents (95%) but surprisingly low levels

of organizing, marching in protests, campaign work or electoral politics.

Given the forces at play today, including growing inequity, global financial instability, and the prevalence of a market based neo-liberal philosophy in all facets of society, many are calling for a re-politicization of the social work profession (Felderhoff, Hoefler, & Watson, 2015; Rocha, Poe, & Thomas, 2010; Reisch & Jani, 2012). Yet social workers have been criticized for lacking what Marston and McDonald (2012) identify as political agency, and often appear reluctant or unable to “confront the political dimensions of their own practice” (Reisch & Jani, 2012).

Political agency and engagement may include anything from voting, to volunteering, to holding public office. More importantly, political engagement requires social workers to employ a critical analysis of how macro structures impact individual problems and to critique the development and maintenance of power in the status quo regarding rights, opportunities, resources or status.

Social workers, unwilling or unable to confront the political dimensions of their work, may lack confidence in their skills and ability to impact change (Reisch & Jani, 2012; Rome & Hoechstetter, 2010). Calls for increased political content in the social work curriculum (Hoefler, 1999; Hylton, 2015; Pritzker & Burwell, 2016) suggest connecting political engagement with political skill-building to increase political efficacy and confidence among students (Hamilton & Fauri, 2001; Ostrander, Lane, McClendon, Hayes, & Rhodes Smith, 2017).

Our research explores how newly elected Members of the Alberta Legislature (MLAs) with a social work education, came to be engaged in electoral politics. We were interested in exploring what influences explained such a career choice and how these politicians perceived their professional development (including social work education) as a path to political office. What could we learn about the role education could play in stimulating future social workers’ interest in higher levels of political engagement?

Methods

Our study was a qualitative inquiry employing open-ended, semi-structured interviews (Berg, 2007). After obtaining ethics approval from the Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board at the University of Calgary, letters were sent to all eight newly elected MLAs with a social work background, all of whom agreed to be interviewed. Interview locations preferred by participants were either constituency or legislative offices. All three authors participated in the interviewing. The majority of interviews were conducted face-to-face. On occasion one or more members of the research team attended by phone. Participants were sent consent and information forms prior to the interviews. Discussions regarding informed consent as well as the limits of confidentiality (considering the

visibility and high profile nature of the participants) occurred prior to participants signing the consent forms. Participants retained a copy of the consent forms. Participants were also invited to review the manuscript prior to proceeding to publication. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Interviews were conducted over a six-month period from May 2016 to October 2016. We asked our participants open-ended questions about their motivations for pursuing political office, and what in their personal and professional development contributed to this choice. We also asked about barriers that might discourage social workers from seeking political office, and what social work educators might do to encourage an interest in political practice among their students (see Appendix A interview guide).

Participants

The following demographic information (age, gender, political experience, educationally attainment) was obtained. Four of our participants identified as male, and four as female. Their average age was 48 years, with the youngest being 25 years of age and the oldest 68 years of age, at the time of the interviews. All but one of our participants indicated they had political experience prior to the 2015 election; one had previously been elected to a municipal office, and two others had run for office (one provincially and one municipally). All had social work education with five holding a graduate degree in social work (MSW), two holding diplomas in social work, and one who was elected prior to graduation from a diploma program. One participant held a law degree (LL.B), an MA in Economics, and an MSW.

Analysis

As a first step, each member of the research team read the first three completed interviews, identifying interesting features of the data as well as recurrent themes and patterns. Coding practices included the constant comparative method described by Charmaz (2006) and others (Fram, 2013), whereby units of text are compared within and across interviews searching for similarities as well as differences (Charmaz, 54).

In step two, a team meeting was held in which primary codes of interest were confirmed and refined based on a reading of more transcripts. Following this, the researchers returned to the interviews to revisit the data using the refined identified structure.

In all, the team met three times to build consensus, and to refine and prioritize themes of interest, each time returning to the data to further refine and synthesize earlier codes. These iterations resulted in the final thematic structure.

In step one, initial interviews were hand coded; after that, the

emergent coding structure was loaded into Nvivo (10) for further analysis. Meeting minutes were kept as a record of our deliberations and coding decision-making. A team approach (peer review) to data analysis assisted in managing bias (Morse, 2015). All participants were sent drafts of the analysis and invited to comment.

Findings

Values Learned in the Family

When asked about the reasons for their political engagement, the people we interviewed all talked about their families. In most cases this meant the family of origin, the majority ascribing considerable importance to the influence of their parents. Only one respondent mentioned support from a current spouse, and one was influenced by his granddaughter:

I wasn't going to do it and my 15-year-old granddaughter... phoned me... and said... "Papa you must run, Alberta needs to change," and I thought, "You know, she's right." So I did it.

Thematic analysis of these data suggests two very interconnected values were inculcated from the family: engagement and social justice. Engagement refers to the value of public citizenship and involvement in the public sphere. When social justice is part of the picture there is reference to the value of working for socially-just goals, such as fairness and equity – part of the conversation was about certain purposes, about engagement for what rather than just engagement per se.

Engagement.

Most of our respondents reported growing up amidst frequent family conversations encouraging engagement with and debate about ideas per se as a value:

My dad was very good about sitting at the kitchen table... and he would just pick a random topic and always pick the opposite of whatever side that I picked. Whether he agreed with me or not, he would just debate with me to create that [interest].

For two of our respondents, family conversations encouraging engagement were associated with partisan political commitments:

I came from probably the most political family you can imagine. The conversation at every dinner table every night was politics in one way or another. Both of my parents were passionate, you know, they were seen as pretty central to the Liberal party in Alberta.

Only one of the families encouraging partisan conversations specifically promoted the NDP:

I grew up in a small town in Northern Alberta and my parents were NDP from way back when, and Grant Notley [a former leader of the Alberta NDP party] would be sitting at my parents' kitchen table when I'd come home from school sometimes, and certainly we talked politics all the time. So politics was something I grew up with.

In some cases, values were described as being communicated more through meaningful action than with words:

I had seen my mother... she was kind of like an informal social worker helping older Italian women who couldn't read or write to fill out their forms at the kitchen table. I'd watch her do all that sort of community work and I thought that was a worthwhile thing to do.

In some families, then, engagement was actually enacted, rather than being simply discussed: *My mother's a speech pathologist, my dad works with the Spanish-speaking community and organizing them. So just from growing up, like I did a lot of community involvement, community activities and advocacy for children with special needs.*

Social Justice. In some families, respondents reported conversations that moved from engagement per se to critical thinking about the social justice of specific policies: Our conversation was always, *"How does this help our overall society? How can this benefit? How can we make sure this is for everyone's gain and not just one person?"*

In the minds of some respondents social justice is assessed by considering if a link can be made between family-valued ideological commitments and particular policies: *When I talk about social justice, I really believe in looking at the policies that we put in place... taking into account the things so many people before us believed, my mother included... She's a feminist.*

As with the discussion above regarding the value of engagement, sometimes inculcation of social-justice values was a consequence of parents modelling a concern for social action around relevant issues:

My parents, because they are immigrants... put me in a situation where I wanted to work for social justice.... I wanted to advocate for policies that reflected a larger, broader community... so when I think of social justice usually the thing that comes up is systematic barriers and creating equality. I think my real goal, if I narrowed it down to one thing, would be achieving a greater level of equality for our society – that is something that came out of me growing up in an immigrant family and knowing that... it's a little bit more difficult and some of it isn't necessarily related to our capacity, it isn't related to how hard you work, it's just kind of... it's related to who you are.

Values and Knowledge Learned in the Educational System

The family, of course, is not the only source of knowledge and values. Educational experiences were also critical:

So it's something that we... I know we shared as a family. The very least, a desire to always look for the solution and to look for solutions, that has definitely been part of my family; with the skills and strategies that are used to get there, those have been a lot from my education.

While few participants indicated that their education (social work or otherwise) directly prepared them for political life, all identified transferable skills and knowledge proved important.

A Macro Framework for Practice. One aspect of our participants' educational experiences that proved to be useful in the transition to politician was the development of a particular framework for practice. Although participants used various ways to describe their practice framework, most referred to a macro or systemic perspective on social problems: *To really understand those larger systems and how things work together. I mean just having a bigger view, you know, so all of that helped tremendously.* One participant identified the contribution from her social work education using the terminology of models: *Models, like person and environment, ecological, looking at systems frameworks ... always the micro and the macro, you know, private trouble, public issues.*

This perspective helped clarify the relationship between individual issues brought forward by constituents, such as the impact of a minimum wage hike on a small business owner, and the need for larger structural fiscal and economic adjustments. Some came to their education with this perspective: *I was more interested in structural social work and kind of more macro level things.* Others gained this perspective through their social work education:

Social work ... gives you a broad experience and certainly gets you into knowing what peoples' lives are all about and advocating for greater income security, great retirement income so that people can address their own financial needs instead of relying on the goodness of charity.

Although many participants reported their educational experiences leaned toward clinical practice, most described an early interest in macro issues including social policy, community development and activism: For me it was more of the social policy, community structure, social structures, that community development piece of social work versus the one-on-one counselling. Another participant put it this way:

Almost on a daily basis in my role in the ministry ... we have people who are suffering and are hurt by a variety of things ... poverty and residential schools and all those kind of things. But if we just focus on the individuals ... we're going to get in big trouble. So our conversation is constantly about the structural.

Maintaining a perspective that recognizes the connection of macro structures to micro problems shifts the emphasis and allows different questions to be asked:

When we talk about children in care and how we have to decrease it ... that is one piece of it, it would be great to measure that and say, we've achieved the outcome because we've decreased the amount of kids coming into care, but we're not dealing with the big social issue around why is it that kids even come into care to begin with, which is what we end up having a lot of conversations about right? How do we, within these different ministries, minimize the ... impacts that create children coming into care? You work with youth that are in shelters and ... even though you're doing the work, it doesn't reduce the number of kids that you're working with or it's getting worse, you know, those are political issues.

Transferable Skillset. Besides a framework from which to view social problems, participants indicated their social work education also provided them with a valuable skillset that helped facilitate their work, be it in legislative committees or their constituencies. Describing her political work, one participant explained the commonalities to social work:

Having some kind of skills where you can connect and join with people and also influence, move them, I mean gosh, we do that all the time in social work that we're working with, people or communities, to sort of influence them and certainly in social policy too, we're doing that. So I think that that is very congruent ... being a social worker and [in] politics.

This skill set also included elements such as compassion and genuineness, good listening skills, empathy, and relationship building: *you know, all those qualities that we learn in our interviewing courses.* In addition participants mentioned group work skills: building teams and dealing with team dynamics. In constituency work, participants indicated such skills were essential:

We're not just pretending to hear concerns, we're actually engaging with people when they're talking to us and we're trying to find a solution rather than just letting them talk and then it goes nowhere, we're actually active in listening and then following up with that.

Core social work skills transfer easily, making this aspect of political work a good fit for social workers. Two of our participants indicated their work as a politician was social work:

Doing what I do every day is social work and I think ...the way that I perceive my position as representing the constituents, as being a voice for Albertans, is doing social work, that's what I do every single day.

Another shared that as a student she had remembered a professor saying: "If you're doing politics properly, you're doing social work," emphasizing how micro social work skills that help facilitate change are transferable to political work:

I'm bringing all of those learnings from social work into that, I'm listening, I'm reflecting, I'm clarifying, I'm making sure I'm really hearing what's important to people and I'm helping them get their voice in it and advocate on their behalf and I'm doing that for them when they can't. So it's social work at its finest in my opinion.

The Value of Social Justice. Although a focus on social justice was an element in the education of many of the participants, the exploration and discussions regarding social justice were never linked directly to political engagement: *I don't know if I would say that talking about the social justice piece ever referred to politics though.* Another participant commented: *Social justice has always been in the forefront of my mind but I never saw it as political. I saw it as advocating to the politicians and advocating on behalf of people to get some sort of change.*

For some participants their social work education was critical in developing their understanding and commitment to social justice. Education regarding social justice included developing analytic skills: *It was more of that critical thinking piece around, "Do you see this as a social justice issue?" and then looking at those big pictures ...like feminism and, you know, cultural identity and racism and all of those components.* For others it was the central core: *"social work for me was social justice more than anything else."* Education with regard to social justice helped shape participants' personal identities: *It gives me a very unique perspective to look at things and it's helped me shape my views and, I guess, it helped develop me as the person I am today.*

Thus, consideration of social justice was identified by several participants as a critical motivation for their political engagement:

If you see somebody on the streets, you don't...as a social worker, you don't look at, well the market is responsible for housing and if you can't make it, you can't make it, rather you're taking a stance that no, living in a safe home is a basic human need, a basic right.

Some identified frustration they experienced due to the previous governments' apparent neglect of the poor and marginalized:

[Social justice] was my number one motivation...being a social worker and just seeing all the injustices that were being done to people that the government at the time didn't care about people, they weren't on the radar, it didn't feel like people that are low income, people that are experiencing mental health, people that are experiencing addictions, they weren't represented, their voice wasn't being heard and that made me crazy.

Welcoming Professional Experience and Networks

Familial and educational influences were important motivators leading to active involvement in political social work practice by our respondents. An additional factor identified in interviews was a professional environment that supported politics as a career choice.

Although one participant self-described as non-partisan, many others were longtime members of the party, "I've always been involved with politics, you know, every provincial and federal election, I've worked for the NDP since I was eighteen," while others were ideologically aligned but not affiliated, "I always supported the NDP, I believed in their values but I never saw myself as being political." Those asked by the leadership personally to run had come to the notice of party leaders either through volunteer networks including working for the party, "I chaired the nomination meeting," or through their professional experience. This professional experience included work that crossed over into the political arena. One of those participants was a union activist, "I was a strong advocate with [the union], I actually represented all of the ... workers in the city." In this position the participant crossed paths with politicians, especially those in opposition, as the NDP was at that time:

I was at the legislature quite a bit and talking to a lot of different politicians... I was working closely with the Minister ... just trying to get involved and learn ... and he said to me at one point, "Well why don't you just run, like, you know this, you know what's going on."

Another participant had a similar experience as a spokesperson for her professional association:

I would be in the media and stuff like that and I knew her [the party leader] a bit, I didn't know her very well but... she took me for lunch and she said, "Well you know why I've asked you here... I want you to run."

Such social and professional networks directly exposing participants to party leadership appeared to be instrumental in promoting their political participation.

Barriers

Respondents were asked what might impede efforts to encourage more political engagement on the part of social workers. One factor is a perceived bias toward clinical practice on the part of students and their teachers: *My sense is... that this particular school, Calgary, in the last 30 years has tended to be more driven by the clinical social work rather than the public policy, the community development school of thought.*

Another possible barrier to political engagement by social workers is that their employers might view it negatively:

Something I had to seriously consider... was, "Am I willing to recognize that my career as a child protection worker is probably over... Will I have an ability to go back to my profession if I run and get elected? If I don't get elected and I've run and I've had conflicts with my employer, how is that relationship going to continue?"

This might be a special concern for workers in government-run services: *The city never used to like its employees getting involved in city politics... You had to kind of do it surreptitiously instead of, well, being open about it.*

The heavy demands of political work can compete with other priorities, such as family responsibilities and this might be a disincentive to involvement. This is more of an issue for women, though not exclusively so: *There are still some sort of more traditional choices that women make, they want to be available to their families... My youngest son is 14... and he just said very clearly to me, "I hate your new job."*

Another barrier is that the ethos in political settings may not be social-worker friendly: *I find politics to be quite hostile sometimes ... you get attacked for all sorts of things.* One important consideration about the ethos in political contexts is sexism: *The women in our party have, unfortunately, been targeted. Our premier has had death threats, Minister_____ just had a threat against her on social media. It's not okay that people are targeting the women in government.* According to another respondent:

We know from research that women need to be asked to run, they don't tend to voluntarily put their name forward and they usually have to be asked more than once and they usually have to go back and check with their partner... Because of their caregiving roles... it is a big decision.

Recommendations

Looking at one area where planning is feasible, we asked what educators might do to encourage involvement by social work graduates. Simply discussing social work practice with reference to political settings is one obvious educational strategy: *Talking about maybe successful political initiatives and how they happen, like deconstructing them... there's lots of politics that could... be run through a social work lens... and excite people, I think.*

Some respondents indicated that an understanding of more generalist rather than highly specialized practices should be the goal: *The issues we are facing in our society are very interconnected and there is a trend toward more integrated practice models.... How different ... disciplines are coming together to deal with an issue in a more holistic manner.*

That said, there are particular practice emphases that should be taught as preparation for political practice: *One of the skills that you may want to be introducing is bargaining and negotiation. Similarly: How to negotiate those resolutions where you're coming from completely opposite sides.... How do you build a consensus?*

Conceptual skills relevant to the analysis and implementation of policy were seen as important: *How do you advocate for different policies? How do you evaluate a policy for the impact that it has on the social level? One respondent was more specific: When you suddenly find yourself in government, you can't just know about social work... you have to know about economics. This particular emphasis was a recommendation shared by others, arguing that our universe of interest is around vulnerable people, the impacts on their lives as a result of economics.*

There are also conceptual skills required for understanding and effecting change that are specific to political contexts, and these need to be learned: *Doing that analysis around the different ministries and their functions and... how they relate and interact with each other and how that impacts the decisions that are made within the roles of social workers. Such an analysis has practical implications: One of the other things I think would be very interesting [is] ... how do you go from an idea to a bill ... to the point where I'm actually standing in the legislature voting on a bill? And, more specifically: We have a huge responsibility... to talk about misogyny.*

The idea of a political practice “stream” was popular with our respondents: *Schools might create a dialogue with the various ministries about how you can have an influence on government and get feedback for the school about how you might be putting some new streams into your social work program. If such a political practice stream is created, some thought needs to be given to practicum supervision in settings where seasoned social workers might not be available: Is it predetermined that you need to be a social worker to act as... supervisor?*

Discussion

Universities have long been championed as arenas in which individuals develop a sense of themselves as civic-minded participants in democratic processes (Nussbaum, 1997). When provided opportunity, students may cultivate a shared sense of humanity and critically reflect on issues of social justice, including what type of society they envision for the future (Young, 2001).

It would appear that social work education and practice can contribute to the preparation of individuals for high levels of political engagement, including running for and holding elected office. Although participants in this study credited engagement in the political process in part to values passed on from important family members, whether observing their family engagement in their community or through discussions at the kitchen table, it was education and experience that allowed them to find language and skills to frame important questions of social justice. While participants appeared to have significant “psychological engagement in politics” (Swank, 2012) prior to entering a social work program, it can be argued that one job of social work education is to translate early experiences and inclinations into politically engaged citizenship – part of a meaningful social work identity (Nussbaum, 1997; Shlomo, Levy, & Itzhaky, 2012).

One way social work education can contribute to successful politicization and civic engagement is through its continued emphasis on a framework for practice that integrates a macro, structural perspective at every level of intervention. This is important for all social work students regardless of their future career aspirations. This lens provides a systemic understanding of the relationship between economic, political, and social structures (systems), and social injustices with effects seen at the individual level. A bedrock of social work practice is the person in environment perspective predicated on a critical ecosystem approach (Rothery, 2016), which our participants seemed to endorse. The recognition that individuals, constituents, are embedded in multiple systems provides social work politicians with a perspective for intervention at high levels. Social workers who integrate a macro perspective are better able to connect worldviews and ideology with approaches to public policy. Potentially this may set our participants apart from what critics (see Specht & Courtney, 1995) have called a therapeutic micro perspective characteristic of much of social work today. Recently Reisch (2016) has criticized the lack of attention to macro practice within the profession – a position with which our participants would concur.

Our current social work education provides skills seen as useful to those running for and holding elective office, for example active listening, problem solving, relationship building, and team work. Still, while certain skills are seen as necessary they are by no means sufficient. Participants

identified areas where their social work education did not serve them, specifically their lack of familiarity about governmental processes, such as those involved in moving legislation forward, and important knowledge gaps, particularly around high-level economic issues.

Professional and social networks can play a significant role in heightening political engagement. These networks are where party affiliates look to engage with politically minded individuals to mobilize them to action (Brady, Schlozman, & Verba, 1999). It was interesting to note many of our participants were actually asked to run by the party leadership. Preexisting affiliations with a political party, either through professional practice or educational experiences (for example, a practicum placement), enabled participants to cross paths with politicians and thus enter into recruitment networks (Ritter, 2008; Swank, 2012). Social work must embrace the political dimensions of practice available by recognizing the inherently political nature of such activities as working on campaigns to end homelessness, poverty reductions strategies, protection for refugees and immigrants, LGBTQ issues, and fighting discrimination against those with disabilities or mental health issues. This is inherently political work, and this work is frequently championed by politicians, both those in power and those in opposition. Membership in these organizations energizes and educates social workers. It also has the potential to increase political efficacy. Although most of our participants had not intentionally entered these recruitment networks, without this exposure and proximity to party members they likely would not be MLAs today.

Barriers

A number of barriers to political engagement for social workers exist but women and visible minorities may face the greatest barriers. Our participants noted some aspects of political office that may deter social workers, particularly women, as the adversarial nature of party politics coupled with a climate of hostility and even misogyny, which has been reported recently in politics at all levels (Bashevkin, 2009; Krook, 2017). Additionally, barriers to political engagement include the work/life balance and stress on families.

Limitations

Ours was a small-scale, qualitative research study conducted in Alberta where the political, social, and economic history of the province creates a unique context not easily generalizable to other provinces. While qualitative research is not intended to be generalizable, in the sense of statistical generalizability, we hope the experiences of our political social work respondents may resonate with other social workers and be transferable to their circumstances despite differences (Morse, 2015). An

additional limitation of our study is that we did not ask participants about their ethnic or sexual identities, yet we know that significant barriers exist for members of minority communities seeking to achieve political inclusion (Bird, 2005).

Implications / Recommendations

Agreeing that social work practice is inherently political (Reisch & Jani, 2012) and that changes are required in order to graduate social work students with a vision of themselves as potential participants in electoral politics, we make the following recommendations:

- 1) In order to better prepare social workers for the political arena a more explicit discussion concerning the political nature of social work practice needs to occur throughout the curriculum. If, as Reisch and Jani (2012) point out, workers miss seeing “the political nature of daily practice” they may also not see an avenue for change in greater political engagement.
- 2) A minimum of one course introducing social workers to political ideologies and legislative procedures should be required within the social work curriculum. Ideally, the curriculum could offer a political stream whereby social workers can specialize in political or policy practice. A framework for practice such as the critical ecosystems perspective (Rothery, 2016), or other structural frameworks that provide an analysis of social issues, is essential.
- 3) Courses within a political stream should include skill-based courses such as advocacy strategies, debating skills, mediation, and negotiation techniques. Having and using influence needs to be grounded in knowledge and theories of power, its uses, and misuses.
- 4) Practicum opportunities should be expanded to include political placements with elected members of government. Practicum placements could include not only constituency and grass roots work but also work within legislative offices. Politically oriented placements could also include placements with unions or other activist organizations.

Conclusion

Social work education is a valuable pathway to political engagement. The resource model of political engagement (Verba, Schlozman, & Brady, 1995) suggests individuals fail to engage in political activities due to perceived deficits: “People may be inactive because they lack resources [skills, time, money], because they lack psychological engagement with politics, or because they are outside of the recruitment networks that

bring people into politics” (Verba, Schozman, & Brady, 1995). Social work education can impact each of these areas and should play a greater role in preparing students for higher levels of political engagement if we wish to see our mission of social justice carried out. A greater attention to the political dimensions of social work practice throughout the curriculum, and a special stream with dedicated content and political placements would provide a more solid springboard to political engagement for graduating social workers.

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