

Northern social workers' experiences with reflective practice: Analyzing power in international development work

by

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Affairs in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Social Work

Carleton University  
Ottawa, Ontario

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## **Abstract**

Colonial histories, processes and experiences created conditions of inequality that continue to exist between the Global North and South and established a power dynamic that plagues international development work. Social workers who work in the international development sector are implicated in reproducing these unequal power relations through the operation and facilitation of this work. As such, they have been criticized for imposing their influence and knowledge in Southern contexts, while at the same time failing to critique the effects of Northern imposition on individuals and communities. Drawing on anti-oppressive social work practice, this project explores whether social workers' engagement with reflective practices impacts their understanding of their own positioning, power, practice strategies and negotiation with their managerial workplaces.

Data was collected with the use of semi-structured interviews with Northern-trained social workers who work (or recently worked) for governments, international aid organizations, or as consultants across the Global South in the Middle East, Caribbean, Oceania, East Asia, Europe, and Africa. Participants revealed that powerful neoliberal ideas in the workplace and location-specific challenges constrained reflective practice activity.

This research provides important insight and understanding into how Northern social workers working in the Global South grapple with their roles, responsibilities, identities, and positions. This study contributes research on the different possibilities for reflective practice within an anti-oppressive international social work practice framework and within international development work. These possibilities include a critical analysis of power as well as how such practices narrowed the gap between critical analysis of power and workers' practice orientation.

## Acknowledgements

*“the breaking  
leads to the opening  
the opening  
allows expansion  
the expansion  
creates more space  
the space  
invites growth in”  
(Doby, 2018, p. 35)*

I am deeply indebted to the participants in this study who shared their insights and stories, so others could learn from their experiences. Their contributions to this study will help to inform future dimensions of international social work and international development work.

This project would not have been possible without my doctoral advisory committee: Dr. Sarah Todd, Dr. Karen Schwartz and Dr. Pauline Rankin. Thank you for your dedication to my project. To my supervisor Dr. Sarah Todd, thank you for your flexibility, direction, rigor, and patience. You allowed me to discover my fullest potential throughout this process, even when I didn't see it or believe I had more to give. I would also like to thank some wise mentors who supported this work and encouraged me along the way: Dr. Yasmin Dean, Dr. Yahya El-Lahib, Dr. Lorne Jaques, Dr. Amanda Lavalley, Dr. Lisa Moy and Dr. Adrienne Chan. It really does take a village to raise a dissertation!

I would also like to thank and acknowledge the Carleton University School of Social Work (staff, students and faculty). The social work doctoral program at Carleton was very new when I started, and I am proud to be a part of its inception. To my fellow PhD Candidates who helped me through the highest highs and lowest lows – in particular, Anna Przednowek, Gareth Park, Filipe Duarte and Katherine Occhiuto – thank you! I share this work alongside you.

I am grateful for the financial contributions of the Ontario Graduate Scholarship award funded by the Ontario Government as well as the Doctoral Fellowship awarded by the Federal Government's Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC). I am also thankful to the Doctoral Scholarship offered by Carleton University. Without this funding, my situation would have been much more difficult as these contributions eased my financial concerns over the years.

To my immediate family: my mom Marianna, dad Bob, stepdad Don, sister Kristie (Brad), brother Bobby (Annalyn) – thanks so much for supporting me as I went on this bumpy ride. Your endless words of encouragement, belief in me and interest in my work helped tremendously along the way. I am also very thankful to my parents and grandparents who instilled in me the importance and value of education while I was younger. For if it wasn't for them doing so, I would not be where I am today. I am proud to become the first person in my family to complete a doctoral program.

And last, but not least, to my husband Kassim: this is for you. *For us*. You've been my rock every step of the way, for better or for worse. I can't even begin to list the many things you did to make this happen - it's endless. I appreciate your love, care, concern, insight, hugs, laughs, smiles, support and willingness to do whatever it took to get this done. I can't wait for what's next!

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## List of Key Terms

**Global North:** This geographical term generally refers to countries classified by the World Bank as high income that are in North America, Europe, Asia, and Oceania. This definition is used to identify, define, and cluster the ‘richer parts of the world’. *Please note:* Neither the North nor the South are homogenous – there are Global Norths within the South, and vice versa – but will use these terms in this project for the purpose of addressing broad power imbalances within the system.

**Northerners or Westerners:** Individuals who are from and live primarily in the Global North.

**Global South:** This geographical term generally refers to countries classified by the World Bank as low or middle income that are in Africa, Asia, Oceania, Latin America, South America and the Caribbean. This definition is used to identify, define, and cluster the ‘poorer parts of the world’. *Please note:* This project also signals that this term references an entire history of “colonialism, neo-imperialism, and differential economic and social change through which large inequalities in living standard, life expectancy, and access to resources are maintained” (Dados & Connell, 2012, p. 13). Thus, the term draws attention to past and present geopolitical processes and relations of power.

**Southerners:** Individuals who are from and primarily live in the Global South.

**International Development:** This term is often associated with a process, actions designed for, and research relating to, poor (or lower-income) countries (Sumner & Tribe, 2008), including foreign aid and human resources, either internationally or local recruited (Currie-Alder, 2016). The term ‘international’ gained popularity in a 19th-century context of cross-border transactions. Meanwhile, the term ‘development’ can be variously used to refer to an idea, objective and/or activity, often interrelated, to set up longer-term, sustainable solutions to problems such as poverty reduction, access to health care and education and gender equality.

**International/Humanitarian Aid:** Aid provided to address the physical, material and legal needs of persons/communities of concern. This may include food items, medical supplies, clothing, shelter, seeds and tools, as well as the provision of infrastructure, such as schools and roads.

**Aid Recipients:** Individuals, groups, families and/or communities that are in receipt of said aid (above) or who are living in communities where development processes or actions are being taken.

**International Development Workers:** Are workers often employed by governments, charities, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), international aid agencies and volunteer groups and they often have varying educational and occupational backgrounds. The primary objective for development workers is to provide aid and assistance to people in locations around the globe, covering all kinds of issues from healthcare, sanitation, housing, education, agriculture, human rights, sustainability and relief from natural disasters.

**International Social Work:** Within this project, international social work is social work practice in the context of international development/aid work. Social work can occur a variety of organizations—governmental body, international agency, international non-governmental organization (INGO) or local NGO—and covers a variety of kinds of social work—such as mental health, advocacy, family work, program development, training, and capacity building.

## **List of Abbreviations**

- ALPS: Accountability, Learning and Planning System
- AOP: Anti-Oppressive Practice
- FAO: Food and Agriculture Organization
- IASSW: International Association of Schools of Social Work
- ICSW: International Council on Social Welfare
- IFAD: International Fund for Agricultural Development
- IFSW: International Federation of Social Workers
- INGO: International Non-governmental Organization
- IPA: Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis
- MDG: Millennium Development Goal
- NGO: Non-Governmental Organization
- NPM: New Public Management
- OECD: Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
- SDG: Sustainable Development Goal
- UN: United Nations
- UNDESA: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
- UNDP: United Nations Development Programme
- UNHCR: United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
- UNICEF: United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
- WFP: World Food Programme
- WHO: World Health Organization

## **Prelude: Setting the Stage**

My name is Brianna Strumm, and I am currently living and working on Stó:lō Territory in British Columbia, Canada. My ancestors arrived in Halifax as Treaty land inhabitants from different parts of Europe (England, Scotland and Ukraine) in the late 1800s, and I was raised across the Western plains of what is known as Canada and the United States. During my childhood and youth, I negotiated many geographical moves. At an early age, I became interested in learning about the people and spaces I called “home”, having to reset and adapt within each new environment. I decided to pursue a career in social work because of pivotal moments in both my personal and professional life, some of which included many physical and familial upheavals, and how I subsequently grew to see the world as gendered, connected, unequal and expansive.

After I completed a bachelor’s degree in social work, I moved to England and worked in child protection and health care. After practicing in Brixton, London, for several invaluable years, I yearned for additional depth to my practice and decided to attain a specialized master’s degree that focused on international dimensions of social work. I wanted to continue to expand my social work knowledge, especially as it related to my understanding of global contexts, systems, practices and issues and the impacts of those oppressive systems on marginalized and racialized populations, many of whom encountered in my work in England. My graduate degree, as well as the work experiences that followed internationally in leadership, community building, research and poverty reduction, provided me with the inspiration to complete this doctorate work.

Over the years, living, working, and studying in different countries I continued to be captivated by connection, as well as difference, across boundaries and borders. I also became acutely aware of how an independent woman moves through the world. While I was extremely privileged to be able to experience untethered mobility, my gendered experience also came with fear, apprehension and experiences of violence and harassment. This research was therefore born out of my personal history as a woman, social worker and learner who has a passion for critiquing and expanding international domains

of social work. I share this history to help contextualize and trace my interest and relationship with this research as a feminist researcher.

### ***Researcher Social Location***

I am a Caucasian, cis-gendered, able-bodied, middle-class, English-speaking social worker born and raised in North America. In sharing my identity and social location, I acknowledge my privilege. I believe that we (Northern-trained social workers and academics) have a responsibility to turn the gaze on ourselves and to unpack with nuance how we practice social work across the world, and especially in the Global South. Throughout my doctoral journey, it was also important to me to find a way to research elements of social work practice found *within* the international development sector – a priority that remains today. Within my professional experiences, I did not encounter many social work scholars, practitioners and researchers debating how to go about operationalizing international development work from an anti-oppressive lens, even though I have felt the practice and profession of social work has much in common with the international development sector.

As a social worker in England (2004-2008), South Africa (2010), India (2001, 2013 & 2016) and Jamaica (2012-2013), I confronted several different professional challenges and complexities. Many of these challenges were rooted in having inadequate local knowledge or understanding, while being asked to perform duties such as capacity building, resource-seeking and managing staff. I was curious about ways to minimize my influence, while having limited workplace support to navigate this tension. I was invested in the ideals of international development work itself, especially as it pertains to achieving justice and equality, but often wondered how to bolster professional, anti-oppressive practice among migrating professionals in positions of power when working in foreign contexts.

Doing nothing to advocate for and create meaningful relationships with those struggling globally seemed unimaginable, and I yearned for different ways to be accountable to communities as the work usually felt one-sided. I wanted to interrogate, for example, funding decisions taken by Northern-based funders doing locality development in Jamaica and wondered what skills or tools would help me to best

navigate my interventions and decisions on the ground. As a result of these experiences, I do hold some insider knowledge about working and living in the Global South and interest in challenging how this work is done; I brought my set of life experiences to this research. Within feminist research, the researcher appears to the reader “not as an invisible, anonymous voice of authority, but as a real, historical individual with concrete, specific desires and interests” (Harding, 1987, p. 9). Undertaking this research was a personal decision that emerged from my own experiences working internationally.

I have endeavoured to do this work in a respectful and humble way and have wrestled with many difficulties throughout my research journey. One of the challenges of presenting this academic research is the use of language, including how things, people, places and phenomenon are labelled, ordered and presented; I have felt somewhat constrained by language. As Lather (1991) writes, “as I write, I face the inescapability of reductionism. Language is delimitation, a strategic limitation of possible meanings” (p. xix). While uncomfortable, it is important to acknowledge that terms used in this dissertation such as participant/researcher, men/women, worker/recipient, North/South, powerful/powerless, high-income/low-income, etc. reinforce dominant categories of groups and silence/reduce others. Language produces, frames, performs and constructs that which is being investigated and reinforces dominant/subordinate positions. I have and will continue, where I am able, to resist and critique language through a commitment to anti-oppressive social work practice and theory. This means adopting a mindset that is critically-reflective of the story I am telling. Moreover, the stories and experiences I share are from and about the positioning of the Northern-based development/humanitarian worker. Hence, the full scope of reflective practice from multiple stakeholders in the international development community is not presented here. As a result of this work unfolding, I am even more committed to future research that includes the colonial impact on social work practice with marginalized groups that is led by narratives from the Global South.

Now that I have situated myself and my experiences prior to conducting this research, I will introduce what is contained in this manuscript. This dissertation unfolds as follows:

### ***Chapter One: Introduction to the Research***

This chapter offers an overview, background and context for the research that was completed over the course of my PhD. It introduces readers to important concepts found throughout the research project and the research purpose and questions.

### ***Chapter Two: Literature Review***

The literature review focuses on core areas of research relevant to this project—reflective practice and international development workers. This is a review of these topics as they relate to my research.

### ***Chapter Three: Theoretical Framework***

This chapter offers an overview of my theoretical framework, anti-oppressive social work practice, which is used to interpret the data. It lays the groundwork for the discussion and analysis of the findings.

### ***Chapter Four: Methodology***

This chapter describes the methodology employed, including how this project was operationalized using feminist and phenomenological research values and principles. The interview procedures, selection of participants and sampling procedures, a description of data collection and analysis, an overview of participant information and ethical considerations are discussed.

### ***Chapter Five: The Findings***

This chapter showcases the findings from the research. It is broken up into three main themes: 1) how participants used reflective practices to unpack and critically reflect on power and power dynamics in their work; 2) how participants talked about their reflective practice experiences as a pathway to modifying their interpersonal practices within international work environments; and 3) how constraining managerial practices worked to undermine participants' efforts to in operationalizing reflective practice. The study also shed light on how reflective practices were used to navigate and cope with professional challenges within development work.

## ***Chapter Six: Discussion and Conclusion***

The final chapter provides a discussion of the findings and the conclusions drawn from the research. It addresses how the scholarly literature is moved forward and the implications of this work. Research limitations are also provided. The dissertation concludes with future research directions and recommendations.

## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Research

*“Research is about listening, not expertise. Research is about being curious, skeptical, surprised and sometimes helpless” (Ackerly & True, 2010, p. 20).*

I am a social worker from the Global North who has worked in different international development<sup>1</sup> contexts in the Global South. After becoming acutely aware of the power imbalance in development work over the years, I became interested in how the troubled, dominant (Northern) development paradigm, burdened by a colonial historical context, could be challenged or interrogated by staff. In particular, I became curious about how Northern-based and educated social workers could be using reflective practices<sup>2</sup> to deal with issues emerging from power relations, unequitable relationships and their working conditions and whether these practices could shift the extensive influence they hold due to their privileged status. I wondered: Are social workers in the development sector troubled by the inequalities and potential for oppressive practices in this field of work? Do they work to adopt practices that encourage ongoing reflection, resulting in an exploration and critique of power and oppression in development work? Power dynamics that maintain poverty and inequality are firmly in place between the Global North and South (Howard & Vajda, 2016; Moosa-Mitha & Ross-Sheriff, 2010; Rowlands, 2016); does understanding the uses of reflective practice help to provide new insight into how these power dynamics are perceived from a Northerner’s position?

This study explores how social workers use reflective practices and whether using these practices creates opportunities for them to critique and question different power dynamics as they carry out this work. I explore the different ways women reflect upon power and inequality and their understanding of how reflective practice created opportunities for them to develop critical perceptions into their own

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<sup>1</sup>For brevity, I will be referring to international development work and international development workers primarily as development work and development workers going forward. The definition of these terms is captured in the list of terms on page 7.

<sup>2</sup>While there is some emerging evidence to suggest that development workers from all disciplines engage in reflective practice (see Howard & Vajda, 2016), this work focuses on social workers due to my specific field of scholarship and the methodology of this study.

thoughts, practices and experiences within their workplaces. My discussions with participants also revealed power-laden neoliberal values in the sector, which constrained reflective practice.

## **1.1 Conceptual Frameworks**

This research project is situated within two distinct but overlapping areas of scholarship: international development<sup>3</sup> and international social work. Generally, these two domains help frame and contain my project, along with the concept of reflective practice. International development is primarily the sector under examination. International social work is the type of social work practice the participants were engaged in, given their academic backgrounds and cross- and trans-border practice experience that was under purview.

### ***International Development***

International development, as a concept, was conceived by Western nations at the end of the Second World War to expand economic, human, social and environmental advancement globally (Rist, 2014). This involved planned interventions in countries with low-income economies, some of which were newly independent and in the process of reconstruction in the 1940s and 1950s (Currie-Adler, 2016; Eyben, 2014). Embedded in this 70-year-old paradigm is the assumption that less developed or lower-income economies and regions around the world (largely identified as the Global South for the purposes of this project) need to catch up to the gold standard that has been set by the Global North.<sup>4</sup> The goals of international development are often a combination of economic growth, social advancement, human well-being and environmental sustainability<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> I recognize that throughout North America and Europe, this field of study is often interchangeably called global development studies and international development studies. I chose to use the work 'international' given the many organizations and agencies that commonly use this term.

<sup>4</sup> Low-income economies, as calculated using the World Bank Atlas method, are defined as those with a GNI per capita of \$1,035 or less in 2019; lower middle-income economies have a GNI per capita between \$1,036 and \$4,045; upper middle-income economies are between \$4,046 and \$12,535; and high-income economies have a GNI per capita of \$12,536 or more.

<sup>5</sup> See the most recent Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for an example of current development goals and targets. These goals recognize that ending poverty and other deprivations must go hand-in-hand with strategies that

But why do these nations need to play catch up? Why is the Global North the gold standard and the Global South struggling to keep up? Power dynamics between these two regions had been long-since shaped and defined by a history of colonialism in which Western and European nations (colonizers) dominated and exploited cultures and communities by controlling the lands of unconquered and underdeveloped countries (the colonized) (Caron, 2020; Heinonen & Drolet, 2012; Midgley, 2001). These colonial histories, processes and experiences created the conditions of inequality that exist between the Global North and South and established an uneven power dynamic that continues to plague the sector, making it difficult to establish relationships of equality within international development work. Some scholars argue that “where colonialism left off, development took over” (R. Kothari, 1988, p. 143; see also Escobar, 1995; U. Kothari, 2005, 2006, 2019; McEwan, 2018; Ziai, 2017), suggesting that development should be understood as neocolonial not only because it sells a single, one-sided notion of what it means to develop and advance, but because this notion of development emerges from a Eurocentric worldview and prioritizes Western values such as modernization, growth, expansion, materialism and ethnocentrism at the expense of non-Western ways of life.

Development was (and, to a degree, still is) imposed on and transported to the Global South, and as such, has been used to enact a wide range of political, social, economic and environmental agendas laid out by the Global North (Haug, 2005; Horner, 2019). Typically, these agendas are depicted as a matter of technical, human and financial transfers to lower-income countries, and donors, large and small, often imagine themselves as charitable givers, offering altruistic support to vulnerable populations living in conditions of poverty. Because these histories of colonialism are largely ignored in the Global North, development workers are often unable to see this history and rely instead on stories of political corruption, local conflicts and a lack of expertise to explain the social and economic inequality in the Global South (Strumm, 2020).

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improve health and education, reduce inequality, and spur economic growth – all while tackling climate change and working to preserve oceans and forests (<https://sdgs.un.org/goals>).

Historically, within this conceptualization of international development, the Northern-based funder, donor, and/or partner, is understood as a superior “helping” an inferior Other. The legacy of development work is one that is formulated and controlled by social actors from the Northern hemisphere. Paternalistic and oppressive extensions of the civilizing mission of colonialism found within development reinforces the narrative of Western saviour and passive “Third World” victims/recipients of aid (Chowdhury, 2009; Escobar, 1995). Over time, the binary of development/underdevelopment has been a determining factor in interactions between the North and other postcolonial regions/societies in which the North defines itself as the desirable model in contrast to the undesirable model offered by the underdeveloped world. For those living in developing conditions, development is “a reminder of what they are not...it is a reminder of an undesirable, undignified condition” (Esteva, 1992, p. 10). The end result of these complex dynamics is a development sector that labels, constructs and produces the existence of poverty and underdevelopment from the position of power and dominance that is the Global North (Escobar, 1995; Rahnema, 1997).

Unequal power relations remain prevalent between individual actors in the Global North and South, between those deemed in need of development and the professionals who live and work within communities to address these needs (Kabeer, 2014; Roth, 2012). Within development agendas, non-Northern communities continue to be widely understood as in need of financial, military and/or humanitarian assistance (Stein et al., 2016) and Northern organizations are the ones able to offer this assistance. A web of organizations that constitute the sector has been established to carry out this work, including governments, donors, recipients, civil society organizations, multilateral institutions, international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and philanthro-capitalists (Eyben, 2014). Widely known organizations and funders that make up this network are, for example, United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the World Bank, African Development Bank, Oxfam, Plan International and the Red Cross.

Within the current development paradigm<sup>6</sup>, the eradication of poverty is one of the most pressing issues for development workers and organizations today (UNDP, 2016). Poverty is also the cause and consequence of other significant global issues such as pandemics, climate change, gender inequality, unemployment, human emergencies and forced human migration impacting billions of people (Tiessen & Smillie, 2016). Furthermore, the growing inequality between rich and poor people, within and between countries, is compounded by a system of global trade and financial policies that impose constraints on individual opportunity and maintain systemic oppression throughout many of the world's poorest countries (Tiessen & Smillie, 2016). Even though development approaches have evolved over time with the emergence of participatory, sustainable, community-based, indigenous and feminist additions – which imply the levelling in the realm of power and relationships - development continues to face scrutiny for its ineffectiveness, failures, greed and corruption (Elayah, 2016; Hope, 2020; Larionova, 2020).

Moreover, development and humanitarian responses are often funded via Northern-based governments through international aid agencies directly to NGOs that, in turn, have their own political and economic agendas to fulfill (Lavalette & Ferguson, 2007). Those working and living in the Global South must contend with this Eurocentric vision that continues to pervade the sector<sup>7</sup>. Consequently, power is largely maintained and upheld by these agendas and this project recognizes this power imbalance. This uneven playing field may make it difficult for workers to work in tandem with their social work values (Baines et al., 2014), which then creates internal struggles and tensions within work sites as workers aim to carry out anti-oppressive social work.

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<sup>6</sup> A short-term, goal-oriented and outcome-based perspective drives the current-day development paradigm, which includes measuring the accomplishment of economic, social, environmental and development goals such as 'halving extreme poverty' and 'providing universal primary education for all' (UNDP, 2016). This approach to international development still draws upon value-laden, paternalistic visions of change and progress as dictated by the 'developed' world, similar to the initial conceptualizations of the 1950s and 1960s, drawing its fair share of criticism for being too universal and lacking ownership and direction by local civil society.

<sup>7</sup> There have been changes to this dominance in recent years, with other emerging economies such as China, Brazil and India gaining influence and an increasing number of South-South focused initiatives, for instance between Argentina and Niger.

### *What about the sector's workers?*

While this introduction so far has focused on structural inequality and oppression—the role of colonialism, paternalism in the creation and perpetuation of large-scale inequality—individual development practitioners who work in the sector are also implicated. They are influenced by these powerful forces in how they carry out their work. These workers have been criticized for imposing their authority, influence and knowledge on Southern groups while at the same time failing to critique the effects of Northern imposition on individuals and communities (Chambers, 2017; Howard & Vajda, 2017; Roth, 2012; Rowlands, 2016; Shutt, 2006). Development workers' inattentiveness to these unequal power dynamics and their role in maintaining them makes a critical interrogation of their practice necessary. This project attempts to get closer to this by exploring how these workers think about themselves and the work they do. Development workers come from many walks of life and backgrounds, but this study looks specifically at social workers working in the international development sector. While social work has operated within the international sphere for the past century, this has increased significantly as globalization has made societies more interdependent and social work more transnational in nature (Bartley & Beddoe, 2018; Lyons, 2018).

Within development work, all workers, including social workers, are often tasked with having to attend to the historic and current structural inequalities that impede global justice (macro practice) as described above, while also listening to the voices of individuals, families and communities affected by these structures (micro/mezzo practice) (Claiborne, 2004; Vickers, 2015). Social workers within the international development field may find they are challenged by how to confront and transcend the structural (social, economic and political) oppression that permeates through the field and disempowers many in the pursuit of social justice and equality (Heinonen & Drolet, 2012). Paradoxically, workers could be negotiating how to work ethically within oppressive global structures (such as neoliberal economic reform or austerity measures) to advance social justice and self-determination, while being employed by the very institutions that often perpetuate oppression, power and control (by, for example, restricting and reducing welfare provision for the marginalized).

Anti-oppressive social workers attempt to see and make visible these interconnections between micro and macro levels. Because social work has historically concerned itself with the advancement of human rights and social justice, with a particular focus on vulnerable, oppressed, and marginalized populations globally (Chitereka, 2009; Hugman, 2017; Kahn & Sussman, 2015; Vickers, 2015), the profession is uniquely positioned to play a key role in responding to global human needs and suffering.

Not much is known about how development workers negotiate these unequal power dynamics, how they are implicated in maintaining them and how they might challenge them. This makes critical interrogation of the inequalities that exist between development workers, including social workers, an important task. Scholars argue that workers from the Global North have “done little to challenge the dominant power relations within which the North-South divide exists” and dialogue how this work can be more equitable, mutually reinforcing and directed towards social justice (Moosa-Mitha & Ross-Sheriff, 2010, p. 105). This work looks to contribute to this dialogue.

### ***International Social Work***

International social work can refer to a few different activities, including intergovernmental work on social welfare, cross-cultural knowledge sharing and understanding, action on global social problems or even just a general worldview that all social work is international in nature (Healy, 2008). It refers to several different practice activities, some of which include workers crossing national borders in their work, some of which do not. A highly regarded and well-known international social work scholar Lynne Healy has suggested that international action for the [social work] profession has four different dimensions. The first dimension is internationally related domestic practice and advocacy, which might include working on a refugee settlement in one’s own community; second is professional exchange, such as identifying social welfare innovations in other countries that could be adapted to your own; third is international practice, such as paid or volunteer work with international development agencies and; fourth is international policy development and advocacy, which aims to expand the capacity of social work to speak to important socio-political issues and influence international policy (Healy, 2008).

This research project examines the reflective practices of practitioners engaged in Healy's (2008) third dimension of international social work: international practice in the context of international development and development agencies. Social work practice within the development field, particularly when operationalized in the Southern parts of the world, is known as international social work for the purposes of this project (Cox & Pawar, 2013; Healy, 2008; Heinonen & Drolet, 2012; Hugman, 2010; Kahn & Sussman, 2015; Lyons, 2018). The participants sought for this study worked in a variety of organizations— governmental body, international agency, international non-governmental organization (INGO) or local NGO —and covered a variety of types of social work—mental health, reproductive justice, family work, program family violence, homelessness, probation, and child and youth care. Their daily tasks included activities such as counselling, program management, evaluation, front-line crisis intervention, training, and advocacy work.

The work participants within this study carried out within the above-mentioned areas, addressed the needs of diverse international communities, and they crossed borders to fulfill their roles as social workers. For social workers, “development is not understood in an economic sense, nor should it define an underdeveloped group or society that ought to normatively reach the level of any other developed group or society” (IFSW, 2021, *How Social Workers Contribute to the UN SDGs* section). Rather, development is a dynamic all-inclusive process of change, within a person, groups or society pursuing/seeking wellbeing for both people and planet (IFSW, 2021).

The origins of international social work practice date as far back as 1928, when the very first international social work conference was held, and when the foundation for the two main bodies representing professional social workers—the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW)—was laid (Healy, 2008; Riano-Alcala & Lacroix, 2008). Over time, the conditions and contexts of international social work has certainly

changed; Borrits and Rasmussen (2006) classify the modern-day context as the ‘third wave’<sup>8</sup> of international social work. The third wave emerged in the era of globalization and transnationalism and is characterized by a growing global consciousness and an awareness of the globalized nature of social inequalities. Globalization, for example, is present in the increased pace of economic transactions between the North and the South, climate change and its effects, conflict and migration of refugees and internally displaced persons, and the rise of social movements and organizations that are transnational in character (Moosa-Mitha & Ross-Sheriff, 2010). This third wave is also marked by neoliberalism and managerialism, a system that goes hand-in-hand with globalization. These powerful systems are important to emphasize as social workers encounter them every day within their international practice.

This research highlights the contexts of worker’s individual experiences and engagement with Southern communities and within their workplaces influenced by oppressive structures, which includes neoliberalism and managerialism (Kapoor, 2014; U. Kothari, 2019; Silva, 2015; Ziai, 2015). For example, the value and emphasis placed on management, performance and efficiency within New Public Management (NPM) often limits the role of the social worker beyond that of a top-down manager or administrator of funds, which can reinforce colonial practices (Lewis, 2008). Management and administrative roles and responsibilities may result in a truncated and power-over form of social work practice. It is in this contested field those social workers intervene, often driven by advocating for human rights and a commitment to listen to local voices and needs, but nevertheless they are embedded in inequalities of wealth and power, within and between countries, which arise from historical and current structural inequalities that impede global justice (Vickers, 2015). Often social workers intervene in ways that reproduce power inequalities, even when they are committed to critical, anti-oppressive, locality-specific, or Indigenous ways of working.

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<sup>8</sup> The first wave appeared at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when an awareness of similar social problems in varying places started to emerge, and professional educational programs were being developed. The second wave came after World War II when there was a need for internationally recognized capacity building, and organizations such as the UN were created to carry out international mandates.

An important issue within this third wave of international social work is grappling with what international social work is and what role it plays in the world. Part of the tension of constructing a universal idea of social work emerges from the Western-centric traditions of social work, which continue to influence many areas of international social work. Western influences in social work are arguably still being disseminated around the world through cultural and professional imperialism (Dominelli, 2005; Gray, 2005; Haug, 2005; Midgley, 1981; Razack, 2009; Sewpaul, 2003, 2006; Snyder, 2012). Professional imperialism refers to trends within social work that promote the dominance of Western worldviews over diverse local and Indigenous cultural perspectives (Gray, 2005; Midgley, 1981). Despite this privileging of Western social work values, they are not universally accepted. Social work practice varies according to the social and historical contexts in which it operates. As Payne and Askeland (2008) suggest, these Western-developed models may provide a framework for understanding social work, but “different cultural assumptions and social needs require different social works” (p. 2). Therefore, balancing the global and the local contexts of social work and varying international understandings of social work itself makes this task extremely challenging (Dominelli, 2003, 2014, 2015; Hugman et al., 2010; Johnson, 2004; Lavalette & Ioakimidis, 2011; Midgley, 2001; Payne & Askeland, 2008; Trygged, 2010).

Although efforts towards a more global social work practice have begun to move social work away from the dominant Western perspective, postcolonial critics (Gray, 2005; Harrison & Melville, 2010; Haug, 2005; Pyles, 2017) argue that the Western frameworks and models that have been labelled international social work are still colonial in nature. International social work continues to privilege Western expertise in its practice (Haug, 2005), and must do more to internationalize the field. Some critics suggest that this universalization of the profession may be seen as a new form of colonization, or neocolonialism (Gray, 2005). Further, they argue that these privileged Western social work ideas and agendas perpetuate colonialist legacies, creating more vulnerability in the Global South (Gray, 2005, 2008; Pyles, 2017). What is missing from these arguments is how to critique these social work ideas and agendas through anti-oppressive practice and through critically reflective practice.

### ***Reflective Practice***

The focus on reflection and reflective practice in this project is due to its significance to social work and anti-oppressive practice<sup>9</sup> (Baines, 2017; Bruce, 2013; Knott & Scragg, 2016; Moffatt, 2019; White et al., 2006). Social work scholars suggest that reflective practice has the potential to promote self-awareness, learning, professional growth, effective change and an analysis of power (Fook, 2012, 2016; Morley, 2004, 2008, 2014; Sicora, 2019). In examining the reflective behaviour of individual social workers who work in an international development context, this research explores the different ways reflective practices succeed and fail in supporting workers as they question themselves and their position of power within this domain of social work practice.

Reflective practice may take the form of: 1) self-reflection (introspection) or the examining of one's own thoughts and behaviors through journaling, for example (Nehring et al., 2010); 2) reflection with others or active listening and questioning of personal or shared beliefs through dialogue (Nehring et al., 2010; Knipfer et al., 2010); and 3) critical reflection, challenging assumptions and analyzing power relationships among a collective, either in groups or individually (Lay & McGuire, 2010). The use of reflection includes a 'critical' element when reflection includes both self-interrogation and challenges dominant structures, discourses, knowledge and power relations in the way they are "implicitly enacted in everyday life" (Fook, 2012, p. 47). Jan Fook (2012) defines reflective practice as the act of engaging with knowledge that has been previously obtained and recognizing the processes by which this knowledge (and thus power/social relations) is organized and maintained, including how individuals view themselves/are constituted within these structures. Critical reflection can therefore enable an "examination of power and subjectivity in social work relationships" (Mandell, 2007, p. 12). This element of reflection is fundamental to this project, as well as to anti-oppressive practice.

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<sup>9</sup> Anti-oppressive practice and its relationship to this project will be discussed in chapter 3.

## 1.2 Research Purpose

Although there is significant research on social work students who engage in field placements internationally (Bell et al., 2017; Cleak et al., 2014; Das & Anand, 2014; Furman et al., 2008; Heron, 2005; Lindsey, 2005; Razack, 2000; Wehbi, 2008), the experiences of trained social workers who work in international development or humanitarian aid remain understudied and undervalued (Hugman, 2010; Lyons, 2018). Professional social workers' contributions to humanitarian aid are sparsely acknowledged in the research literature (Caragata & Sanchez, 2002; Dominelli, 2015; Hugman, 2010; Maglajlic, 2019; Pittman et al., 2015). Most research and analysis that documents social work practice in developing contexts looks primarily at the profession's theoretical and educational frameworks and its possibilities for practice in the new global order (see, for example, Chitereka, 2009; Dominelli, 2014; Hugman et al., 2010; Kahn & Sussman, 2015). Moreover, specific examples of social work practice in developing contexts are often assessed at the macro-level—how social and political action can create structural changes—rather than at the personal level of how social workers practice in the field (Heinonen & Drolet, 2012; Hugman, 2010). Finally, anti-oppressive social work practice strategies and methods for how to mitigate oppression and neocolonial attitudes and processes are often missing from the discussion on how to practice in the international development field.

This project looks at how international social workers use reflective practice to wrestle with the dominance of Western social work values and the social and historical contexts in which Northern workers are operating within, as well as the power dynamics discussed earlier, that permeate the development sector. There is little discussion in the literature regarding how Northern-educated social workers, working in the Global South, might engage in a critical analysis of underlying present-day inequalities and unequal power relations in the operation of international development work (Chambers, 2017; Deepak, 2011; Groves & Hinton, 2004; U. Kothari, 2019; Rowlands, 2016). Development scholars continue to overlook the specific ways power is operating and interrogated at the micro-level and within the demands placed on them from a macro perspective. With this knowledge, practitioners might come to

understand their role in perpetuating oppressive practices within development projects and see the need for critical reflection of their own work within development work as a whole.

Reflective practice can assist social workers to explore entrenched power dynamics and structural barriers in globalized and ‘borderless’ contexts (Hugman et al., 2010; Morley, 2004). Being reflective about “the processes we use in our work and how we construct particular situations and power relations forces us to be aware of our potential to unwittingly comply with discourses that actively disadvantage us” (Morley, 2004, p. 303). Hence, critical reflective practice has the potential to unpack how power is circulating within an oppressive system. I wondered whether self-reflection led practitioners to grapple with their own power and if this gave workers pause to critique their ways of knowing and doing. Does reflection go beyond self-awareness and encourage them to develop alternative priorities and practices? Given the current political climate of service delivery in the NGO sector, I also was curious about how workers navigated reflective practices in neoliberal workplaces where their own power to make changes to the agenda might be limited.

### **1.3 Research Questions**

Using an anti-oppressive practice theoretical lens to anchor this project, this research explores how social workers use reflective practices to help negotiate their international development work. It seeks to understand to what extent reflective practices inform how practitioners perceive and work to question power while engaging with development recipients, and whether this questioning raises awareness about the ways their Northern-based theoretical knowledge and practices are transposed onto Southern contexts (Dominelli, 2014). The overarching research questions are:

1. *How are reflective practices being used to analyze and negotiate power dynamics within international development work and do how such practices help social workers take up anti-oppressive approaches within an international context?*
2. *What, if any, additional impacts do reflective practices have on practitioners working in the development sector?*

In considering how reflective practices are being experienced and deployed by social workers in international development (or humanitarian aid) settings, this research is framed within both development and social work. Social work and international development have much in common: they share activities, such as community development and mental health counselling; types of interventions, such as advocacy and training; and end goals, such as poverty reduction and gender equality; and each discipline pays particular attention to the social justice and human rights implications of their interventions (Hugman, 2017; Gaba, 2016). Yet, despite the parallels between the helping job descriptions of social workers and international development workers, to date social work has had little influence in the development field (Kahn & Sussman, 2015). By bringing reflective practice and anti-oppressive practice into discussions of development, this dissertation is attempting to exert this influence.

This introductory chapter included the purpose of the study and an overview of the conceptual framework, which includes international social work and development work. It outlines the background and justification of the project and the research questions. In the following chapter, the literature important to this project will be reviewed.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

*“A radical reconfiguration of development studies would include more individual reflection, especially self-critical epistemological awareness” (Chambers, 2005, p. 85).*

This literature review focuses on scholarship within two broad themes: reflective practice and development workers. First, I will explore the origins of the concept of reflective practice and then examine the critical turn the theory took from an anti-oppressive perspective. I then review literature on reflective practice within social work, including international domains of social work. Third, I will examine research on international development workers that addresses issues related to reflective practice, power, and worker’s wellness. The review is mostly contemporary in nature but does explore the foundations and evolution of core theoretical ideas. I discuss what is already known about the themes as a whole and outline the key ideas and theories that support the work. I hope to contribute to the literature by exploring the relationship between reflective practice and the development sector, as discussed through an anti-oppressive social work lens.

Keyword searches were performed in the Social Work Abstracts databases within EBSCO, the Social Services Abstracts within ProQuest and cross-referenced with journal article searches in Routledge, JSTOR, SAGE and Google Scholar. Convergence searches were conducted in three major bodies of knowledge: (a) reflective practice and social care; (b) international social work; and (c) international development (or humanitarian aid) work/workers. A combination of peer-reviewed journals and books were selected based on their date range (the majority are between 2000–2021 unless seminal work), relevance and accessibility.

### 2.1 Reflective Practice

Reflective practice has long been an influential concept in social work (Thompson & Pascal, 2012). The scholarship on reflection and reflective practice are often attributed to the seminal work of John Dewey (1910, 1916 & 1933) and Donald Schon (1983, 1987). American philosopher John Dewey is understood to be the first person to have theorized learning from experience through the use of reflection

(Rolfe, 2014; Thompson & Pascal, 2012). For Dewey (1910), reflective thinking is a form of experimentation-in-practice in which people can test out different ways of dealing with situations/people in the moment. The product of reflection is immediately “put into practice in a continuous and spontaneous interplay between thinking and doing, in which ideas are formulated, tested and revised” (Rolfe, 2014, p. 1180).

Dewey (1933) believed that the learning achieved as a result of reflecting on experiences contributes to professional development, consequently improving performance (Bruce, 2013). He also believed that in reflective operation, one must be in a state of perplexity, hesitation and doubt; learning is most likely to arise from experiences that were found to be challenging and difficult. For Dewey (1910), the reflective practitioner must “overcome inertia that inclines one to accept suggestions at their face value” (p. 13) and have a willingness to maintain a state of doubt (or uncertainty) throughout their experiences while reflecting on difficult situations in the workplace. Reflective practice is, within Dewey’s work, a process of experimentation and trial-and-error, which can produce new understandings and interpretations for individuals.

Building upon Dewey’s work, Donald Schon’s (1983) ideas remain influential in health care and social work. His model in *The Reflective Practitioner* describes reflection-in-action, reflection-on-action and reflection-for-action, and it generally agreed this model can be adapted to and useful for different professions (Bolton, 2010; Brookfield, 1995; Bruce, 2013; Burgess et al., 2013; Edwards, 2014; Ingram et al., 2014; Kinsella, 2010; Ryan, 2011; Thompson & Thompson, 2008; Thompson & Pascal, 2012; White et al., 2006). These three kinds of reflection are temporal: reflection-in-action is reflection on an experience as it is happening, reflection-on-action means reflecting on an experience, and reflection-for-action involves planning for an upcoming encounter. For Schon (1984), “reflectivity-in-practice” (or reflective practice) was a necessary departure from the traditional, textbook generated professional knowledge used in practice, which he suggested did not provide practitioners with everything they needed. Schon (1984) argued that the professional’s reliance on “technical rationality” (i.e., positivist epistemology of practice), which informs a professional’s knowledge base, “failed to provide ready-

made” or “right” answers to the unique and complex realities of actual real-world practice (p. 30). What has therefore become established as traditional reflective practice, as popularized through the work of Schon (1984) and others, offers the potential for mindful, well-informed practice and for reflective learning (Bruce, 2013; Burgess et al., 2013; Thompson & Thompson, 2008; Thompson & Pascal, 2012; White et al., 2006).

Influenced by the work of Dewey, Schon (1984) asserted that the process of reflection could enable professionals to meet the challenges presented by constant change in practice and could, ultimately, improve upon their individual practice and generate new knowledge that was relevant to the challenges confronting professionals. Bruce (2013) and Fook (2012) concur that reflective practice becomes part of the practitioner’s view of service and therefore enables adaptability in practice based on everyday experiences. Numerous authors argue that practitioners who examine the assumptions they hold may become self-aware when they critically evaluate their responses to everyday practice situations (Greene, 2017; Toros & LaSala, 2019). As Howe (2009) writes, “reflective practice demands you learn from experience. It requires you to be self-critical. It expects you to analyze what you think, feel, and do, and then learn from the [practice] analysis” (p. 171). Previous studies on reflective practice for social workers based on Schon’s and Dewey’s theories have reported that it is positively transformational and useful for practitioners as it pertains to their professional and personal development (Ferguson, 2018; Kinsella, 2010; Rosin, 2015; Ryding et al., 2018; Toros & LaSala, 2019; Wilson, 2013).

While instructive, this earlier seminal literature on reflective practice does not concern itself with reflection on established social structures and power relations. Within these frameworks, reflective practice is more problem-oriented and situational in professional practice and does little to interrogate the positionality (and power) of workers within moments of reflection. Consequently, the power relations that produce social inequalities remain invisible and uninterrogated within this body of literature. As reflective practice evolved and became integrated within critical and anti-oppressive social work theories, scholars developed a more critical reflective practice that explores structural oppression and power relations. This work attends to the broader sociological context and includes such factors as power relations,

discrimination and oppression as foundational to critical reflective practice (Thompson & Pascal, 2012). This will be discussed next.

### ***Critical Reflection***

Critical and anti-oppressive literature posits that practitioners engage not only at the level of the personal, but also at the structural level, thereby attending to the underlying power of macro-level structures of domination and oppression within social work. Much of this current literature on reflective practice focuses attention on it being used as a recommended tool for making power visible and challenging social work complicity in dominant power relations (Fook, 2012; Fook & Gardner, 2007; Mattsson, 2014; Morley, 2004; Pease, 2015). Ramsundarsingh and Shier (2017) suggest that reflective practice is one “tool for dismantling social injustice through both personal reflection and reflection on society and the ways in which oppression manifests in systems” (p. 2320). This involves developing a deepening awareness of both the socio-historical reality that shapes their own lives as workers and of their capacity to shape that reality contextually within their work (Baines, 2017; Pease, 2015). Some scholars suggest that critical reflection is foundational to anti-oppressive social work practice as practitioners begin to understand the inherent power and privilege related to their social location and how this contributes to the further oppression of communities and groups (Baines, 2017; Danso, 2009; Moffatt, 2019; Vanderwoerd, 2016).

From an anti-oppressive perspective<sup>10</sup>, reflective practice is not just a way of seeing and analyzing injustices “out there” in the society and seeks to reduce them, but also encourages practitioners to see injustices “in here,” that is, in how each of us is directly implicated in oppressive ways of working and being (Baines, 2017; Pease, 2015; Vanderwoerd, 2016). Critical reflection therefore asks professionals to internally deconstruct potentially dangerous assumptions and interrogate their practice behaviours/intentions in an effort to create less oppressive relationships with the communities they work

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<sup>10</sup> An additional discussion of reflective practice within an anti-oppressive practice framework is found in chapter 3.

with. Critical self-reflection can provide social workers with an opportunity to step back from their work and pause in order to think about the impact their work has on their lives and the lives of others (Fook, 2012; Mullaly, 2002).

For many scholars, critical reflection is a tool used to advance critical consciousness, which may aid practitioners to promote social justice in their practice (Bisman & Bohannon, 2014; O'Neill, 2015; Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005; Suarez et al., 2008; Yan, 2008). Critical consciousness is the intentional cultivation of self-awareness in contexts that attend to the dynamics of power in relationships and the structural environment invoking action towards social justice (Freire, 1970; Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005). This includes questioning how dominant ideologies have shaped workers' perspectives about their professional roles (Pease, 2015). Raising critical consciousness through critical reflection challenges social workers to examine "how the taking up of the authority within their professional roles may be perpetuating prevailing authoritarian power differentials, despite overt efforts to avoid doing so" (Bransford, 2011, p. 935). It means utilizing reflective practice to grasp how oppression is produced societally and institutionally, and how it is enacted in personal relationships and how it is internalized, represented and reproduced by individuals within any given set of power relations (Froggett et al., 2014).

### ***Contemporary Theorizing of Reflective Practice in Social Work Research***

In surveying recent scholarship on the use of reflective practice, including critical reflection, within the discipline of social work, three distinct categories of scholarship emerged: (a) how to utilize/deploy/teach reflective practice within educational settings; (b) reflective practice in direct social work practice; and (c) the engagement of reflective practice within international social work. The first two categories will be reviewed briefly. The third category is the most relevant to this project and refers directly to my work.

Literature that explores the use of reflective practice in educational settings generally points to how reflective practice is operationalized in teaching and learning as well as the utility it has in promoting professional development for both educators and students (Morley, 2008; Norton et al., 2010; Sicora,

2019; Watts, 2019; Wilson, 2013; Whitaker & Reimer, 2017). Many scholars have created frameworks for utilizing reflection as a pedagogical strategy in schools and understanding what specific tools can be used in the classroom for structuring critical thinking and reflection (Balen & White, 2007; Burr et al., 2016; Froggett et al., 2014; Hermsen & Embregts, 2015; Lay & McGuire, 2010; Mishna & Bogo, 2007; Morley, 2008; Nehring et al., 2010). The literature speaks to how to create moments of “authenticity” in reflection by building reflective skills for students (Bowers & Pack, 2017; Guransky et al., 2010) and nurturing moments of “not knowing” through reflection while working in “uncertainty” and unique situatedness (Balen & White, 2007; Fook et al., 2000; Parton, 2003; Ruch, 2002).

Current research seems to indicate that critical reflection is important and significant for social work students because it can foster involvement in social transformation and social justice efforts (Bransford, 2011; Lay & McGuire, 2010; Mattsson, 2014; Morley, 2008; O’Neill, 2015; Wehbi & Straka, 2011). The literature also suggests that reflective teaching while supervising and supporting social work students in their field practicums and placements can be useful (Davys, 2001; Davys & Beddoe, 2009; Rankine, 2017), and that using reflective techniques helps instructors better prepare students for practice within the social work profession (Hermsen & Embregts, 2015; Norton et al., 2010; Thompson & Pascal, 2012; Wehbi, 2009; Whitaker & Reimer, 2017). For example, reflective supervision emphasizes cyclical and layered learning led by practitioners and promotes an examination of decisions and actions taken rather than a prescriptive or instructive position taken by the supervisor (Davys & Beddoe, 2009; Rankine, 2017). While there is broad agreement that social work students benefit from using and studying reflective practice (Bay & Mcfarlane, 2011; Burr et al., 2016; Wehbi & Straka, 2011; Whitaker & Reimer, 2017), this project is concerned with social workers in professional practice, specifically interrogating how they analyze power and privilege while working professionally in an international context. This project takes these ideas from social work education (theory) and builds on this previous research (Bransford, 2011; Lay & McGuire, 2010; Mattsson, 2014; Morley, 2008; O’Neill, 2015; Wehbi & Straka, 2011) by analyzing reflection within professional international contexts (praxis).

Some authors acknowledge the effectiveness of reflective practice when working with specific populations such as children, family support and child welfare (Mandell, 2007, 2008; Pack, 2016; Ryding et al., 2018; Ruch, 2005, 2007, 2009) and during social work supervision (Davys 2001; Ghaye & Lillyman, 2000; Lawlor, 2013; Varghese et al., 2018). Focusing more on internal transformations, some authors discuss how reflection can support workers to become aware of their “use of self”; consciously using knowledge and skills to interrogate power and privilege within oppressive structures (Adamowich et al., 2014; Froggett et al., 2014; Heron, 2005; Mandell, 2007, 2008; Miehl & Moffatt, 2000). Within this research, reflection is understood to help practitioners navigate the complexity, uncertainty and instability of the current work climate (Bruce, 2013; Hermsen & Embregts, 2015; Kinsella, 2010) as well as their anxiety (Ferguson, 2018; Ruch, 2002).

In terms of understanding the impacts of reflective practice on international social work practice, scholars have highlighted how students specifically are engaging with reflection in their international field placements (Bell et al., 2017; Cleak et al., 2014; Das & Anand, 2014; Furman et al., 2008; Matthew & Lough, 2017; Pawar, 2017; Ranz & Langer, 2018). In the research conducted by Das & Anand (2014) and Bell et al. (2017), for example, formal and guided critically reflective strategies enabled international social work students to rework previously held values, assumptions and theories of social work practice and education as they were exposed to different ways of knowing. They found that critical reflection was central in reducing attitudes of oppression and universalism in Western social work.

Additional literature focuses on the negotiation of students’ positionality and identity in this context (Crabtree et al., 2014; Fox, 2017; Heron, 2005; Moorhead et al., 2014; Pease, 2015; Ranz & Langer, 2018; Willis et al., 2019), the dangers of Western-dominated internationalization of social work education being neo-colonialist in nature (Dominelli, 2014; Harrison & Melville, 2010; Kreitzer, 2012; Lavalette & Ioakimidis, 2011; Midgley, 1981, 2001; Razack, 2000, 2009; Vickers & Dominelli, 2015; Zuchowski et al., 2017), as well as the tensions present in North-South educational exchanges, particularly with how social work students deal with inequality in Southern spaces (Bell et al., 2017; Jonsson & Flem, 2018; Ranz & Langer, 2018; Zuchowski et al., 2017). Caron (2020), Patterson Roe

(2019) and Carranza (2019) provide more recent contributions on building anti-oppressive social work practicum models for international student placements. Yet, critical debates remain between scholars regarding how to encourage student learning, professionalism and cross-cultural learning, without extending exploitative relations and power over with local organizations and thus enacting a colonial hegemony (see, for example, students in a Malaysian context in Crabtree et al., 2017). This debate also extends into the professional environment of international social work practice (Dominelli, 2015; Hugman, 2017; Pyles, 2017; Wehbi et al., 2016).

Northern scholars discuss wrestling with their own imperialistic standards while using culturally appropriate and local-specific ways of engaging in their social work practice (Alphonse et al., 2008; Kreitzer, 2012; Palattiyil et al., 2019; Razack, 2005). This requires Northern-based social workers to be flexible, creative and responsive to local needs and assets and to lean on local leadership and expertise (Maglajlic, 2019). Cox & Pawar (2013) emphasize that highlighting local knowledge and practice is important to counter and outweigh the “ever-present danger of the West” imposing its basic understanding of the nature and roles of social work on other countries (as cited in Palattiyil et al., 2019, p. 1047). Pyles’ (2015, 2017) and Dominelli’s (2013, 2015) on social work in international aid and development settings is helpful and they suggest that it is especially important that social workers acknowledge and understand colonialist legacies, and that this requires grappling with power differentials.

While these debates are informative, there is very little literature that reveals an understanding of how social workers use reflective practice to interrogate their positionality and power while navigating international environments, especially from an anti-oppressive practice framework. The literature does not reveal experiences of social workers’ who engage in critical reflection and how this might facilitate the building of anti-oppressive social work practice skills. Chatterjee (2015), Clarke and Wan (2011), Reynolds (2010) and Sakamoto (2007) do speak to anti-oppressive approaches to working with refugees, immigrants and newcomers (international populations), however, this work is situated in the Global North.

There are also notable gaps in the literature of reflective practice and international work. Practitioners' experiences of reflective practices in international contexts once they enter the work-world remain largely understudied (Claiborne, 2004; Deepak, 2011; Dominelli, 2014, 2015; Hugman, 2010, 2017; Kahn & Sussman, 2015; Maglajlic, 2019; Pittman et al., 2015; Wehbi et al., 2016). There is limited social work research on the skills and practices used by social workers internationally that emphasize equitable distribution of power and resources (Dominelli, 2013; Maglajlic, 2019) and how these professionals conduct and question themselves through an anti-oppressive approach (Dominelli, 2015; Moosa-Mitha & Ross-Sheriff, 2010). Generally, there is limited literature about Northerners' anti-oppressive practice and reflective practice within the international dimensions of social work in the Global South. While this review of literature offers important insights into the use of reflective practice by Northern social workers in a contemporary, global environment, it does not speak to the complexities of doing this work overseas. Therefore, there is an opportunity here to create a contribution that uses an AOP lens to examine the possibilities of reflective practice in both professional and Southern contexts.

### *Critiques of Reflective Practice*

While critiquing reflective practice is not a part of this work, it be remiss not to mention the limitations of reflective practice found in the literature. In addition to the criticisms present regarding anti-oppressive practice, some authors have advised that practitioners "proceed with caution" regarding the use of reflective practice (Yip, 2006), arguing that it is not without its criticisms (Badwall, 2016; Smith, 2013).

Admitting one's power and privilege, on the part of the dominant group especially, does not necessarily work to unsettle its operation (Badwall, 2016; Heron, 2005). Badwall's work (2016), for example, with racialized social workers in Canada argues that reflection does little to de-centre white dominance and power in social work. She argues that critical reflection can operate to reinscribe colonial notions of moral superiority and is a practice that privileges and centres white social workers. Similarly, Smith (2013) argues that within postcolonial settings, the white/settler subject fails within their

responsibilities in reflection as they confess their awareness from a place of privilege. She argues that the white/settler subject has the potential to “reassert her or his power through self-reflection” and in doing so, his or her subjectivity is “reaffirmed against the foil of the oppressed people who still remain the affectable others who provide the occasion for this self-reflection” (Smith, 2013, p. 268). Within these arguments, reflective practice has the potential to shore up power and privilege, through the confession of it, rather than disrupt it. Admitting one’s privilege, from members of the (white) dominant group especially, does not necessarily unsettle its operation (Heron, 2005). Smith (2013) acknowledges that there is no simple anti-oppression formula to follow as one engages in this self-reflective work, and that many are in a state of experimentation when it comes to dismantling settler colonialism and white supremacy through critical self-reflection.

Yip (2006) cautions that under certain conditions, reflective practice can be destructive to social workers’ self-development. Inappropriate conditions may include difficult environments of workload and organizational oppression, as well as historical trauma, physical and health considerations (Yip, 2006). Reflective practice often involves self-analysis, self-evaluation, self-dialogue and self-observation and therefore may be an unpleasant and harmful experience if practitioners are not in a safe workspace. Yip (2006) suggests that due to the rigour and insight involved in reflective practice, it is important that practitioners take care to avoid inappropriate conditions that may be harmful to their growth and development.

Despite these important critiques and challenges with reflective practice, I, similar to other scholars, see the possibility and opportunity for reflective practice as a process/tool that raises self-awareness (Whitaker & Reimer, 2017), builds upon and consolidates learning/knowledge for individual and social transformation (Cornejo, 2020; Fook, 2012; Wehbi & Straka, 2011), enables critical thinking on the role of social work in society and social work practice (Bay & Mcfarlane, 2011) and perhaps could be an avenue for acknowledging, recognizing and moderating workplace stressors for practitioners rather (Cornejo, 2020; Kinman & Grant, 2011).

## 2.2 Contemporary International Development Critiques and Realities

Three decades ago (1990s), postdevelopment and postcolonial scholars began to argue that there had been a substantive material, social and cultural price paid by those who had endured colonization and were subsequently subjected to an agenda of development (Escobar, 1995; Esteva, 1992; U. Kothari, 2019; McEwan, 2018). Development programs were imposed by former colonizing countries as they provided top-down funds and guidance supported by experts who often knew little of the local context and who did not consult with the local people about their realities and priorities (Chambers, 2014; Midgley & Conley, 2010). The objectives of Northern countries and multilateral agencies such as the World Bank were economic growth and modernization, so other countries would ‘develop’ through stages similar to societies in the North. Sustained efforts to improve the lot of low-income nations abroad—through growing their economies, reducing poverty, building infrastructure, fostering trade, etc.—was born out of ideas of modernity and progress that suggest there is an ideal society, and all countries should strive to achieve this ideal (Currie-Alder, 2016). Theorists had believed that economic development would lead to political stability and economic prosperity globally (Sumner & Tribe, 2008; Williams, 2013).

This research by scholars reveals that not only has development failed to achieve this economic success, but the implementation of Northern-influenced aid, policies and actions have perpetuated global inequality by benefiting the wealthy at the expense of those in poverty (Elayah, 2016; Escobar, 1995; Esteva, 1992; Aragon & Glenzer, 2017). Influential author and development critic, Arturo Escobar (1995) argued that, instead of the abundance and wealth promised by development theorists and politicians, what the “strategy of development produced is opposite: massive underdevelopment and impoverishment, untold exploitation and oppression” (p. 4). This can be seen, for example, in a report produced by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2020), that after 70 years of development, the average income of people living in North America remains 16 times higher than that of people in sub-Saharan Africa.

Critical and postdevelopment scholarship (Veltmeyer & Bowles, 2019; Ziai, 2007) has taken up this issue and advocates for alternatives for development, which means a reorientation towards social transformation and a focus on the needs of the excluded, the oppressed and the exploited, and engaging in advocacy and community-led (or grassroots and participatory) development. This critical scholarship has encouraged development workers to resist the replication of colonial and ethnocentric ways of doing development and instead focus on acting in solidarity with countries in the Global South (U. Kothari, 2019; McEwan, 2018). The focus on solidarity also includes participatory and empowerment-based approaches to development, using key principles such as: prioritizing voices of the poor, increasing skills and knowledge of poor communities and inclusive involvement (Chambers, 2007, 2017). To that end, alternative development approaches found in the literature are encouraging localized, regional organizations in low- to middle-income countries to challenge the outdated development thinking from the industrialized world as reported in a recent Development Co-operation Report (OECD, 2018).

The discipline of development has made some efforts to attend to these critiques with, for example, social and transformational development models that are more locally led and focus on the most basic human and social needs of communities (Aragon & Glenzer, 2017; Snyder, 2012). Unlike traditional top-down development work, the literature emphasizes grassroots and collectivism and try to prioritize egalitarian values. Development work has also broadened, moving beyond its original focus on economic development to embrace environmental sustainability, women's equality, human rights and social justice. Changes have also been felt in the North, where the gender, race and class composition of development workers have shifted over time to reflect local populations more appropriately (Horner, 2019; U. Kothari, 2005, 2019).

While the development landscape has shifted as a result of these critiques and ongoing debates, many of the postcolonial and postdevelopment criticisms continue to be relevant today (U. Kothari, 2019). A postcolonial and postdevelopment analysis keeps us focused on how unequal global power relations have been created and recreated over the decades (Snyder, 2012) in order to continually privilege dominant Western interests. The worsening poverty, violence, vulnerability, environmental

degradation, migration and distress we currently see are widely understood to result from this troubled development model (Tiessen & Smillie, 2016).

Globally, development workers struggle with questions of inequality and disparity that go far beyond wealth or income, although economic realities are still central to development. It is estimated that 767 million people, or 10 percent of the world's population, currently live below the international poverty line of \$1.90 per person per day, over half of whom are in sub-Saharan Africa (World Bank, 2019). The number of people who suffer from hunger is increasing – more than 820 million people in the world were suffering from hunger in 2018 and over 2 billion people do not have regular access to safe, nutritious and sufficient food worldwide (FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP & WHO, 2019). The proportion of the world's population who are displaced continues to rise – 1% of the world's population (1 in 97 people) are forcibly displaced due to war, conflict, persecution, human rights violations and public events disturbing public order (UNHCR, 2019).

Plainly put, despite decades of work, development has bypassed many groups, communities and societies (UNDP, 2016) and the world continues to face many complex development challenges; “some challenges are lingering (deprivations), some deepening (inequalities) and some emerging (violent extremism). Some are global (gender inequality), some regional (water stress) and some local (natural disasters)” (UNDP, 2016, p. 3). Given these facts, “development projects as Northern intervention in the South have not only failed to alleviate poverty, but many have actually exacerbated the poverty, dispossession and powerlessness of local people” (Haug, 2005, p. 131). It is with good reason that the British academic and pioneer of participatory development Chambers (2017) recently reiterated that “international development is replete with errors, myths and omissions” (p. 1).

### ***“Invisible” Development Workers***

Research for development purposes, whether academic or mainstream, tends to focus on the organizational and political level, that is, the critical examination of development policy, individual projects and outcomes, as well as collective responsibilities and activities such as attaining development

goals and milestones. Change is understood to happen at the level of systems, projects and structures (e.g., top-down global policies, formal political processes, institutional resource allocations, project work, etc.), rather than at the interpersonal or individual levels, the bottom-up change-making practices of workers themselves (Chambers, 2017; Eyben, 2006, 2014; Fechter, 2012; Fechter & Hindman, 2011; Roper & Pettit, 2003). The power to enact change is thought to rest within formal structures and political systems, which biases the research towards assessments of power dynamics within formal institutions and structures that implement change (Eyben, 2014). As a result, we know little about how individual development actors make change happen (Eyben, 2014; Rowlands, 2016; Scott-Villiers, 2004) or how they learn from their experiences or mistakes (Chambers, 2017). Thus, it is important to consider the process of development, as well as the outcomes.

As a result of the emphasis on the structural aspects of development, many scholars therefore agree that the individual attitudes and processes of international development and humanitarian aid workers are “invisible” in the research (Eyben, 2006, 2014; Fechter, 2012; Fechter & Hindman, 2011; Hunt et al., 2014; Lokot, 2019; Scott-Villiers, 2004) and their behaviours, practices and actions go unexamined. At the same time, this lack of research also means that we have little understanding of how development workers negotiate intercultural, social, ethical and emotional tensions, or how they balance the multiple, competing and sometimes contradictory agendas and demands of the community, their employer and global development policy (Hoggett et al., 2009).

The dearth of literature on the experiences of development workers and how they perceive the operation of power within their work is significant. It has been established that these actors have considerable influence over the work that happens with vulnerable people in marginalized communities worldwide (Chambers, 2017; Dominelli, 2015; Howard & Vajda, 2016; Scott-Villiers, 2004). Northern development staff are typically hired as experts, dispensing legitimized knowledge and ensuring projects are implemented (Roth, 2012). These practices often replicate relations of inequality as Northern workers shape agendas, project directions and decide what gets reported and how (Kumar, 2015; Lokot, 2019). Since individuals often mediate/negotiate relations on the ground, it is the individuals themselves and

their relationships within their work that must be examined if we are to understand micro/interpersonal power dynamics (Chambers, 2017; Scott-Villiers, 2004). Destabilizing the historical, neocolonial positions of power between the individual aid givers and aid recipients means changing attitudes and behaviours on the ground as much as in policy and procedure (Dominelli, 2015). Debates about the relevance and effects of aid would be more nuanced and grounded if more were known about the behaviours and actions of aid practitioners.

Hence, Fechter and Hindman (2011) call for the “insertion of development workers” into studies of aid/international development not merely because they are absent from the research but because they are part and parcel of the theory and practice of development (p. 3). They argue, and I concur, that the “failures of development not only occur at the level of theory, history and hegemony, but also emanate from the daily tasks undertaken by development practitioners” (Fechter & Hindman, 2011, p. 2). Too often,

...scholarship on development is shaped by the ongoing battle between the theories of the academic world and the applied concerns of aid professionals, both of which often neglect the day-to-day experiences of those doing the aid work. In the rush to offer either prescriptions or critique, the human actors who transform policy into projects are neglected. (Fechter & Hindman, 2011, p. 2)

This project attempts to address this ‘invisibility’ by speaking directly about the experiences of those doing the aid/development work.

### ***Development Worker Realities and Challenges***

Although I have established a significant gap in the literature about the day-to-day experiences of those doing development work, a recent line of research has focused on the working and living conditions of development workers and the concern for their well-being. This area of research speaks to development workers struggling with high levels of stress and indicates a growing concern over both the well-being of staff and the lack of psychosocial support provided by organizations (Jachens et al., 2018; Ren et al., 2017; Young et al., 2018). This is largely due to the challenging environments—disease outbreaks, natural

disasters, political instability, conflict and violence, uncertain security situations, health concerns and unreliable communications and resources—of international work (Jachens et al., 2018; Young et al., 2018).

Some research has focused on the psychological/emotional well-being of international development workers that explores both how workers manage stress, including burnout and trauma (Ager et al., 2012; Connorton et al., 2012; Eriksson et al., 2009; Jachens et al., 2018; Katz et al., 2012; Solanki, 2016; Vergara & Gardner, 2011), and how they develop resiliency within this work (Brooks et al., 2015, Comoretto et al., 2015). What is quite clear from the literature is that support mechanisms to deal with the emotionality and stress of humanitarian work are underdeveloped and require more attention (Ager et al., 2012; Comoretto et al., 2015; Ehrenreich & Elliott, 2004). An analysis of the literature suggests that little is known about workers' coping mechanisms or self-care strategies.

Self-care could be broadly conceived as individual practices consisting of thoughts and actions that workers employ to attend to and deal with internal or external demands perceived as stressful, draining, or traumatizing (Iacono, 2017; Proffitt, 2008). Self-care has specifically been examined among helping professionals in counseling, nursing, and social work, with the results showing potential personal and professional benefits, such as reduced stress and anxiety (Heffernan et al., 2010; Ying, 2009), however, it has not been discussed within contexts related to humanitarian and development work. Research outcomes in social work show that self-care is essential to decreasing the possibility of burnout and increasing effectiveness with clients (Newsome et al., 2012; Shapiro et al., 2007; Ringenbach, 2009).

Another common theme found in the literature is juggling workload and organizational stress, such as excessive bureaucracy (NPM<sup>11</sup>), development management, heavy workloads, team conflict, inadequate funding and personnel shortages (Ehrenreich & Elliott, 2004; Lokot, 2019; Young et al., 2018). As neoliberalization gained ground, NGOs have become more professionalized and corporatized; they have become objects of managerialist intervention, carrying out agendas on behalf of the state

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<sup>11</sup> This topic will be addressed in the next chapter as an extension of colonial relations within an AOP framework.

(Fechter & Hindman, 2011; Lewis, 2008). NGOs, therefore, have been “constructed and acted upon as objects of managerialism” with low morale and largely ineffective results (Lewis, 2008, p. 54). NGO staff tend to feel more like “bureaucratic aid administrators” than development workers, spending more time on paperwork than development (Lewis, 2008). This bureaucratic paradigm is concerned primarily with results and performance measurement, not the day-to-day realities and wellness of staff, including operationalizing and measuring the impacts of reflection (Girei, 2016; Baines, 2018).

### ***Reflection and power analysis by development workers***

There is a growing awareness of the existence of unequal power relations within international development spaces and the impact this has on relationships between development actors and aid recipients (Eyben, 2006, 2014; Fechter, 2012; Groves & Hinton, 2004; Howard & Vajda, 2016, 2017; Lokot, 2019; Martins, 2020; Pettit, 2010; Roth, 2012; Rowlands, 2016; Shutt, 2006). This is evidenced by NGOs such as OXFAM International and ActionAid that have conducted power analyses of their programs and proactively emphasized the inclusion of stakeholders who would otherwise be excluded (ActionAid, 2011; Rowlands, 2016). However, despite this holistic look at power, little is being done to encourage staff members to understand and factor in their own positional and personal power in their relationships in the various spaces in which they work (Rowlands, 2016). Lokot (2019) argues that workers and agencies “neglect to recognize the power hierarchies present in their own engagement with communities” (p. 467). Martins (2020) adds that if the sector is going to reimagine itself in a genuine way, then it needs to “grapple with entrenched power imbalances” (p. 135). A few contemporary scholars and projects in development studies are pertinent to my project due to their focus on elements of reflection; I will introduce these in the following paragraphs, in order to situate my project in conversation with them.

A seminal scholar who attends to reflection in the field of development is Dr. Robert Chambers, whose career has been marked by a spirit of self-criticism and reflection (Biekart & Gasper, 2013). He has written books outlining his own “critical reflections” and lessons learned from over 30 years of

international development work. Chambers (2004, 2005, 2014, 2017) advocates for others to do the same, arguing that a “radical reconfiguration” of development studies would include more individual self-reflection, especially as it pertains to power. In an interview, he stated, “we would do so much better in development if we were more self-aware and more critically reflective” (Biekart & Gasper, 2013, p. 17). He believes development workers have been “weak” on transparent self-examination (Chambers, 2005), and argues that,

...reflection and awareness of interpersonal behavior and power relations is critical to the behavior and perceptions of donor staff on mission...because of their power, such missions are vulnerable to being misled. Yet to my knowledge they have never been studied or documented beyond the level of personal anecdote. (Chambers, 2004, p. 14)

Repeatedly, in his work, he suggests that critically reflective practice and self-awareness is a missing component in international development work, as is the study of reflective practices (2004, 2005, 2014, 2017). This project attempts to address this ‘missing component’ with ways in which social workers engaged with reflection and analyzed their power.

Chambers’ (2005) influential work led me to consider other scholarship that examines and unpacks reflection, inclusivity and relationships in development work. Albeit small, there is a maturing collection of research that looks specifically at power dynamics and hierarchies in development work (Lokot, 2019; Martins, 2020; Pettit, 2010; Rowlands, 2016; Shutt, 2006) and reflective practice within development work (Clarke & Oswald, 2010; Eyben, 2014; Howard & Vajda, 2016). Although development scholars have long suggested that development workers spend more time and effort reflecting on their roles and their power, reflection has rarely been a topic of research, or the actual phenomenon being investigated. Critical reflection remains underdeveloped as a core competency in international development contexts and there is little empirical evidence of the outcomes of critical reflection on practice (Payne & Askeland, 2008).

Reflecting on their own time in “aidland,” Rowlands (2016), Shutt (2006) and Eyben (2014) offer their views of power from their individual perspectives and narratives. Shutt (2006), for instance,

suggests that, in her experience, critically reflecting on difference using the lens of power can “help to illuminate how assorted individuals’ attitudes and behaviours are influenced by various traditions and ways of thinking” (p. 86). Eyben’s (2014) work explores her own “reflexive inquiry” and the impacts of this on her development practice. Eyben (2014) comments that this kind of inquiry helps her to understand herself and how she is understood in relations to others. Eyben (2014) also recognizes and the nuances of power while working in the field. She highlights that power operates in development contexts in complex ways; it is not necessarily linear or vertical. Within individual relationships, “power is fluid and relational, embedded in relationships and behaviours, rather than static and positional or ultimately based on force – power over” (Eyben et al., 2008, p. 204). She shares examples of the complexities of power between individual workers and funders, between colleagues, as well as within inter-agency and inter-governmental work. She talks about power being exercised in a variety of ways – by choosing to be absent, by staying silent, by withholding information and by speaking openly (Eyben, 2014). This helps demonstrate how engaging in international development work is a complex process, which takes place within power dynamics attributed to social forces such as colonialism, racism, sexism, classism, and managerialism.

Pettit (2010) also talks about how development workers need to learn about power and power analysis and provides an overview of the different experiences he has had learning about power. They make a case for using deep, experiential and reflective approaches that combine “rational reflection and technical analysis with more embodied, emotional and creative methods of sense-making” when looking at the complexity of power in this sector (Pettit, 2010, p. 25). While insightful, these sparse narratives point to the necessity of engaging with and learning about power, and do not speak to a broad or sustained initiative regarding how organizations or the sector itself is looking to transform unequal power relations.

Finally, scholars Howard and Vajda (2016, 2017) argue that there is a need for development practitioners—European aid workers specifically—to be reflective and critical of their “invisible power.” Through the processes of individual and group reflection, they explore how development workers have the potential to become more aware of the operation of invisible power and how this power impacts on

the lives of people they work with (Howard & Vajda, 2016). They invite a “critical pedagogy” into international agencies to guide reflective practices. Their unique work is helpful to my research because it highlights the need for, and possibility of, reflective practice in this sector.

This literature review provides a solid foundation for my doctoral research, which aims to contribute to our understanding the juncture of development work and the use of reflective practice in social work. Moreover, this project contends that reflective practice could be an important tool in challenging unequal and unjust relations within international development work. The research will provide an opportunity to examine and address reflective practice and the possibilities of adding such practice to the narratives on AOP. The next chapter explores the theoretical framework that guided this project.

## Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework

*“Social workers need to be more cognizant of their complicity [in oppression] and challenge it in others” (Pease, 2015, p. 97).*

One of the greatest challenges for social workers is avoiding the replication of imperialism and colonialism (Razack, 2002). Adopting an anti-oppressive social work practice—is one step in avoiding this replication (Curry-Stevens, 2016). An anti-oppressive approach to practice provides guidance in understanding unequal power relations and the responsibility of social workers in combating inequalities and social injustices both locally and globally. Since individual social/development workers are often navigating unequal power relations on the ground, these individuals, and the unequal relationships within their work, must be examined and understood (Chambers, 2017; Scott-Villiers, 2004). Anti-oppressive practice provides this project with a theoretical lens in which to examine both power and individual worker practices.

### 3.1 Anti-Oppressive Practice: A Conceptual Underpinning

Anti-oppressive practice (AOP) has been a significant conceptual force in social work education and practice for a number of decades, as evidenced by its “inclusion in the discourses of some social service agencies and in accreditation standards in Canada, the United States and Australia” (Wehbi & Parada, 2017, p. vii). AOP is unique in that it is grounded in practice rather than philosophy (Ramsundarsingh & Shier, 2017). This framework offers an alternative to the remedial approaches often found in mainstream and contemporary social work settings. Rather, this framework emphasizes issues of power and oppression within the provision of social work services themselves as well as within the lives of clients who have been marginalized and oppressed (Pollack, 2004). An anti-oppressive framework seeks to deindividualize clients’ problems in order to see them within the wider social context of their lives. In addition, this framework attempts to move away from an “expert” model of service delivery towards one that is more inclusive of clients’ experiences and that incorporates recognition of coping and resistance to oppression. Central to the anti-oppressive approach is a commitment towards “changing

social relationships and institutions that perpetuate the exclusion of marginalized groups of people” (Pollack, 2004, p. 693–694).

Social work is not exempt from or immune to the reproduction of inequitable oppressive practices and, as such, social work has made and continues to make a concerted effort to challenge injustices that reproduce oppression and inequality, including its own legacy of injustice. As social work aims to advance the causes of the vulnerable and marginalized while promoting social justice, equality and human rights, in practice, social work may perpetuate oppression and injustice in different ways. For example, in Canada, the history of social work is steeped in the legacy of colonialism and assimilation (Sinclair, 2004, 2007). The social work profession was involved in the mass removal and relocation of Indigenous children into the residential school system and is implicated in the systemic abuse and maltreatment of children that occurred there. It was also implicated in the “60s scoop,” which saw large numbers of Indigenous children taken from their homes and placed into foster care or adoption (MacDonald & Gillis, 2017; Sinclair, 2004; Spencer & Sinclair, 2017). Although the sixties scoop ended in the 1980s, and despite the rise of AOP and a growing awareness of social works’ complicity in perpetuating assimilationist policies, Indigenous social worker Cindy Blackstock (2009) points out that there are now more Indigenous children in care than there were during the sixties scoop period.

It is not uncommon for contemporary social workers practicing in workplaces such as hospitals, mental health facilities, corrections or child welfare services to participate in oppressive practices unwittingly and sometimes unknowingly with clients (Baines, 2017; Brisebois & Gonzalez-Prendes, 2015; Cowie, 2010; Pollack, 2004). The child welfare system, in which social work plays a significant role, has faced particularly strong criticism for judging the perceived failings of parents and intervening in family life and removing children—particularly in the case of marginalized communities—while excluding parents from decision-making processes (Brisebois & Gonzalez-Prendes, 2015). There is an inherent power imbalance within child welfare service delivery because workers have the power to assess and survey parenting and then put punitive sanctions into place if they feel parents are noncompliant (Wong & Yee, 2010). In this situation, workers have enormous power over these populations, including

the power to remove children from the home. Power, control and surveillance by social workers are also predominant features in the prison system (Pollack, 2004), and in hospital and mental health settings where individual interventions are often aimed at individual shortcomings, pathology or inadequacy, rather than the “power, structures, social relations, culture or economic forces” (Baines, 2017, p, 21) that may cause physical and mental health challenges.

Anti-oppressive practice recognizes the ways social work has failed in its social justice mandate. It recognizes that social work could analyze and understand social conditions and relations that lead to oppression and offer a challenge to systemic oppression rather than band-aid solutions. AOP asks social workers to emphasize advocacy, collaboration and critical consciousness raising to analyze power relations and mobilize for policy and economic change while paying attention to labels and language and engaging in participatory and emancipatory work with clients (Baines, 2017). A commitment to anti-oppressive social work practice requires self-examination, self-analysis and self-awareness of social workers’ own social location and position of relative privilege and power. Doing so may create change in the way social work is operationalized and offer a way to engage in critical consciousness to confront oppressive structures (Havig & Byers, 2019). One tool to accomplish this examination, awareness and analysis is reflective practice.

AOP is essentially a “constellation of strategies, theories and practices that help people understand oppression and how to fight it” (Clarke & Wan, 2011, p. 5). Within AOP, individual problems (e.g., poverty, addictions) are understood to emerge from social inequality and structural oppression rather than some failing of an individual. This means that workers must help individuals and communities meet their needs while also identifying and challenging “forces within society that benefit from and perpetuate inequality and oppression” (Baines, 2017, p. 7). AOP operates at the micro-, mezzo- and macro-levels of intervention, focusing on workers’ decisions, actions, behaviours and intervention strategies as well as their broader efforts to combat structural inequality. Anti-oppressive perspectives attend to the complexity of power relations within and between macro-, mezzo- and micro-systems and allow for a nuanced approach to how social work is being carried out in the Global South. As a form of

social work practice, AOP also requires that social workers be oriented towards social justice, working to simultaneously achieve individual praxis and social change (Baines, 2017). Where traditional maintenance-oriented views of professional practice ask vulnerable and marginalized communities to cope with or adjust to their current realities, AOP demands that professional social workers challenge the socio-political conditions that create oppression, inequality, division and injustice in the first place. This includes examining the inequitable relationship between the client and the worker. It is this starting place, the interrogation of practice, where this study is situated. It seeks to understand how the use of reflective practices impacts practitioners' awareness and perceptions of power and inequality in their work.

Baines (2017) suggests that AOP is an umbrella term for social work practices that are rooted in efforts to wrestle with issues of justice and oppression. These practices include, for example, feminist, Marxist, postmodernist, Indigenous, postcolonial and antiracist approaches (Baines, 2017). By including a multitude of existing liberatory approaches within social work, AOP is an inclusive framework for addressing issues of sexism, racism, classism, and other forms of oppression (Brown, 2012). Taking an intersectional anti-oppressive approach—understanding that individuals experience multiple, intersecting forms of oppression—is an attempt to reconcile the complexity of oppression while not privileging one form over another (Brown, 2012). It enables “social work to address a broad range of social structural inequalities while minimizing some of the deleterious effects of fragmentation through a focus on plurality and intersectionality” (Brown, 2012, p. 35). In the context of this research, for example, workers taking an intersectional approach would recognize how communities must navigate multiple forms of oppression such as poverty, violence, environmental degradation and political unrest. Using an intersectional lens helps practitioners develop a more nuanced understanding of oppression and the ways oppression is experienced by marginalized communities around the world.

### **3.2 Colonial Relations Within an Anti-Oppressive Framework**

Using an AOP framework requires that social workers intentionally confront oppressive and powerful social structures such as colonialism, globalization, and racism through proactive efforts; this

begins with acknowledging that colonial practices continue to influence the development sector. That the industry is predicated on the Global North having the authority and legitimacy to act on the Global South is one of the clearest indications of continued colonialism (U. Kothari, 2006). Within this project, interrogating colonial practices begins at the personal (micro) level, specifically in an exploration of how AOP could be a transformational tool for self-governing in everyday practices (Hinds, 2019). A commitment to anti-oppressive social work practice requires a commitment to self-examination and a self-awareness of social workers' social location and position of relative Northern privilege. International social workers are encouraged to interrogate themselves and their motives and recognize both their personal and historical privilege and how this can lead to the subordination of others in development (Razack, 2002).

Social workers, including those in development work, must ensure they are not oppressive in their daily interactions with marginalized populations while delivering top-down, ethnocentric, and/or charity-based programs developed by aid agencies. Making power relations and oppression visible is an important first step towards change and accountability (Ramsundarsingh & Shier, 2017) and language is a central part of this. Language is a powerful tool for perpetuating oppressive colonial power relations (Baines, 2017), but it is also a powerful tool for resistance and change. Changing the way we use language, for example choosing new words to refer to subordinated groups, is a political act that allows you to convey a different message about that group (Mullaly, 2002).

In development work, communities most seriously impacted by the immediate and long-term consequences of poverty, natural disasters, inadequate health care, and conflict are most often the ones with the least power to address these issues. As such, when examining the practices of Northern social workers who have taken up positions that involve living and working in the Global South, it is particularly important to understand issues related to power and oppression. Given the imperialist, neocolonial nature of both social work and development, the encounters between client and worker, worker and agency, and agency and state are all shaped by the context of unequal power relations (Pollack, 2004). In this context, it is unsurprising that “services for excluded and vulnerable populations

are fertile ground for oppressive practices” (Strier & Binyamin, 2014, p. 4). Furthermore, within development and humanitarian agencies, there is an overriding concern with producing data and evidence through monitoring and evaluation (Lokot, 2019). Essentially, this means ‘counting’ beneficiaries of aid to demonstrate interventions are making an impact. This is a problematic practice as not only is it extractive and exploitive, but systems of monitoring are funder-led and generated. The focus is on political objectives related to organizational aspirations rather than a focus on building relationships and showing solidarity.

### ***The negative impact of managerialism on anti-oppressive practice***

Anti-oppressive social work has become harder to do because of current social, political and economic forces, including neoliberalism and managerialism. The re-organization of workplaces and restrictions placed on workers’ in using social justice skills and interventions in the name of efficiency and effectiveness is concerning for many who practice AOP (Baines, 2010, 2018; Baines et al., 2011, 2012) . Global economic changes due to neoliberalism<sup>12</sup> have forced the public sector to act in a more entrepreneurial and business-like manner. Managerialism is understood in this context as a scientific construction of management (Dar & Cooke, 2008). It is often portrayed as a neutral and objective science, coupled with its potential to contribute to ‘progress’ in social and health care sectors (Girei, 2016; Murphy, 2008; Parker, 2002). In recent years, managerialism has become dominant, “with its strong focus on developing a performance management culture” and it has been criticized for its rigidity and authoritarianism (Thompson, 2008, p. 12). The survival of colonial ways of knowing/doing in organizations can be made visible within these managerial practices (Dar & Cooke, 2008). Within this complex system, upheld by historical conditions in our societies, such as colonization and patriarchy,

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<sup>12</sup> A family of “social and economic policies that values unlimited growth, deregulation, commodification and privatization of social services, and an individualistic approach to social problems” (Pyles, 2017, p. 632). Neoliberalism aims to reduce the size and influence of the state, increase deregulation and promote private enterprise. These changes have resulted in higher caseloads, standardized work processes and the reduction of some forms of practice aimed at advocacy and empowerment (Baines, 2017).

westernized managerial behavior, attitudes and beliefs can serve to reinforce unequal social relations through policy prescription, decision-making processes and being at the top of the ‘aid chain’ in the wider geo-political context.

Further, a common neoliberal administrative and organizational system in the public services sector known as New Public Management (NPM) has dominated the coordination, management and delivery of service provision over the last 30 years (Trevithick, 2014) is of key concern to the practice of anti-oppression work. NPM is characterized by the withdrawal of the state from service delivery and the downloading of this responsibility onto civil society and non-profit organizations. It takes a pro-market approach, favouring business-like management solutions rather than “non-market initiatives stressing social connection, equality and a public service ethos” (Baines, 2017, p.32). As a result of this orientation, organizations are also experiencing significant insecurity due to the “dominance of project-based funding, demands for increased accountability, decreases in funding and increased community needs” (Boucher, 2018, p. 26).

Baines (2018) states that New Public Management (NPM) models within the public sector “do little to address long-standing inequities, racism and colonialism” (p. 35). NPM has led to attempts to “maximize labour efficiency, reduce staffing levels, downsize organizations, increase managerial control and formal regulation of the professional workforce,” which has resulted in reduced and constrained abilities to not only reflect as an integral part of their work, but address these conditions which creates further challenges for workers and communities to share ownership of the work (Strier & Binyamin, 2010, p. 1911). Hence, the organizational contexts that the workers in this study were experiencing constrained the ways in which AOP could be applied within their organizations.

AOP scholars argue that this ideological approach to social services has severely limited the ability of many workers to respond to the needs of the most vulnerable and undermines social workers’ capacity to fulfill their fundamental social mission: to promote social change and pursue social justice (Baines, 2017; Strier & Binyamin, 2014). Rigidly enforced adherence to hierarchical state authority and top-down decision-making is promoting the corporatization of social services rather than collectivist

ethics of care, well-being and equality (Baines, 2017; Ramsundarsingh & Shier, 2017). As funds are allocated to non-state organizations, they retain control and power through their ability to invoke short-term funding, financial constraint, cutbacks and therefore financial stress. The practice of short-term funding is accompanied by increased accountability and government control, whereby the state dictates program outcomes, closely monitors activities for efficiency and inhibits flexibility in responsiveness (Woods et al., 2018). This speaks to how oppressive practices, rather than anti-oppressive practices, are being perpetuated by organizations providing services, aid and assistance, and to how workers are being constrained in their efforts to implement an anti-oppressive stance, including engaging in critical reflection and providing community-responsive services.

Thus, the project considers the challenges of social workers who are working in globalized workplaces ripe with managerialism as they work to resist oppressive practices. The (often adverse) impacts of managerialism within non-profit and NGO sector is widespread throughout the literature (Baines 2010, 2018; Conto & Girei, 2014; Dar & Cooke, 2008; Girei, 2016; Groves & Hinton, 2004; Woods et al., 2018). This project focuses on the concept of managerialism as a powerful, restrictive factor that impacts international social workers as they navigate the field of development while trying to initiate a practice rooted in reflection and anti-oppression. It imagines neoliberalism (and its cousin managerialism) as a system of power that shapes and impacts the behaviours and micro practices of social workers.

Development scholars suggest that colonization continues to influence development work through managerial practices, and they also acknowledge that these deep organizational cultures are difficult to confront (Conto & Girei, 2014; Dar & Cooke, 2008; Girei, 2016; Groves & Hinton, 2004). Speed and tangible outcomes are prioritized over relationship building, slowing down and co-creating knowledge, all of which require more time. As a result, Southern counterparts continue to have limited power within NPM frameworks; the work continues to be intrusive in nature despite pushes for more inclusive and anti-oppressive work (Hinton, 2004).

### **3.3 Power and Anti-Opressive Practice**

Power dynamics within development work operate structurally and relationally. Those with more power (historically workers from the Global North) created the structures of development (e.g., institutions, networks, organizations, governments and donors) that are imposed on the those with lesser power (the Global South), and these same power relations are also at work within relationships between development practitioners and recipients. Eurocentrism and Northern knowledge (Roth, 2012) continue to determine North-South relations in the postdevelopment period of aid work. It is in this context that unequal power relations are sustained between workers and local beneficiaries (Schech et al., 2015; Schech et al., 2020). Within this project, power, in the context of worker-recipient relations, is conceptualized as a relational dynamic, whereby individuals, groups and/or structures exercise power-over non-powerful (subordinate) groups. Subordinate groups have limited power with which to negotiate for or achieve their needs, and powerful groups maintain the authority to make the final determination about these needs.

Power analysis within social work relationships is fundamental to anti-oppressive practice and to this project. Anti-oppressive practice, at its core, “must include an analysis of power and in order to strive to work across differences” (Thomas & Green, 2019). Power relations, and the oppression that comes with it, emerge not only from the larger society, but also from within social work practice and research (Barnoff & Coleman, 2007; Rogers, 2012). Power here is relational and social, whereby a person or dominant group consistently has the power to prevent subordinate groups from achieving their needs or aspirations, maintaining the power differential and accompanying privilege. Those without power are often ruled by forces they are not even aware of and left with little control of their lives and limited choices for addressing their oppression (Mullaly & Dupre, 2019). Within an AOP perspective, power is understood to be afforded to certain groups based on race, class, gender and sexual identity, and these group identities are associated with an array of experiences that lead to positive or negative life outcomes such as health, income, education, marginalization, violence and social inclusion/exclusion (Parada et al., 2011; Curry-Stevens, 2016). In an effort to minimize this power differential, AOP prescribes ethical

practices aimed at increasing the social and political power of marginalized communities. Part of this work includes reducing the unearned power of those of privileged status (Curry-Stevens, 2016).

AOP theorists further prescribe a social work practice focused on empowering vulnerable groups by reducing the negative effects of power hierarchies, including the social relations between practitioners and those they work alongside. AOP practitioners acknowledge the power differential and oppressive structures that exist between various dominant and non-dominant groups in society, including the dominance of the social worker over the client (individual, group, community or otherwise) and the danger of this position, emphasizing awareness of the unintentional oppression that can take place when in the role of the helper (Caragata & Sanchez, 2002). On an interpersonal level, social workers using this conceptual orientation are supported as they shift their relationships with clients, moving away from privileging their own expert knowledge in their practice (Dominelli, 2002). The model encourages a demystification of professional power and prescribes professional practices that aim for power-sharing, “paying attention to the processes in and through which they intervene in people’s lives” (Dominelli, 2002, p. 34). AOP perspectives imagine the possibility of shifting power within social work relationships from *power over* to *power to* or *power with*<sup>13</sup> (Cowie, 2010; Dominelli, 2002; Dumbrill & Yee, 2019) and building personal relationships with respect, trust, dignity and reciprocity. Essentially, conceptualization of power looks at finding ways to increase the social power of marginalized groups and decreasing the power of those who have privileged status through specific practice actions such as engaging in critical consciousness work, advocacy work and challenging inequalities in society.

If social workers are to practice anti-oppressively, they too must “first understand their roles as oppressors in order to create a space for deeper empathy and understanding” (Cowie, 2010, p. 48). They

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<sup>13</sup> This conceptualization of power is used in anti-oppressive social work (adapted from Dominelli, 2002 and Dumbrill & Yee, 2019). Power over is a negative form of using power for domination or control over those who are subordinate and can hold mechanisms of oppression in place. Power to enables or empowers others, however, the person/groups with power still holds authority over those they are assisting. The difference is that they are not using their power to hold individuals back. Power with is non-hierarchical, cooperative, collaborative and relational form of power because less powerful groups’ views, actions and values are integrated and are equal in terms of responsibility, voice and authority.

must also understand the ways they continue to benefit from and account for the historical legacy of colonialism, particularly within the development sector. AOP approaches sketch the possibility of an international practice in which social work professionals use reflective practices to reflect on their privilege, power and/or authority so as to transform hierarchical power relations, while juggling interpersonal issues of inequality such as race, class and gender within colonial institutions. To do so, AOP embraces clients and communities as teachers and partners, recognizing the complementary expertise of both social workers and communities in the process of change. This requires the social worker to be aware of their own position and to acknowledge that social work itself is shaped by oppressive relations and social relationships. This may assist them to engage power-with approaches (using power in the moment to create participation by all) to ensure they avoid an overdependence on power over (Dumbrill & Yee, 2019).

Listening to and learning from less powerful groups is a fundamental pillar of AOP and may be facilitated through reflective practice (Clarke & Wan, 2011; Dominelli, 2002; Pollack, 2004). This may work to ensure that these groups' opinions and experiences are prioritized in decision making (Hulko et al., 2020). As practitioners work with and learn from clients in development contexts, this learning could promote the adoption of an accommodating practice stance while questioning engrained, dominant (Northern) social work perspectives and practice (Dominelli, 2002). Additionally, AOP is a practice model that encourages replacing a worker-led model of social work practice with one that is client-centred and client-led (Dominelli, 2002; Pollack, 2004).

### **3.4 Anti-Oppressive Practice in International Social Work**

Social structures that create and maintain disparities between those who hold power relationally, socially, economically and politically and those who are subject to it are present in all aspects of society, including international development and humanitarian aid work. Recognizing the need to make this power imbalance visible and challenge it in daily practice, scholars created AOP as a theoretical and systematic approach to promote inclusive practices (Baines, 2017). Based on principles of egalitarianism, AOP

requires that practitioners be committed to helping people and communities understand the causes of their oppression, be willing to engage with the harsh realities in which oppressed groups work and live and always seek to challenge and even change these realities through social work practice. Since society is unequal and the problems people face have both personal, cultural and structural components, social workers need to engage in dialogue with individuals and communities, accept their expertise and connect their story to wider political processes (Dalrymple & Burke, 2006; Dominelli, 2002). At its core, AOP is concerned with promoting values of equality and social justice by challenging the power of oppression (Dominelli, 2002). That these values are found within the context of international social work (Rogers, 2012) is evidenced by the definition of social work offered by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW):

Human rights and social justice serve as the motivation and justification for social work action. In solidarity with those who are disadvantaged, the profession strives to alleviate poverty and to liberate vulnerable and oppressed people in order to promote social inclusion. (IFSW, 2014)

The power dynamics present in international development contexts are ubiquitous, complex and still only partially understood (Rowlands, 2016). The aid and development sectors have come under increasing scrutiny for perpetuating unequal relations, and some practitioners and agencies have made efforts to find new ways of supporting marginalized communities. Anti-oppressive practice offers practitioners a variety of strategies to achieve this goal. The use of AOP in development work supports practitioners who are working to create equal synergies between actors, shifting power differentials in favour of those who are currently silenced and marginalized, and applying diverse and flexible approaches that allow for locality-specific ideas and processes. This research project is concerned with the use of AOP at the personal (micro) level, as social workers work to create new strategies, reframe and challenge thinking, change interpersonal behaviour, navigate challenging environments and reflect on and evaluate their experiences in international development work.

### **3.5 Reflective Practice and Anti-Oppressive Practice**

Anti-oppressive social work aims to challenge traditional power relations and structures as well as mainstream social service practices. Dominelli (2002) argues that a social workers' ability to use AOP to reflect on their identity is crucial to their relationship with clients. AOP therefore requires "self-examination and self-awareness from our own social location and positions of power of relative privilege; as individuals and as a profession" (Havig & Byers, 2019, p. 70). Reflective practices, AOP theorists argue, may assist workers in their efforts to be inclusive of and responsive to the multiple relations of oppression and social locations of clients by encouraging workers to recognize their own privilege and power as well as the oppression manifest in systems (Lee & Robinson, 2014; Ramsundarsingh & Shier, 2017).

As mentioned in the literature review, a core idea found in this scholarship is the self-interrogation through reflective practices may develop critical consciousness in social workers, raising their awareness of the various manifestations of oppression as well as the power they hold to perpetuate oppressive relations in their work (Bransford, 2011; Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005; Sandys, 2017; Suarez et al., 2008). Developing critical consciousness involves critical thinking in tandem with action whereby domination is challenged on three levels: personally, interpersonally and structurally (Fook, 2002). Ross (2017) also contends that an anti-oppressive approach challenges workers to not only self-reflect, but to reflect specifically on the ways power is distributed historically and institutionally. Hence, within an AOP framework, it is important that practitioners use reflective practice to engage in a critical analysis of how social contexts and systems of power influence interactions on micro-, mezzo- and macro-levels (Suarez et al., 2008).

Through the dual actions of self-interrogation and critique, critical reflection challenges dominant structures, discourse and knowledge as well as unequal power relations, recognizing how they are "implicitly enacted in everyday life" (Fook, 2012, p. 47). Critical reflection can enable an "examination of power and subjectivity in social work relationships" (Mandell, 2007, p. 12). Jan Fook (2012) writes:

Through deconstructing this [previous] knowledge, and unearthing multiple constructions, [the reflective practitioner is] able to further develop (reconstruct) their own practice in inclusive, artistic and intuitive ways, which are responsive to the changing (uncertain, unpredictable and fragmented) contexts in which they work and in ways which can challenge existing power relations and structures. (p. 47)

A critical reflective and anti-oppressive practitioner situates their work in a specific context and takes a “holistic perspective because they must take into account all factors which impinge on the situation at any one time, so that they might accurately interpret their practice respective to its context” (Fook, 2012, p. 46). Doing reflective practice through an anti-oppressive lens provides the opportunity for social workers to reflect upon the shifting situational context of practice as well as the tensions and contradictions, such as colonization and managerialism, of development work. A reflective stance encourages social workers to critique and question their professional power as well as their social location in relation to others (Fook et al., 2000). Critical reflection offers the means for social workers to engage with their privilege, power and difference, allowing development practitioners (or organizations) the opportunity to understand how power operates through their own activities.

### **3.6 Limitations of Anti-Oppressive Practice**

Anti-oppressive social work practice has roots in Canada and the UK and, since being introduced in the late 1970s, has been taught in many social work programs in Canada, the US, the UK, Australia, New Zealand and Europe (Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005; Zhang, 2018). As such, anti-oppressive social work perspectives are primarily Northern-led and informed. To date, “anti-oppressive theories have critiqued mainstream social work practice mainly from the perspective of the Global North” (Holscher & Chiumbu, 2020, p. 3; see also Amadasun & Omorogiwa, 2020). This centres a Northern social work practice approach and limits the visibility of experiences and perspectives of anti-oppressive social work practice from voices in the Global South.

A post-structural critique of AOP suggests that it is a dominant, utopic discourse that needs to be problematized in social work practice and education. One concern is that AOP may inadvertently

contribute to workers moving to a false place “of security and of innocence” when they demonstrate and articulate that they are critically aware of their power and various privileges in practice (Zhang, 2018, p. 132). The false promise that AOP may offer is that once a practitioner identifies as taking on AOP as their practice approach, they may seemingly situate themselves as being independent from structures or behaviours that produce and sustain inequality and marginalization. The risk then is that social workers are provided with deceptive reassurance that they are ‘good’ social workers who are protected from engaging in harm due to their inherent ‘anti-ness’ (Zhang, 2018). This can be dangerous since workers are typically a part of the very structures they are critiquing and are not outside the injustice and harm being perpetuated by many organizations and practices.

Others have critiqued the lack of critical analysis of the state within anti-oppressive research (Brown, 2012). McLaughlin (2005) argues that “rather than being a challenge to the state, anti-oppressive practice has conversely allowed the state to reposition itself as a benign provider of welfare, as the solution to the problems of the oppressed” (p. 284). This holds true for the purposes of this project, as I am limiting my examination at state structures and policies that provide aid and looking at the individual responsibilities practitioners have in carrying out aspects of AOP. I do, however, critique and examine the powerful agenda of performance management and the performativity and efficiency found within international NGOs. As will be explored later in this study, participants attended to the dynamics of power within their work and narrowed the gap from limited participation to inclusivity in terms of some of their organizational reporting.

AOP has also been criticized for its limited inclusion of service users or recipients of social work in the discussions and initiatives associated with the development of AOP (Wilson & Beresford, 2000). Sinclair and Albert (2008) write that it is important to “listen more keenly to the experiences of those who actually experience oppression” and engage in ongoing dialogue about the challenges individuals face (p. 7). They voice that it is important that AOP continues to move beyond the theoretical or intellectual realm of activity and engages in personal, political and practical activity that is rooted in the experiences of oppression (Sinclair & Albert, 2008).

While considering these valid criticisms, I proceeded to use this theoretical perspective throughout the data analysis as it allowed me to examine power as layered and interconnected. By engaging with an anti-oppressive theoretical perspective, I could draw attention to power at multiple levels, including the structural, organizational, professional and interpersonal levels of development work (Mullaly & West, 2018). A critical analysis of individual and structural power helped me perceive power as it is exerted in the participants' positioning as well as within their workplaces. AOP allowed me to see reflection as a way to confront the underlying power of macro-level structures of domination and oppression such as colonialism and managerialism (Baines, 2017; Barnoff, 2011; Ross, 2017) and to interrogate how these structures negatively impact and disempower individuals. The theoretical perspective offered by anti-oppressive practice helps highlight and address the complexity of power relations within and between structures and relationships in international domains.

AOP also allowed me to directly interrogate social work practice within a development context. I could examine the unequal distribution of power in perpetuating unequal power relations, oppression and injustice. AOP asks practitioners to analyze the power they have as a result of their social positioning, and to seek and find opportunities to reduce power imbalances between workers and clients and work across differences (Baines, 2017; Thomas & Green, 2019). This theoretical perspective allowed me to see the ways in which systems influence individual workers/clients, as well as ways in which individuals can influence systems through processes (such as reflective practice) that unfolded within social work interventions.

This chapter explored the theoretical perspective that framed the data analysis for this project. Next, the methodology and how the project unfolded is explored.

## Chapter 4: Methodology

*“The qualitative researcher’s perspective is perhaps a paradoxical one: it is to be acutely tuned-in to the experiences and meaning systems of others and at the same time to be aware of how one’s own biases and preconceptions may be influencing what one is trying to understand” (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994, p. 123).*

This chapter begins with a discussion of the methodology that guided this research, which is rooted in primarily feminist qualitative research and secondarily, phenomenology. I offer an overview of the methods used, including how data was collected. I describe the interview procedures as well as general participant information. I then present the cyclical and interpretive approach taken to complete the data analysis. An inductive and iterative approach to qualitative data analysis synergized the ideas shared by the participants. I conclude the chapter with a discussion of the ethical protocols adhered to within this project and how the knowledge gained will be disseminated.

The methodology as outlined here infers that the research unfolded neatly in a step-by-step manner. That was not the case. The research process has been ongoing, fluid and emergent (Tickner, 2006) and the result of many interpretive, analytical and philosophical circles. I begin by exploring influence of feminist methodology on this research before turning to how I engaged with phenomenology. I will also discuss how these methodologies together created a unique framework for examining reflective practice experiences of women development workers/social workers and power dynamics.

### 4.1 Feminist Research Methodology

The reasons for selecting feminist methodology for this research project was multi-faceted. First and foremost, feminist research paved the way for me to create a space and an opportunity where women’s voices could be included within the scholarship on development work, which has been largely shaped by patriarchy (Patel et al., 2020; Roth, 2012). A shared assumption of feminist research is that women’s experiences are important; feminist research aims to make women visible, bring women from the margin to the centre and put a spotlight on women (McHugh, 2014; Jenkins et al., 2019). Women

working in development have commented on not being seen as sufficiently capable in this work environment (Hoppe, 2014), while contending with embedded discrimination at the organizational, cultural, and social levels within this patriarchal system (Patel et al., 2020). This research endeavoured to amplify women's voices within development—recognizing and navigating both their oppression as women working in a masculinized field, and their power as privileged social workers. In a sector that is historically masculinized, I was driven to produce new work by and about women (hooks, 2015).

Listening to women's voices was central to this project on development as it worked to challenge and resist the patriarchal-colonial legacies that typically animate institutions in the development field. Feminist research alerted me to the importance of studying “silences and absences in familiar institutions” and to insert the excluded experience of women in understanding our local and global world (Ackerly & True, 2010, p. 7). As Harding (1987) wrote, “it is women who should be expected to reveal... what women's experiences are. Women should have an equal say in the design and administration of... institutions where knowledge is produced and distributed for reasons of social justice” (p. 7). Taking up Harding's (1987) call, this research recognized the importance of women's work to the design and execution of development work worldwide and, in an effort to insert women into the development picture, investigated women's experiences in development institutions.

Women play a significant role in this work yet carry less influence. For example, in 2016, while women made up the majority of entry level staff at the UN, their representation as a percentage of the workforce dropped steadily the more senior the role; less than one in three director-level positions are occupied by women (UN, 2016). This, even though 25 years ago, in 1996, the UN made a commitment to achieving gender parity in managerial and decision-making roles by the year 2000. Women are significantly under-represented in the most senior humanitarian leadership roles; patriarchal attitudes restrict women's aspirations and abilities in the humanitarian/development sector (Patel et al., 2020). This research therefore captures women's unique experiences in describing and interpreting the realities of Northern-trained social workers in development work (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2009).

Secondly, as a feminist researcher, I am interested in power - its nature, the ways it can be wielded, and by whom – and this project probed power in a variety of ways (Jenkins et al., 2019). Recognizing the power inequalities that exist in development work, this project acknowledged the privilege and power of predominantly white, educated women embody from high-income countries, as they engage in their work in the Global South. This power analysis is also imperative to the fundamentals of my theoretical framework, as discussed in the previous chapter. This project examines social workers in this context as power-holders and decision-makers. It also revealed the impacts of structures (e.g., colonialism and colonial thinking) and practices (e.g., NPM and “performance” management and the SDGs) within development and the effects of these powerful forces on communities and workers in the Global South. Paternal development policies of past decades have had the devastating and damaging effects on communities who are most distanced from power and resources and this project works to challenge patriarchal power-over (Jenkins et al., 2019). Feminist researchers focus on these issues of power put them at the forefront, and in this case challenging notions of power that development workers have as “experts”, over people in low-income countries.

The women who were interviewed talked about their own power within development work, as they discussed their reflective practices. What was revealed in these conversations were the power of dominant development practices as well as their role in them. Gannon and Davies (2012) suggest that power within dominant practices constructs “our ways of being in the world—our subjectivities—in ways that can make us (un)consciously complicit in our own and others’ oppression” (p. 81). During the interviews, the participants critiqued dominant practices and how they are complicit in some of the negative effects of powerful forces as well as their social (privileged) identities. Through dialogue and in-depth conversations, participants were able to speak in detail about their power within development work and how reflective practice enabled them to approach power constructively.

Third, conducting research that is informed by feminist values also extends to the process of research itself and the way in which research is conducted; this was invaluable to this project. Drawing on feminist-centred research methodology, this research adhered to feminist principles of transparency,

flexibility, collaboration and reflexivity, all while attending to the power dynamics between myself and the participants (Ackerly & True, 2010; Gannon & Davies, 2012; Lokot, 2019; Lykes & Crosby, 2013; Maynard, 1994). As I made choices throughout the unfolding of this research, I was highly influenced by two feminist researchers - Brooke Ackerly and Jacqui True (2008, 2010). Guided and encouraged by their “feminist research ethic” (2010), I continually examined what I was investigating, my interpretation of the data, the participants’ stories, their situatedness and positionality, as well as my own influence and assumptions. As such, feminist-informed research is not static—it is fluid, non-linear and evolving, as is the nature of the research/world itself. Ackerly and True (2010) state that,

...as social scientists, we are part of the very world that we are trying to understand, and that world is always changing...at the same time feminism requires us to re-examine continually our assumptions as we engage in research, making that research even more dynamic and nonlinear. (p. 3)

### ***Feminist Research Ethic Operationalized***

After I finished collecting the data I made some significant changes to the research project, amending the theoretical framework through which the data was analyzed. Though it is challenging to make these changes during a research project, doing so demonstrated my commitment to questioning the impartial knowledge that informed my initial framing of this project. The feminist research ethic forced me to ask important questions about how I was making sense of the data and demanded flexibility in response to the unexpected experiences and stories the women participants shared. After questioning my original choices, I decided that it was time to move on from one way of seeing the research and try out another theoretical frame.

Guided by a revised theoretical outlook, I then reconsidered the research questions. The data I captured went well beyond the original questions posed and the scope of the research questions I posed was too narrow. Concerns raised by the participants about how reflective practices are used in relation to power, knowledge and self, led me to re-evaluate the original scope of the project and propose different research questions. Through this process, I came to recognize that my understanding and knowledge had

been incomplete at the start of the project, and this feminist research ethic helped me destabilize my position and alter the process accordingly. I listened to the participants and then re-examined how I was interpreting their stories. These changes came about as a result of the knowledge and insights shared by the participants as well as my own wrestling with the material.

A feminist ethic also promotes reciprocity and transparency between the researcher and the participants while aiming to unsettle the researcher's authority—commitments that reverberate in the language of anti-oppressive social work practice as well (Creese & Frisby, 2011; Gatenby & Morrison-Hume, 2004; Rogers, 2012). As the researcher, I was attentive to power imbalances throughout the process. As the study progressed, participants were invited to: (a) critique and comment on the interview process and interview questions during the semi-structured interviews (data collection); (b) suggest other women participants to be included in the research (snowball sampling); (c) provide input on the analysis process after they viewed their transcript (data analysis); and (d) contribute ideas to the knowledge dissemination phase, including suggesting possible groups who may find value in the work. During the interview process itself, I clarified and reflected on any preliminary interpretations of the women's stories about their experiences. I used open-ended questions in a semi-structured fashion that allowed participants to express their views and experience with reflective practice, rather than purposive questions where the researcher's assumptions and views are privileged (Lokot, 2019).

Further, individual interview transcripts were sent back to the participants, and they were given the opportunity to comment on, clarify, add to or change any aspect of their account. I also followed up with participants as the data was being analyzed in order to clarify any comments that were not clear as I endeavoured to be inclusive and participatory. I took seriously my ethical responsibility to accurately represent the participants' stories by confirming, rather than assuming, the meaning of these stories.

Feminist research, and anti-oppressive social work practice, is concerned with “equalizing or reducing power imbalances in the research-respondent relationship,” viewing it as an ethical responsibility to attend to power differentials (Gray et al., 2015, p. 759). This is important given the “hierarchal, deductive approach to knowledge building often found in conventional models of research”

(Gringeri et al., 2010, p. 392). A feminist view argues that research participants are not merely “subjects” to be studied and assessed, but that everyone engaged in the research process is an equal “knower” (Carey, 2013; Lykes & Crosby, 2013). Cultivating an open, honest dialogue with the participants was critical to the essence of this project. While the dynamics of power are ever present, Gray et al. (2015) suggest researchers should aim for “an equitable research process wherein inclusive partnerships are created by leveling the playing field to ensure participants’ voices are heard, valued and respected throughout the research process” (p. 761). I endeavoured to do this throughout.

Another important part of challenging this power dynamic is in situating oneself as the researcher and providing details about my social location as well as relationship to the research. This also requires self-reflexivity within the research process, which emphasizes a commitment to creating the conditions to investigate the social context of the researcher. I operationalized reflexivity in this study by exploring my personal struggles, intentions, experiences and questions that led me to this research topic. Reflexivity allowed me to analyze how my social location and lived experiences “influenced methods, interpretations and knowledge produced” (Nencel, 2014, p. 77). For me personally, this consisted of reflective procedures that helped me investigate my own preconceptions, situatedness and positionality within the research, including conversations with peers and colleagues and journaling my thoughts and intentions. Davies (2004) argues that the experiences of the researcher will inevitably affect the research; that is, the lived experiences, assumptions, beliefs and positionality of the researcher must be placed within the frame/foreground of the research itself. In feminist research, the researcher’s motivation and position is a part of the research – and can even add to it.

Although these experiences may have been beneficial within the interview process and in soliciting participants, I was aware of the potential danger of my insider knowledge and experience. An element of emotional involvement and attachment arose throughout the interview (conversation) and transcribing (text) processes, and, through reflexivity, I had to turn a critical gaze on how this shaped my interpretation of the actual phenomenon. For example, I wrote memos at the conclusion of each interview,

considering my thoughts and feelings to discharge any assumptions or emotions that may have arisen. A short snippet from my notes is as follows:

She took a lot of extra weight on as a social worker and, perhaps, as a woman? She is trying to be a leader for change within the organization with regards to self-exploration and reflection and she is questioning whether or not the organization is truly living up to its mission and value statements.

Detailed reflection on the subjective research process, with a close awareness of one's own personal biases and perspectives, can reduce potential concerns associated with insider membership. This process helped me remain open to what was being shared with me. I was deeply interested and invested in the experiences of the participants and committed to accurately and adequately representing their experience. This passage from Dwyer and Buckle (2009) describes the space I occupied and how the process unfolded for me as the researcher:

The stories of participants are immediate and real to us; individual voices are not lost in a pool of numbers. We carry these individuals with us as we work with the transcripts. The words, representing experiences, are clear and lasting. We cannot retreat to a distant "researcher" role. Just as our personhood affects the analysis, so, too, the analysis affects our personhood. Within this circle of impact is the space between. The intimacy of qualitative research no longer allows us to remain true outsiders to the experience under study and, because of our role as researchers, it does not qualify us as complete insiders. We now occupy the space between, with the costs and benefits this status affords. (p. 61)

While the guidance of this feminist research ethic has been helpful as I navigated the design and implementation of this project, I acknowledge that my role as researcher and my place within the academy mean that I am in a position of power within this research. Although I can make efforts to break it down, the power dynamic is inevitable because I am responsible for the project, ultimately choosing who I spoke with and how the data was collected, interpreted and presented.

## 4.2 Phenomenological Research Methodology

Phenomenology is considered an appropriate qualitative approach to researching human experience, examining what people experienced and how they experienced it (Moustakas, 1994). So, when executing this project, I found that phenomenological research provided me with a supplementary methodological anchor concerning the interview process itself, as well as data analysis.

As a methodology, phenomenology has a few functions that were helpful to this project. First, it works with first person descriptions about specific human experiences and highlights the complexity of the research participants' worlds. It aims for "depth and understanding of the human condition, rather than statistical validity" (Simms & Stawarska, 2014, p. 9). As outlined by Moustakas (1994), the researcher, using this methodology, develops a description of the individual experiences of the participants as well as a structural account of their experiences in terms of the conditions, situations and/or contexts. It offers critical engagement with the human experience and works to understand the pervasive influences of "ideology, politics, language and power structures as they construct and constrain the lived experiences of people" (Simms & Stawarska, 2014, p. 11) and the individual and/or collective strategies that people use every day to try to make sense of the world. This approach was useful as I worked to see and understand the implications of contextual development managerial practices while in international locations and the constraints these placed on workers.

In this study, I interpreted the anecdotes relayed to me about how each person understood reflective practice and what it meant for them within their work environments. The overall outcome should be a renewed insight into the "phenomenon at hand," informed by the participant's own relatedness to and engagement with that phenomenon (Larkin et al., 2006). In the case of this research, this meant engagement with reflective practices in the day-to-day work experiences of social workers working in different Southern contexts. The interview produced a "descriptive attitude which focuses attention on the fullness of things and events" (Simms & Stawarska, 2014, p. 9). A phenomenological approach unravels the meanings that underlie the experiences and stories that people share as well as the structural and contextual conditions of the human experience (Padgett, 2008).

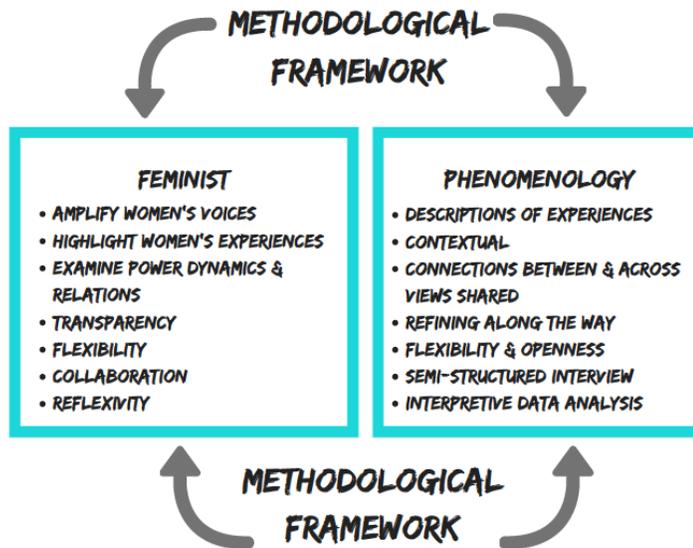
Secondly, this methodology provides a helpful analytic framework for exploring the shared meanings and beliefs of a small group (Carey, 2013). Connections were discovered between stories and organic patterns developed (Crist & Tanner, 2003). The focus on women social workers and their collective efforts to challenge dominant development practices and expose power relations in the work through their reflective practice became visible (Carey, 2013; Creese & Frisby, 2011; Simms & Stawarska, 2014; Wendt & Boylan, 2008). Researchers are to transform “raw data” into meaningful segments by a process of converting what are implicit or unarticulated meanings in lived experience, so they explicitly render visible the meanings that play a role in the experience of the participant (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). This is essentially an interpretive process that involves the identification of themes and the assignment of thematic labels (Smith & Osborn, 2003). These labels (“themes”) will be shared in the data analysis section of this chapter.

Third, this methodology helped me to adopt an interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) stance through which to interpret the data. I approached the data with two aims in mind - the first was to try to understand the participant’s experiences of events, processes and relationships and then accurately describe them, trying to get as “close” to the participant’s view as possible (Larkin et al., 2006). Throughout the data presentation, I attempted to produce coherent descriptions of different events and reflective processes. The second aim was to position the participants' descriptions of experiences in relation to a wider social, cultural and, at times, theoretical context. This afforded me the opportunity to deal with the data more fully and “to think about what it means for the participants to have made these claims and to have expressed these feelings and concerns in this particular situation” (Larkin et al., 2006, p. 104). The primary goal is to capture as closely as possible the descriptions of lived experience in a particular context.

According to Fonow and Cook (2005), phenomenology encourages the interview as a method so researchers can capture the ways subjects themselves made sense of their own experiences and to gain access to experiences in their everyday lives. Wanting to get as close as possible to the participants’ own experiences and views, I had two guiding questions to turn to during the interview process. I was able to

refine and adjust as I went along, and essentially just focused on two main issues: participants' engagement with reflective practice and how they saw themselves in their positions as it related to different social identities.

**Image 4.1 Summary of the methodological framework**



### 4.3 Participants

I deployed convenience, purposive and snowball sampling methods. Participants were chosen based on the following inclusion criteria: (a) gender (identifying as a woman); (b) educational background (identifying as social worker); (c) language (English-speaking); (d) geography of employment (based in the following regions: Africa, South East Asia, Middle East, Central/South America or Eastern Europe/Northern Asia); (e) currently or recently worked in these areas; and (f) having a general understanding as to what engagement with reflective practice means within the context of their work. In total, 13 participants were interviewed, which is an appropriate sample size for a phenomenological approach (Creswell, 2006).

Initially, my association with international development work helped me find a small number of participants. I am a graduate of an international social work program at the University of Calgary and

have worked in development, with the bulk of my post-MSW experience abroad occurring between 2010–2013. As a result of this work, I am connected to several international development networks and have remained in touch with individuals in the field. Most of the participants were recruited through my personal and professional connections in social work, development, professional social work associations and online list-servs (after being granted permission by the organizer of the list to send out an email). I sent individual recruitment emails to organizations and individuals outlining the purpose of the project and asking for participation from internationally based social workers (see Appendix C). I also used social media sites such as Facebook and LinkedIn to post recruitment notices to relevant groups.

The study used snowball sampling to locate and illuminate the experiences of social workers using reflective practice in international development work. The intent was not to develop a representative sample, but rather to locate this little known and hard to find population. Given the transient nature of development workers, and how few social workers engage in this work, recruitment was tricky. Snowball sampling was helpful because it is an informal process that uses insider knowledge to gain access to a small, difficult to locate target population.

After a few months, when the snowballing technique ran out of leads, recruitment became challenging. I then decided to recruit social workers who were doing unpaid internships or educational placements in development. This choice was consistent with feminist research by including the perspectives of those with less experience and who therefore may have lesser status in this work. This opportunity emerged from convenience sampling; social workers who had just completed summer internships as a part of their educational programs heard about the research and asked to participate. This led to four additional interviews and a more diverse data set: participants' experience in the field ranged from a student summer internship to 20+ years. To be clear, these participants were not engaged in service-learning or study abroad experiences; they were discussing hands-on work internships, which gave them the same responsibilities and experiences as their paid counterparts. Ultimately, there was very little in the data that differentiated the employees from the interns—they all did similar short-term work and faced the same kinds of challenges.

#### **4.4 Data Collection**

Data was collected by conducting exploratory, in-depth interviews using a semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix A). The interviews lasted between 30 and 65 minutes. Altogether, there were ten and a half hours of interviews and 153 transcript pages.

I intended to conduct 10-15 interviews, but after the initial 12 interviews were finished, I felt that I had a good sense of the stories and experiences that were shared and an understanding of the direction the findings were taking me. I felt I had enough to move from data collection to analysis. Interviews were conducted in English through the technology platform Skype. Interviews were completed over a six-month period (August 2016–February 2017). I conducted one additional interview in 2020 as the project was undergoing a comprehensive overhaul. An opportunity arose to speak to another social worker active in the development sector who was interested in this project (convenience sampling), and she offered a unique perspective, which helped with the reinvigoration of the project. This interview was conducted during a time when the project was taking on a new shape, and I was reviewing all the interviews and re-analyzing the data; her interview was therefore easily and fittingly incorporated.

The focus of data collection was to gather individual experiences of reflective practice within international development contexts. The semi-structured, open-ended approach involved the development of an interview guide with several predetermined questions and subsequent probes (see Appendix A). Modifications made the study responsive. For example, it became clear that the participants had unique experiences with and interpretations of reflective practice, so I began to ask them to define what reflection meant to them. Through our discussions, participants considered their reflective practices and were encouraged to reflect on the inequitable power dynamics in development and their location within these dynamics, as informed by anti-oppressive practice.

All participants completed and emailed a demographics form (see Appendix B) prior to the interview, which helped me understand the background and situatedness of the participants. To protect the privacy of participants, limited identifying information will be shared. All participants were women, aged 23 to 63. Eleven of thirteen participants identified as white and two identified as mixed race. Eight

participants had university degrees from Canada, four from the United States and one from Australia. Nine of the participants had an MSW, two had BSWs combined with other graduate degrees (Public Administration and an MBA), one participant was completing her BSW, and one had an MES but was registered as a social worker (RSW) in Canada. The findings were therefore shaped by a sample of primarily white women (except for two), who had all studied social work in the Global North. Different racial groups of professional social workers were not represented in the sample.

Two participants worked independently as consultants, one participant worked in a government setting, while the remaining participants were either currently working for, or had recently worked for, international non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The participants' social work experience overall varied from one to twenty-three years in the field. The participants also worked in a variety of international locations including in Africa, the Caribbean, the Middle East, Oceania, Southeast Asia and Europe. The field of social work practice that they were working in varied greatly: food security, refugee resettlement, program evaluation, women's health, child protection, mental health, youth work, family violence prevention, homelessness, and parenting. The participants worked with a variety of population(s) and development issues within work.

#### **4.5 Data Analysis**

Audio-recorded data was transcribed by a third-party and then reviewed by me. Transcripts were then read, analyzed and coded using a cyclical approach (Saldana, 2016). The transcribed documents were uploaded to the software NVivo for Mac as a back-up measure, however, I relied on my manual analysis to assess the data. Employing an inductive system, I engaged in four cyclical tiers of analysis to explore the qualitative data, highlighting themes, topics and issues, with the goal of coming to know the phenomena under study (reflection) through the participants' perspectives (Moustakas, 1994).

Guided by a phenomenological interpretive process, in the first cycle of analysis, I immersed myself in the data by reading through the transcripts line-by-line, identifying the subset of data for analysis and excluding the data that did not relate to the phenomena under inquiry (Moustakas, 1994). I

started to assign codes to the transcripts. A *code* in qualitative data analysis is a “researcher-generated construct that symbolizes or ‘translates’ data and thus attributes meaning to each individual datum for later purposes of pattern detection, categorization...and other analytic processes” (Saldana, 2016, p. 4). My initial read was to decipher and breakdown participant’s answers—I read mostly for content. I began to highlight and capture ideas and concepts by reading through each line/paragraph and assigning codes to them. These codes acted as summative, salient, essence-capturing translation of the data, which started the analytic process(es) (Saldana, 2016). I placed emphasis on coding situational views of the participants’ experience during/within reflective practices, looking particularly at how the women positioned/talked about themselves in relation to their reflective practice and the contexts in which these were set, with the aim of exploring how their subjectivity and power was constructed within the social relations of development (Leonard, 2010). I also read for how they spoke about different layers of power and how they reflected on their identities within development work.

Within this first stage, I was also reading for ideas and themes that were congruent with my initial research questions. I then began to inductively identify important themes, topics and issues that could be grouped together to reflect common and shared meanings (Moustakas, 1994). The coding enabled me to organize and group similarly coded data into “families” of data that shared some characteristics—the beginning of a pattern (Saldana, 2016). This is a process that involves connecting similar themes and clustering them together under broader conceptual labels. Usually in an analysis of this type, there would be variability in the experience of participants that would result in not just a single structure, but several. At this stage, these data families included:

- 1) participants’ experience of reflection/reflective practice
- 2) participants’ opinions and beliefs about reflection/reflective practice
- 3) participants’ notions of self as related to power because of/linked to their reflective practices
- 4) participants’ experiences of reflective practices and the impact of this on them and their work

While analyzing the data, I sought out similarities and patterns but also absences and silences, conflicts and variations in relation to their positioning and experiences as they reflected on and processed

their use of reflective practice. I took note of the differences and contradictions that emerged from the narratives.

In the second stage of analysis, I went back through each coded transcript to begin to synthesize the individually coded lines into larger categories or groupings with a view to finding a more nuanced story in the data (Saldana, 2016). I utilized open coding, attribute coding and NVivo coding methods (Saldana, 2016). A constructivist-interpretive paradigm employs flexible guidelines, so categories were not predetermined but were “mapped out” inductively and segmented as the analysis unfolded (Clarke, 2005). This process is also typical of interpretive analysis, as these decisions are led by respondent’s accounts and the experiential claims made by participants (Larkin et al., 2006). Though I made the initial decisions about the groupings, throughout the analytic process I invited the participants to dialogue about the suggested groupings. I started to extrapolate statements that could be grouped together to reflect the common meanings. The inductive interpretation of data was initially grouped into four main codes and 18 supplemental sub-codes.

It was after completing these first two cycles that I went through significant personal reflection and introspective questioning regarding how I was seeing and interpreting the data. I then returned to the data and did another round of coding, or “recoding” (Saldana, 2016), through the additional analytic frame of anti-oppressive practice in social work. In addition to garnering support from my supervisor to add new depth and complexity to my theoretical framework, I also returned to Saldana’s book to assist in this decision to recode. Saldana reminds us that “data are not coded—they’re recoded” and that it’s very common to do several cycles of coding in the refinement of qualitative data analysis (Saldana, 2016, p. 68). The next cycle of coding helped me to refine and add more depth to the first two cycles.

During this third cycle, I used process coding, concept coding and affective coding to further understand the impacts of reflective practices. Process coding helped me look at the actions/inactions of the participants with regards to their practices of reflection as well as how this fit into their overall work-worlds. Concept coding helped me assign meaning to data that looks at the bigger picture of development work, particularly when understanding it as a neocolonial project. Affective coding allowed me to

investigate the emotions, values, attitudes and beliefs of the participants regarding their work within the development industry, as seen through their descriptions of their experiences with reflective practices. Through all cycles, I was able to highlight significant statements, sentences or quotes to provide an understanding of how the participants experienced reflection within international development work (Creswell, 2006).

The final interpretive stage of coding resulted in the following analytic categories of data, each of which helped inform the three main themes. This also included selecting narratives to include in this dissertation and included the additional participants' view. The major themes that emerged were: (a) reflective practice and how social workers think about power dynamics; (b) reflective practice and how social workers narrow the gap between reflective analysis and action; and (c) reflective practice and how social workers experience reflection within neoliberal workplaces. Drawing upon qualitative analysis typically utilized in IPA—cumulative coding (when patterns of meaning are generated within a transcript) and integrative coding (when patterns of meaning are generated across a series of transcripts)—I was able to develop a plausible thematic account (Larkin et al., 2006).

#### **4.6 Trustworthiness of Data**

Establishing trustworthiness in qualitative studies is done by using a variety of techniques and strategies (van de Sande & Schwartz, 2017). Member checking was used when I asked participants to provide feedback and clarify specific parts of the data. Participants also confirmed that the interpretation of what they said was accurate when I consulted with them after the interviews. Although I was the primary researcher, I engaged in peer debriefing and collegial mentorship to seek credibility and confirmability of the results. Triangulation is another means to achieve trustworthiness (van de Sande & Schwartz, 2017). Triangulation was deployed by member checking (as described above) as well as seeking consistency in the literature throughout the presentation of the analysis and discussion.

#### **4.7 Ethical Protocol Considerations**

The study proposal was reviewed and approved by a doctorate thesis committee, which was composed of three faculty members from Carleton University—two from the School of Social Work and another from the Department of Political Science. Soon thereafter, on July 13, 2016, the Carleton University Research Ethics Board-A (CUREB-A) reviewed and approved my ethics application. This ethical protocol was reviewed on an annual basis, up until the summer of 2021. CUREB-A is constituted and operates in compliance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS2). Since this research did not include vulnerable or marginalized populations in its sample, only social work professionals, and did not pose any anticipated harm to participants other than what is encountered in their everyday life (Carleton University, 2015), it was deemed a “minimal risk” study. Participation resulted in minimal disruption to participants, as they scheduled their interviews outside of work hours, and emotional risk was low, as participants were only asked about the way they perform and carry out their work with regards to reflective practices.

All participants were informed of the voluntary nature of the study and their choice to discontinue the interview at any point. Each participant received a letter containing information about the research and a consent form to sign prior to the interview (see Appendix D). Consent forms included my contact information as well as the contact information of the REB in case participants had any questions about the study. Signed consent forms were collected electronically, stored on a password-protected hard drive and then locked in a filing cabinet. Data management and storage was kept on my password-protected computer. Access to data was limited to myself and my dissertation supervisor.

Data was recorded using a digital voice recorder. No participants refused recording. All raw audio data was transferred onto my password-protected personal laptop, which remained at my residence. Interviews were then transcribed by a professional transcription service. There was no identifying information included in the electronic transfer of audio data to the transcriber other than the country each participant worked in, as described in the audio file.

I used numerous measures to protect the participants' identities. The responses collected were attributed to the participants and kept in confidence; participants were given pseudonyms that will be used within the dissertation itself and in any other publications or presentations that come from this work, including in academic journals, conferences, reports and professional or educational workshops. Participants' identifying information was kept in the password-protected Carleton University network server and on my computer, also protected by a password. I also kept hard copies of the signed consent forms locked in my filing cabinet at home.

Once the interviews were conducted, the audio-recorded data was uploaded and stored on my personal computer. Interview transcripts were altered to remove all names and other identifying information, including name of employer. Each participant was given a corresponding numeric code, and the transcripts were labelled with this code. Once stripped of any identifying information, the interview transcripts were kept in a secure network system provided by NVivo as well as on my password-protected computer. Demographic information about the participants revealed their job title, age, length of time in development and country of work.

#### **4.8 Knowledge Dissemination**

This study is part of a doctoral dissertation in social work, and once submitted as part of this degree, it will exist in the public domain. The data and study findings may be used by researchers for academic peer-reviewed publications and for educational purposes. Some parts of the study's findings have been disseminated to the wider scholarly and professional community through numerous conference presentations, the publication of an academic journal article, as well as through a workshop for development and social work practitioners. I will continue to publish and present additional materials from this study to both the scholarly and professional community, and it will help to inform future research and practice.

In the next chapter, the findings of the research are presented.

## Chapter 5: The Findings

*“There’s a piece about being a social worker that is nothing but reflection. There is no social work without reflective practice. It wouldn’t be social work if it didn’t have that component”. —Dana, participant*

In this chapter, I share and explore how Northern social work practitioners working in the Global South used reflective practices to acknowledge the unequal relations that shape their work and their relationship to these inequalities. Three themes emerged due to iterative data analysis and were based on the participants’ shared experiences with reflective practice.

In the first theme, I explore how participants thought about power and the power dynamics present in their work through reflective practice. I identify the power dynamics that participants spoke to inequitable North-South practices and relations. They mentioned colonization, their ‘outsider’ (yet prized) expertise and knowledge, and the racial tensions witnessed within their work in development. In the second theme, I discuss how some participants utilized reflection in moments of direct practice, critiquing themselves and their priorities. This was exposed through participants’ narratives on learning, localizing, challenging language and procedures, noticing barriers to participation and orienting themselves towards relationship building. In the final theme presented, I explore how reflective practice revealed dominant and oppressive practices that are widespread within neoliberal workplaces, and how these powerful practices undermined and limited the reflective efforts of workers. These were reflected in participants’ comments about the lack of time they had for reflection, short-term project work, administrative requirements as well as their overall experience with stress in the workplace. Finally, workers also shared further engagement with reflection as a way to partake in self-care.

Before I begin with the presentation of the themes, I will briefly share how the participants engaged in reflection overall. Reflective practice appeared to be a self-initiated activity in their work and was not a formalized activity. The strategy discussed most by participants was reflective dialogue with colleague to examine one’s own thoughts and/or reflective practice in a group setting with others on an ad-hoc and haphazard basis. Another common reflective strategy used by multiple participants was self-

reflection and introspection through individual critical thinking and journaling on their own time, both on their personal time and within work. Participants often spoke to engaging in more than one type or reflective practice during their interviews.

### **5.1 How Social Workers Think About Power and Power Dynamics through Reflective Practice**

This theme explores the relationship between reflective practice and the critique of power and oppression by social workers. For many participants, reflective practice emerged an important tool for grappling with and critiquing unequal relationships and processes within development work. Through reflective practice, many women acknowledged and began to question the perpetuation of power imbalances in the context of development work. They questioned their own positions in relationship to their contexts and tried to find ways to level their relational power with their counterparts. They also touched on the structural inequalities between themselves and their Southern counterparts. Joy, who had 16 years of experience in the development sector and was working on food security issues in Sub-Saharan Africa at the time of the interview, said it well when she stated that reflective practice in this context was:

being able to [reflect on], what you do, what you experience, and being able to look at the bigger picture and what you're doing in a larger context. So, reflecting on both yourself and your environment ... I think of it more as a systems view.

Additionally, reflection was being used to recognize how power is maintained within structures that work to uphold inequality and the oppression of Southern groups. Reflective practice provided a pathway for critically theorizing the experiences of Southern groups and contextualizing the historically unequal power relations. In addition, many participants reflected on their expertise and influence and the unwanted deference they witnessed, experienced, benefited from and contemplated in the work. An anti-oppressive social worker's self-reflection of their own contribution to the oppressiveness of their intervention may also help them to be cognizant of their participation in these problematic social processes of oppression more broadly.

### ***Power Dynamics 1: Working as a “Colonizer”***

The ‘working as a colonizer’ theme examines the dominant (Northern) development paradigm, burdened by a colonial historical context, and how it was challenged, or interrogated by some of the participants. Within their reflective stories they acknowledged their historical involvement in oppression as social workers from the Global North and spoke of how the development agenda is organized to sustain global inequality, with on-the-ground development institutions being dominated by expatriates.

Samantha and Harriett both described their power and positioning as Northern development workers and how they saw colonialism influencing the power dynamics found within their work. Samantha had six years’ experience working with migrants and refugees globally, while Harriett’s eight years’ experience was primarily in African countries working families. For them, a critical analysis of power helped them to acknowledge and reflect on the colonial roots of the development sector and the ways in which it continues to plague the development process and the people within it. Within an anti-oppressive practice stance, it is understood that oppression and inequality exist both structurally (macro) and interpersonally (micro) (Baines, 2017; Kandydaki & Kallinikaki, 2018; Mullaly & West, 2018) and that both are important to address. Samantha’s comments focus on the lingering impacts of colonization and how to mitigate these through reflecting and listening,

A lot of the world is still recovering from colonization. It’s terrible to go into other countries and tell people what to do in that country that I had only just come to . . . how am I supposed to know what they need? I have reflected on always feeling like a colonizer, going in and having this weight of the UK behind me, telling them that they should listen to what I want to do . . . I wanted to listen more to what they wanted to do and having them tell me about everything that they suggested and that [Northern organization] has ignored.

Through reflective practice, Samantha acknowledged that parts of the world are still “recovering from colonization,” and that development processes replicate the colonial practices of the past. Samantha reflected on being implicated in this process when she was tasked with “telling people what to do” and had an awareness of others’ needs. She reflected on her identity and subsequent associated power (feeling

like a “colonizer”), while acknowledging the “weight” this carried as she worked within a Northern-led organization. Samantha’s reflections also generated a desire to “listen more” to people within the communities where she was working, rather than asserting and securing her authority. She was empathizing with client groups, while seeking their views.

Harriett described having similar awareness of her positioning as someone implicated within the legacy of colonialism, as well as how this history has influenced development work:

I think in particular if you are of the previously oppressing colonial culture, it has with it a set of baggage that predisposes people to assume I will be directive, because if you look at the history, that’s what happened - that we will in fact infantilize people and not recognize [that we are doing so]. So, it’s important in international development work to reflect and understand how you’re perceived and what the predominant response to you might be if you’re going to introduce some of these [old, colonial] strategies.

Harriett identified both the structural (“colonial culture”) and relational (history of directing and “infantilizing people”) power within her role. Harriett assessed how working in development positioned her in relation to her Southern counterparts. She recognized her position as a Northern worker from a former colonial power and engaged in critical reflection to help navigate this reality. Harriett additionally spoke later in the interview of being “careful”, because she was critically aware of the “dangerous” colonial history within development work and did not want to approach the work from “this terrible foundation of charitable benevolence.” The misuse of power afforded to development workers from Northern agencies could (and does) extend what she saw as the colonial legacy of development. She was critically reflecting on and analyzing power relations within this context.

Harriett recognized above that this positioning from an “oppressive, colonial culture” comes with “a set of baggage.” This “baggage” - like the “weight” Samantha speaks to - is the expectation that development workers take charge/control and dispense directives from the “colonial culture.” These ideas are consistent with AOP -- reflecting on power/control, taking up the position of accompaniment rather than directing the process towards change, and minimizing supremacy when working with vulnerable

groups (Clarke & Wan, 2011; Strier & Binyamin, 2010, 2014). This approach requires social workers to reflect on their positioning, while simultaneously examining how oppressive structures continue to influence the development sector.

Harriett further noted that, given her privileged positioning working in various communities in Africa, she might routinely be “deferred to.” She recognized this is “not useful” in the context of her work and spoke to using reflection to look back and analyze how she is carrying out her role. She stated that she is committed to

...sustaining some level of clarity about my role in the process and ensuring that the role that I play is facilitative and not directive. Reflecting back and making sure that I look at how I’m doing the work helps me do that. In many of these countries, you know, going in as a white woman with professional credentials and experience and seniority, it’s very easy to be put into the position of being deferred to, and that’s not useful as a strategy in this context.

Harriett articulated how she was able to “reflect back” (reflection-on-action: Schon, 1984) on moments to think critically about whether she was indeed behaving as a facilitator/consultant. In making the effort to be facilitative and not directive, Harriett endeavoured to take on the role of the collaborator, rather than a top-down, authoritative role, in the process of development. This role switch may work to upend power dynamics and work to build capacity locally (Chambers, 2017; Clarke & Oswald, 2010).

Harriett was questioning her authority and trying instead to be led by the voices of the community. This shows engagement with an AOP framework by probing the persuasive nature of her position (Baines, 2017; Carranza, 2019; Dominelli, 2002). She recognized the significance of her power and influence (*power over*) and rejected the notion that external Northern consultants, such as herself, need to be unquestionably “deferred to” for solutions or strategies. This recognition and resistance of *power over* are part of what Chambers (2017) discusses as possible ways to engage in “reversals in power relations” (p. 121). This helps us see how moments of reflective analysis may result in changes in how one engages in their roles.

Harriett and Samantha recognized that it was important to reflect on how they were being perceived by others and how colonial practices, vis-a-vis development work, could be replicated by workers who have not created this self-awareness. They were concerned that if Northern development workers were not aware of their participation in the replication of oppression in their personal interactions, they may inadvertently fall into reproducing directive, neocolonial strategies. Not wanting to take up this directive role, she was working to resist “infantilizing” others by engaging in moments of self-reflection.

Dana, whose experiences were in child protection across many different countries in the Global South, expressed a similar sentiment regarding her reflections with the social power she holds as a “social worker from Canada”, suggesting that she prefers to offer “alternatives” or choices rather than definitive answers. She recognizes that a form of colonization lingers in the delivery of one-sided, Eurocentric delivery of answers, ideas or directives, as post-colonial and post-development authors have suggested (Struckman, 2018). This perspective stands in opposition to the common narrative that, as a white, social worker “from Canada,” she is expected to direct the process:

Depending on where I’m working there’s also major tensions in that I’m a [white] social worker from Canada and I often work with people who have much more prestigious degrees than me, but they happen to be in a lesser position because of the country they’re from, newer to the economy or whatever the case is. I think there can be some value in me presenting alternatives, whether it be an alternative worldview or an alternative model of social work or an alternative way of interacting with colleagues and clients. And sometimes [my] alternative view just isn’t relevant.

Earlier, Harriett was not prepared to “tell others what to do,” preferring instead to take a more consultative approach. Dana similarly recognized the power dynamics (“major tensions”) between her and her counterparts and the differences that are present between approaches to practice. She also acknowledged that her views were not always “relevant” and remained open to lessening the hegemonic Western worldview.

Sophia, who had five years' experience in development sector in program evaluation work, also analyzed and questioned her influence in development as a worker from the Global North and the problematic historical relationship of “dominance” that persists between the Southern and Northern communities. Sophia. She then linked this one-sided relationship to her social and political positioning:

The historical relationship [between the Global North and South] is one of dominance and the current relationship is still one of dominance. Very frankly, I have resources and the very premise of me being here [in the Global South] is that I know something that they don't know, that I can do it better than they can do it.

She then addressed the underlying authority that was associated with her colonial “dominance” (which she identified as “white supremacy”) based on her experience in the field:

The other piece is—what I'm learning—part of a white supremacy culture. It's in the ways in which our frameworks, our Western thinking is seen as a “best practice.” There is one way to do things, and if you do this and you do that [my Western way], “perfection” is a possibility. And there's this mindset going into something that leads to this power structure at hand that there's a right way and wrong way to do things—and unwritten is—I know the right way. So, I'm coming into this [development] space with this power dynamic.

By critically reflecting on the norm that Western thinking is “the right way”, Sophia illuminated how power was embedded in her role as the worker/helper with resources and preferential knowledge. This comment emphasizes how attitudes in the field continue to be influenced by the distribution of power rooted in colonialism and Western/white superiority (U. Kothari, 2019) and the embedded culture that keeps the North-South status quo in place. This power dynamic as observed by Sophia underpins the idea that Western values and knowledge are still the problematic gold standard.

While discussing this topic, Sophia talked about how her and her team build reflective tools within their work, which help to her hold herself accountable within this unequal power dynamic:

We are aware of the need to build reflective tools that we use on a really regular basis—for project design, for choosing even what work to bid on, for thinking about the

approach we have—having our work go through an equity audit or an accountability tool, and to be really explicit about the power dynamic assessment.

By engaging in reflective practice and building reflective tools into their work processes and decision-making, Sophia, along with Harriett, Samantha and Dana, were explicitly paying attention to and interrogating the social/political contexts in which they were working as well as the unequal power dynamics that influence this work. Workers who are not aware of this larger structural context may create further harm with “heroic white saviourism” (Pyles, 2017)—white people/settlers/colonizers sweeping in, unasked and usually unwanted, to rescue non-white people that they perceive as helpless victims. Anti-oppressive social workers ought to work to understand and consider, as some of the participants did, the colonial histories, processes and experiences that created these unequal power dynamics and how they continue to plague development and their own practice. It is not their role to “sweep-in” and “save”, rather, as these participants have discussed, reflective practice may create possibilities for workers to act like co-creators of the development/social work process as they engage with understanding power dynamics, not managers or directors of development.

A social worker’s self-reflection of their own contribution to the oppressiveness of the social work intervention may also help them to be cognizant of their participation in problematic structures of oppression broadly. Harriett, Samantha, Dana and Sophia acknowledged this and spoke directly about the control/influence that was embedded within their positionality as a Northern worker, as well as how this influence was being imposed on communities; this acknowledgement and awareness is a salient component to anti-oppressive practice (Baines, 2017; Bisman & Bohannon, 2014; Dominelli, 2002; Larson, 2008). Critical methods of reflection and power analysis could work to expose and make visible the governing power dynamics and challenge the way in which development agendas unfold. Explicitly naming the issues of power through reflection extends AOP ideas in drawing attention to the inequitable relations that permeate within the work. It is evident in these narratives that extensions of colonial thinking are inescapable within the sector.

Power analysis like this may open a number of new opportunities for development relationships. Chambers (2017), Rowlands (2016), Howard and Vajda (2016) and Lokot (2019) all outline some of these opportunities when recommending that development workers spend more time reflecting on their roles and their power to possibly transform their behaviours and subsequently their relationships. For example, we saw Harriett reflecting on such opportunities, broadening her orientation to practice. Specifically, she was attempting to loosen her position of power and unsettle her professional voice. Similarly, in making the commitment to share this “weight,” Samantha was attempting to shift from a position of *power over* to one of *power to* or *with*.

### ***Power Dynamics 2: Being a Northern “Expert”***

Some of the women I spoke with engaged in reflective practice to examine and question the assumption that Northern development workers are all-knowing experts who have earned the power and influence they experienced in the Global South (Roth, 2012). This power dynamic is in addition to their reflections on the power (or “baggage”) they identified regarding their identities and histories linked to colonialism, as explored in the previous section. Reflective practice contributed to the self-examination of participants’ being identified as “the expert”. An anti-oppressive approach calls on workers to engage in ongoing reflection about the expert role/position that has been assigned to them and the relative privilege they experience as a result (Bisman & Bohannon, 2014; Cowie, 2010). This includes a “persistent investigation” of their professional practice and perspective that may not ultimately be best for Southern communities (Gottlieb, 2020, p. 10). It also requires, as Hugman (2017) recommends, exercising self-awareness and restraint to avoid overreaching.

Marie, who had just been in the Caribbean working with children and youth, experienced a privileging of expertise when working with local colleagues on assignment. Her colleagues were willing to accept her opinion when making decisions despite her limited local knowledge and experience, often saying, “You tell us, you’re the expert, you know better.” She investigated this view of herself as an expert through reflective practice, preferring instead to amplify the voices of the real experts:

When, really, that [being an expert] wasn't the case at all. So, my [reflective practice] was more about how people were really quick to accept my opinion, even though I was way less qualified than most of the people who were on the team. [As a result], oftentimes, I would get locals' opinions or highlight other people's opinions so that they were also heard and valued.

Reflective practice was used to question her knowledge/power as an international staff member and the perception that she was the most "qualified". Marie utilized reflection to question how and why she was more likely to be listened to as a novice member of the team. Here, reflective practice allowed her to question the notion of "expertise" and qualification, especially as an outsider to the community.

In addition to her concern with being identified as an expert, Marie also questioned and challenged what she had to "offer" as a Northern worker, despite the position of power she was in and the role she was playing. She "struggled" with being in a privileged position and reflected on the Northern-led nature of development projects in general:

One of the challenges for me was, "What do I have to offer? And is this the right way to do development in terms of me coming in from the West, coming into a developing country?" I was wondering "Is this what we should be doing [based on my knowledge]?" And I struggled with that question [while reflecting].

Harriett also described the critically reflective process she used to challenge herself, highlighting some of the fundamental components of critical reflection including questioning her position as the "expert" and the decisions she made in her practice, working in a neo-colonial context that afforded her social and organizational power. She used reflective practice to pay attention to how her power was continually being re-inscribed in this context and to remind herself to take the role of learner within international development work:

In international work there is a tremendous risk in adopting the expert approach. And what I find a very good mitigator to that risk is reflective practice. It's that ability to actually talk about and put out in the open how you're doing your work, because for me, when I hear it coming out of my mouth, when I talk about what I'm doing, it really

increases my awareness of whether I'm falling into that sort of neocolonial, "I'm the expert" trap or if I'm really being true to promoting self-efficacy, paying attention to the context, knowing that the NGO and the people that I'm working with on the ground know much more about what they need to do than I do, that I simply have experience in strategies to help guide them in a way that will work for them if I listen to them.

Harriett recognized the inequality present in these power relations, reflecting on how the local partners "know much more about what they need than I do". Through reflective dialogue, this demonstrates resisting the "expert trap"—the position of dominance and control awarded Northern practitioners—and to listen to her local colleagues instead (Wehbi et al., 2016). In this way, Harriett was attempting to share *power with* her Southern partners. Through reflective practice, Harriett considered the experiences and preferences of Southern populations and let go of her own agenda and approaches. She reflected on her Western knowledge as well as the knowledge held within communities and local NGOs. She described working to build capacity with her Southern counterparts by admitting her own limitations and encouraging their contributions and "self-efficacy".

Empowering or promoting client's capacity (promoting self-efficacy) to make changes to their own lives is an important way to minimize power imbalances within an AOP framework, as it works to promote equity and empower marginalized groups (Dominelli, 2002, 2015). Dominelli (2005), Wehbi et al. (2016), and Hugman (2017) also caution against an over-reliance on foreign workers to play the role of the expert in Southern development projects as this underutilizes available local human resources and reproduces a sort of professional imperialism. Harriett and Marie appeared aware of these concerns and wanted to avoid imposing their ideas and knowledge. They offered insight into how reflective practice could be utilized to both advance self-efficacy as well as downgrade their power and authority by working to avoid the "expert trap".

Marie and Harriett also critically reflected on their lack of familiarity with local contexts and used critical reflection to heighten their awareness of moments when they were careful not to impose their Westernized perspectives. They were seemingly aware of the limits of their knowledge and experience,

yet knew they were in positions of power because of their identities in their environments. Both women used reflection to wrestle with this dissonance. Rather than uncritically accept the expert status and power that was allocated to them in these roles, they appeared to reflect on retreating and valued collective knowledge. They provide us with commentary that shows us how international social workers actualize AOP as it pertains to questioning their powerful positions. This also deepens our understanding of reflective practice as a way to decentre the dominance of worker (Northern) knowledge in development contexts.

While Marie and Harriett questioned and self-reflected on their individual knowledge and contributions as Northern development workers with so-called expertise, other participants described using reflective practice to consider the professional “space” they took up within projects and communities. These accounts also exposed the power dynamics present in development work as Northerners are placed in positions of superiority as experts, while agencies underutilize available local staff and expertise. These participants recognized their part in reproducing the neocolonial nature of international development, where notions of expertise are conflated with expatriate status and white Northern identity.

Angela, an intern in West Africa working in project evaluation, spoke about reflective practice being utilized to create an awareness of the space (and associated power) they take up as foreigners in this work. Angela stated:

I am associating reflective practice with self-awareness and that's something that is constant, it's always happening whether I'm debriefing with someone or writing it down, or just thinking, it's something that's always happening. And I think that's what Western social workers really should do—it keeps them aware of what they're doing, what space they're taking up [here], and the impact they're having [on a situation].

Angela's engagement with reflective practice helped her gain an understanding of the professional “impact” she had while working in a Southern community, while imposing Western approaches. Later in the interview, as she wondered how to have less influence as a Northern worker in

Southern contexts of development work, Angela said that “there is always going to be this tension [in the work] and it is important to be aware of this.” This “tension” results from practitioners being placed in a position of power based on perceived rather than real expertise. Sophia also recognized this tension regarding her identity as a foreign “expert” when she stated:

Reflection is asking those questions about power dynamics and relationship building, asking how we appear as white women coming in, asking how do we show up in that space and how does that interact with what our purpose is, and with the dignity and capacity and wholeness of the people in the room? What are we getting in the way of when we are in that space, by taking up the space that we do, whether we want to or not? And so, we design [our work] to the extent that we can, to accommodate for the power dynamics and the identities that we're bringing into the room.

Sophia explored this idea of “taking up space” in the interview, as well as the consequences of taking up space in the way that foreign workers do. It appears she used reflection to “accommodate” for the influence and control she had as a Northern worker in this environment, and then assess how to “best leverage” her social positioning so her contributions in development are “sustainable” and bring about equality:

[We] keep asking ourselves, “Is this our work to do?” I don't know that I should be in the field as a white woman. Most of the time it's not appropriate for me to be the one in the field. I'm a firm believer that we need to have these reflections to really hone in on what is our work to do and how do we best leverage our identities and how we show up for the best possible outcome that's equitable and in concert with others and the Earth—equitable and sustainable.

This self-interrogation as a white woman is an example of a participant developing awareness of her positionality as well as a recognition and analysis of being in a powerful group. Sophia wanted to find ways to “leverage” her powerful identity/position, despite her discomfort with it, in order to shift the observed power imbalance and make the work more “equitable”. This contributes to our understanding of AOP in that she understood, through reflection, how she did not want to preserve her position of

authority, and rather than advance her agenda, she wanted equality. It appears her reflective practice enhanced her self-awareness of her identity and positionality, and how she decided to advance her work by first questioning the roles that she may be expected to play.

Jennifer, an intern also working in the Caribbean in a health care setting, discussed an incident where she engaged with reflection-on-action (Schon, 1983) to generate self-awareness of the professional and conversational “space” and position of power she occupied in international development work as Northern social worker:

I remember reflecting on a time when I spoke up and I didn't need to. I could have let other people speak but I took space from them. I think I reconciled this later by being constantly reflective and recalling my objective and motivation for being there which was to advance the local expertise and to get more local people working on what was happening.

Her self-reflection prompted her to try to abandon some of the discursive space she took up in this context. She discussed engaging in reflective practice to learn from and “reconcile” a situation where she felt she misspoke (“took space”), after it had occurred. Instead, she wished to advance local expertise and ensure local colleagues shared their knowledge instead of her. In this way, Jennifer used reflective practice to generate awareness of her status and power and map a corrective path through her missteps. Another participant, Laurie, made similar remarks as she engaged in daily reflective practice to reconcile her struggle with her place in the sector:

I remember I struggled even on what I was doing there, sometimes I felt like I wasn't really doing that much and I was trying to reflect and critically understand international development work. I don't speak the primary language; I don't really know all that much about the country. So, I guess I struggled with that and reflected on that [every day].

Laurie, who was based in Southeast Asia while engaging in community development work with homeless children, described using reflection to question her role within the environment she was in, especially as she was not familiar with the community or the native language where she was located. She also drew

attention to the larger (macro) context of development work while taking a critical look at the complex conditions and power relations in which she worked. She reflected on how she was missing critical information and skills that suited the local-specific context, yet was seen as the expert:

[Upon reflection], I didn't feel like I really gave that much to the organization, because I was there for such a short time. I feel like things were more for my benefit, me being able to experience a new culture, me being able to experience learning about what is going on there. But for me to give back to them, I feel like it wasn't two-way. Also, because I didn't really have a lot of experience in what they were asking me to do. That was another thing I struggled with. And I don't know if it was 100% because I'm from a Western country and educated in [Western country], but I feel like some of them saw me as this expert . . . I felt a little bit uncomfortable that they were seeing me as such an expert when they were the experts in this [work].

Laurie recalled her process above as she critically reflected on the overarching asymmetrical power relations that operate within development work and questioned who benefits in these encounters between development workers and the communities they aim to support. Laurie acknowledged how development could inequitably serve the interests of Northern workers and institutions, an indicator of critical reflection. She reflected upon a variety of discomfiting issues, including her role, her lack of knowledge and how ineffective/damaging the work could be, despite its aims. This reflection exposed the extractive nature of development work as well as the influence and control expert Northern practitioners continue to have on the way the work is organized (Chambers, 2017; Howard & Vajda, 2016; Roth, 2012).

AOP asks practitioners to be aware of their role in perpetuating the unbalanced dynamics present in their work and how these relationships reflect and replicate “power inequalities present in society at large” (Strier & Binyamin, 2010, p. 1916). While navigating and reflecting the complexity and layers of power dynamics in this work, Laurie acknowledged the privilege she benefited from by working in this sector and the experience she gained by virtue of her social location and position. Through reflective practice, she became aware of how she was a beneficiary of power imbalances and that she took more

than she was able to provide. Laurie also realized that there was a disconnect between how she perceived herself and how domestic colleagues/clients saw her. All these factors led her to question the contributions she was making in the sector and the oppression that exists.

These participants' comments indicate that they developed self-awareness regarding their power and privilege as Northern workers. This led them to question their positioning and role in development work as the "reluctant" expert (Wehbi et al., 2016) and how this problematic role may reproduce neocolonialism. Rather than affirming the workers role as the expert and legitimizing their position in development, reflective practices helped some participants challenge individual heroization and unquestioned (suitable) knowledge. They understood these insights as preparing them to resist directing the development process, trying instead to become "facilitators" who approached their expert power constructively. Such reimagining draws on an investment in having oppressed populations regain some control - by workers actively withholding or resisting moments of authority and being transparent regarding individual limitations so others could step forward.

Contrary to other studies, reflective practice did not appear to produce an increased sense of professional legitimacy, validity or clout (see Ryding et al., 2018 for instance), rather, it seemed to invite participants to shift and defer authority/responsibilities to their local colleagues— aiming to share *power with* them. Some participants also spoke of deliberately avoiding sharing their perspectives, as they didn't believe it was their place to do so. This is a valuable addition to how social workers think about AOP – using reflective practice to debunk expertise, de-centre their knowledge and choosing to communicate differently (less leadership). Moving away from entrenching themselves in an expert-led model and then taking a humble learner's stance requires practitioners to engage in ongoing self-reflection to develop the skills necessary to change and adapt practice to suit international contexts (Chambers, 2017; Clarke & Wan, 2011). This stance requires practitioners develop a "deep understanding of the other person's position while at the same time reflecting on the privileged nature of one's own" (Dominelli, 2002, p. 9). AOP also prioritizes understanding the clients' perspective and learning from clients and groups what they need and want. This means not only listening to partners carefully, but also endeavouring to find

solutions that come from and are co-produced within communities, rather than deciding for them, in dealing with their local challenges (Raineri & Calcaterra, 2018). This data helps us see how we might reach towards this in practice but does not allow insight into how to co-produce decisions and solutions as I did not speak to beneficiaries and Southern partners.

While it is important to acknowledge one's oppressive positioning, AOP asks that practitioners also actively work towards systemic change or risk perpetuating inequality between groups on a larger scale (Larson, 2008). Though understanding how international social workers translate their discomfort with power into broader action or activism was beyond the scope of this study, this would be an important area of future inquiry.

### ***Power Dynamics 3: Navigating Racial Tensions***

Marie and Jennifer, who were both situated in the Caribbean, considered the issue of racism within their experiences in the field. They named racism as a structural issue and factor in their work and spoke to their participation in perpetuating racism in the sector. This is important from an AOP perspective, as an analysis of oppression includes an examination of race as one aspect of social difference (Baines, 2017; Dumbrill & Yee, 2019; Mullaly & West, 2018). Furthermore, imbalances of power between workers and service users, as well as between culturally diverse development workers themselves, is an important consideration for reflection within an anti-oppressive framework.

Through critical reflection, Marie explored her biases and beliefs, which she self-identified as being racist in nature. Marie was critical of herself as a social worker in a low-income community and wrestled with and analyzed her own values in relation to local views and perspectives:

Being a white female growing up in a Western country, a lot of [reflection] was exploring a different race in a developing country. So, for me, it was personally exploring my own biases or racist beliefs. Also, understanding how different values and beliefs conflict with mine. So, through reflection, I was exploring things like, "Why is this a belief? Where did it come from? How is it different from mine? Why is my belief

right and theirs is wrong?” I explored some of those issues that came up [through reflective practice].

This central AOP practice of questioning assumptions, values, and beliefs while engaging in critical reflection means acknowledging that social workers have biases and make judgements and are not immune to essentialist beliefs and stereotypes about marginalized groups in society (Larson, 2008; Ramsundarsingh & Shier, 2017; Sandys, 2017); Marie was engaging in reflective practice to look inward and self-reflect to better understand her biases, judgements and assumptions. She also examined the differences between her beliefs and the beliefs of others as they arose in the work. This search for self-understanding and her attempts to resolve internal conflicts when difference arose came from her reflections. She added:

I’ve never considered myself to be a racist person, but if I look at the true definition of racism, believing that a race is superior to another, I think there were some values that I held that were reflective of that. So, that was hard for me to, number one, acknowledge and number two, to process until I figured out where that [racism] comes from and really challenge it. I think coming from a Western country and growing up in a Western country, I have beliefs that have been embedded in me since I was young. So, [I was] challenging some of those beliefs through reflection. While being in a developing country, there were a lot of times where I kind of had a moment that, “Oh, I know better. I have a better way. I know better.” I think a lot of times it was just me having the assumption that I come from a more “developed” experience, a Western country, where some people don’t even really explore their habits and why they do things the way they do them [using reflection].

Marie used reflective practice as a way to acknowledge her Western ways of doing things and to self-reflect on her embedded beliefs and “her way.” She questioned whether these were indeed “better.” When Marie questioned her assumptions about her knowledge and experience, she confronted her Eurocentric beliefs and values. Furthermore, reflective practice helped Marie recognize and interrogate the authoritative positioning and influence of her values and beliefs, which were self-admittedly rooted in racist views. Self-reflecting on her values and beliefs may have helped her be cognizant of her

participation in problematic social processes of oppression, such as colonization, racism and paternalism, in development work. This included questioning and examining her own participation in discrimination and its possible effects on others. Reflection may help practitioners in these dominant roles to see and analyze systems of oppression (such as racism), thus opening the possibility for more accountability for their actions (Howard & Vajda, 2016) and beliefs.

Marie's practice is an example of cultivating cultural humility<sup>14</sup> (Gottlieb, 2020) as she questioned her power/knowledge as a Westerner and challenged her beliefs and knowledge. Marie was additionally challenging a system that perpetuates that Western knowledge is superior. Cultural humility encourages practitioners are "aware of their considerable power—both real and perceived—within the worker/client relationship, and that [they] have a desire to equalize that imbalance to the greatest extent possible" (Gottlieb, 2020, p. 3). This concept will be explored further as a practice strategy in the next thematic section but is an important piece to note here as she addresses racism and how she saw it pervade the sector.

Jennifer spoke to race relations within the context of her work and reflected critically on the impact of race in her workplace. Jennifer had a unique view of racial issues in development as she was one of two participants from the Global North who identified as mixed race. Jennifer spoke of a particular incident that led her to engage in reflection with her supervisor. The incident had to do with gaining access to patients in the hospital and reflected on the impact race had on access:

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<sup>14</sup> Cultural humility is the commitment to an ongoing learning that requires humility as individuals continually engage in self-reflection and self-critique. Cultural humility considers the fluidity and subjectivity of culture and challenges both individuals and institutions to address inequalities; it challenges active engagement in a lifelong process (versus a discrete endpoint) with clients, organizational structures, and within themselves (Gottlieb, 2020).

When it came to things like being in the hospital or things where someone's power was at the forefront, that's where you could definitely see it was much easier for the white [Western] staff members to speak up or just get into the hospital.

Jennifer observed that many of her white coworkers "didn't acknowledge their own privilege and being able to do things" when situations of privilege and authority arose. She further reflected upon her experience with racial dynamics in the workplace:

Race was one of the main points because I was working within an [Northern] organization so we had white people working for the organization...so, race was at the forefront of everything but people didn't talk about it. I definitely felt more comfortable talking about things with my supervisor and asking how race plays into how a meeting went . . . I definitely would talk about those sorts of things openly through reflection and I do think it had a lot to do with the social work lens.

Here, Jennifer acknowledged that racial issues were at the "forefront" of her workplace when it came to power dynamics, though they often remained hidden. Other scholars have discussed inequalities in development work such as social, economic, environmental and political inequalities (Howard & Vajda, 2016, 2017; Rowlands, 2016), but have not named confronting and naming racism in these particular ways like Jennifer has, amongst workers themselves.

Wilson (2012) maintains that race and racism in development is an arena of silence. This is especially problematic and weighted when the work itself is structured by power-laden encounters by historically white workers and racialized and minoritized groups in the Global South. Jennifer's reflective analysis did include racist and unequal practices that are present between workers within workplaces. These institutions are shaped by unequal power relations and imbalances, and her commentary redirects our attention to additional racial tensions between workers. This complicates the possibilities of engaging with an AOP framework and pursuing social justice not only with communities, but within the workplace.

Later in the interview, Jennifer emphasized that "we need to at least work with and reflect on race, we can't just ignore this issue because it's a huge problem [at our organization]." Based on her experiences, Jennifer saw firsthand that powerful groups (white expatriate workers) continued to maintain

power and influence over less powerful groups. Discrimination operates within institutions within people's habitual ways of thinking and behaving and needs to be challenged in order to address the wider power relations between and among development actors (Howard & Vajda, 2017; Rowlands, 2016). Opening a dialogic space for reflection on issues of racism within development contexts may, therefore, work to expose the power differentials between workers, while working across differences in an anti-oppressive manner. As Rowlands (2016) writes, power analysis when working with multiple stakeholders positioned differently within existing power relations, "may proactively emphasize the inclusion of people who would otherwise be outside" these conversations or spaces (p. 122). Reflective dialogue may be one way to interrogate power analysis within a context of racial difference and perhaps facilitate a dialogue of inclusion and inequality. Individuals, however, must be willing to have difficult conversations, in addition to practicing self-reflection. Jennifer was able to speak "openly" to issues of race through reflective analysis and dialogue, which I see as evidence of her naming the power dynamics she witnessed in her work. Other than raising these issues of race with her supervisor, it is not clear that there were broader implications of such conversations in terms of anti-oppression work.

Without institutional-level critical reflection illuminate how attitudes and behaviours have been influenced by the legacies of colonialism and racism, individuals may get caught up in reproducing power relations that have negative effects not only on citizens of recipient countries, but also on workers themselves from Northern countries (Lokot, 2019). And it is also true that Northern workers may be resistant to challenge the power and privilege their position offers them as they essentially benefit from being in positions of power. Critical learning and reflection in these international contexts could mean critiquing themselves and the colonial legacy development workers may be caught up in (U. Kothari, 2005, 2006, 2019; Escobar, 1995; McEwan, 2018; Ziai, 2017). In turn, this could help practitioners to move beyond taken-for-granted assumptions that may well be informed by prejudice and discriminatory discourses. It enables an identification of any ideological biases to social work practice and to the situations they are engaging with as part of that practice (Thompson & Pascal, 2012).

Chambers (2017) calls our attention to the importance of reflecting critically on our mindsets, behaviour, biases and blind spots. This is important; however, I would offer additional elements of reflection to Chambers' list based on these participants' remarks. This are additional insight about professional power and developing capacities to be more strategic with it ("leverage" it) as it pertains to their colonial identities, expertise and social location within Southern spaces.

## **5.2 How Social Workers Narrow the Gap Between Power Analysis and Action through Reflective Practice**

The previous theme explored how reflective practice assisted international social workers as they sought to expose and critique unequal power dynamics experienced in their work in development. Building on this theme, the next section explores how participants spoke to challenging and critiquing their social work practice as a result of engaging in power analysis. Essentially, this section responds directly to what Sophia raised in her interview:

If awareness is achieved, then what? It's certainly something that for years I've asked—is there a way to participate in this industry that doesn't perpetuate colonial harm? I think it's a great question. I don't know. It's very much a living question. Assuming that the [development] field is going to continue, it's not going to just disappear—is it better to participate in it and to shift it to be as good as it can be or to just say that the whole thing is tainted?

While relational power and influence surfaced in the professional relationships between social workers and their Southern counterparts, participants spoke about their priorities to contest and “shift” these unequal relations of power that work to unravel, rather than inadvertently perpetuate harm. The general picture emerging from thematic analysis uncovers how reflective practice was centrally important when narrowing the gap between awareness/analysis and self-reported action in moments they spoke about. Chambers and Pettit (2004) and Howard and Vajda (2016) have suggested that a leverage point for effecting change regarding power, participation, and relationships within development lies in reflection; both self-reflection (awakening self-awareness) and in critical reflection (reflecting on structures of power and power within relationships). Here I present some empirical data to expand upon their assertions.

### ***Practice Strategy 1: Prioritizing Learning While Localizing Practice***

Many participants spoke about the localized learning and understanding they prioritized and fostered while working in the Global South and how this was incorporated within their reflective practice. This prioritization was commonly discussed in relationship with reflective practice and undertaking an analysis of power dynamics. The recognition of power differentials and workers' self-reflection regarding their social positioning within North-South power dynamics in international development contexts prompted not only self-evaluation but also an intention to be open to learning local perspectives and practices. Using self-evaluation to reflect on self-identified gaps in knowledge appeared to help some participants consider local expertise.

Katie, who was situated in Oceania and working in family violence prevention, was able to identify the strengths and resources of local communities and groups and work with them to find their own solutions to their problems. She labelled this a "slow, reflective approach". She encouraged an intentional slowing of professional intervention as her learning took place. Her cautious approach contributes a unique perspective to engagement with AOP (Larson, 2008; Parrott, 2009; Vanderwoerd, 2016; White, 2007). Rather than using her position of power to be persuasive or directive, reflective practice allowed her to pause and analyze her unhelpful response. Katie also spoke to how reflective practice aided her in "understanding" of local groups and realities:

Reflective practice can create opportunity to build on what already is there, on what already is working and connecting to people in a way that can describe their situation, [it's about understanding] what's their reality of the environment each day, what are their challenges, what are their struggles and then working together in a process that can support what you do.

Katie used reflective practice as a strategy to connect, understand the "reality" of others and then "work together" to approach problems. She suggested that she felt it created an opportunity to "build on what is already there," embracing the strengths the community brings to situations and issues. She also said in her interview that she had to "take a back seat and really look at this situation very deeply". She thought that

the “Western paradigm” she brought with her was “not going to work” and that her “Anglo-response is not helpful”. The decision to step back and evaluate her practice limitations (Baines, 2017; Thomas & Green, 2019), appeared to be triggered by her reflective practice.

Katie also stated that “within [development] project work, things can be quite chaotic and complex and so you have to totally be all eyes and ears open and come from a position of not knowing.” Starting from a position of “not knowing” and being willing to listen to the community (“eyes and ears open”) highlighted Katie’s willingness to learn from others rather than imposing her Western knowledge within “chaotic and complex” development contexts. Katie recognized that her Northern knowledge was not relevant and that she needed to adapt to suit her location.

An anti-oppressive approach calls on workers to reflect on their professional knowledge and “be comfortable with not knowing” (Clarke & Wan, 2011, p. 17), and Katie demonstrated a willingness to pause and look to local communities for guidance. In Clarke and Wan’s (2011) work they suggest that social workers “interrogate...the authority of [their] professional knowledge” (p. 21) and to discover, through reflection and collaboration, what is in the best interests of clients. It appears Katie did this through slow and unsettled engagement.

A similar strategy can also be seen by Angela when she asks herself, “I’m not an expert on this situation, so does my perspective actually make sense here or should I be asking more questions [and learning from locals]?” However, Angela’s discussion expands on Clarke and Wan’s (2011) ideas to not only investigate and be aware of her lack of knowledge, but to use that to expand the frameworks through which one sees the problem and to innovate new and locally inspired solutions:

[I get] new perspectives, almost always [out of reflection] ... through, I guess, reflecting and collaboration, we were able to find a solution for the time being and it will be revisited when the proposal comes back again in a year [with a local partner]. But just trying to get a new perspective on problems that are going on, I guess is the biggest takeaway [for me].

This example explores how “new perspectives” that emerge from reflective and reciprocal dialogue with a co-collaborator. Finding opportunities to generate collaborative “new perspectives” is critical to AOP, as workers revisit the assumptions they make about their practice and work to harmonize their knowledge/practice within foreign contexts and within different cultures (Parrott, 2009).

Angela used reflective collaboration to find alternative ways of problem-solving that valued local knowledge, which builds on elements of AOP. This is also an example of drawing upon the practice values of AOP that seeks partnering with local groups and working constructively between groups and cultures (Clarke & Wan, 2011; Ramsundarsingh & Shier, 2017). It moves beyond critiquing and questioning what is transpiring in the foreign context to empowering local groups to achieve their wishes and desires through open and mutual conversations. This creates an opportunity for anti-oppressive social workers to ‘level-down’ and focus on curating a more egalitarian approach to worker-recipient relations in development work (Strier & Binyamin, 2014).

Marie’s process of reflection-on-action (Schon, 1984) helped her question how her Northern social work values and beliefs fit within the local context. (As you may recall, Marie had exposed and critiqued her racist beliefs in theme 1). Not only did reflection help Marie engage in self and critical analysis of her own biases, assumptions, values and cultural worldview, she discussed further how reflection helped her develop a “better understanding” of the local cultures and contexts and determine whether her Northern social work “values and beliefs” even fit within this context:

So, I was intentional about being really curious, and asking lots of questions, and just being really, I guess, openly vulnerable to my [local] supervisors in an attempt to gain a better understanding quicker of the culture and my response to that and how my [Western social work] values and beliefs may or may not fit into that.

Through reflection and being “vulnerable” and “curious”, Marie examined her values and beliefs as well as her practice (how clients “responded” to her and her ideas). Building self-knowledge and self-awareness is a central component of the repertoire of skills that forms the bedrock upon which anti-oppressive practitioners build their interventions (Dominelli, 2002). Additionally, through reflection,

Marie also reported she could adjust and adapt “quicker” to the local context. Marie illuminated how international settings could require a practitioner to respond with cultural sensitivity to local traditions and that reflection may speed up the process of cultural awareness and understanding. This is a helpful insight especially when work conditions workers have little time to grasp information in “chaotic” new environments.

Research found on the experiences of social work students from Northern countries who participate in international field programs suggests that an enhanced cultural sensitivity and an appreciation for diversity may be a result of these international experiences where there is some form of reflection (see Bell & Anscombe, 2013; Cleak et al., 2014). Marie’s comments build on this and pertain to reflective practice outcomes for professional social workers working in international contexts. Marie has illuminated that in order to respond to international conditions with cultural sensitivity to local traditions, reflection may work to accelerate the process of cultural awareness and understanding. This is particularly interesting and useful when framed within the limited, time-bound context of development work; social work students are not necessarily under the same type of pressures to produce results and outcomes. This notion of creating efficiencies in her understanding and making meaning of cultures is a new possibility for utilizing reflection within an AOP framework and within managerial constructs of being ‘efficient’.

Marie also said that as a result of reflection and engagement with local groups, she became more open-minded. She said, “I have a different appreciation and outlook for a lot of [clients] and where they’re coming from. I’m just a lot more—not that I was necessarily close-minded before—but I’m even more open-minded and compassionate towards [clients].” Avoiding judgement and displaying compassion are important to building anti-oppressive relationships and partnerships with clients, however, this is an additional way to think about the possibilities of reflection (Larson, 2008). Marie’s perception was that she came to appreciate, on a deeper level, the importance of not only learning about others, but being open to differences through reflection.

While Marie discussed her openness in generating cultural understanding while talking about reflecting within Southern communities, Harriett suggested that reflection was helpful in her avoiding

employing a one-size-fits-all approach in her practice. As a consultant, Harriett worked within many different communities throughout Africa specifically. She talked about how reflection helped her focus on the unique priorities of each community:

I work in a number of different countries at a different pace or with different people, and it's because the context when you're working around communities is so critical, reflecting on what you're doing in each community I think enables one to be careful about and not overgeneralize. So, I keep clarity about "Oh, this is what this community needs, and these are the priorities for them, and this is how this community wants to engage" and I think it might be quite easy to just paint everybody with the same brush if one didn't engage in a reflective practice about each specific initiative and community.

Harriett was endeavouring to be responsive in her approach by paying attention to the uniqueness of each community's needs. Understanding the local context and other dynamics that may oppress and "marginalize certain groups from participation" is critical and centres community needs (Pyles, 2017, p. 3). Responding and adapting to the specific needs and priorities of each group or community and intentionally seeking clarity so as not to "overgeneralize" was an important strategy for Harriett, who worked in a variety of countries as a consultant and used reflective practice to learn about and respond to each unique cultural context. This draws attention to the importance of Harriett including reflective actions to locate specific community needs and to deter from a universal approach. This may also help workers deter from enacting Westernized, professional imperialism, which Dominelli (2005) and others cautions against.

Lucy, who had worked for two years in Tanzania with youth, took similar steps to adjust her interventions based on a process of learning. She articulated that she needed to "adapt" her practices to suit the local context, and she did this through reflection and discussion:

I think one of the things is also to know the limits of the local culture you're in. I think this is something that can be pretty helpful when you're reflecting on your practice. Sometimes it's hard to know if your intervention on this strategy you're thinking of will

work in the country or not. Because sometimes you don't really know the culture or sometimes you don't know the resources or things like that. So, it's good when you have the opportunity to reflect and to discuss those things with someone ... here it's not the same thing so you really have to adapt or to make sure [the intervention or solution is] possible.

Lucy spoke plainly about the limits of her knowledge. Understanding these limits led her to reflect on whether her strategies were even "possible." Recognizing that she was unfamiliar with the environment, Lucy found it helpful to check with local colleagues to ensure her practice was local-specific and culturally relevant. Within the scope of development work, acknowledging one's practice challenges and limitations may help practitioners critique Northern-based practice assumptions and pivot to include local conditions and interventions.

During her self-reflective practice, Lucy would have conversations with colleagues to discuss the "limits" of her practice knowledge in order to "not cause more damage" locally. Lucy recognized the benefits of reflective practice for her own work and recognized the benefit that learning from local communities contributed to her work:

I think [reflection] is a way to stay aware of the impact of our work, and I think it's really important to make sure that we'll not cause more damage to the people in this country. So, I think this is where it's also important to reflect on best local practices ... I think that's good when you can just take a pause and say, okay, so far, I've been doing this and is it the best for those youth in this country or maybe we need something more? This is something I found also was missing here in my practice, and I think it happened very late [in the project], and I had very little chance to exchange with our local colleagues about best practices. Because I think [this exchange] is part of reflecting about our practice and engaging in reflection.

Cognizant of unequal relations of power, Lucy valued gathering local expertise and acquiring up-to-date knowledge from local organizations and Southern communities. She also expressed an interest in learning about local practices, though she found, with few opportunities for this kind of cultural sharing, it was sometimes difficult to access this information. The sometimes limited and brief way in which

workers engage with each Southern community may make these conversations hard to come by (Howard & Vajda, 2017; Roth, 2012). By asking questions and taking a learner's stance, Lucy was attempting to shift her relationships with her local colleagues from one of *power over* to one of *power to/with*.

Dominelli (2014) has suggested that it is critical for social workers to interrogate their Western biases through reflection while practicing internationally to ensure they “do not damage the people they aim to help further but work with them in local empowering partnerships” by working in context-specific ways to address issues (p. 258). It appears that Lucy was attempting to do this and prevent further damage. She “exchanged” ideas with local partners through her engagement with reflective practice. Mutuality and reciprocity as practice techniques could be perceptible here.

Angela described reflection as a way to remain “culturally humble” and interrogate her power and knowledge she holds as a development worker. This stance “places the practitioner in a learning mode as opposed to maintaining power, control, and authority in the working relationship, especially over cultural experiences about which the client is far more knowledgeable” (Danso, 2018, p. 423). She utilized reflection to remind herself that she did not want to overstep her role; she was there to “facilitate or advocate.” She recognized Northern worker's tendency to overreach in their efforts to “change the world” and tried to exercise self-awareness and restraint, while learning from her interactions with local groups:

In my day-to-day work, the biggest reflections come in my interactions with people, specifically people that are from the country that I'm working in. So, in Burkina Faso, with the [local] people, the thing that I was most intentionally reflecting about is being culturally humble and not saying “here I am, I'm a North American expat here to like change the world.” That's not my role. That's not my goal and that's something I have to continually reflect upon and tell myself that I'm not there to do that. Cause it's really easy to get a “big head” and think that you're doing more than you are and you need to bring yourself down and remind yourself that you're not the expert in the situation. And I think that's true of all social work, not just international social work. Everyone is the expert on their own experience, and you are just there to facilitate or advocate.

Gottlieb (2020) defines cultural humility as a commitment to an ongoing process of self-awareness and inquiry while being open to learning and growing. It is “striving to see cultures as our clients see them, rather than as we have come to know or define them” (Gottlieb, 2020, p. 3). This concept helps us to see how reflective practices raises awareness about Angela’s Northern-based theoretical knowledge and practices are transposed onto Southern contexts (Dominelli, 2014). Angela was aware that she may be seen as an overbearing and heroic foreigner, out to single-handedly “change the world” through her professional power and knowledge. Being culturally humble, as Angela has articulated, could be a strategy to learn from local professionals in development contexts and is also a possible outcome of engaging with reflective practice to question herself. A cultural humility framework is aligned with many of the principles embodied by anti-oppressive practice in that it challenges workers not only to self-reflect, but to reflect specifically on the ways that de-centre their own knowledge in favor of prioritizing the clients’ experience (Gottlieb, 2020).

It is evident from the statements above that the participants engaged with reflection to enhance their learning and listening. Participants self-reported gaining additional insight/understanding of cultures and local context, and of evaluating and learning as a means of creating different solutions through collaboration with local populations. These outcomes underscore the value of questioning themselves and their work through the deployment of intentional and informal moments of reflection. I explored micro-level practice examples of how reflection was utilized to reveal power relations and how this revelation might motivate practitioners to consider shifting their approach to learning and localizing within Southern communities. This recognition of power dynamics created possibilities for change and the challenging of structured power relations at an interpersonal level. This, in turn, may create an opportunity for local partners to speak to their knowledge, and to participate in decision-making and problem-solving.

### ***Practice Strategy 2: Altering Language and Challenging Procedures***

Critical self-reflection of one’s positioning and one’s complicity in oppression can change the way social workers engage with their work with community partners and to be vigilant to ways in which

language and workplaces reinforce or dismantle existing power structures (Baines, 2017; Gottlieb, 2020; Pease, 2015). Carol and Samantha both spoke to how critical self-reflection encouraged them to alter their language and challenge procedures as a way to take some responsibility and accountability for how they were operating within their organizations.

Baines (2017) asks that anti-oppressive practitioners hold themselves accountable in their use of language, and through reflective practice, Carol found that language was an important issue for her. Carol had nearly two years' experience as a social worker in women's sexual and reproductive health, mostly situated in Sub-Saharan Africa. Evaluating the kinds of terms she used in her practice, Carol was able to reframe and adapt her language. She said, "I'm constantly critically reflecting on phrasing and using language that I think reflects collaborative and open relationships." Carol understood how language could be used to perpetuate unequal power relations. She also recognized that language is a tool for resistance and change from an anti-oppressive practice perspective. Changing the way she used language, by choosing new words to refer to subordinated groups for example, laid the groundwork for new ways to engage with and think about her Southern counterparts.

Through critical reflection, Carol identified language as a way to promote inclusivity and recognized that language can contribute to, or undermine, efforts to account for unequal power dynamics and can act as a catalyst for gradual change in behaviour. Carol was also aware that language in international development may play a role in sustaining unequal power dynamics:

The first [thing I reflect on] is understanding that there's a power dynamic between funders and people, people who are giving money and people who are receiving money. And we say we partner, but what does that mean? What does "partner" look like for the [clients] that we support?

Carol questioned the use of the word "partner," which implies collegial equality and mutual reciprocity. In reality, most funder-borrower and donor-recipient relationships are unequal and those who control the funding have the power. True partnership is difficult to attain when power dynamics between Northern funders and Southern partners remain asymmetrical. "Partner" implies equality within

relationships, but equality is not matched in practice. Partnership as a concept is often criticized by development scholars for failing to question and address unequal power relations present in development work (Kreitzer & Wilson, 2010; Schech et al., 2015). Carol critiqued the concept and use of the word partner, recognizing the lop-sided nature of partnerships in development work. She exposed the power dynamic and hierarchal nature of ‘partnerships’ through reflective practice and placed herself in her clients’ worse-off shoes. Carol’s critically reflective analysis guided her to think about these terms and her partners in the wider social context, by taking into consideration the North-South power imbalance. She was aware of her complicity in replicating dominance as a Northern funder and how she could begin to address this imbalance by altering her language.

In addition to thinking about her use of language in practice, Carol reflected on the language and terminology used more broadly by her employer, an NGO. She found herself questioning the extent to which the organization lived up to its public mandate, and raised concerns about the disconnect between the organization’s public persona—a “thought leader” that works to be “inclusive, feminist and diverse”—and “what we are” in reality. She encouraged the organization to think through these value statements and consider whether these values are operationalized in the work. She considered, for example, whether their use of “feminist” was too narrow. She critically reflected on how this term was being interpreted and exercised in global development:

So, as an example, we call ourselves a feminist organization and some of us were questioning what do we mean when we say “feminism”? We know that we’re pro-choice and we know that we’re rights-based... we need to continue to self-reflect upon how we engage in other social justice movements that are related to sexual reproductive health and rights and bodily integrity and all that. We need to be rooted in or come from a racial justice perspective.

In this instance, Carol wanted the organization to leverage their power and social position to work to the advantage of racialized and marginalized groups internationally and locally. She urged this “feminist” organization to connect their work to larger social justice issues and provide frontline services

for women and questioned why this was not happening already. She felt that engaging in reflection with colleagues might help them see that structural and organizational change is necessary and support them as they make these changes. This corroborates with Baines (2017) ideas that practitioners must lead on activism with clients, engaging in social justice work and confronting racial injustice (Baines, 2017). Carol's individual reflections led to a larger critique of the goals and visions of the organization and motivated her to demand change on a macro level.

Samantha, on the other hand, worked with an influx of refugees and migrants and had to make “snap decisions” about how she was going to support these individuals. Samantha spoke to negotiating difficulties and tensions regarding the “rules” and how procedures required reflective thinking and flexibility in her approach to this work. Speaking to the needs of the clients she was working to assist, Samantha questioned and then altered aspects of service delivery when working with refugees:

It was this constant reflective thinking about the rules, but then what's best for the kids and where do I fit all the kids, where do I fit within this situation? Which I'm sure you hear a lot about in terms of social workers bending the rules, ignoring the rules if they're not best for the clients, that kind of thing. This was the thing—we bent a lot of rules in [country]. But upon reflection we felt like we were doing the right thing [by bending the rules]. [The organization] was a little bit of top-down, trying to tell us what to do. But they just didn't have the capacity to keep an eye on what we were actually doing, so we could just do what we thought was best for the clients, for the people that we were helping, for the refugees all the time ... we were constantly discussing all of this and are we doing the right thing, and just reflecting on what we were doing to make sure that we weren't going too far off.

Samantha reflected on how to be more just and client-centred in her work, “bending” organizational rules to do “what's best for the clients.” Samantha's reflections helped her gain insight into different ways of working with her clients (“the kids”). Exposing and challenging organizational structures that can further marginalize vulnerable groups is an integral part of AOP (Baines, 2017; Dominelli, 2002). By bending the rules to “do the right thing” and work in ways that fit the needs of the clients, Samantha was challenging the organization's top-down, oppressive structure and she resisted

these organizational “rules” by altering her practice. While personal actions such as changing language and bending practice procedures are important acts of resistance inside a large system, these efforts are often limited by the realities of rigid procedures, and multiple reporting requirements in a hierarchical culture.

When looking at these quotes from Carol and Samantha, engaging in power analysis with regards to language and procedures may help promote an organizational culture that is oriented towards reflection and that begins to blur the boundaries that have been drawn between how Northern practitioners engage in interventions in the South. This certainly involves looking inward and developing self-awareness, but it also involves challenging, through self-reflection, use of language and hierarchical practices that permeate the development field.

### ***Practice Strategy 3: Noticing Barriers to Local Participation and Visibility***

Reflective practice emerged as a tool to help workers acknowledge that local communities face significant barriers to participation and act to promote their visibility (Folgheraiter & Raineri, 2012). Some participants spoke to how to open spaces for less powerful groups and create more inclusive processes. The awareness of their power within their roles and position led them to see the inequities in participation and what they needed to do to shift from *power over* to *power with/to*. It is important that practitioners use reflective practice to engage in a critical analysis of how systems of power influence interactions in everyday practice moments (Ross, 2017; Suarez et al., 2008) and to identify who is and is not included.

Joy reflected on how she could use her position of power to increase “visibility” of the work that local groups were doing “on the ground”:

I was looking at the opportunities that [my privilege] presents [through reflection]. For example, the visibility that you can give to the work of organizations, I reflect on how to be in a position to present good work that those on the ground are doing, which is the real work, right?

She then talked about a specific opportunity that arose within her reflective practice:

I got to a semi-annual steering committee meeting, it's two days and you get to visit some projects and you hear from different stakeholders and that's so valuable. And sometimes I read a report and I think it doesn't do justice to the work at all. We have certain key funding information that we have to report on annually through our systems and we need that information. But there's a whole range of other information that does not get captured. That's where I say we use the opportunities that we have as funders—if you know about a project and you know about some of the results, you can use the network to give visibility to some of that local work.

Joy talked about the management and outcome-based “systems” that are in place for reporting, however, she acknowledged that these do not capture the work done by Southern counterparts, nor are the communities directly involved in reporting their own contributions. She articulated the ways she could promote the work being done by local communities within these Northern-led reporting processes. Joy considered utilizing her power as a funder to showcase the work being done by stakeholders through the “network.” By doing so, Joy ensured she met the reporting requirements of her organization while adapting her practice to be more inclusive of local groups, so they are at the forefront of sharing results that matter to them.

Joy talked about how reflection, connection and the promotion of local voices and successes brings a different element to the work and makes it more “humane”. Given the framework in which services and systems are set up and delivered, shifting participation in micro practice moments is not a panacea, nor does it necessarily disrupt the inequality that exists in North-South power relations (Hugman, 2017). Regardless, AOP asks practitioners to find strategies to ensure that those who are receiving the development aid and assistance are included in the development process (Larson, 2008). In no way does this inclusion transform or reform hierarchical reporting structures that saturate development organizations. However, by valuing their voices and views within reporting processes, Joy spoke to promoting the important work done by her local partners and community groups and advocating for their participation in development processes.

Dana also talked about the importance of involving and collaborating with local partners while conducting her work when leading training sessions. She explained how she used collaborative evaluations as a way to reflect on and directly involve participants in the training:

I'm delivering training myself, I try to make them collaborative, so the evaluation at the end of the training is a chance for me to get feedback on how I'm doing—this is reflective practice for me. I'm constantly wanting to do better and just understand what my impact is on my colleagues and trainees.

She also discussed other tactics she used to promote participation while conducting her training. She anticipated some initial concerns given her outsider and professional status, and to counter that, she spoke of listening, collaborating and empathetically engaging with local trainees. Dana called this strategy a “collaborative, participatory ethic”:

For me, it's about embedding a truly collaborative, participatory ethic into all of my interactions. So, I make a point of listening first before I start talking about the model I'm familiar with and may be hired to implement. And looking beyond resistance, to finding out what people's fears are when they're confronted with an unknown like me, an unknown social worker from Canada.

Dana was working to embed local voices into her training and interactions. In practice, this meant “listening” to the views shared by Southern groups to develop a collaborative relationship between herself and her counterparts. Increasing opportunities for collaboration and participation helped Dana engage in reflection-for-action (Schon, 1984) as she tried to dispel the local communities' fears. In the context of historically unequal North–South relationships, which can include aid decisions that clash with the aspirations of forming equal partnerships (Schech et al., 2015; Schech et al., 2020), reflective practice may be a way to interrogate these power hierarchies, while enabling dialogue and trust-building between development actors. Reflective practice may contribute to the bridging of power and knowledge gaps between partners and create opportunity for equitable engagement, resulting in the willingness to assert their own development agendas (Schech et al., 2015).

Sophia also talked about how an awareness of power helped her modify her participation within her work. She suggested that awareness was the first step in terms of shifting the unequal power dynamics, and that the second step was envisioning what could be different. She emphasized working collaboratively with local groups to “get ourselves out of this” current one-sided North-South transfer:

How does awareness of power shift my participation? The first step of seeing it, right? You can't change something that you can't see ... The second thing is you can't create something that you can't envision. And so being able to think outside the box, being able to think that it could be different than it is right now [is the second step]. I think that's maybe where there's opportunity in the awareness piece. We need to see clearly what is happening, but then how do we be in a spot where we're in regular community and group conversations about this? What can we envision together that's fundamentally different than what we have now? There has never been a North-South partnership that has existed that hasn't caused harm. So, what would that look like? We have to totally imagine something brand new that has never been in order to get ourselves out of this and in order to actually change the nature of our participation.

Sophia's comments point to some key issues. Sophia recognized the damaging nature of participation by Northern workers. She acknowledged, as a first step, the patterns of inequality and oppression that continue to exclude marginalized populations in the Global South, and recognized, as a second step, that Northern groups need to shift these dynamics of harm. Collaboratively envisioning how power dynamics could be different between the North and South is a constructive starting point. She does not want to impose yet another Northern agenda and instead prioritized working with local partners to determine what a less harmful partnership might look like.

Sophia spoke to questioning and disentangling the colonialist histories of development aid and create new positionalities and possibilities, steered by Southern voices and leadership. I see this as relational, reflective work that may be activated by constructing a slower development worker who recognizes their limitations, listens more and advocates for others who are undoubtedly the experts of their own lives. Too often, Northerners speak for Southerners, and I saw in the data here moments when Northern workers declined to speak for, or on behalf of, their counterparts, choosing instead to

acknowledge and value their diverse, rarely visible and undervalued perspectives. Reflective practice may promote the visibility and inclusion of Southern voices and groups, while simultaneously promoting the invisibility of an anti-oppressive social worker.

#### ***Practice Strategy 4: Orienting Towards Relationship Building***

It became clear that as some participants engaged in a self-examination of their positions of power and authority, they turned their attention to considering how to build relationships. Participants spoke specifically to the centrality of relationships in their work and the emphasis they placed on building a relationship-based practice (Eyben, 2008; Ruch, 2009). However, the skill of relationship building is critical to any collaborative international project, but it takes time (Kreitzer & Wilson, 2010; Schech et al., 2015).

Harriett described how she focused on building relationships and trust with her Southern counterparts even prior to arriving on site. She believes that the work she does “at some level is all relationship-based,” reinforcing the need to prioritize relationship building in development contexts. In other words, she valued the work of building relationships and trust over the demands of the development agenda, which is rooted in speed and meeting performance targets:

I think we can get pigeonholed being that expert—it’s very easy to be benevolent and a bit paternalistic... [I] focus on building the relationship first and being very clear about what I have to offer and very clear about offering it not suggesting that it has to be or will be useful for them. So, it’s very deliberate, quite explicit and it could take a while, sometimes it takes 4–6 months to get anywhere close to moving forward or doing a first visit because there has to be some level of trust there with the people I’m working with knowing who I am. So, that’s the first order of business.

From Harriett’s perspective, she felt that by her reflecting on power and then prioritizing relationship building she was able reduce hierarchies in the work, as did acknowledge that her recommendations were not always helpful or valid. While these observations are helpful for this study, it is important to note that we are only focusing on her interpretation of her work. What that lets us see is

her own angle but does not allow insight into actual practices as this would require further study into the impressions and experiences of Southern partners who work with women development workers who are committed to such practices. Harriett recognized how easy it was to become “benevolent” and “paternalistic” and to accept the role of “expert,” but by engaging in power analysis through reflection she hoped that she was more able partner with local groups as an equal. She was trying to build bridges across differences. She also thought reflective practice enabled her to focus on inclusivity and her responsibility to others:

I think reflective practice is the intentional approach to remaining clear and true about how you do your work and what the outcome of one’s work is. I think reflective practice helps in terms of a level of intentionality and awareness, self-awareness of myself within a context, self-awareness of myself within relationship to others. Reflective practice enables me to be more successful in that endeavor. Do you know the term ‘Ubuntu’? I think reflective practice, it contributes very well to Ubuntu.

Ubuntu has roots in African philosophy and is based on values of interconnection and reciprocity (Mayaka & Truell, 2021). It is regarded as a key concept in the broader context of Indigenization, Africanization or decolonization of social work, particularly in Southern regions in Africa (Osei-Hwedie, 2007). Harriett has suggested that reflective practice helps her to understand herself and her impact in relationship with others, and within a larger context. This signifies a responsibility towards building communal relationships and the interdependency she sees between her actions/nonactions and the wider environment in which she works. Within an anti-oppressive social work practice framework, this demonstrates an orientation towards collaboration, self-awareness and considering the rights of others as equal to theirs (Baines, 2017); Ubuntu may be another way to think about reducing power imbalances and seeking equality.

Katie discussed at length how she engaged in reflection to connect and build rapport. Her strategy involves, “looking, listening, understanding, not actually telling people what to do, but just lots of

observation, lots of spending time with people, lots of listening.” In addition to spending time listening and observing, she values connection, building rapport and trust in the workplace:

You can really connect to others if they see that you’re listening as well and that you’re asking questions that relate to their work. And actually, that comes through, if you can ask questions that relate to their work, they know that you understand them as well. So, yeah, putting yourself in their shoes, definitely. It’s all about local engagement as well. And paying a lot of attention to what they’re doing and their struggles really helps with my engagement and my reflection of what it means for me to be working in [country]. So, because of all the questions that I asked, this helped me to build up that rapport and trust, actually. Connecting with the immediate supervisors or people that you’re working with, to clarify and confirm am I doing this the right way? Is this the right approach?

Katie’s comments demonstrate her desire to develop a deeper, empathetic understanding of other people’s situation while at the same time reflecting on her own position. Katie was aspiring to find ways to engage in reflection and build rapport and trust while securing local engagement from an anti-oppressive, client-centred approach, which seeks to reduce and minimize unequal relations between herself and her Southern counterparts.

Carol’s efforts to understand the client’s perspective on their context and their experiences of social problems and work accordingly—her effort to prioritize learning and localizing practice—were discussed earlier, but she felt that this strategy helped with building trust in relationships. Despite the challenges she faced in creating opportunity for reflection, Carol prioritized time for this. Carol stated that relationship-building was not valued by her employer and was not seen as a productive element of her work, but she did it anyway because she understood how important client-worker relations are to challenging top-down, *power over* attitudes in AOP service delivery. She engaged with reflection in order to learn about partners and build trust with partners, moving from questioning (analysis) to the intentional building of relationships (action). She stated that:

[through reflection], I'm trying to learn about what the situation was for the groups that we work with, and what's going on with them and how they work so that I can have a good understanding of what they do, and also that I can build trust with them.

Even though she may have worked “slower” than her peers to produce outcomes with partners, she felt it was worth the risk because she was “taking the time to build relationships”. She believed in maintaining relationship building and reflection within her practice and engaging with others slowly and thoughtfully, despite the questions she may face from her employer and the shame associated with being “slower”.

Ambitious development projects with heavy workloads mean that it can be hard to carve out space for analysis, reflection, learning and relationships (Clarke & Oswald, 2010; Rowlands, 2016). Yet, Katie and Carol paused and resisted the expectation to speed through despite the lack of incentives to do so. This demonstrates placing value on relationships and using reflection to learn more about the local situation and recognize that worker-client relationships must be built on trust and understanding (Larson, 2008; Strier & Binyamin, 2014). Carol and Katie were attempting to adopt anti-oppressive practice, while risking being disciplined for her slow pace. This requires time, care and a willingness to challenge how her work is measured and monitored within managerialist culture that prioritizes outcomes rather than investing in relationships (Baines et al., 2012; Baines et al., 2014).

If workers are to generate awareness of their positions of power, and ultimately share *power with* marginalized groups, as prescribed in an anti-oppressive practice framework, reflective practice strategies may promote a relational and interactive approach to development (Eyben, 2008). Eyben (2008) writes that a relational approach sees empowerment and capacity-building within a larger, complex web of unequal power relations, and may lead to building on identified strengths and self-determination with local groups. The relational approach does not view development work as a technical transfer of ideas or knowledge as though there is a deficit to fill, rather it emphasizes “creating relations of mutual influence and trust” and helps to “accomplish shared visions and goals for multiple parties facing complex and challenging problems” (Eyben, 2008, p. 35-36). In describing their critically reflective practices, it

appears as though they are engaging in the approach that Eyben (2008) aspires for. It has also been conveyed here that this approach requires a deliberately slow progression and for workers to reduce their footprint on the work itself.

### **5.3 How Reflective Practice was Constrained by Working Conditions**

The first main theme discussed how participants used reflective practices to critically analyze and identify power dynamics shaping their practice. The second exposed practice strategies that emerged for participants while engaging in reflective practice and the power dynamics found within their work. In the last theme, I examine the challenges and struggles revealed with engaging in reflective practice within the managerial underpinnings of development work.

Context is an important determinant of a practitioner's ability or inability to reflect (Fook, 2012) and this theme highlights the wider context of development work that complicates engagement with reflective practice. Context is also important when examining practitioners' experiences through feminist and phenomenology methodologies, which, offers a way to look at how participants are embedded and immersed in the world they inhabit as they engage with reflective practice (Larkin et al., 2006). In addition, the practice of anti-oppressive social work is not context-free, and the profession at large adjusts to the oppressive systems and procedures that surrounds it, including the standardizing outcome-based measures of neoliberal management.

As discussed, development work is marked by neo-managerial accountability frameworks which monitor workers, track their efficiency and emphasize their outputs (Girei, 2016; Ornellas et al., 2018; Wehbi et al., 2016). Performance management models prescribe and standardize interventions and outcomes, and focus heavily on primacy of results, outcomes and performance indicators (Girei, 2016). These practices were born from neoliberal shifts that NGOs and governments have undergone worldwide. Some development scholars argue that these shifts in development management nurtures asymmetrical power relations between the Global North and the rest of the world (Chambers, 2017; Dar & Cooke, 2008; Girei, 2016; Lewis, 2008). This is because such accountability and performance-based frameworks

often result in regimented practice prescriptions, which, through the adoption of heavily technocratic and standardized management approaches and tools (see the Government of Canada's results-based management as an example<sup>15</sup>), appear as a controlling practice (Girei, 2016; Lokot, 2019; Wehbi et al., 2016). Through analysis, these practices were identified while examining how participants talked about reflective practice and power/control. Social workers in this study wrestled with the effects of dominant and powerful neo-managerial practices within their workplaces.

Along with the struggles with 'managing for results', this theme also addresses the experiences participants had with burnout and stress as they navigated working in the development sector. While many women addressed their privilege and power while working as Northerners in the Global South, they also encountered moments of struggle as development workers/social workers who were troubled by the stressors inherent to their working conditions as well as these dominant practices which sustain and maintain *power over* by governments and organizations. Reynolds (2009) links burnout to neoliberal conditions and writes that these conditions cause workers to burnout and feel disheartened because of their inability to work in-line with their professional ethics, and their "frustrating failure to personally change social context of injustice that clients wrestle with and live in" (p. 6). I could see moments in the data whereby processing their discomfort with their working conditions (which included the oppressive and powerful nature of 'managing for results') meant turning to individualized reflection for self-care and comfort.

To make matters even more complex, Northern workers tasked with working in the Global South are often separated from their regular sources of psychological and social support (i.e., community, social, emotional or family ties), which may serve as a buffer against undesirable stress-related outcomes (Eriksson et al., 2009). As a result, research shows that development workers are at increased risk of

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<sup>15</sup> The Government of Canada uses results-based management (RBM) to manage Canada's international assistance program from start to finish: planning and implementation, evaluations, and reporting and integrating lessons learned into the development of future programs.

having mental health challenges in the field while they are removed from these supports (Ager et al., 2012; Cardozo et al., 2005; Connorton et al., 2012). Reflection was identified as a positive and practical individual response to personal struggles in international development work, which included concerns with burnout, stress, fatigue and self-reported mental health challenges.

### ***Struggle 1: Reflection Itself is Neglected***

When asked about their reflective practice experiences, some participants spoke about how it was difficult to allocate adequate time within their work to engage with reflective practice. This meant less time to examine and challenge inequality and finding ways to address power imbalances and interpersonal dynamics; many stated it was not an integral part of their work culture due to the push for speed and the focus on results.

Samantha, who worked for a large INGO that has a substantive history in the development sector, said that reflection was “certainly not structurally organized within the organization or anything like that”. Carol concurred and said that it is “not institutionalized regularly across the organization”. She spoke specifically to this issue and why reflection was not prioritized in her workplace:

The challenges of reflection are that it takes a lot of time. It’s hard to describe, it’s hard to get money to do it. It’s hard to pay to do that. It’s hard to show a result of that...You’re slower. It’s not necessarily true, but, yes, you’re slower to make decisions, maybe. Or you need more time to think, I don’t know. You want to know why we’re doing things, so you want more background as to why this [client issue] is happening. Yes, so, it takes time [to reflect with partners].

It is possible to read Carol’s quote as highlighting how workplace pressures to be efficient and show “results”, which impacts her ability to reflect. She talked about how “it’s hard” to demonstrate results or outcomes for the time spent reflecting (everything is quantified or measured) and by engaging in reflective practice alongside her tasks, she may be “slower” to make decisions (speed matters). She carved out this time regardless because she recognized that if she did not critically reflect, it may prohibit

her from developing relationships with clients and generating a fuller understanding of the underlying “background” as to why certain issues are present for her Southern partners.

Sophia also addressed the need for time to reflect and how important having that time was to her work, especially as she engaged in research and evaluation. Despite the anti-oppressive foundations in which her reflections were rooted, they were incompatible with the way in which projects were being delivered. She commented on how it is dangerous and disrespectful to the work when the parameters of the project are being set by outside funders and when they do not allow adequate space and time for reflection:

It is a conundrum of how to make the time and space [to reflect] in this industry when the timelines are not allowing that. Some projects I just don't bid on because I look at the timeline and I think, whoa, that's just disrespectful to the work. Obviously, the level and quality of work that they're looking to procure is a “check the box” activity ... and I just find it all incredibly dangerous and worry that without the demand for reflection and reflection in groups to whom are we accountable, what's the point of reflection if you're not reflecting with others in [research and evaluation]? That case consultation piece is where the change-making can happen. It's just really hard to get your elbows out and to insist on [reflection time] or to have it be valued, whether it's in the timeframe or even being paid for it. So, I guess I find that troubling.

Here we see Sophia churning over the unequal power relations within development work, especially as it pertains to valuing the time required for reflection and collaboration. She argued that the risk of perpetuating *power over* within communities was too high when/if there was not adequate time allocated for reflection or consultation. She made the choice to decline to participate in these “dangerous” conditions when she could see that these activities were not valued within the timeframe of a project. Sophia valued reflection, local accountability and consultation, especially when tasked with evaluation. These are important pieces when working from an anti-oppressive perspective and attempting to shift *power to* (Baines, 2017) and create a more consultative development agenda (Pasteur & Scott-Villiers, 2004). The compatibility of development project work and anti-oppressive components (being inclusive,

adjusting power imbalances, attaining contextualized views of clients' situations and consultation with communities) may not be possible within the broader frame of neo-managerial policies (Strier & Binyamin, 2014). The realities of "check-box" service delivery shape and influence Sophia's inability to engage in "consultation" and "reflection", and ultimately, make her complicit in oppressive relations.

Lucy also expressed concerns about the shortage of time she had to spend with clients and on reflective practice itself. She discussed the "constraints" regarding time allocated to reflection and the availability of others to reflect alongside her within her NGO: "Sometimes it's government constraint, sometimes it's financial constraint, sometimes it's program constraints of the NGO. Sometimes it's simply human resources." She also addressed the nature of her workplace culture and the results-focused nature of her work:

My concern is the time [for reflection]. It's not in the culture to plan to reflect about our practice. The context is that we're here for a very short period of time, we have deadlines, we have specific objectives and goals we really want to reach. They really want us to have outputs and I think it goes very fast, but we don't take time to reflect on our practices and I think it can be even dangerous to not do so. If you just come here and you never do it, I think there's kind of a danger that what you could do could even negatively impact the population that is super vulnerable. So, I think this is maybe my concern. And there's a link between an analysis of the situation and trying to come up with recommendations based on all the information I've gathered from youth [in Tanzania] because they do open up to me. So, in that case, I think I've been very privileged [because they opened up to me]. But I think that if not, it could have been a danger that I could have led a strategy that maybe would not correspond to their actual needs. Because if you don't stop to reflect on your practices, you can be very mistaken, I think.

Lucy voiced multiple concerns and insights regarding both the organizational culture and the challenges she faced within her organization to engage with reflective practice. When talking about the lack of time to reflect, she pointed to the short-term and outcome-based nature of the project, the emphasis on deadlines, the fast pace, and the resulting "dangers" that could arise as a result of workers not reflecting

with each other on their practice. Lucy's concerns highlight the different oppressive attributes of her work such as a lack of time to invest in local community members and the prioritizing of outcomes and results-measurement.

Lucy felt that the organizational culture restrained reflective practices, but she managed to find ways to prioritize them anyway. Despite the pressure to produce "outputs" in a timely fashion, she "stops to reflect" when analyzing situations and working closely with youth, suggesting that reflective practice supported her efforts to research practice strategies suitable for local needs. Lucy's comments indicate how reflective practice may be used to localized practices (practice strategy #1) and that counterparts are consulted and valued through open communication, a valued AOP practice commitment. This practice of consultation and reflection in which Lucy addresses contributes to what Carranza (2019) calls an "iterative approach" to ensure both Southern and Northern teams apply a critical lens is applied to the work, to help minimize power imbalances and strengthen communication channels (p. 13).

As Baines (2017, 2018) and McLaughlin (2017) state, standardized outputs and short timelines make it difficult for social workers to generate innovative and meaningful strategies that responds to clients' needs and build the kind of relationships that Carol, Sophia and Lucy felt were important but not valued at the organizational level. This managerial culture makes it challenging to engage in reflective practice on a regular basis and is what McLaughlin (2017) calls the "demise of relational practice" in social work (p. 34). By fixating on functional activity, performativity and speed, constrained the ability of workers to engage meaningfully with communities, partners and individuals (McLaughlin, 2017).

Working in reciprocal ways with Southern partners to ensure their involvement, decentre Northern voices and be accountable requires the time and space for conversation and consultation. Yet, there was limited opportunity to carve out time and space for it, nor was it considered a valued outcome. Sophia, for instance, was resisting this context by removing herself from consideration for these shorter, time-bound projects, but not all social workers have the option of refusing to work in less-than-ideal circumstances where reflection was absent. Others were doing so on their own unpaid time. This begs the question: What are the limits to reflection done in isolation? When social workers practice in isolation or

reflect with like-minded people serving as echo chambers, they may not be afforded the wisdom and humility of differing (and valuable) perspectives (Gottlieb, 2020). The findings suggest a greater need for understanding the limitations to reflective practice behaviour that is done in solitude.

### ***Struggle 2: Short-Term Projects***

Marie, Laurie, and Joy commented on the consequences of the limited time they had in Southern contexts given their short-term employment and project contracts. The adoption of neoliberal values is evidenced by short-term contract work (Baines, 2017). This also impacted their ability to reflect and undermined their reflective practice efforts, and the practice strategies that accompanied this.

Joy struggled with the short-term nature of the work and how this impacted her ability to reflect and build relationships with her clients. She noted that addressing long-term development issues such as extreme poverty “requires long-term action . . . it takes a long time to get adjusted to and acquainted with the work and two years is too short.” She believed that in order to implement sustainable and meaningful projects, “you have to invest the time, the robust funding and the tailored support”—but in her experience these are the very practices international donors did not prioritize. AOP encourages a professional practice that aims for power-sharing and paying attention to the processes in and through which social workers intervene in people’s lives (Dominelli, 2002) and it is difficult to do this when you have no time to reflect and imagine how to shift these relations in practice.

As a consequence of not having enough time to reflect and openly discuss project work, personal relations were further strained. Joy talked about how some Southern partners did not feel “free” to talk openly about their work, and were afraid to discuss the elements of a project that were not going well:

To a certain extent, although being in government, people don’t always feel as free to talk about the things that aren’t going well in projects. However, I would be receptive to that because that’s really what we want to hear. We want to hear about the learnings, the lessons learned and that’s often where the most interesting parts of the work are and then being able to adjust, allow for adjustments and projects through that. That’s a very

important part of the work, right? It's important to have those conversations and reflections.

The fear local community groups may have of being truthful and open about project outcomes makes it challenging to learn and adjust to local needs and challenges. This comment points to the continued paternal and colonial nature of the one-way power that funders/governments maintain in the sector. Joy stated, "particularly with Southern groups or partners, it's important to be able to take the time to understand what their reality is and what they are trying to address so I'm not coming at [the work] from a totally directive manner." Workers had little room for reflecting on what they learned from the communities, as well as the mistakes they made, and how this could be used to overturn power relations. By maintaining power, organizations undermine trust-building efforts; by demanding short-term contracts, they undermine relationship-building and knowledge-generating efforts. This visible and consequential power dynamic creates further barriers to building trusting relationships with communities and partners, an important component of AOP.

Enabling staff to take time to understand local dynamics will "ultimately help broaden and deepen the interaction with stakeholders" and create time to reflect with each other, building mutual trust and understanding (Hinton, 2004, p. 218). Despite this, the development sector continues to deploy workers on assignments that are fixed-term contracts (Fechter, 2014; Groves & Hinton, 2004), which, at between one and three years, means that workers have limited and fractured perspectives (Groves & Hinton, 2004). Further, rapid turnover of staff in country offices ruptures relationships (Hinton, 2004), which then must be nurtured again from scratch with every contract.

Speaking to her concerns with being deployed to Southern contexts on a short-term basis, Marie noted that reflection enabled her to quickly absorb new information, especially as it pertained to learning about new cultures and investing in relationship building within communities. This was briefly described earlier as a useful practice strategy, and here she talks about how this was situated within short and time-bound work:

Being there such a short period of time, I struggled with how people just come in for a 6-month contract. For me, by the time I left, I felt like I was just starting to get a grasp on the culture, which I think is so important, to have a good understanding of the culture before you make decisions in terms of development. I think that [development workers] are often so quick to just say, “Well, this works for us [the West], so this will work,” without having a true understanding of the culture or why things function the way they do. I wanted to figure out more about the way I practice by using reflection. Also, trying to get the most out of and understanding the culture in such a short amount of time. I knew only being there for a few months, I didn’t really have a lot of time to grasp the culture and have a really good understanding of it. So, part of that was, I guess, speeding up that purpose and trying to get a good understanding or feel for the culture there [through reflective practice].

Marie raised some interesting points about the limits of short-term employment and the lack of time she could spend evaluating and learning about the local cultures as a means to work towards creating just and timely solutions that are localized and specific. She acknowledged that adopting a Northern social work paradigm may not be congruent with the local context and she needed time to adjust. Marie worried that, without opportunities to step back and examine practice choices and decisions, practitioners are at risk of perpetuating *power over* because it had historically “work[ed] for us.” Arguably, short-term employment and projects prop up and reinforce Northern control and knowledge because it forces powerful groups (development workers) to make unilateral decisions for—and possibly even go against the wishes of—a less powerful group (local recipients) because there is little time for discussion and reflection.

In considering how her practice and education are rooted in “Western ways” and reflecting on the power this affords her, Marie expressed a growing sense of unease that her approach fails to take local perspectives into account. By developing critical thinking about identity and using this skill to scrutinize and question workers’ knowledge and how it is shaped and where it came from, Marie was demonstrating a commitment to anti-oppressive practice (Vanderwoerd, 2016). It is important for Northern workers to destabilize and decolonize their own imperialistic ethics and standards while being reflective and using

culturally appropriate and local-specific ways of engaging in their social work practice (Alphonse et al., 2008; Kreitzer, 2012; Palattiyil et al., 2019; Razack, 2005). This involves acquiring, assessing and producing knowledge that engages with different perspectives, which may help workers guard against generalized approaches and lead to improved future actions. However, neoliberal conditions do not favour the kind of long-term trust- and relationship-building work needed to acquire this knowledge.

### ***Struggle 3: Paperwork Over People and Reflection***

NPM has dramatically increased the amount of paperwork social workers have to do (Baines et al., 2013; Cunningham, 2008). Some estimate that “social workers in the field . . . spend up to 70 percent of their time doing paperwork . . . with very little time left for interaction with clients or communities” (Baines, 2017, p. 41). Joy addressed the busy nature of her reporting processes during our conversation, as well as the importance of finding opportunities to reflect. Joy stated that time and opportunity to reflect is not “built-in” to her work and she can get “caught up” in the busyness of her job (i.e., regulatory reporting requirements). She valued the time she spent processing things for herself and wished for “more opportunity” do to this:

I think [reflective practice] is really important because I think it’s easy to sort of just sit back—there’s protocols and there’s processes and you can get caught up in just the busyness of the work, which, dealing with financial people and contracts people, and dealing with sort of the reporting requirements—it’s easy to just get caught up in the busyness of the work and not to reflect on whether you’re being effective, what you could do to make the work more effective . . . [It’s important to] process things for yourself through reflection so that you don’t just get caught up in the busyness of the work. So yes, [reflection is] useful, certainly for me. It would be nice to have more time for that. But being in a [government setting] is not so conducive to having those opportunities for reflection. But yes, it would be good to have more opportunity is what I’m saying, because it isn’t built-in, it isn’t natural to value that time.

Sidelined by administrative duties, Joy found herself struggling to be attentive to reflection. She used reflective practice as a way to evaluate whether she was being “effective” and to improve her practice

while working in Kenya. Reflective practices are being displaced by “protocols” such as monitoring, outcome measurement and performativity (Baines et al., 2012).

Joy felt that without a deliberate effort on her part, outside of her other responsibilities, reflecting on her effectiveness (value, usefulness) may not otherwise occur within her busy schedule. “Effective” practice is more than ticking a box or reporting an outcome (Baines, 2017) for those engaging in AOP. It involves transforming client-worker relationships to be more collaborative and challenging the usual top-down attitude towards clients while working to address complex problems structurally and through emancipatory social change (Dominelli, 2002; Strier & Binyamin, 2014; Morley & Dunstan, 2013). Joy had to do this work on the edges, finding time to reflect on her practice as a social worker despite managerialist paper-based processes and priorities that worked to make such reflection next to impossible.

Joy also admitted some frustration regarding not having time to focus on her local colleagues and the impact this had on establishing relationships as administrative (paperwork) duties took over: “[I reflect on] my frustrations and practice realities. Everybody who works in this field has their burnout or has their frustration with the [time limits and reporting requirements] and not being able to focus as much on people.” The amount of paperwork and documentation was frustrating as it took priority over more people-focused activities. The curtailment of people- or client-centred practices impacted Joy negatively and her frustrations became another object of her reflection and were shaped by the workplace conditions and adherence to managerialism.

Samantha shared similar experiences, noting that she was consumed by reports:

...it was very much “international development work” that was just reports, reports, reports—you see them all, sitting there . . . and so, I felt like in the DRC I was doing more of the “international development reporting work” that I said I wouldn’t ever do, even though I was trying my best to fight against it as much as I could within the structure that I had.

Samantha was concerned about the abundance of reporting and the demanding nature of paperwork but was prepared to resist these processes “as much as she could.” She felt restricted by managerial

requirements and was interested in “fighting” oppressive reporting structures within her work.

Samantha’s willingness to reflect critically on the excessive reporting, a consequence of managerialism within development work, points to her attempts to rethink and resist her participation in such practices.

Carol also described her difficulty with the demands of a technical, rather than relational, approach. Managerial practice demands systematized paperwork full of reporting, monitoring and evaluating. However, Carol preferred to report on the work from a reflective and contextual stance. She valued reflection and relationship-building within reporting and NPM and tried to create opportunities for deeper probing and understanding despite the lack of institutionalized support. She talked about her work style, which, in being so personal and bringing in so much “humanness,” stood in opposition to the way results are traditionally gathered and reported:

It’s also challenging on a day-to-day basis when we’re doing reporting, because my style to writing and reporting is very personable. I try and provide as much detail as I can about individuals that I met with, with regards to how they came across, how they presented and I bring life to people in our reports, whereas that type of detail is not deemed to be necessary by all of the organization or by all of the people who work in the organization. And what people really want—the main focus—is what did you get out of the meeting? I try to bring as much humanness to the reporting that I do talk about the challenges that individuals are having or the successes that individuals are having.

Carol felt pressure to simply produce outcomes (evidence) rather than engage in a reflective, thoughtful, systematic analysis of the complex social problems she was hearing about from her counterparts. She recognized that if local voices and narratives remain unheard, then she was not doing the work of decentring Northern knowledge in development. These participants confirmed Lewis’ (2008) claim that development workers are “bureaucratic aid administrators”, spending more time on paperwork than people-centred development. This can also result in the reduction of anti-oppressive social work practices such as reflection and relationship-building that are difficult to quantify within reporting

regimes (Baines & Cunningham, 2011; Baines, 2018). It also means that this important AOP work is unwaged or unpaid as it appears to happen outside the paid job requirements.

#### ***Struggle 4: Experiences of Burnout, Exhaustion and Stress***

In addition to dealing with the pressure of time, paperwork, and the focus on outputs and efficiency, participants were also reckoning with the physical, mental and emotional impacts of development work and living/working in Southern contexts. While I have discussed at length the role of reflective practice in promoting the analysis of unequal power dynamics, Ruch (2007) reminds us that reflective practice may also help social workers cope with the difficult emotions and conditions that emerge because of ongoing work-related pressures. This includes security risks, overwork, burnout and fatigue. Hence, participants used reflective practice to not only address the power differentials within their roles and organizations, but also as a way to manage and deal with individual emotions and realities while working in the development sector. I argue that the working conditions, coupled with the emotional, physical and psychological impacts of development work, undermine and limit workers' abilities and capacities to be fully anti-oppressive as well as reflective.

Despite the busyness of the work and the limited opportunities participants had to reflect formally within their day-to-day practice, many participants engaged in reflective practice to deal with stress, burnout and exhaustion and to attend to their mental well-being. Reflection for well-being created an opportunity for workers to think about how they are affected by stress and how this impacts their ability to do their work while managing burnout, stress and exhaustion on the job. Some participants felt reflective practice was a protective tool that enabled them to process their feelings regarding the personal impacts of the work as well as the professional workplace challenges. The organizational and industry-wide challenges added an additional layer of heaviness to their workloads.

Dana said that reflective practice helped her to manage stress and fatigue. She defined her "self-care practice as reflective." She explained how she managed burnout through reflective gratitude and that her reflective pauses "surfaced" when she was resting and recuperating. She explained that her time-

bound, short-term contract work did not give her enough time to rest, let alone reflect, while living in Southern contexts. Instead, she talked about essentially burning out and then taking time off to reflect:

Sometimes I'm in a hectic environment and literally there's barely enough time to sleep, let alone think about what I'm experiencing. So sometimes time off is just a rest, and reflection just surfaces when I'm ready [to reflect]. These difficult experiences that participate in [in the field], they do come up eventually, they do surface later even if I coach myself through not getting too attached [to them]. There's a lot of vicarious trauma in the work that I think is no matter how strong your professional boundaries are, [the difficulties] are something that constantly needs to be managed through reflection.

This comment exposed some of the challenges Dana experienced within development work as well as how hard it was to manage work-life boundaries in the field. The busyness and demands of the work meant that there was limited ability to find space for reflection and therefore limited time to regroup and take care of her personal and professional well-being. Creating space to step back and think about the work itself and the impact it had on her health and well-being was an asset to Dana's practice and her ability to recover from "hectic" project work.

Based on her extensive experience in the development sector, Dana agreed that the international development community does not always prioritize supporting staff with strategies for dealing with difficult emotions or stressors in the field. She said that "psychosocial support for development workers, no matter what their professional background is, is very new to most people."

The literature also speaks to the lack of organizational support and sensitivity to the emotionality and stress of development in practice (Ager et al., 2012; Comoretto et al., 2015; Ehrenreich & Elliott, 2004; Solanki, 2016). It indicates that workers feel that their employers were insufficient or inadequate in the delivery of staff care components and that there is an erratic approach to staff debriefing (Solanki, 2016). However, despite this, Dana was optimistic and sensed this may be changing. In her most recent field-based experiences in Eastern Europe, Dana has recently noticed a "movement in the humanitarian world to do better for their workers in terms of offering psychosocial support to its workers." Dana had

been working in the development sector for approximately 10 years when she made this comment about the sector evolving to be more attentive to the needs of its workers. The data from this study raises questions about the importance of spaces created for individual or group reflection as a supportive approach to not only find ways to be anti-oppressive, but to work with workers on burnout and stress management.

This can also be seen in Angela's comments when she suggests that reflective practice could help prevent burnout caused by the "heavy" nature of the issues she was exposed to in the field:

[The work] is not easy. It's not just saying "Okay, I did this thing today, now I'm going to go home." Often, social work here doesn't allow us to do that because we're dealing with things that are really heavy and we have to reflect on them otherwise we just get burned out.

For participants in this study reflective practices were helpful in being preventative and proactive when it comes to issues of well-being and stress. This is evident in Carol's contributions as she believed that reflective practice was a good strategy for her to prevent burnout and support mental health. She also suggested it was a factor in someone's "longevity" in the field:

[Reflection] is also good for your mental health, like a strategy for longevity, and trying to get burnout not to happen. It's actually a health benefit to do that [reflection], which then can lead to an employment benefit because you're not sick all the time because you're so stressed out.

Later in our conversation, Samantha, like Dana, mentioned that she was able to engage in meaningful, reflective dialogue once she got some distance from the work itself. Her emotions were sometimes overwhelming while in the field, and she needed some time away from the work to process them through reflection. Samantha also admitted that it was, at times, "embarrassing to be seen as weak and embarrassing to admit that you're upset about something." She is not alone – research has indicated that development workers, especially women, are hesitant to raise well-being and mental health concerns within their organizations because of taboo and stigma (Solanki, 2016). They indicated that raising

concerns regarding their mental well-being would have an adverse impact on promotion and deployment opportunities (Solanki, 2016). Samantha spoke to how her stress had built up and she felt “over-tired, burned out, exhausted” by the end of one short-term contract:

In [country], I was working way too hard, I was completely burned out by the end of it. There was stuff going on in my head, but I didn't have the time to sit down and process it while I was there . . . I was kind of aware of a lot of the discomfort that I had, but at the same time I had so much work to do, I was just kind of pushing through with the work and not processing. I've done a lot of processing since I left, and since I got back [home]. I mean, at the beginning it was quite hard for me to talk about the whole thing. It was only recently that I feel that I've got enough distance to talk about it.

Samantha reflected on certain issues once she returned home; she was not able to reflect in-country because of her negative state-of-mind, and she decided it was best to “just get on with the work” and conceal her emotions:

I didn't want to reflect because I was already in a bad place [mentally], so I didn't want to reflect on that too much because I always beat myself up about those kinds of things. Because I'd been working ridiculous hours, I was already over-tired, exhausted. Psychologically, I wasn't in a good place, so I just knew if I started reflecting too much while I was out there, it wouldn't take me to a good place psychologically. I knew there were things that I wasn't comfortable with, but I also knew that if I thought about it too much, I would be even more uncomfortable and it would upset me even more, so I just wanted to get done what I said I'd do and get out of there, and then get back and then process it in a place where I'm surrounded by supportive people, where I'm more comfortable, where I have that distance from it. So, there was almost a choice not to reflect too much because that would just make me feel even worse about the situation. So just to kind of just do what I had to do and get out of there.

Not having adequate social or organizational support made it possible for Samantha to “avoid” reflecting on things. She knew that she could plan to reflect once she was with supportive colleagues and able to look back at the work with some space and distance. She did not have the support required to engage in “comfortable” reflection and she did not want to seem weak and incapable of performing.

Baines (2017) emphasizes the pace of neoliberal processes and practices, noting that resources and support for staff are increasingly under-resourced. Samantha was reacting to the struggle of working in these environments, under such working conditions, when she decided not to deal with her emotional well-being because her performance was being measured. She did not want to appear incompetent, and she did not have the time needed to deal with her mental state.

Reflection was also useful for Ashley while she was working in high-conflict zones and exposed to chronic danger, fear and uncertainty. The impact of living and working in a conflict zone resulted in heightened awareness of safety and security for Ashley, who was often in places impacted by conflict. She had five years' experience working in mental health in emergency contexts and had worked recently in Turkey, Libya and Afghanistan. She said her decision to hire a psychologist when she started her role was self-led, "because [when] I first started in a very high-conflict country, I needed that extra support." Ashley found that engaging in reflective practices with a psychologist helped her to reduce her stress, especially when work got challenging. She and her psychologist discussed a variety of issues including "things related to work that might be stressful, things related to how I'm feeling in terms of competency to do my role because that influences well-being." She added that with her psychologist:

I would usually talk about more things related to how the work was affecting me. Or how I felt to do the work. So, for example when I started a role more in management and supervision, we're discussing kind of that and then how that was going, and new like challenges that rose related to that . . . I would also talk about my well-being and self-care, and breaks, when to take my breaks.

She felt that overall, "having someone separate [to reflect with] has made the process of reflection more effective, specifically on things related to gender, things related to security, things related to privilege and things related to my own role."

Like other participants, Ashley found that there was little infrastructure to give proper oversight or even attention to workers' overall well-being. She suggested that the management team (of which she is a part) was just "so overwhelmed" in responding to [the crisis] that they were unable to engage and

support their staff adequately. She stated, “my psychologist helped me reflect on different things that might get missed cause we’re all so busy trying to respond.”

Jennifer spoke of dealing with and managing grief within her work within health care facilities, and she also worked with clients who were themselves mourning and overcoming loss. While she did not elaborate on how she chose to manage her own grief, she talked about the importance of having the opportunity to debrief during her work in Haiti and reflect upon grief and loss:

There needs to be an opportunity to be to talk about that [grief] as a group in a circle if they want to, if they don't want to that's fine, but there needs to be that opportunity. I saw death too, at one point a dead baby, and I just remember [supervisors] talked to me once and asked, “are you okay?” I was but as an agency there should be opportunity to reflect [more] about that.

When speaking about reflective practices in general during our interview, she also said that reflection was “good for her mental health” because, through reflection and dialogue, she was not tempted to “suppress a lot of [negative] thoughts or emotions.” She said reflective practices helped her move through difficult situations at work “because some things are paralyzing. If you reflect and work through your emotions, it can definitely make you able to move on with your practice.” By “talking to my coworkers, reflecting with them, I was able to relate with them and understand that we had similar experiences.” At the end of our conversation, Jennifer commented on the value of reflective practice to her mental health while in this field as well as the limited opportunities development workers have to reflect:

I think [reflection is] 100 percent important. I don't see how you can be healthy mentally if you're not reflecting and maybe that's a very biased opinion, but I think especially when you're working in development, even if it's disaster relief or you're coming in as a foreigner into this community that you're very unaware of. There's just so many things happening and there's so many emotions and thoughts and processes that you go through that I think you have to reflect on those things . . . I don't know if development gives

enough for aid workers to be able to reflect on how things are going and so I think that definitely negatively impacts their mental health for sure.

Sophia also commented on the heavy nature of development work and the “headspace” that it took up. She then commented on the importance of reflection for her personally in dealing with a variety of issues she faced in the field:

I think we always underestimate the power of the headspace that is occupied by having conversations about, I don't know, that, for example, there are whole adult populations that exist outside of a literate context. So, we spend our headspace here and chronically, I think, underestimate that impact of going into a community, for example, where I'm going to see mostly malnourished babies and I've just recently been pregnant and that it takes an emotional toll. It is not neutral. We don't do well to make space for the recovery when you come home, both the culture shock of slamming back and forth when you've got, 24–48 hours of travel and then bam, you walk in the door, your own kids need you and now the project needs these three things. In the moment of the reflection, you are letting your humanity catch up with you. I feel like so often the timelines in the field don't allow for this time. The pressure is to just produce and perform and move, move, move through the work and forget that might've had a really moving interaction, or you might've been struck by joy in a community, or you might've you know, been triggered by how I was just totally erased today trying to talk to that man. It's just all of those experiences and the verbal debrief serves that function, barely. I'll be honest—it's not ever enough. We don't attend to it nearly as well as the space that it takes up, the largeness of it.

As Sophia stated, the need to reflect on emotions appeared to be an important part of international practice. Social workers may find it helpful to use self-care approaches to prevent emotional fatigue and burnout (Cornejo, 2020; Iacono, 2017; Proffitt, 2008) when employed in this sector. When organizations compromise the professional wellness of their workers, it is not only the worker but also the communities with whom they work who are put at risk. Burnout in the helping professions, for example, can have a detrimental effect on practitioners, on the effectiveness of treatment for their clients and on the health of the organization itself (Milicevic et al., 2016). Professional self-care is an integral part of ethical, anti-

oppressive practice and must be incorporated at the organizational level rather than relegated to the edges of work, piled on top of a workload that is already overburdened with excessive paperwork (Mullaly & West, 2018).

#### 5.4 Summary

Northern social work practitioners working in the Global South used reflective practices to unpack and critically reflect on their power as they negotiated local/global relations in international development (theme 1). Participants talked about their reflective practice experiences as a pathway to modifying their interpersonal practices within complex international work environments and orienting themselves differently with coworkers and development recipients (theme 2). The social workers I spoke with were also critical of constraining managerial practices, which undermined their efforts to alter power relations and made it difficult to operationalize reflective practice (theme 3). The study also shed light on how reflective practices were used to navigate professional challenges within development work, such as burnout. Reflective practice emerged as a coping mechanism when dealing with stress while in the Global South.

**Table 5.1 Summary of the research findings**

Critical analysis of power dynamics surfaced the following:	Narrowing the gap between power analysis and action was prioritized by:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Making connections between historical conditions/practices and interpersonal oppression/inequality in development work.</li> <li>• Detecting and naming power dynamics in the development sector.</li> <li>• Taking responsibility for and challenging the power/influence afforded to them.</li> <li>• Minimizing overreach within their positions of control.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learning from Southern groups/colleagues.</li> <li>• Working to localize social work practice.</li> <li>• Altering and paying attention to language.</li> <li>• Working around procedures that oppress clients.</li> <li>• Noticing barriers to participation of Southern groups.</li> <li>• Creating opportunity for visibility of Southern groups and their contributions to the sector.</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Shifting their behaviour in micro practice to work as facilitators.</li> <li>• Working towards being culturally humble.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Orienting practice towards relationship and trust-building.</li> <li>• Engaging in a “collaborative, participatory ethic”</li> </ul>
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This project rests on the belief that social workers—as with all development workers—are individually responsible for examining their practice actions and resisting the dominant and oppressive development practices that sustain asymmetrical power relations often associated with exclusion and domination. Thus, this study highlights reflective practice habits as a potential means of questioning and problematizing established development processes and North-South relations in development work. The stated purpose of the social work profession, globally, is to promote social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of all people (IFSW, 2014). The promotion of social change therefore becomes a lens through which work is carried out. Ideally, social workers are questioning the existing social order, which is deeply rooted in inequality based on power differentials, to understand the impact of oppression on the lives of clients. In a context of expanding bureaucratization of agencies and a focus on outcomes and results, these social workers found it challenging to maintain reflective practice and therefore carry out a comprehensive anti-oppression mandate. Participants spoke to the discomfort they felt with their *power over* Southern communities and the efforts they made to share power in moments of interpersonal interactions. Ultimately, reflective practice assisted practitioners as they perceived and attempted to shift their influence and control while engaging with development organizations, recipients and partners, creating moments of self-awareness, self-evaluation, self-critique and self-preservation.

## Chapter 6: Discussion and Conclusion

*“Our [research] can be framed with service to humanity as its goal, and this service begins with engaging oneself, as the [researcher] continues reflection, examination, and exploration of one’s heart and mind for the true purposes of one’s work” (Rodriguez, 2011, p. 597).*

Using AOP as a theoretical frame, and influenced by feminist and phenomenological research methodologies, I carried out this qualitative study to explore how social workers use reflective practices as they work in international development. Data was collected through 13 exploratory, semi-structured interviews and analyzed through an inductive and cyclical approach that focused on understanding the shared experiences of reflective practice within their work in development. Engaging with qualitative research allowed me to explore not only whether international social workers use reflective practice, but also what this practice meant to them and whether it changed the way they think about power within their work.

It was the purpose of this study to examine how women social workers employed in the international development sector describe and examine their experience of reflective practice, and to identify from their responses consistent themes that explain the experience of engaging in this technique. In addition to centering women’s voices, phenomenological exploration (Moustakas, 1994) allowed me to analyze the descriptions of participants’ experiences and, from those descriptions, identify and synthesize common themes to form overarching statements, holistically capturing the elements of the phenomenon. As an exploratory study, phenomenological qualitative methodology (Moustakas, 1994) was used to expose their experiences and the analysis yielded three central themes: experiences with different types of power and witnessing/experiencing power dynamics, engaging with a variety of practice strategies to resist/question/challenge these power dynamics, as well as their struggles both personally and professionally with managerial/organizational power while practicing social work internationally.

In this final chapter, I provide a discussion of the research findings and respond to the research questions posed. I then outline the contributions of the study and implications for social work practice, international development work, international social work education and NGO organizational

programming. In addition, I explore the limitations of this study. Finally, I suggest future directions for research on reflective practice within international social work and development work.

### **6.1 Discussion of the Study Findings: Power and Power Dynamics**

Participant stories revealed that self-reflection enabled participants to consider and analyze the unequal power dynamics at play within international development work. Many of the women used reflection to perceive and critically question their own power, knowledge, identity, and authority, and understand how this was linked to their ‘expertise’ in the development process. They acknowledged the conflicts of the past, and in doing so, spoke to how they wanted to relate differently to others within their work. Participants grappled with how they are/can/will dangerously and erroneously replicate oppressive colonialist and controlling behaviours, drawing attention to the persistent inequalities found in this work; they are not neutral actors. They made connections between historical practices and current processes in development work through reflection and situated themselves in the middle of these problematic processes. Reflecting on and foregrounding the historical conditions that created global power relations helped some participants see how those same relations are reflected in their present-day interactions. This awareness enabled workers to make the connection between interpersonal struggles and structural oppression on a global level, as well as their role in perpetuating these inequalities. Critical reflection can help workers discern how the invisible operation of power can undermine their work (Howard & Vajda, 2016).

The women I spoke with recognized their various identities—i.e., white women, Westerners, experts and colonizers — and how these are linked to authority and control in the context of development. Many recognized they had differential access to relational power based on their professional status, race, ethnicity, credentials, citizenship status and their position within their organizations. Acknowledging these power differences between Northern workers and Southern counterparts, practitioners engaged with reflective practice to examine their own positions of professional power and authority and reflect on how they could shift these power dynamics within their own work. Without this awareness, the risk of

reinforcing the social and political arrangements that sustain inequality and injustice such as racism, classism, paternalism and colonialism remains.

Workers from the Global North are often positioned as the dominant group because of social and historical conditions (Roth, 2012). Undeniably, they carry with them their Western theoretical knowledge and practices, which are transposed and adapted locally (Dominelli, 2014), even when it is questioned whether these practices are relevant in the place of development (Hugman, 2010; Midgely, 1981). The social workers working in the Global South cannot simply transcend the structures of privilege in which they are participants; they are responsible for using critical reflection to continually interrogate the systems that perpetually privilege them (Pease, 2015). They can, however, as many of the women I spoke with did, try to resist the dominant roles that were given to them by reflecting upon their entitlement as they critically reflected upon their privileged Northern knowledge. Hugman (2107), Wehbi et al. (2016) and Dominelli (2015) have recommended that international practitioners exercise self-awareness and restraint by not overreaching in this work—by not always voicing their opinions or making recommendations, and by empowering others to contribute. This section addresses how reflective practice may be used as a specific tool to restrain the unearned authority Northern workers hold in the South, as well as expands upon our understanding of the importance of critically reflecting on power and the problematics of imposing ‘expert’ knowledge within AOP.

In its commitment to social justice, an AOP approach emphasizes “the ongoing detection and examination of difference, power and oppression with particular attention to the effects of dominance across systems” (O’Neill, 2015, p. 626). AOP also promotes the intentional cultivation of self-awareness in practice contexts, asking social workers to attend to power dynamics in relationships and in the structural environment and invoke action towards social justice (Freire, 1970; O’Neill, 2015; Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005). A commitment to social justice was therefore seen in workers’ understanding of their social location and identities and how it informs relationships and practice behaviours in development. The participants’ questioned existing social hierarchies in which powerful groups maintain power and influence over less powerful groups in development work.

Making these power relations and oppressions visible is an important first step towards change, transparency, and accountability (Ramsundarsingh & Shier, 2017). Becoming aware that they are implicated in the unequal distribution of power and privilege is a start; changing how development operates begins by facing the predicament of unearned advantages. The dynamics of global power relations often remain hidden in development work because many development actors and organizations have benefited from these relations. People maintain their privilege by ignoring the historical processes that gave them that privilege (Howard & Vajda, 2017, 2016; Rowlands, 2016). An AOP framework requires social workers to confront oppressive structures intentionally and proactively such as colonialism and racism (Baines, 2017); this begins with acknowledging that these oppressive structures continue to influence the sector. Within this project, interrogating colonial practices began at the personal (micro) level, specifically in an exploration of how AOP could be a transformational tool for self-governing in everyday practice (Hinds, 2019). Acknowledging these histories and current realities, rather than pretending they do not exist, can be a productive way to begin to adopt AOP principles, including building relationships of trust with partners (Chambers, 2004; Eyben, 2006; Owusu, 2004; Pyles, 2015, 2017). In particular, some participants used reflective practices to deal with issues emerging from these damaging processes and their own unequitable working relationships.

This research therefore contributes to understanding the role of reflective practice in developing an anti-oppressive international social work practice that includes intentional power analysis of relationships and systems of oppression. As is clear from the experiences the participants shared, critical reflection helped workers reimagine power and status as they sought less exploitative and more just ways of engaging with development work. When engaging in critically reflective practices that increased their awareness of their own power and privilege, some participants prioritized the shifting of this imbalance of power—as far as they were able—in their own micro (interpersonal) practice behaviour. In other words, they engaged in a “critical analysis of how systems of power and social contexts influence micro situations” (Suarez et al., 2008. p. 409). The next challenge for development workers is to examine how

they perform tasks within their work and whether they are willing to question and adapt their practices accordingly. How this is transferred to individual action is taken up in the next section.

## **6.2 Discussion of the Study Findings: Practice Strategies**

The critique and negotiation of power sparked specific individual practice priorities and self-reported behaviour modifications. First, this required an understanding and acknowledgement of power dynamics among actors through reflection and then identifying ways to challenge the distribution of power among actors. AOP is not just about an analysis of the dynamics of oppression, power and privilege—it is also about direct practice and addressing the structural inequalities in the work done with clients and communities. This section provided some practical insight into how social workers spoke to carrying out work in the Global South in a way that they hoped would be sensitive to community members and partners. While these findings are limited to the subjective experience of the development workers themselves and are not validated by the communities with which the women worked, they offer us insight into how reflective practice may be a foundation for re-orienting individual behaviour. Embedded into their professional responses was a sense of the importance of reflection.

Workers' self-reflection regarding their powerful social positioning within North-South global dynamics in development helped them to consider reorienting their relationships and trying to build them based on respect and reciprocity (Bisman & Bohannan, 2014). The participants spoke to several practices they used to achieve this aim, including being more relational by listening, leading from behind, facilitating participatory conversations, unsettling expert/Northern knowledge and taking time to invest in trust-building. Each of these strategies are tools that have the potential to challenge oppression in that they promote dialogue and learning based on the recognition that “effective aid means recognizing diverse perspectives and voices” (Eyben, 2008, p. 45). A willingness to listen to local Southern counterparts creates the potential for Northern development workers to step into the passenger seat rather than asserting power and influence; some participants were able to take this step towards mutuality when

they made the effort to abandon, even temporarily, their development/Western driver seat perspective (Cook, 2008).

There are various anti-oppressive possibilities that such a shift unlocks, including mutual exchange of ideas and learning what other's lives are like and what they need. Participants spoke to their priorities as they identified power dynamics/relations, coupled with a focus on the self, and how this led to the possibility of a role switch, such as “lowering” or “reversing” the power imbalance between themselves and their Southern counterparts (Chambers, 2017; Dominelli, 2002). By using an anti-oppressive practice framework to analyze the participants’ accounts, focus is on the utilization of reflection to orient practice towards shifting overarching power differentials in this area of unpredictable practice.

Like the research done with international social work students by Das & Anand (2014) and Bell et al. (2017), the findings of this study exposed opportunities for learning from local stakeholders and the integration of localized practice decisions. The data from this study adds to their work, suggesting reflective practice may support international social workers to identify knowledge gaps, discover strengths, slow down to reflect before intervening, come up with localized, innovative solutions, speed up learning and consider being open-minded in their practice. Involvement with domestic groups (clients and staff) needs to be flexible and adaptive to the needs of communities in order to be anti-oppressive (Cook, 2020). Development planning and problem-solving processes therefore could become opportunities for reflection and conversation about current work practices and possible improvements.

Chambers & Pettit (2004) suggest that the “personal dimension is central for inclusive aid—in personal behaviour, attitudes and beliefs, in relationships and in learning” (p. 157). By reflecting on their power as Northern-based social workers, participants’ identified opportunities to alter their personal behaviour, attitudes, and beliefs, in relationships and in learning within international settings. This personal adjustment revealed that reflective practice may be used to reorient towards inclusive and relational practices. Participants spoke to the ways reflective practice exposed opportunities for listening,

learning, connecting, critiquing, and questioning themselves and their work while orienting themselves differently in practice. At times, it enabled a sense of cultural humility.

While the above outcomes may be understood as beneficial to the participants and for the interactions they are having at the interpersonal level, influencing any organizational or structural changes would be the next step for discovery and implementation. The focus of the findings is on how reflective practices shaped the participants' experience and interpersonal relations and their struggles with navigating the current context of international development when trying to deploy reflective practices. Individual reflective practices do not appear to create opportunities to change dominant, neocolonial development practices. Rather, participants raised their issues, challenges and frustrations while reflecting and then worked to adjust their practices around these challenges. They use reflective practice to process challenges and difficulties that may arise and then maneuver accordingly, individually perceiving themselves as more inclusive as a result.

This shift did not necessarily mean that power was, in fact, being redistributed, and rather, was being 'confessed'; this confession of power and influence has limits as Smith (2013) and Badwall (2016) speak to in their work. Addressing systemic power imbalances that give the Global North control and power through funding, staffing, and timelines, will take more than individual self-reflection and self-awareness to move the needle fully towards anti-oppressive and inclusive development work. However, these accounts highlight how participants were endeavoring to challenge systems at the interpersonal level by shifting their own behaviour and through inviting other opinions, advancing local expertise, and advocating for more local involvement. This helps development workers see reflective practice as a way to create moments of solidarity, as they attempt to build egalitarian relationships with local populations.

Critical reflective analysis of Westernized, top-down practices that create unjust relations exposed the importance of negotiating new power relations rooted in cooperation. Many participants questioned themselves and their practice when engaging with reflective practice, while working to achieve stronger relationships rooted in taking time to gain understanding. It is possible to read this intentional move from an overly paternalistic intervention to one that is more relationship-focused, a central tenet of AOP

(Dominelli, 2002; K. Healy, 2001; Hugman, 2017; Strier & Binyamin, 2010, 2014). AOP proponents also acknowledge that translating the theoretical analysis of oppression and power into concrete practice can be complex and difficult (Baines, 2017; Strier & Binyamin, 2014) and is a continual “work in progress” (Barnoff & Moffatt, 2007). I recognize this difficulty and seek to advance understanding regarding how reflective practice acts as a spark to implement practice priorities that, in turn, have the potential to shift power within interpersonal relationships in development work.

### **6.3 Discussion of the Study Findings: Working Conditions**

Perhaps one of the biggest challenges for practitioners committed to reflective activities in professional practice relates to the tensions between reflection and the focus on performance and efficiency that pervades practice (Ruch, 2009). This limited the workers’ ability to engage reflective practice, leading some practitioners to comment that reflective spaces are undermined and in fact, a luxury (Ruch, 2009).

Research shows that the spread of managerialism within the delivery of international development (specifically in the NGO sector) has similarly “narrowed the possibility of NGOs to engage in transformative practice and in social change agendas, while it wittingly or unwittingly supports the expansion of the political and cultural hegemony of western [government] donors” (Girei, 2016, p. 193; see also Cooke & Dar, 2008). Baines (2017) also suggests that widespread adoption of NPM models within non-governmental agencies does little to address long-standing inequities and unequal power relations, including racism and colonialism. This management model has led to staff reductions and increased workloads and stress that make ongoing learning and self-reflection challenging, if not impossible. Workers are asked to do more with less time and efficiency is a priority.

When taking into consideration the high demand for documentation, heavy workloads, fast paced work intensity and short-term nature of the work (Baines, 2017; Carey 2008), participants found it difficult to prioritize reflection. They shared some of their experiences within their workplaces as evidence of just how challenging it was for them to pause and reflect on the unequal relations and

imbalances that shape their work. The inability to reflect in a formal, communal and collegial manner was a concern for many participants as they negotiated their role and the power they held and aspired to transform their practice. Their reflective practice was therefore self-led against a backdrop of dominant managerial culture. Hence, this study suggests that reflective practice emerged as an individual and customized practice strategy within the current managerial context. Carving out time to reflect on their power was indeed its own challenge within the contexts of their work environments. Workers had very little influence over their standardized work processes, let alone time to challenge broader social injustices that were undermining themselves as well as the communities in which they work. Though these concerns about work demands limiting opportunities for reflection have been examined in social service agencies with social workers in North America (see Ryding et al., 2018 & Baines et al., 2012, 2013, 2014), this this project expands that line of inquiry to global NGOs that are engaging in social service provision.

Furthermore, participants revealed how short-term contracts and funding, the pace of work, and top-down, funder-privileged agendas created a working environment that left little room for reflection but also made reflective practice that much more valuable as a means of self-care and sustainability. As a result of discussions on and about the use of reflective practices, several issues related to workplace values and organizational-specific challenges were explored. Participants spoke to juggling the structural oppression NPM brings to development work, particularly how they were often caught between effectively performing tasks and being burdened with paperwork, while trying to attend to the needs of the community as they navigated myriad asymmetrical power dynamics. They spoke to how these opposing organizational priorities and processes create barriers to engaging in reflection. Workplaces were often experienced as constraining, making it nearly impossible to embed reflective practice into their work. Workplace conditions made self-reflection, critical thinking, and subsequent power analysis a task that was perhaps seen as a personal and professional responsibility, rather than an integral and prioritized part of their work.

Reflective practice could be an important strategy of resistance in neoliberal and managerial environments, as described by these social workers (Morley, 2004, 2008, 2014). Participants did not speak to supportive supervision to buffer the negative impacts of NPM and other forms of managerialism, as is present in other research in this area. Baines et al.'s (2014) findings suggest that there are important roles for managers and supervisors in resisting managerialism imposed by funding bodies and that managers and front-line staff can work together within and against NPM (Baines et al., 2014). Rather, resistance by these participants came by creating their own reflective opportunities and teams, in these often solidary and isolated international environments. Reflective practice as self-analysis, self-evaluation, self-dialogue or self-observation was not seen as an unpleasant and harmful (Yip, 2006) despite having workplace conditions that may not have been supportive of this practice.

Within this context, present-day development processes are seen as an extension of Western colonialism, which shapes how the work of “solving” development issues such as poverty is carried out. These established management practices turn development organizations into instruments of domination and exploitation that uphold sociopolitical systems, including patriarchy and racial inequality, as they shore up asymmetrical power imbalances between the North and the South (Dar & Cooke, 2008). The limitations placed on participants regarding their reflective practices is, in part, a result of a powerful managerialist agenda that has permeated the field. Despite organizational resistance to reflection, the women in this study made space on the edges of their work to engage in reflective practices. This suggests reflective practice was valued to cope within these powerful agendas. However, when done in isolation and without holding others accountable, it may be limited in its effectiveness as anti-oppressive practice.

Navigating the possibilities of reflective practice within these workplaces, where their own power to make changes to the way in which development work is executed, was inadequate. This study troubled the suggestion that critical reflection has the potential to transform international development work (Chambers, 2004, 2005, 2014, 2017; Groves & Hinton, 2004; Howard & Vajda, 2016). Given the pervasiveness of these oppressive practices in the workplace and the devaluing of some of the key

principles of reflective practice, this practice alone does not hold the answer to a radical reconfiguration of development and development studies (Chambers, 2005).

Within non-profit organizations, it has been found that time to self-reflect and engage in ongoing learning with/from colleagues and clients can be valuable (Boucher, 2018). Supervision also provides a safe place to critically reflect on practice and analyze the effect of structural power differentials on vulnerable communities (Davys & Beddoe, 2009). However, the findings of this study suggest that participants felt that neither their employers nor funders were investing in reflective practice opportunities. In a managerial environment, participants had to create moments for reflection on the edges of their work while subtly navigating barriers and power dynamics, adding to their workload, and contributing to their experiences of burnout.

Although I did not ask any questions specifically about how each participant maintained their mental and emotional health in this work environment, their experiences revealed that reflective practice has the potential to support them emotionally while working through a variety of environmental and workplace stressors. Reflection as a self-care strategy and a means for enhancing well-being while working in development was an unexpected and unique finding of this project. There is some growing evidence of development organizations trying to address issues of staff well-being (Ager et al., 2012; Thomas et al., 2018), however, the research stops short of identifying workers' views on their coping strategies or what constitutes social support. There was a sense among many of the participants that using reflection was one such coping mechanism. Reflective practice for some became synonymous with self-care and helping workers maintain their well-being in this stressful line of work. International environments are isolating, stressful and sometimes dangerous; workers require interactive, formal, and creative approaches to self-care and self-management practices such as collaborative supervision, team supervision or formal mentorship. This study suggests that this collective sense of care and solidarity was largely absent from participants' experiences of development. The participants in this study clearly valued reflection for the support it offered them when they were struggling in the field. Northern organizations

might consider making space for reflection as a way to support workers who are experiencing fear, guilt or other overwhelming emotions.

#### **6.4 Conclusions and Research Questions Answered**

In this study, I asked how reflective practices were being used to analyze and negotiate power dynamics within development work and how such practices could assist social workers to take up an anti-oppressive approach within an international context. I also wondered what additional impacts reflective practices have on practitioners working in the development sector. In answering these questions, I discovered that reflective practices are being used by individual social workers to analyze and negotiate the legacy of colonization in development. They interrogate their individual power/knowledge/influence as well as the power and oppression that pervades their workplaces due to governing and influential organizational norms.

The study revealed that reflective practices may assist social workers to grapple with how they are positioned and constituted within the global relations of power present in development work; some participants identified themselves as outsiders in positions of power who were aware, and skeptical, of the control and authority allocated to them in the workplace. Participants emphasized the importance of working to build relationships and trust and hesitated to take the lead or be assertive in an effort to reduce the power differential. Participants shared how self-reflection allowed them to evaluate their relationships and behaviours (Larson, 2008), which offered important insight into how generating an awareness of power through reflective practice may unsettle and reshape professional conduct in micro-level practice moments.

This led to the uncovering of anti-oppressive practice approaches and attempting to reduce the influence of post-colonial relations. This wrestling with unequal distribution of power enabled the possibility of a responsive and relationally focused reflective development practitioner. An awareness of the negative effects of professional power can enable social workers to challenge systemic racism, to promote a social justice and human rights perspective and to respectfully consult with individuals and

communities affected by this power (Zufferey, 2012). Social workers can work to develop relationships characterized by reciprocity, respect and trust, which integrate many worldviews, by using skills such self-reflection (Bennett et al., 2011). These results are consistent with the literature and consistent with some of my lived experiences.

This negotiation and questioning of power emerged as a self-led enterprise in dealing with unknowns, uncertainties, complexities, discomfort and challenges in the work. Reflective practices primarily supported individual workers in attempting to generate individual practice responses based on local contexts and as a way to tune into their emotional needs when negotiating unknown territory in search of understanding and reassurance. While organizations have an obligation to care for their staff, workplace well-being schemes are undermined by performance targets and high workloads (Cornejo, 2020). This study discovered that reflective practice plays a role in worker well-being and is a self-initiated preventive measure for dealing with complex work situations that can lead to stress and burnout. While this study set out to understand the role of reflective practice in challenging the unequal relations that shape international development work, it also unexpectedly discovered the potential of reflective practice as a coping mechanism for worker well-being.

Few participants mentioned engaging in systemic advocacy while they negotiated their power and the unequal power relations; the impact of reflective practice was largely focused on helping workers work through interpersonal dynamics. This is likely due to the mode of regulation and control in the workplace and the focus on performance management systems. Throughout this study, discussions on and perceptions of reflective practice made visible the complexities of individual situations and the difficulty of challenging interorganizational dynamics. It also made visible the challenge of building relationships between Northern and Southern actors when the roles of funder and partner remain divisive and the focus on improving internal efficiency compromises the time available for reflective processes.

Taken together, the data and analysis presented here provide some evidence that reflective practice may enhance anti-oppressive social work practice in the following ways (the “4 Rs”):

- Reflection as a way to *reconcile* differences (slowing down to relate to one another and taking time to build collaborative relationships);
- Reflection as a way to *resist* oppressive procedural protocols or decisions (noticing and challenging expertise, structures and dominance);
- Reflection as a way to intentionally *respond* (pausing to explore assumptions and work from a place of uncertainty);
- Reflection as a way to promote *resilience* (helping with feelings of overwhelm, ineffectiveness and encouraging wellness).

## **6.5 Research Implications: How This Study Moves the Literature Forward**

This project has implications in four distinct areas: international social work, international development work, social work education, and working within NGOs. This research begins to fill some important gaps in knowledge at the juncture of reflective practice, international social work and international development work such as the use of reflective practices by professional social workers working within international development contexts; whether the use of reflective practices becomes a means of unpacking power and difference in the day-to-day work of development workers; and reflective practice and its relationship to development worker well-being. The unique focus of this research on the workplace experiences of Northern social workers within the international development sector working in the Global South provides important insight and understanding into how Northern social workers in international contexts grapple with their roles, responsibilities, identities and positions in this contested area of work.

### ***International Social Work***

The findings of this research offer a unique exploration of the experiences of social workers employed in various international development projects in the Global South. There is limited social work research on the skills and practices of social workers involved in international development and how they conduct and examine themselves through an anti-oppressive approach in the development sector

(Dominelli, 2015; Pyles, 2017). Research into specific fieldwork practices in international social work remains relatively underdeveloped (Beddoe & Bartley, 2019; Carranza, 2018; Dominelli, 2015; Kahn & Sussman, 2015; Maglajlic, 2019; Pittman et al., 2015); this project begins to fill this substantial gap by offering a small but detailed examination of reflective practice possibilities and impacts in international development contexts.

Research participants' personalized accounts have the potential to help social workers ponder the ways in which reflective practice in international professional contexts can help to analyze power dynamics, relations and structures. Overall, this study points to how reflective practice is being deployed in international social work practice as a constructive technique that may work to promote the unsettling of knowledge claims and expertise and therefore make different choices in practice. The study also suggests that reflective practice may assist with well-being.

The findings also point to harmful distributions of power in international development and the need to continue to probe and find ways to disrupt these practices. Critical reflection is one way to probe and poke at power interpersonally by orienting workers to prioritize building trust and relationships, embracing cultural humility and transforming hierarchies into participatory spaces for reflection, learning and solidarity. Social work practice in international development work includes facilitating and mediating the work and taking the time to understand the local realities to include a wider range of people in the planning and implementation of the work. It means utilizing reflective practices to slow down, remain patient, listen more and talk less. These critical components of AOP are key to a more just and empowerment-focused social work practice in the Global South.

All participants mentioned some form of personal or professional struggle while situated/working in the South. They all articulated how they were implicated in the relations of dominance found in development work and raised self-awareness of their privileged positionality in Southern locations. While this acknowledgement of power is an important first step, and the women worked to shift power in their micro practice, they were uncertain how to structurally dismantle or change the sector on a larger scale, as it pertains to Northern dominance. Throughout their elaborations on the sector and on reflective practices,

they seemed to confront the part they play in this dominance, especially as they carried out a development agenda that is rooted in neocolonial practices of control from the North.

### ***International Development Work***

It has been discussed in the data that Northern development workers take up much less space and power, both physically and intellectually, if development is to be truly inclusive and relational. This means that workers need to continue to critically reflect on and negotiate their power and influence. Yet, insufficient attention has been paid to how reflective practice is being used by development workers overall across a range of disciplines (Chambers, 2017; Eyben, 2006, 2014; Groves & Hinton, 2004; U. Kothari, 2019; Rowlands, 2016); thus, this work contributes new knowledge on what this engagement looks like and how it is used to analyze unequal power relations.

This research suggests that it might be useful to use reflection to reorient the professional concepts, values, methods and behaviours that serve Northern purposes and that in doing so, there may be increased opportunities for Southern-based counterparts to express their reality, stories, knowledge and ideas. Unless these voices are prioritized through reflective dialogue, these valuable contributions could remain hidden, buried in reports and performance management documents. But this requires an ongoing and resolute commitment to a democratic, participatory management style and willingness to relinquish power and find ways to share it more equitably with other partners. It also means engaging in training that is geared towards anti-oppression, anti-racism and anti-colonialism.

By examining their use of reflective practices and the impacts this practice has on their work, this research contributes new knowledge on whether engagement with reflective practices encourages critical analysis of the unequal relations of power between the Northern practitioner and Southern recipient. The research found that critical reflection can lead to an awareness of power relations and oppression, particularly regarding complicity in these relations of inequality. This research explored the possibility that reflective practices may offer workers the opportunity to unpack their power, reorienting their

positionality within development work and challenging workers to identify different strategies for anti-oppressive practice as they negotiate local/global relations in international development.

These research findings shed light on what impact reflective practices have on international development workers' (women, especially) individual well-being within current workplace conditions. This is an underexamined aspect of NGO work, and this study offered insights based on the utilization of reflection by women practitioners. No qualitative research has been found that investigated coping strategies for development workers (Young et al., 2018) and this research points to reflective practice as a possible coping strategy used to manage stress. The findings of this study suggest that creating additional social and team-based infrastructure built into the process of international development may help workers manage the emotional and professional experiences they encounter abroad. Endorsing and integrating a proactive and intentional approach to issues of stress management and worker welfare concurrent with output and project deliverables may be addressed through team or group reflection. This study also found that reflective practice was a way to resist the demands and struggles found in workplaces which prioritize efficiency, outputs and performance management.

There are concerns coming from the development scholarship regarding the well-being of staff in the international development field and the argument that NGOs need to do more to support women (Mercado, 2017; Solanki, 2016); this study offers a way forward in addressing some of these issues. This research identified some of these struggles with workloads and limited supports and suggests that engagement with reflection may support workers to manage their stressors; however, there is more work to be done in this area.

### ***Social Work Education***

Social work curricula for international contexts often include elements of reflective learning and/or critical reflection (Das & Anand, 2014; Matthew & Lough, 2017; Ranz & Langer, 2018). This typically exists to create opportunities for an interrogation of personal knowledge, assumptions, culture and personal power as well as increasing understanding of local contexts (Das & Anand, 2014; Lough,

2009; Pawar, 2017). When students from the Global North are placed in the Global South for international learning, uncontested ethnocentrism may exacerbate and propagate detrimental postcolonial power dynamics. This continues to be of grave concern for many institutions (Matthew & Lough, 2017). It is imperative to prepare the next generation of social workers for practice in international development and to provide opportunities for students to practice abroad, however, many questions remain about how to teach competencies for practice not easily met in domestic opportunities.

From an international perspective, this study builds on other empirical research that suggests elements of reflection may continue to be helpful in social work courses that cross international boundaries, including when working within contexts of conflict and violence, migration and climate change uncertainty. Furthermore, if student practicum experiences are to continue to be international in nature, then formalized and collective opportunities for reflective practice may be useful in all areas of the experience, including pre-departure training, intercultural humility training, supervision in international practice, re-entry assistance and psychosocial support for students/facilitators (Matthew & Lough, 2017). Razack (2002) points out that both preparation and follow up work with international practicum students is crucial to critical learning, and this requires the integration of an anti-oppressive practice framework.

I would also suggest a complimentary seminar/course which takes a deeper dive into a critical examination of the colonial roots of current international development/humanitarian processes, providing an opportunity for students to examine the messy nuances of the practicum experience that might otherwise remain hidden. The aim would be to enable students to critically interrogate their own positioning in relations of power in their practicum and the similarities to and differences from how they are positioned in Canada (Heron, 2006). Moving students toward an appreciation of the limits of their engagement in, and corresponding knowledge of the global south may reveal the dynamics of colonization, imperialism and Western hegemony that often go hidden and unexamined (Haug, 2005). This learning, in turn, could help students develop more critical awareness of the partial, incomplete and privileged nature of their knowledge/experience and help them re-envision international social work

through an anti-oppressive perspective. Analyzing the power embedded in these contexts continues to be of importance in interrogating the Northern sense of superiority.

### *Working in Non-Government Organizations*

Performance measurement and outcome management practices are typically highly unreflective; this research suggests that reflective practice may open opportunities for discussion and learning beyond capturing outcomes and results. Through this process, I identified one organization that includes an element of formalized reflection on power within their reporting/management framework—ActionAid. Within their Accountability, Learning and Planning System (ALPS), ActionAid (2011) aims to optimize staff and partner time spent on critical reflection and learning, rather than on unnecessary bureaucracy and routine processes, and adapts requirements where necessary to ensure processes add value. They also aim to “seek first to understand personal power” (p. 7) in how they organize and negotiate their work internationally. ActionAid recognized that, too often, “adjusting organizational structures is not enough to solve underlying problems in the work...new structures do not, in themselves, herald new dawns,” especially in mitigating unequal power relations and accountability (p. 108). Rather, they understood that the attitudes, behaviours, values and commitment of its people hold the seeds of success or failure in this work.

In creating and prioritizing systems for reflection and dialogue, staff were able to acknowledge the power they hold and were encouraged to shed the image of themselves as experts and establish new relationships of equality with the communities receiving aid. They promote learning with and from traditionally excluded people, their partners, allies, supporters and others so that better decisions are made, while creative solutions are shared and developed (ActionAid, 2011). This organization believes that a monitoring framework should be used on a continuous basis to support ongoing reflection, analysis, learning and, lastly, reporting. In this way, ActionAid is bucking the international development trend by prioritizing learning over results. Rowlands (2016) reports that Oxfam is also making efforts to strengthen and formally embed power analysis into their work.

Perhaps if more organizations were to adopt systems and frameworks like ALPS, new opportunities for learning and reflection from multiple sources might emerge, and organizations might ensure that local knowledge and expertise are not only valued but also integrated into reports and evaluation processes. Furthermore, international organizations often give policy advice—they analyze the world as they see it and offer prescriptions for what should be done and how. It is rare, however, for international organizations to reflect publicly on how they think about the world and what this means for the policies they recommend. This would be welcomed in the sector.

The literature on group supervision and group or collective reflection for social workers may be useful to help orient this contribution and to find language to translate it to the international development sphere. For example, Pare (2016) and Cornejo (2020) write that despite being risky for practitioners to lay bare their work for others to see in group reflective supervision, there is much benefit to reflecting in a group. These benefits include: the multiple perspectives afforded by the diverse social locations and personal histories of workers, the added creativity associated with generative group discussion and reflection, the group solidarity that creates a soft-landing supporting reflection and the chance to learn from one's mistakes (Cornejo, 2020; Pare, 2016). However, to capitalize on these advantages, group supervision must not be susceptible to unhelpful preoccupation with worker competence or outcomes (Pare, 2016); this may be difficult because individual actors have little control over performative requirements. This research therefore offers insights regarding worker well-being and self-care when working in cross-cultural or foreign contexts. Practitioners should be given the space to share their experiences and emotional reactions with supervisors and peers as an act of self-care and reflection. International social work practice, and anti-oppressive practice, would benefit from building a reflective community of practice.

It is also true that international work entails working at a physical distance from communal and familial roots, amplifying the desire to create different communities of support. A collective, team-based reflective practice model may be effective for the management of emotions in international social work/development work. Communal acceptance, observation and reflection of workers' inner emotional

world could be used as a source of knowledge and an opportunity (Sicora, 2019). Fook and Gardner (2007) suggest critical reflection should be much more than merely individually thinking about experience, but rather it should occur through dialogue in a group setting and involve the “sort of questioning that assists people in uncovering deeply held assumptions and taken-for-granted ways of thinking, in order to consciously develop the most ethical and improved ways of working with people and communities” (Beres, 2017, p. 281). Examining ourselves as Northerners in isolation does little to unsettle the colonial project of development and this work further highlights the need for critically reflective groups in international practice rather than simply self-initiating ad-hoc and ongoing moments of reflection.

## **6.6 Research Limitations**

This section outlines the limitations of this research and research process. Any claim of knowledge generation from this study is equally matched with a need for further inquiry (Dean, 2013). This was an exploratory study that offered some insights on reflective practice and critical reflection among professional social workers doing international development work and the sample size was small. The conclusions articulated may not in fact be representative of social workers, generally. Additionally, there may be subsets of social workers where these offerings are not representative at all.

I paid close attention to my own situatedness within the project as a feminist researcher and I worked to temper my considerable influence. I worked to not privilege my own biases and experiences throughout the project, as detailed in the methodology section. This said, as a feminist researcher with insider knowledge, the interdependence between researcher and research participant should be acknowledged as a strength and as a limitation. Efforts were made to preserve the context of the phenomenon under investigation through detail and description of the data presented. Insider knowledge can be a curse and a blessing. While it is an asset in interpreting the data and relating to the participants, it can also cause the researcher to not properly interrogate the data that is an outlier or different from what others report.

All participants were educated in the Global North and working for Northern institutions. This is most likely due to my own social location and inability to connect with (and interview) women who were outside my professional network in Canada. The colonial-settler perspective of this research is a limitation, given how/where the research participants and I are situated. This project centres on the reflective practices and activities of Northern-trained social workers, however, future research needs to also explore how local beneficiaries, staff and communities operationalize and make sense of reflection. This work draws upon the Westernized narratives that dominate much contemporary scholarship about development work. This perspective showcases how the West would like the relations with beneficiaries and Southern communities to be. What's missing are the different, even unintended, outcomes for those situated as beneficiaries and counterparts. In that sense, this project has a partial narrative, one that centres Northern/Western narratives and interests and obscures the narratives and interests of those in the Global South.

The findings were shaped by the sample of primarily white women (except for two women who identified as mixed race). Therefore, many groups of professional social workers were not represented. With future research to draw comparisons and discern commonalities, intersectionality could be further integrated within the research. Issues of race, gender, ability, ethnicity, and class merit examination. Although this study provided a description of reflective practice in development work contexts, the results are unique to Northern-educated social workers who were exposed to reflective practice concepts due to their education and training. Participants' experience varied as well - some had just completed an internship, others had been working for decades, and still others fell somewhere in between. Such variability and other critical events likely shaped the participants' experiences and depth of practice. At the same time, these women each provided a unique perspective. In addition, participants were recruited and invited to participate because they had knowledge of reflective practice and had some experience engaging with it. This may have biased the data in favour of positive comments related to reflective practice.

The methodological decisions also have their limits. This study employed a feminist lens to consider the role of privilege and marginalization in development work. With primarily white women as participants and as the analyst, white privilege shaped the findings. This study cannot therefore fully disentangle the meaning of privilege and marginalization from this positionality. Further investigation of reflective practice should occur across the spectrum of designs and paradigms.

The primary focus of this research project was to explore and understand participants' experiences of reflective practice and how this engagement impacted them. Without direct observation, this study relied on participants' reconstructed observations of their own reflective practice. Their perceptions of the discussion of reflective practice are subjected to recall bias. Given the methodology and methods chosen, I did not observe their reflective practice nor talk to local partners about their practice. This was an exploratory study that raised questions about one side of the equation—Northern-trained development workers. While it would be beneficial to see how this reflective practice plays out within the participants' workplace environments, this was outside of the methodological scope of this research project. Furthermore, the research was not designed to validate their representations of the impacts of reflective practices within the communities in which they were working. I was strictly concerned with how they engaged with reflective practices and their self-assessment of that engagement within the context of international development.

Lastly, concerns with reflective practice, as noted in the literature review, could in fact be reflected within this project. While engaging with Smith's (2013) and Badwall's (2016) work, a limitation within this project was brought into focus due to their attention on how challenging it is to disrupt or unsettle dominant power and privilege through self- and critical reflection. The reflective process does not necessarily reduce the white/settler/colonial power and privilege workers have in this study – this problem of imbalance and inequality remains. Given that we only hear from Northern professionals, and the overall narrative is how social workers have succeeded in doing (good) reflective practice, the story told is one that that privileges and centres (primarily white) social workers as they confess their awareness from a place of privilege. I also re-centre and reinforce whiteness, which is a process and outcome that I

benefit from. Within these arguments, reflective practice has the potential to be seen as shoring up power and privilege, through the confession of it, rather than disrupting it. These are complex dilemmas that are difficult to reconcile. Smith (2013) acknowledges, as do I, that there is no simple anti-oppression formula to follow as one engages in this self-reflective work, and that many are in a state of experimentation when it comes to dismantling settler colonialism and white supremacy through critical self-reflection. While reflective practice could (and does) create visibility into the privileges accrued to professional social workers within colonized communities, it also brings into focus past and present oppressive processes that create and maintain privilege and how to re-imagine the ever-evolving landscape of development work.

### **6.7 Research Recommendations**

Given the limitations of this work, I recommend a few different avenues and visions for future research in this area; this starts with talking to different sets of individuals about their reflective practices. In centring the principle of solidarity, inclusivity and equity, future qualitative research should speak to Southerners to understand the local realities and struggles regarding the possibilities or limitations of reflective practice in development as well as the impacts of reflective practice from a localized perspective (Deepak, 2011). This includes examining the experiences of social workers from the Global South working in NGOs or government. Further research in solidarity with workers from the Global South has the potential to offer important insight into how reflective practices inform international work from a culturally relevant and inclusive standpoint. It may also uncover whether reflective practice is of importance to Northerners only. Research regarding reflection can be enhanced and more impactful if it “includes the engagement with different worldviews, perceptions and interpretations of experience” (LaBelle, 2017, p. 690-691) in an engaged and participatory fashion.

Additional research efforts need to include input from Southern colleagues on this important topic. More decolonization of development work is necessary as a process of disrupting power structures. This emergence of knowledge and theorizations from the Global South should be brought into

conversation to allow for mutual and collaborative relationships where power imbalances are not only acknowledged but also shifted.

This could also mean inviting the perspective of development workers with different ethnicities, genders, those in upper management/administration and/or development workers with varying qualifications such as nurses, doctors, psychologists and anthropologists. This may allow for a richer discussion of the possibilities of reflective practice within international development work from a multidisciplinary and diverse perspective. I remain curious about reflection's potential in these spaces. Inviting others to offer their insights about these practices will make an important contribution to the conversation about the value of reflection as a part of a larger "ethical framework" for development workers (Hunt et al., 2014).

There are a number of other directions that remain unexplored. To better understand international development workers' reflective practice capacity and execution, for example, future research could examine the utilization of specific reflective models (see Gibbs', 1988, Reflective Cycle as an example) in active reflective teams or groups. Learning through reflection could also be introduced as an individual core competency, with the stated objective of providing multiple means for developing reflective thinking. Processes such as guided written reflection via templates or weekly reflective supervision/debriefs and/or online reflective discussion groups could be introduced locally for/with workers. These processes could then be examined to develop a better understanding of the content and long-term impact (regular journaling with question prompts) of reflective practice. Cornejo's (2020) recent work on critical reflection groups in England is a useful example of how this could look.

Experiences with these practices could be evaluated over an extended period, providing insights into the development of workers' reflective ability and the role regular reflective behaviour plays in international contexts. Findings may provide insights into what topics and reflective activities are most effective in fostering a deeper level of reflection. It would also be instructive to see if workers developed an appreciation for the role of reflection in their professional practices over time and if this leads to the adoption of an anti-oppressive approach. This type of study could be executed in international

development organizations/spaces overseas or within international social work contexts locally in Canada, such as organizations working with refugee or newcomer populations. This would provide further insight into the possibilities for reflective practice in a wider range of international social work contexts.

This research was influenced by feminist research ideals, which played out in two ways throughout the research process. First, within the scope of this study, I had hoped to inform readers of the reality of women's experiences and perspectives within international development work so as to better understand their experiences. I wanted to clearly see the conditions and experiences in international development work through the voices of women; this led to the identification and examination of issues of central importance to them, such as their mental health in the workplace. Overall, women's experiences as practitioners are lacking in the humanitarian/development literature, and this project sought to do research on, by, and for women to showcase their contributions to this field through their own voices. Second, feminist research methodology was influential and informative to the research process itself. As discussed in the methodology chapter, the main features of feminist research include paying attention to power, reflexivity, voice/representation and ethics (Gringeri et al., 2010).

As seen in the findings, many women had concerns with burnout, their mental health and implementing self-care in the work. They were also challenged to carve out space to meaningfully reflect within managerial environments. These factors led me to raise two additional questions: 1) Was reflective practice a gendered experience that emerged as an oppositional, feminine, caring practice in resisting the constraints of managerialism? 2) Are practices and needs pertaining to self-care, mental health and security also gendered? These questions require further refinement and future exploration beyond the scope of this dissertation.

Finally, as I ponder future engagement with historically marginalized communities as a feminist researcher, critical self-reflection and recognition of power are continually required. As a white, Northern-based social worker and academic, there is much that I do not know or have not experienced about racism and power (Tuana, 2006) and this needs to be acknowledged. An awareness of the negative effects of professional power can enable social workers, including myself, to challenge systemic racism to

promote a social justice and human rights perspective and to respectfully consult with individuals and communities affected by this power. Social workers can develop relationships characterized by reciprocity, respect and trust, which integrate all worldviews, by using skills such as deep listening and considerable self-reflection (Bennett et al., 2011). I must be also willing to challenge the assumptions I make about myself and to engage in an honest and truthful examination of my own privilege related to race, gender, income, class, culture, age, education, ability, etc. I am committed to holding myself and others accountable to examine and re-examine power dynamics in our work and in our everyday lives. I must also be committed to constantly learning and understanding the larger oppressive power structures that serve to hold certain groups and people down. I accept the responsibility of learning and growing in my role as an effective ally.

## **6.8 Closing Thoughts**

From the time I took my first social work position internationally, I felt something was missing from my practice but, at that time, I did not know what it was or how to find it. Now, nearly 20 years later, and as a result of this study, I am even more aware that something is indeed missing and needed in development work. While the profession of social work may have unique skills, values and ethics to bring to development work (Claiborne, 2004; Dominelli, 2015; Kahn & Sussman, 2015; Pittman et al., 2015), I now believe it goes beyond the simple acquisition of abilities such as interviewing, listening, assessing, reporting and advocating for resources—and certainly more than an altruistic attitude. What this project has exposed is the need for more critical and anti-oppressive ideas and transformative ideals by social workers who work abroad. This includes moments to reflect collectively. More resistance is required to challenge practices of oppression that continue to permeate this sector; ethically, we must sit longer with contemplation, complexity, variance, difference and unknowns, and we must remove ourselves proactively from situations and decisions that are not ours to make. Development is not ours to create or manage; it is ours to contest, question and most importantly, limit.

Responding to the demands for change made by Chambers (2017), U. Kothari (2005, 2019) and Groves and Hinton (2004) regarding the future of development work requires more collaborative directions and grassroots activism that might be more readily available to workers by first listening actively to those in the South. Moreover, social workers need to do more than just listen, they need to be willing to learn, acknowledge power and uncover discrepancies in their roles and responsibilities when engaging with marginalized communities in the South. They must be willing to see that existing power dynamics continue to favour Northern workers and work to change this.

Partnerships and participation imply a democratization and collaboration in how the work is being conducted; for that to be achieved, systemic tensions and privilege must be unmasked and dismantled, including those structures and institutions that prop up the work. Social work and development still do operate under current hegemonic conditions, reinforcing a sense of Northern dominance that is frequently left unchallenged.

Despite this unfortunate reality, there is a growing movement toward re-imagining a development process that is rooted in uncovering and highlighting local capacities and rethinking the control, power and influence we have as Northerners. This aspirational re-imagining of development work is what I will continue to advocate for and strive towards in my own social work practice.

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## Appendix A: Interview Guide

(1) You have been invited to participate in this study because you stated you have a general understanding of the concept of reflective practice and that you reflect within the work you do as a social care/social development worker. Can you talk to me about your work overall and how you reflect on your day-to-day work as a social care practitioner within international development?

If needed, ask the following probing/follow up questions:

- a. Can you talk to me about the kinds of things you reflect on?
- b. How often do you reflect?
- c. With whom do you reflect?
- d. What do you get out of your reflective practice?
- e. What concerns do you have with reflective practice?
- f. How does reflection appear in your workplace?
- g. Can you tell me about a couple specific incidents that you reflected upon? How did you reflect in/on/after these incidents?
- h. Are there certain things you feel uncomfortable discussing/writing about through reflection? Are there certain things you feel more comfortable discussing/writing about through reflection?
- i. What constitutes as engaging in 'reflective practice' for you personally?

(2) Can you talk to me about how you reflect upon your role as a social work practitioner within the structure that is 'international development'?

If needed, ask the following probing/follow up questions:

- a. How do reflect upon what you do for work?
- b. How do you reflect upon professional tensions you may encounter within your work that have to do with inequality and power?

(Such as the following examples...)

-Race

-Ethnicity

-Gender

-Profession

-Class

-Age

-Ability

-Education

c. How do reflect upon the sector (development work) itself?

d. How do you reflect upon the community in which you live and work?

e. How does the clientele you work with reflect and give you feedback?

## Appendix B: Demographic Information

Please provide the following information as part of your participation in the study.

**1. How old are you?** \_\_\_\_\_ years old

**2. What is your ethno-racial background?**

White \_\_\_\_\_ Black \_\_\_\_\_ Latino/Hispanic \_\_\_\_\_

Asian \_\_\_\_\_ South Asian \_\_\_\_\_ Aboriginal/First Nations \_\_\_\_\_

Other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

**3. Please list any other sociocultural identities or locations that are important to you.**

\_\_\_\_\_

**4. In which country did you complete your post-secondary education?**

\_\_\_\_\_

**5. How long have you worked for your current organization?**

\_\_\_\_\_ years or months

**6. How long have you worked in your current role?**

\_\_\_\_\_ years or months

**7. How many years have you been working in the field of social care/work/development (or similar)?**

\_\_\_\_\_ years or months

**8. How long have you been working in the international development sector?**

\_\_\_\_\_ years or months

## Appendix C: Recruitment Letter Invitation

**Subject:** Invitation to participate in a research project on reflective practice for international development professionals

To Whom It May Concern:

My name is Brianna Strumm, and I am a PhD Candidate at Carleton University in the School of Social Work based in Ottawa, Canada. I am doing this research project to complete my doctorate in social work. I am writing to you today to see if you or someone you know might be interested in participating in my study about understanding the **reflective practices of social care workers in the international development sector**. This study aims to understand how social care workers (those trained as social workers, mental health specialists, community development workers, social service workers, etc.) reflect on and process their day-to-day work within international development work.

I am looking for individuals who identify as: (1) a woman (2) English-speaking (3) presently working in the Global South (generally speaking this means: Africa, South/East Asia, Middle East, Central/South America or Eastern Europe/Northern Asia) and (4) having a general understanding as to what reflective practice OR reflection means within the context of their work.

This study involves one open-ended 60–90-minute interview that will take place either face-to-face in a mutually convenient and safe location in the city in which you work *or* on the phone *or* on Skype. **Interviews will be audio-recorded.** Furthermore, please note that Skype is subject to the United States of America Freedom Act, therefore, our conversation will not be confidential in that regard. You will be asked to share how you engage with reflection within the context of your work.

Once the recording has been transcribed, the audio-recording will be destroyed. While this project is unlikely to involve any social, economic or emotional risks, care will be taken to protect your identity. While transcripts will be prepared from interviews, no identifying information (e.g., names of individuals or agency of work) will be included in the final transcripts. All participants will be given a ‘code name’ that will be used in reference to the interviews and all de-identified electronic transcripts will be kept in a password-protected file. You can also request that certain responses not be included in the final project. Any hard copies of data (including handwritten notes or USB keys) will be kept in a locked cabinet in my office or briefcase in a locked safe in my locked hotel room if traveling. Research data will only be available to me and my academic supervisor, Dr. Sarah Todd.

You will have the right to end your participation in the study at any time, for any reason, up until 24 hours after the interview is completed. If you choose to withdraw during the interview, all the information you provided until that point will be destroyed. Your participation in this study will contribute to the development of knowledge about reflection and international social development practice. There will be no monetary benefits for study involvement.

The ethics protocol of this project was reviewed by the Carleton University Research Ethics Board, which provided clearance to carry out the research. (Clearance expires on: \_\_\_\_)  
Should you have any questions or concerns related to your involvement in this research, please contact the Carleton University Research Ethics Board A by telephone at 613-520-2600 ext. 2517 or by email at [ethics@carleton.ca](mailto:ethics@carleton.ca).

If you would like to participate in this project, want more information, or have any questions, please contact me at 403-612-1187 or at [brianna.strumm@carleton.ca](mailto:brianna.strumm@carleton.ca).

Sincerely,

Brianna Strumm, MSW, RSW, PhD(c)  
Carleton University

## Appendix D: Informed Consent Form

### Name and Contact Information of Researchers:

Brianna Strumm, MSW, RSW, PhD Candidate  
Carleton University School of Social Work, Faculty of Public Affairs  
Email: [brianna.strumm@carleton.ca](mailto:brianna.strumm@carleton.ca)  
Supervisor and Contact Information: Dr. Sarah Todd, [sarah.todd@carleton.ca](mailto:sarah.todd@carleton.ca)

**Project Title:** Northern social workers' experiences with reflective practice: Analyzing power in international development work

### Carleton University Project Clearance:

Clearance #: 104494

Date of Clearance: TBC

### Invitation:

You are invited to take part in a research project because you identify as a woman, have social work training, and have worked recently in global development. You are also familiar with the concept of reflective practice. Your participation in this study is voluntary, and a decision not to participate will not be used against you in any way. As you read this form, and decide whether to participate, please ask all the questions you might have, take whatever time you need, and consult with others as you wish.

### What is the purpose of the study?

This study aims to understand how women social workers (those trained as social workers or mental health specialists, community development workers, social service workers, etc.) reflect on and process their day-to-day work within international development work. This study already involved one open-ended 60-minute interview that took place on the phone, Zoom or Skype. I am now looking to have brief, 30-minute follow-up interviews with participants, if willing, as the project's conceptual and theoretical framework has undergone some changes. Interviews will be audio-recorded. Both Zoom and Skype (Microsoft) comply with the [EU-U.S. Privacy Shield](#) and the [Swiss-U.S. Privacy Shield](#). Participants should be aware that the Privacy Shield program is administered by the International Trade Administration (ITA) within the U.S. Department of Commerce.

### Risks and Inconveniences:

We do not anticipate any risks to participating in this study. Professional and personal risk is expected to be minimal, and I will take precautions to protect your confidentiality as no organizations or individuals will be named in the finished dissertation. This project will ask you about your professional reflective practices and should you experience any emotional distress during the interview, you will be provided with contact information for appropriate counseling services available nearby.

### Possible Benefits:

Your participation in this study will contribute to the development of knowledge about reflection and international social work practice. You will not be paid or compensated for your participation in this study.

### No waiver of your rights:

By signing this form, you are not waiving any rights or releasing the researchers from any liability.

**Withdrawing from the study:**

You will have the right to withdraw information collected at the follow-up interview, for any reason, up until 24 hours after your interview is completed. If you choose to withdraw during the interview, all the information you provided until that point will be destroyed. After the study is completed, you may request that your data be removed from the study and deleted by notice given to the Principal Investigator (named above) within 6 months of the dissertation completion. You can also request that certain responses not be included in the final project.

**Confidentiality:**

We will remove all identifying information from the study data as soon as possible, which will be after transcription. Transcripts will be prepared from interviews, and no identifying information will be included in the final transcripts. We will treat your personal information as confidential, although absolute privacy cannot be guaranteed. No information that discloses your identity will be released or published without your specific consent. Research records may be accessed by the Carleton University Research Ethics Board to ensure continuing ethics compliance. All data will be kept confidential, unless release is required by law (e.g., child abuse, harm to self or others).

The results of this study may be published or presented at an academic conference or meeting, but the data will be presented so that it will not be possible to identify any participants unless you give your express consent. You will be assigned pseudonym so that your identity will not be directly associated with the data you have provided. All data, including coded information, will be kept in a password-protected file on a secure computer. Any hard copies of data (including handwritten notes or USB keys) will be kept in a locked cabinet in my home office. Research data will only be available to my academic supervisor, Dr. Todd and me. We will password protect any research data that we store or transfer.

**Data Retention:**

Your de-identified data will be retained for a period of five years and then securely destroyed. At the end of five years, all research data will be securely destroyed. Electronic data will be erased and hard copies will be shredded.

**New information during the study:**

In the event that any changes could affect your decision to continue participating in this study, you will be promptly informed.

**Ethics review:**

This project was reviewed and cleared by the Carleton University Research Ethics Board A. If you have any ethical concerns with the study, please contact Carleton University Research Ethics Board A by telephone at 613-520-2600 ext. 2517 or by email at [ethics@carleton.ca](mailto:ethics@carleton.ca).

**Statement of consent – print and sign name:**

I agree to be contacted for follow up research	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No
I agree to be audio-recorded	<input type="checkbox"/> Yes	<input type="checkbox"/> No

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Signature of participant

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Date

**Research team member who interacted with the participant:**

I have explained the study to the participant and answered any and all of their questions. The participant appeared to understand and agree. I provided a copy of the consent form to the participant for their reference.

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Signature of researcher

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Date