

Weaving and unraveling dominance: A critical analysis of
personal and professional social work identities in Alberta,
Canada

by

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Abstract

This thesis reports on findings from a critical qualitative study exploring and challenging normative notions of what it means to be a social worker. Throughout this thesis, I investigate how practicing social workers in Alberta negotiate their personal and professional identities. Drawing on 22 transcripts from semi-structured interviews with 11 unique participants, I analyze discursive strategies that are used to define and categorize what social work is and who social workers are expected to be. Grounded in critical and anti-oppressive theories and methodologies – namely Critical Disability Studies and Critical Discourse Analysis – I critique how dominance and power are woven into narratives of identity, belonging, and pride within the interview data. In particular, I critically illustrate how being a social worker is constructed in opposition to being a client. I conclude by reflecting on what social work could become when the rigid exclusionary boundaries of the profession are unraveled and reimagined.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

In this thesis, I draw from semi-structured interviews with 11 practicing social workers in Alberta to explore the following research questions: *1) How do social workers in Alberta negotiate and construct their personal and professional identities (in relation to normative professional boundaries)?*; and *2) How is normative social work identity bound with multiple intersecting axes of oppression and power?* Grounded in critical theories and methodological approaches, I explore the normative boundaries of social work identity and ideology, and how social workers interviewed engaged with these boundaries. In particular, I aim to highlight the power relations frequently hidden in discourses about what social work is, and who “normal” social workers are expected to be. This study included two semi-structured interviews with 11 unique participants between July and October 2020, which culminated in 22 transcripts. Participants were all registered social workers in Alberta with at least five years of practice at the time of interviews. I use Critical Discourse Analysis as my overarching methodology, and the analysis process consisted of multiple readings of the interview transcripts while coding for rhetorical means, ideological statements, and discursive strands or themes.

In what follows, I situate myself in relation to this research, discuss some of the relevant historical context of the establishment of social work in Canada, and engage existing literature that explores personal and professional identities for social workers, as well as ongoing critiques of professionalism. In Chapter 2, I discuss the theoretical and methodological foundations which ground the study. Specifically, I introduce Critical Disability Studies and Critical Discourse Analysis as the guiding frameworks for this study, and describe how I apply the tenets of these theories to the project at hand. I also describe the specific methods I used to select, collect, and analyze data.

In Chapter 3, “That’s Not What Social Workers Do”: Exploring Social Work Ideology, I introduce the concept of a social work ideology. While threads that hold the social work profession together may seem obvious to social workers themselves, I contend that many of them are frequently hidden or taken-for-granted – especially those that weave dominance into the fabric of our professional identity. As such, I aim to make explicit some of the discursive strategies used by practicing social workers to construct and enact “social work,” and to situate these discourses in their social and historical contexts.

In Chapter 4, “Being a Social Worker is Ten Thousand Things and Nothing at the Same Time”: Exploring Social Work Identities, I explore how participants talked about the processes of becoming a social worker and their nuanced expressions of belonging and affiliation with the profession. The findings I investigate highlight threads of assumed normativity within narratives of social work identities; I discuss some participants’ mixed feelings of belonging and identification with the profession of social work and how homophobia, racism, and ableism factor in their stories. I conclude the thesis in Chapter 5 with a discussion of future possibilities for social work based on the findings of this study.

1.1 Situating Myself

An important part of good critical research is transparency between writer and reader, and between researcher and participants. In the proposal I submitted for this thesis research, I included a “personal” introduction to situate myself in relation to the questions I was asking and the overall structure of the proposal. I think that this introduction to my

proposal – as it is – helps to ground and situate the overall thesis, and so I have included it here:

I had a conversation a few weeks ago with one of my best friends, Maimuna, about the thesis process and about our specific experiences with drafting research proposals. At the time, I felt like the proposal I had drafted wasn't sitting well with me, and I couldn't put my finger on why it just wasn't "quite right." After reading it, she noted that I hadn't written it in the first person. Her observation caught me off guard because I almost always write in the first person, and I hadn't noticed how I had reverted to old patterns of "professional and polished" academic writing. We talked about Gloria Anzaldúa and breaking the conventional writing mold. She said to me, "we're so colonized that we think we can't even bring our narrative into our proposals." I have since revised this proposal and tried to have my voice come through clearer, and added this quick "personal" introduction to the project before getting into the weeds of it all.

The project is - in addition and alongside its very academic components - a personal inquiry and reckoning. Although I'm sure I could trace the history even farther back than this, the questions I'm asking here emerged at the beginning of my social work training. Since my first day in a social work classroom, I have been painfully aware of how some parts of who I am are expected and welcome within the profession (e.g. my whiteness, my settler status), and some parts are not. In particular, I picked up on ways that this new professional social work identity I was supposed to be cultivating felt incompatible with my ongoing experiences as a client. I wondered whether I was allowed to be both a social worker and a client¹ at the same time, and internalized that my experience as a client made me less suitable to be a professional social worker, especially if I was going to keep being a client. I wondered whether I could be my sickest self, or my most disabled self, and also still be a professional social worker.

I learned that the sick and Mad parts of myself were certainly not expected and generally unwelcome as part of my social work identity. My queerness was passable, most of the time, and mostly because it is also inherently connected to my whiteness. And yet, despite my clear sense at the end of my BSW that some parts of me are congruent with my social work self, and some parts are not... I still didn't

¹ In the interest of clarity and consistency, I use the word client to refer to individuals on the receiving end of social work throughout this thesis. I recognize that there is considerable weight associated with the term client, especially in relation to the term social worker, and that others in similar positions or with similar experiences might prefer newer terms like service user or consumer. I believe that individuals accessing social and medical services should choose terminology that feels best for them, and that social workers and other clinicians should be aware of and respectful of chosen identity language. I also believe that using traditional terminology in new ways beyond their oppressive or derogatory origins (i.e. reclaiming) can be liberating and a valuable tool for resistance. I use the term client throughout this thesis *because* I have been trained to believe that client is a derogatory term through my social work education, because it was commonly used by participants, because I reclaim it for myself and my experiences, and because I think it is essential for clinicians to confront uncomfortable feelings and beliefs about the term.

feel completely clear on what *exactly* my social work self is or ought to be. I read social work texts with the specific intention of uncovering a clearer idea of what social work is, who social workers are, and what social workers do... after already finishing an undergraduate degree in social work. It turns out that the social work scholarship is actually murky about these issues. There are some really clear claims that we are mostly morally good, that our ethics are a top priority, and that we share a desire to achieve social justice. But how that connects to who we are and what we do still feels fuzzy to me.

So, here I am/we are, embarking on this thesis journey, asking social workers who they are and what being a social worker means to them. I am seeking to understand how social workers negotiate their own multiplicities, how they claim their professional identities, and how they reconcile these understandings with the parts of themselves that are relegated to the “personal/private” realm. I am also curious about how social workers resist and challenge these dominant professional narratives. I am soaking in the feelings of tension and ambiguity about (maybe) claiming this professional identity for myself, while knowing how exclusive it is, how much I am expected to be the least sick and least queer and most sane version of myself to be a social worker. I am mapping the boundaries of normativity within the profession, and then also thinking about how I fit within and across the borders of what a social worker ought to be.

I think that sometimes I slip into the disconnected third-person writer to explore some of these ideas because of how deeply this work is connected to who I am and what I do outside the academic institution. It is sometimes easier to write about “the discursive paradigm that situates social workers as a mutually exclusive social category to disabled people” than it is to write about the heat of rage in my arms and fingers, and the twist of demoralization in my stomach, and the weight of disappointment in my chest when I read social work literature about clients like me. So, I have a little bit of both writing styles in this proposal, and I hope that this “personal” introduction gives a better sense of what this work is about.

The questions I ask in this thesis project evolved from my undergraduate research where I examined disability discourse in social work education in Western Canada. That study asked about disability content in social work training from the perspective of students; I also completed a cursory analysis of social work course outlines from schools across the country that focused on disability. Throughout that research, I grew particularly interested in the narratives about social work and social workers that emerged in my findings, and how those narratives intersected with ableism. My findings explored how social workers are discursively constructed as non-disabled and in excess of

normalcy, of ability, of power, of humanity, and of moral goodness. I was interested in the ways that clients are constructed as vulnerable and powerless, and how social workers are constructed as strong and powerful. I argued that social workers are not situated neutrally within the construction and maintenance of ableism, and that discourses about the profession shape and are shaped by normative values about care, dependence, professionalism, and expertise.

My interest in the discursive construction of social work in my undergraduate research (in addition to the personal experiences I shared earlier) led me to ask more explicitly about what it means to be a social worker throughout my graduate studies. As such, the objective of this thesis is to expand and further develop a critical understanding of professional social work ideology and identity and explore how practicing social workers negotiate these normative boundaries. In other words, I wanted to uncover the stories we tell about what social work is and who social workers are and analyze how these stories shape and are shaped by power.

To situate the study and its findings, in the following section I provide a brief summary of the relevant historical context for this project, as well as an overview of the existing literature about what social work is and how social workers negotiate their identities.

1.2 Very Brief Historical Context: Social Work in Canada

Developing a discussion on social workers' professional identities requires some grounding in the historical context of the profession and its establishment in Canada. Further, understanding how this historical context is embedded with past and present social work discourses is an essential component of a rigorous Critical Discourse

Analysis study. This includes analyzing current dominant discourses as they relate to the history of social work in establishing the settler colonial state and its political role in maintaining white supremacy, conservative ideology, and ableism. In this section, I discuss the entanglement of colonialism, ableism, and the establishment of social work in Canada.

One of the primary aims of my thesis is to make explicit the discursive boundaries that shape social work, as in the many different elements that inform an understanding of what social work is, or what social work is not. While these boundaries can be seen as operating in an objective, normative fashion, my work challenges what “counts” as social work, and what does not. It is important to note that most accounts of the history and establishment of the profession in Canada cite the import and propagation of state welfare programs through colonization as the “beginnings” of social work. As Mel Gray and Michael Yellow Bird (2018) note, “this colonial narrative, like that of many of the ‘discovery’ narratives of colonizing peoples, weaves the myth that social work (...) is a white European innovation” (pp. 62-63). Chapman and Withers (2019) trace how many forms of social working (that is, “any interventions into our social world done by anyone” (p. 5)) are disqualified from constituting as “social work” (that is, “paid work done by those who have accredited social work degrees” (p. 5)). They argue that “a great deal of work goes into policing the boundaries of who is and isn’t this strange beast called a ‘social worker’” (p. 4). Further, they argue that “who gets included or excluded in a profession, and what work gets legitimized as professional, are tactics of institutional violence” (p. 5). Although I discuss in this chapter some of the events of the last century or so that are especially relevant to understanding the context of mainstream social work

identity today, it is crucial to understand that the rich and diverse practices of Indigenous peoples across Turtle Island to providing care, justice, and welfare have largely been disqualified from being considered “social work.”

In addition to recognizing that many accounts of the history of social work fail to acknowledge diverse forms of social working, it is important to discuss how the establishment of social work in Canada is entangled with colonial violence and the enactment of a Canadian state. The role of social workers in the genocide of Indigenous peoples has been and continues to be an active one. This is especially evident through the enforcement and operation of residential schools and child welfare programs which remove and displace Indigenous children from their families and communities, the latter of which continues to this day (Blackstock, 2020). Child welfare remains one of the central functions of social work, and Indigenous children remain overrepresented in child welfare cases (Blackstock, 2020; Canadian Association of Social Workers, 2018). In addition to some of these explicit roles that social workers have played in the enactment of the Canadian state and the enforcement of colonial violence, the establishment of the profession has also relied on the importance of colonial welfare systems. These include systems established through the English *Poor Law of 1601* in Canada, which have also profoundly informed the construction and definitions of disability today.

Hanes (2017) argues that the *Poor Law of 1601* contributed to the delineations between disabled and non-disabled people in Canada through practical distinctions between the deserving (disabled) and undeserving (non-disabled) poor, determined “based on the inability to work, or to serve one’s master or landowner” (p. 408). These distinctions remain pervasive within dominant discourses and mainstream Canadian

social work practice today; the demarcation of disabled people as beneficiaries of care and non-disabled people as employable care providers prop up deficit-based models of disability. These distinct role separations between social workers and disabled people have served to commodify disability through care or helping industries that often employ social workers (Fudge Schormans, 2010; Harpur, 2012; Linton, 1998; M. Oliver, 2009). In the theory section, I discuss in greater detail how these role separations are shaped by ableism and are relevant to an analysis of social work identity.

In writing about the origins of the social work profession in England, the United States, and Canada in the 19th and early 20th centuries, Chambon (2013) noted that increased urbanization as a result of industrialization resulted in economic and social disparities becoming increasingly apparent, especially to “religious and secular leaders from the middle and upper classes” (p. 121). Concerns from those in socially and economically privileged positions inspired visits to the “slums” (Chambon, 2013, p. 121). Subsequently, the institutions of Charity Organization Societies (COSs)² and the Settlement House Movement (SHM) emerged to respond to the apparent disparity. The primary work of COSs (typically associated with Mary Richmond) was to organize “friendly visits” where “ruling class volunteers would visit, typically, between two and four poor families on a regular basis” (Chapman & Withers, 2019, p. 31) without providing any substantive material relief. As such, the “visits” essentially served the purpose of surveilling the poor and celebrating the “benevolence” and “altruism” of the ruling class “visitors” (Chapman & Withers, 2019; Margolin, 1997). Further, Chapman

² Charity Organization Societies and their Community Chest programs developed into the United Way, which continues to operate within Canada and across the globe today.

and Withers (2019) trace how COSs across Canada openly adopted and implemented eugenic values and practices and “eliminated the visibility of poverty” (p. 37). The SHM (typically associated with Jane Addams, the founder of the Hull House settlement in Chicago) is often posited in contrast to COSs as a politically active, activist-driven, and community-oriented response to poverty and social inequity (Chapman & Withers, 2019; Margolin, 1997). As mentioned previously, both COSs and the SHM were founded in England and subsequently transported to Canada and the United States. Both COSs and settlement houses in Canada are often credited as the original and founding “social work” practice settings; similarly, Mary Richmond and Jane Addams are often credited as social work’s founders in North America (Chambon, 2013; Chapman & Withers, 2019; Margolin, 1997).

The approaches promoted by each of these women and their respective organizations are, in some ways, very distinct. As Leslie Margolin (1997) writes:

Social workers may claim Jane Addams as their source of inspiration, but they *do* Mary Richmond. To put it in a nutshell, social workers attempt to change individuals and families, while social reformers such as Jane Addams aim to change institutions and culture. (p. 4, emphasis original)

In other words, some of the basic assumptions guiding the aims and values of the profession’s “founders” are fundamentally different. In the following sections, I discuss how some of the varied and even contested aspects of social work – like the contrasting approaches of COS’ charity focus and the SHM’s social reform aims – shape social work today³. Understanding these origins helps to frame some of the ongoing tensions within

³ It is beyond the scope of this thesis introduction to provide a comprehensive overview of the origins of social work in Canada; I would recommend Chapman & Withers’ (2019) book *A Violent History of Benevolence: Interlocking Oppression in the Moral Economies of Social Working*, in particular, for a thorough account. Hugh Shewell’s chapter on Canada in Geiss et al.’s (2003) book *Professional Ideologies and Preferences in Social Work: A Global Study* is also very informative.

the profession (i.e. between charity based and politically-oriented approaches to practice); this historical context also frames how modern social work practice in Canada was established as part of a colonial project. Shewell (2003) argues that “there is no distinctive Canadian social work” but rather that practice in Canada “can best be described as a hybrid, having been influenced primarily by its development and practice in the UK [United Kingdom] and the US [United States]” (p. 48). I would argue that, actually, this influence that Shewell highlights is evidence of how the development of social work in Canada is entangled with colonialism and the establishment of the settler state.

1.3 What *is* Social Work?

The profession of social work has almost consistently struggled to articulate and enforce a cohesive and consistent account of what social work is. A few pivotal moments and formative happenings in the history of social work can give us context about the divisions and tensions within the profession today.

Like a number of other professions and specialized disciplines, social work has been fighting to attain legitimacy and validity in society and the academy since its inception (Blau, 2017; Gomory et al., 2011; Okpych & Yu, 2014; Wheeler & Gibbons, 1992). Although there are many approaches to defining and legitimating a profession, one of the most commonly proposed requirements is the establishment and application of a unique knowledge base or scientific methodology (Evetts, 2003). I contend that social work does not have a specific method or unique evidence base, although I discuss later some scholars who argue that social work is a science with its own unique expertise and method.

One of the common themes in the articulation of what social work is centres the *values* of the profession - particularly the value of *pursuing social justice* (Baines, 2017; Canadian Association of Social Workers, 2005; Hick & Stokes, 2017; Mullaly, 2010; Payne, 2015). Payne (2015) argues that social work is unique among the helping professions because it promotes social justice and social change. Similarly, Shebib (2017) argues that the pursuit of social justice is unique to social work among helping and counselling professions in Canada. He writes that “social workers recognize that social problems arise, at least in part, from ineffective social systems” (p. 3). In this thesis, I explore how the distinguishing value of pursuing social justice emerges in social workers’ identity narratives, which I speak to later in Chapters 3 and 4.

In this section, I explore how the profession is defined by its epistemological roots and situate these boundaries historically. Olson (2007) notes that “in the 1870s, social work’s pioneers disavowed the approach the newly emerging social sciences based in public research universities were taking... [by] grounding their approach in empirically generated theory and knowledge” (pp. 51-2). In particular, these “pioneers” expressed concerns about the tensions and competitions between science/knowledge, and interventions/approaches (Olson, 2007). A few decades later, in 1915, Abraham Flexner delivered a speech in the United States (that was subsequently published) which asserted that social work was, in fact, *not* a profession, citing in particular “its lack of a specialized knowledge base” (Blau, 2017, p. 77). Some scholars cite Flexner’s speech as a pivotal moment in the historical project of establishing social work as a profession, especially the profession’s focus on championing the scientific method and establishing a unique scientific technique (Blau, 2017).

Okpych and Yu (2014) contend that prior to Flexner's speech, "the unifying element of social work rested in its concern with common social welfare rather than in a common method," but that this rejection of social work's professional status suggested that "a moral imperative was an inadequate basis for a profession" (p. 10). The authors go on to trace the history of social work's aspirations to become an "empirically grounded profession," executed through a number of projects including, for example, the adoption and use of psychoanalytic theory. Gomory et al. (2011) trace social work's allegiance with psychiatry, in particular, over the course of the 20th century, noting that this alliance "provided both a semblance of a scientific approach to enhance social work's hoped-for professional clout" (p. 142). They also single out Mary Richmond's development of the casework intervention as a clear indication that social work, "struggling for professional acceptance (...), strove to resemble medicine, by doing diagnosis and treatment" (Gomory et al, 2011, p. 142). Hick & Stokes (2017) maintain that Richmond "used the term 'diagnosis' deliberately, borrowing the term from medicine," (p. 42) and in so doing, established what would now be referred to as a medical model of social work.

Some other scholars propose that a specific scientific knowledge base does indeed make up a unique expertise shared among professional social workers (Cheung & Ngai, 2009; Fossetøl, 2019; Wiles, 2013). In addition, a number of generalist social work texts and articles on social work theory emphasize the importance of evidence-based practice (Gehlert, 2016; Parrish, 2021; Payne, 2015; Reid, 2001; Shebib, 2017), maintaining aspirations that social workers will ground their practice in science and therefore assert our legitimacy as a profession. Hick and Stokes (2017) argue that "as a more scientific

view of human services emerged” in the 20th century, so did the professionalization of social work in Canada, especially with the development of social work education:

The education of social workers gradually shifted from agency-based, volunteer training to a university-based, professional formal education. Originally based on the concept of charity, social work had evolved from a set of rules to guide volunteers helping the poor into a philosophy that embodied many of the principles of modern casework and techniques that could be transmitted by education and training. (p. 50)

Shewell (2003) affirms the argument that the first social work training programs in Canada (at McGill University and the University of Toronto) in the 1920s reinforced the glorification of science in social work over social reform or justice aims (p. 53). Soon after the establishment of social work schools in Canada, the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) was founded in 1927; the association is an umbrella organization for provincial social work regulatory associations (Shewell, 2003).

The prioritization of evidence-based practice is critiqued by some social work scholars including Amy Rossiter (2007), who argues that the move towards a scientific foundation for social work practice overshadows the relational and dynamic aspects of the profession. Relatedly, Shewell (2003) argues that:

The institutionalization of social work, its adherence to the project of science and empiricism, and its pursuit of professional status have together reinforced conventional, psychosocial modes of practice. Simultaneously, social work props up a capitalist system that ideologically isolates and blames individuals for social problems. (p. 45)

Haug (2001) also argues that “the assumption that expertise is based on formal academic training excludes the many ‘social workers’ in non-Western countries who lack professional qualifications” (as cited in Gray et al., 2018, p. 2). As such, Eurocentric values about knowledge and expertise continue to structure who can call themselves a social worker.

At the same time as some factions of social workers sought to advance the scientific basis of the profession, those especially concerned with justice aims and claims called for the adoption of power-focused and politically-motivated theoretical foundations, adopting a number of critical social theories under the umbrella of anti-oppressive social work practice (Blau, 2017). Critics of these power-focused theories have both historically and more recently rejected their legitimacy by dismissing their usefulness (rationalization) and even characterizing those who employ them as pseudo-conspiracy theorists (Payne, 2015, p. 325). For example, Payne (2015) argues that critical social workers “neglect clients’ immediate personal needs (...) can appear very negative to colleagues” (p. 324-5), and may “blame social factors for personal behaviour, which encourages offenders or people behaving badly to evade personal responsibility for their actions” (p. 333). While most generalist social work texts argue that the diversity of theories for practitioners to pick and choose from is a strength of the profession (Hick & Stokes, 2017; Payne, 2015), it is also important to acknowledge that some of the basic epistemological and axiological tenets of approaches to social work practice contradict one another.

As such, social workers and social work scholars sometimes report being caught between competing priorities, beliefs, and values (Chambon, 2013; Cheung & Ngai, 2009; C. Oliver, 2013; Shewell, 2003). Shewell (2003) argues that these tensions “remain today an unresolved question in social work” and asks: “should social work concern itself mainly with individuals and their abilities to adapt to their social environment or should it be concerned more with the nature of social conditions under capitalism and how to change them?” (p. 51). Relatedly, in an article describing how she came to be a feminist

social worker over the course of her practice and teaching career, Mary Valentich (2010) refers to the tensions between traditional casework approaches and structural approaches when she writes that “some [social work] faculty saw the revised social policy content and experiential, research-oriented teaching format as destructive to the school’s casework focus” (p. 226). I explore how participants in this study describe these tensions and professional dynamics in Chapters 3 and 4 of this thesis.

Today, employment settings for social workers in Canada are vast and diverse, although primarily constitute direct practice (e.g. counselling, casework, child welfare) in public and private health and social services, as well as non-profit community-based settings like community health centres. Social workers may also work in indirect practice, which typically does not include regular interaction with clients, and might consist of research, public policy practice, advocacy, and lobbying (Hick & Stokes, 2017; Shewell, 2003). With such a wide net of occupational responsibilities, practice settings, and theoretical foundations, it makes sense that the identity of the profession can feel intangible or confusing for social workers, students, and educators alike. However, fostering a solid “professional identity” is a core component of social work education, and it is generally expected that students graduate from social work programs in Canada with a firm grasp on what their social work identity *is*. The Canadian Association for Social Work Education (CASWE) is the regulating body for social work education in Canada. In CASWE’s *Standards for Accreditation* (2014), the first listed “core learning objective” for social work students is to “identify as a professional social worker and adopt a value perspective of the social work profession” (p. 10).

Social work literature that explores issues of professional identity typically focuses on the identity development processes for students (Bogo et al., 2006; C. Oliver, 2013; Osteen, 2011; Wiles, 2013). In their discussion on the professional identity of social work, Carolyn Oliver (2013) uses social identity theory to argue that the incoherence in what it *means* to be a professional social worker is grounded in “highly contested identity scripts” (p. 775). Specifically in reference to the process of socializing a professional identity for students, Oliver (2013) contends that:

Professional socialization is made more difficult by messages about social work identity which are contested, contradictory, and do not translate well to the interprofessional settings in which many social work students practice for the first time.... Are we clinicians or community activists, aspiring to expertise or equality with our clients? (p. 774-5)

In this excerpt, Oliver reproduces some of the crucial existential tensions of the social work profession, namely the tension between clinical practice and activism, and epistemological superiority (expertise) in tension with the professional value of equality. The tensions that individual social workers and students may experience are reflective of broader tensions that we can trace throughout the history of the profession. Through this study, I was interested in exploring how practicing social workers negotiate this ambiguity and tension when articulating their own professional identity and how it connects with the broader social work project.

1.3.1 Personal and Professional Dualism

Social work identity discourse often encourages dualism between the personal and professional “selves” of the practitioner. Although this phenomenon is certainly not unique to ethical documents, the CASW (2005) *Code of Ethics* provides an excellent example of how social workers are asked to divide their personal and professional selves in their practice:

A social worker's personal values, culture, religious beliefs, practices and/or other important distinctions, such as age, ability, gender or sexual orientation can affect his/her choices. Thus, social workers need to be aware of any conflicts between personal and professional values and deal with them responsibly. (p. 2)

In this excerpt, the distinctions between personal self and professional self are overt; although values are shared between the two selves, there are distinct personal values and professional ones. Identities related to culture, religion, age, and so on are relegated to the personal self. Social workers are called to negotiate discrepancies between their selves in responsible ways. I wonder how this call to split our personal from the professional might also be a call to filter the ways that we could, in any way, be like our clients. If you *must* be unprofessional (or unethical, or poor), be clear that this is in no way associated with your status as a social worker.

These tensions between the personal and professional are addressed in some literature on social work identity. For example, Wiles (2013) addresses the tensions in her article on varying conceptualizations of professional identity. She notes that “a recurring pattern in the data was that students presented their professional identities as a source of contention in their personal relationships” (p. 861). Most of the narratives in the article that highlight this tension situate the complexity in students bringing their professional social work values *into* their personal lives, rather than tensions in bringing their personal values *to* their work. In this thesis, I explore how participating social workers negotiate this dualism, and in particular how the distinctions between personal and professional are constructed. I explore how this divide is shaped by power; that is, how marginalized or oppressed facets of our identity are relegated to our “personal” or private selves or are constructed as unprofessional.

There is an inextricable link between the notion of professionalism and of ethics within social work practice and literature. Although the explicit discussion focuses on *ethical* social work practice (rather than the ethics of the *existence* of the profession), there is a clearly established connection between professionalism and morality. The language used in the CASW *Code of Ethics* (2005) clearly indicates that the guide is intended for *professional* social workers, social workers who engage in *professional* practice, and that social work as a whole is, indeed, a *profession*. Every value description is unmistakably qualified by its relevance to *professional* practice. The purpose of the *Code of Ethics* states that “ethical behaviour lies at the core of every profession” (Canadian Association of Social Workers [CASW], 2005, p. 2). This statement draws inherent links between ethical behaviour and the *professionalization* of social work. Further, the general use of professionalism as a concept within the *Code of Ethics* suggests that there is a strong connection between unethical behaviour and unprofessional behaviour – so much so that it may even be hard to differentiate what is unethical from what is unprofessional for social workers.

The inextricability of the notion of professionalism from the *Code of Ethics* indicates a discursive connection between morality and the professionalization of social work. This does not serve merely to distinguish professional/ethical social workers from unprofessional/unethical social workers, but also to delineate between social worker and client. In chapter 3, I discuss in detail how participating social workers reproduce the construction of oppositions between professionals and clients.

1.3.2 Critiques and Counter-Narratives of Professionalism

Some scholars challenge the normative boundaries of professional identity within social work practice and education (Chambon, 2013; Chapman & Withers, 2019; Dominelli, 2018; Fook & Askeland, 2007; Mullaly, 2010; Poole et al., 2012; White, 2006). For example, in one chapter of *Critical Reflection in Health and Social Care*, Sue White (2006) writes about Hyde's concept of a *trickster* to explore professional identity development and role narratives in interprofessional practice settings. White (2006) describes the professional trickster as "a boundary crosser, but also a boundary creator, exposing new distinctions, making the usual strange.... Often breaching morals and mores, the trickster invites the possibility of new values" (p. 21). She argues that humour and creativity are important tools for tricksters to challenge dominant ideas and blur boundaries in their practice, without recreating "anything prescriptive in its place" (pp. 36-7). White's (2006) conceptualization of the trickster as an important character in interprofessional practice - particularly in their role of inspiring reflexivity for practitioners – offers a valuable counternarrative to some of the more rigid professional norms within Canadian social work.

In their revolutionary book *A Violent History of Benevolence: Interlocking Oppression in the Moral Economies of Social Working*, A.J. Withers and Chris Chapman (2019) conduct a critical genealogy of social work and offer explicit connections between disability justice and social work practice. For example, they refer to the teachings of disability justice activists to recommend that social workers reflect on how notions of dependence, help, and care shape their identities as "helpers" (Withers & Chapman, 2019, pp. 359-361). Acknowledging our own needs, recognizing our collective

interdependence, and honoring when we receive help is an important first step in embracing disability knowledge in our practice.

Scholars who question and challenge the normative boundaries of professionalism tend to sit on the margins of mainstream social work literature, and the dominant discourses about professional identity and ableism remain largely unchallenged and unquestioned in mainstream social work practice, education, and research. Through this thesis, I hope to contribute to the body of literature that explores the normative boundaries of professionalism and challenge taken-for-granted assumptions within and about social work.

Chapter 2 Theoretical and Methodological Foundations

This study is grounded in critical theories and methodologies - specifically Critical Disability Studies and Critical Discourse Analysis - and is guided by an anti-oppressive and intersectional approach to inquiry. Critical social theories challenge and question “existing social and political institutions and practices and locates the sources of social problems (i.e., domination) within them” (Leonard, 1990 as cited in Mullaly, 2010, p. 86). Critical theory broadly informs critical approaches to social work, which focus on power relations and how institutions are oppressive. Mainstream, dominant approaches to social work in Canada construct social problems and inequality “as an effect of the individual’s lack of ability to cope with every day life,” and these approaches fail to acknowledge how broader social structures shape individual experiences (Mattsson, 2014, p. 8).

The application of more specific critical theories (e.g. Critical Feminism, Critical Race Theory, Critical Disability Theory, Queer Theory, etc.) in social work practice are referred to under the umbrella of anti-oppressive practice. These theories are categorized together by their shared “acknowledgement of subordinate/dominant power relations that characterize social relationships in society” (Moosa-Mitha, 2005, p. 61). Baines (2017) defines anti-oppressive practice as:

An umbrella term for a number of social justice-oriented approaches to social work including feminist, Marxist, critical postmodernist, Indigenous, critical poststructuralist, queer, critical constructionist, anti-colonial and anti-racist. These approaches draw on social activism and collective organizing as well as a sense that social services can and should be provided in ways that integrate liberatory understandings of social problems and human behaviour. (p. 5)

I specifically apply a critical and anti-oppressive *social work* perspective in this research and reject the notion that social work is a “fairly benign activity” (Payne, 2015, p. 323).

Rather, I uphold that social work as a profession is both shaped by and contributes to broader, intersecting forces of social domination and oppression. I adopt Margolin's (1997) view that "the more intense the belief in social work's essential goodness, the more immune it is to criticism, and the less clients are able to resist its ministrations" (pp. 6-7).

There are specific implications for applying the principles of critical theory in research of this nature. For one, the focus of this study is on the profession of social work as an institution that exerts power and maintains an oppressive status quo. Beyond acknowledging the power relations that characterize individual relationships between social workers and people they interact with, I want to uncover how what it means to be a social worker is shaped by power. In applying a critical and anti-oppressive approach to my research, I aim to draw the connections between participants' individual experiences and the broader social and political structures that they live and work within. In particular, this means attending to how participating social workers experience and negotiate their identities within the boundaries of normative professional social work ideology.

I use a number of central concepts and ideas from critical theory/anti-oppressive practice theories in this thesis. I use theorization as a fundamental tool in my resistance to dominant discourses within the profession that maintain oppression (hooks, 1994; Moosa-Mitha, 2005). I also use intersectional analysis approaches to explore and challenge rigid social categories within the profession; this includes a particular focus on anti-categorical approaches to resist how social workers are discursively constructed in contrast to clients (McCall, 2005).

There is an important distinction between the critical methodologies I apply in this thesis project and interpretivist underpinnings that are common in qualitative social research. A fundamental tenet of interpretivist research is that participants of the research (i.e. interviewees) are the experts of their narratives and lives, and the role of the researcher is to highlight and make meaning across diverse experiences (Babbie & Roberts, 2018; Leavy, 2017). Conversely, as Trinder (2005) describes:

In poststructuralist and postmodern research practice the interview is not seen as a straightforward window on the world, the interviewees' true feelings, but as a local accomplishment, a topic in its own right, where the researcher uses the interview to examine both which discursive resources or linguistic repertoires the interviewee draws upon, what moral reputation or self-identity is displayed and how accounts are constructed within that particular context. (p. 52)

This distinction is especially important in understanding how and why I conducted the analysis of interview data the way that I did. Rather than analyzing and reporting on thematic aspects of participants' individual experiences with social work identity, I am interested in the "discursive resources [and] linguistic repertoires" (Trinder, 2005) participants draw upon to enact and maintain social work ideology and identity. The focus of my analysis was on how social workers enact discourses of professional identity, and the ways these discourses are enacted in power-rich contexts of social injustice.

The theories and methodological approaches I use are rooted in similar epistemological bases. For example, Potts and Brown (2005) describe *political listening* as a key component of anti-oppressive social work research, whereby the researcher "becomes aware of the construction of multiple interpretations and multiple truths" (p. 272). This practice aligns and overlaps with the key principles of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) where the researcher interprets, analyzes, and presents data within their situated social and political contexts, and rejects the notion of purity and researcher

objectivity in favour of emancipatory research objectives. This bond across anti-oppressive research and CDA makes sense because of the shared epistemological underpinnings of both approaches. My work does not rely on positivist understandings of knowledge or approaches to inquiry and I am not seeking to share or create “objective” or value-free findings. The research I do is inherently political in nature, with emancipatory aims, which is consistent with an anti-oppressive approach to social work research (Potts & Brown, 2005) and my methodological application of CDA (Weiss & Wodak, 2003). In resistance to values of researcher “neutrality” and objectivism, and in alliance with feminist research practices, I typically write in the first person. This is also consistent with the values of CDA regarding transparency of the researcher’s positionality.

2.1 Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a research methodology that examines the relationships between power and discourse, and the role that these relationships have in shaping social practices, processes, and phenomena. Discourse is “not restricted only to statements, because a discourse also includes the unwritten rules (based mainly on ideology and culture) about what will be included and excluded in the statements” (Mullaly, 2010, p. 167). Approaches to conducting CDA vary widely, and scholars argue that CDA is more of an approach to social research rather than a clearly delineated set of methods (Meyer, 2001, p. 14; Weiss & Wodak, 2003, p. 12). CDA is a fundamentally interdisciplinary methodology in that it blends together sociological and linguistic theories and methods (Weiss & Wodak, 2003). CDA scholars argue that “complex interrelations between discourse and society cannot be analysed adequately unless linguistic and sociological approaches are combined” (Weiss & Wodak, 2003, p. 7).

When applying CDA, scholars are not tasked with conducting a sociological inquiry and then a separate linguistic inquiry (or vice versa), but rather work to blend both approaches together to analyze the space (and action) in between social processes and discourse.

Wodak (2001) describes the focus of CDA as “fundamentally concerned with analysing opaque as well as transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language” (p. 2). CDA studies “endeavour to make explicit power relationships which are frequently hidden, and thereby to derive results which are of practical relevance” (Meyer, 2001, p. 15). The focus on power in social processes makes CDA inherently political. The objectives of CDA studies are typically emancipatory in nature rather than contributing to or maintaining existing dominant power structures (Meyer, 2001). In order to highlight frequently hidden power relationships, CDA studies analyze “the ways in which linguistic forms are used in various expressions and manipulations of power” (Weiss & Wodak, 2003, p. 15).

There are a few essential theoretical assumptions that ground CDA. Firstly, CDA scholars believe that there is an important relationship between language and power. CDA scholars accept Habermas’s (1977) claim that “language is a medium of domination and social force [which] serves to legitimize relations of organized power” (as cited in Wodak, 2001, p. 2). CDA scholars understand the relationship between language and power in the following way:

Language is entwined in social power in a number of ways: language indexes power, expresses power, is involved where there is contention over and a challenge to power. Power does not derive from language, but language can be used to

challenge power, to subvert it, to alter distributions of power in the short and long term. (Weiss & Wodak, 2003, p.15)

This assumption is central to CDA studies; without a fundamental acceptance that language and power are intertwined, the process of blending sociological and linguistic theories and methods does not make sense and would not be an appropriate approach to social research.

Secondly, CDA scholars contend that there is no pure objectivity or neutrality in social research or in discourse. CDA questions and challenges positivist approaches (Weiss & Wodak, 2003) and emphasizes the importance of context in interpretivist inquiry. Similarly, discourse is assumed to be inherently ideological and contextual, and so a related fundamental assumption of CDA is that “there is no arbitrariness of signs” (Wodak, 2001, p. 3). Discourses do not appear out of thin air, and so they are inherently historical, and “can therefore only be understood with reference to their context” (Meyer, 2001, p. 15).

CDA values transparency and questions how power is hidden in what is *not* said or “say-able”; dominant power relations “naturalize and stabilize” discourses (Wodak, 2001, p. 3) and CDA scholars work to uncover and make explicit discourses that may typically go unquestioned and unchallenged. In resistance to the power that goes unchallenged by what remains unsaid, CDA “is always explicit about its own position and commitment” (Meyer, 2001, p. 17). This includes a positionality that aligns with those who suffer, and a commitment to critically analyze “the language use of those in power; those who are responsible for the existence of inequalities and who also have the means and the opportunity to improve conditions” (Weiss & Wodak, 2003, p. 14). CDA scholars do not claim neutrality or objectivity in their position as researchers; they

“determine their interest [in the context of the research problem] in advance” (Meyer, 2001, p. 15) and reject the claim that reliable, unbiased research is inherently apolitical.

Thirdly, CDA scholars believe that discourse is both structured by and structures social practices, processes, and phenomena. CDA scholars acknowledge that discourse is inherently a social process and avoid determinism in their analyses that position discourse or social practice as the cause or effect of the other (Weiss & Wodak, 2003, p. 10).

Correspondingly, CDA studies acknowledge that social actors involved in discursive practice (e.g. the “speakers” who might be the subject of analysis) are both shaped by the social phenomena they exist within and reinforce and/or challenge those same structures through their discourse (Meyer, 2001, p. 21). As such, CDA scholars acknowledge that “it is very rare for a text to be the work of any one person” (Wodak, 2001, p. 11); although speakers/writers make choices (consciously or otherwise) about the discourses they employ.

My choice to use CDA as a methodological approach to this work aligns with my overall critical and intersectional approach to social work research. For this study, the discursive materials I analyzed are transcripts from interviews with social workers in Alberta with over 5 years of practice experience. The study aims to “make explicit” the power relations that are frequently hidden in social work narratives; the study highlights norms and dominant boundaries of professionalism within social work and develops a framework of understanding of how a professional social worker is expected to be. Using CDA as a methodology provides me with specific tools to uncover the relationship between discourse and power that may otherwise be challenging using other qualitative

analysis approaches; I outline the specific analytic approaches that I used later in this thesis.

2.2 Critical Disability Studies

The questions that I ask in this thesis, as well as my overall selection of theoretical and methodological frames, are deeply enmeshed with my experiences with disability as well as my academic training in Critical Disability Studies (CDS). As I discussed in the introduction to this thesis, the questions I wanted to answer are shaped by a reckoning with my own personal and professional identities as a social worker. Broadly speaking, I am inquiring about what it means to be a social worker, and how the boundaries of these definitions are shaped by power. Much more intimately, these inquiries are fuelled by my desire to explore whether one can be both a client and social worker at once, or be a sick social worker, a Mad social worker, or a disabled social worker. I know that there are people who hold these identities in tandem, and the objective of this thesis is not to find a conclusive answer to these specific questions; rather, the objective is to explore the discursive constructions of social work identities, and explore how defining edges of the profession are painted with brushes of power. While this inquiry extends into realms of intersecting axes of power, my experiences with disability and ableism in particular led me to these questions. Further, the teachings of disability studies and disability justice ground my academic work. In the following section, I provide an overview of CDS and discuss the teachings that I apply in this thesis.

Simi Linton (1998) is a seminal disability scholar who describes Disability Studies (DS) as “an organized critique on the constricted, inadequate, and inaccurate

conceptualizations of disability that have dominated academic inquiry” (p. 2). Among many issues, DS explores *medical* and *social* models of disability, as well as the operation of ableism and disablism through class structures and the glorification of independence in capitalist societies (Linton, 1998; Robertson & Larson, 2016). The medical model frames disability as a deficit requiring treatment, cure, or rehabilitation. It is individualistic and situates disability within the boundaries of a person’s body; it does not account for external factors which may contribute to disablement. This model disregards the historical and ongoing oppression of disabled people and fails to address the complexities of disabled experience and identity (especially its political layers). The medical model of disability typically shapes eligibility criteria for access to social services for disabled people, which is relevant for social workers who often oversee the administration of such services and programs. Disability activists and scholars alike call on social workers to reject medical model approaches to practice (Autistic Self-Advocacy Network, 2014; Chapman & Withers, 2019; El-Lahib, 2017; Linton, 1998; Mingus, 2011; Walker, 2013; Wendell, 2001).

Despite these calls, disability literature within Canadian social work scholarship typically prioritizes this medicalized and individualized approach to disability. A growing body of literature demonstrates how social work discourse on disability tends to promote and favor pathologizing approaches to working with disabled people (Dupré, 2012; El-Lahib, Yahya, 2020; Gilson & DePoy, 2002; Meekosha & Dowse, 2007; Roulstone, 2012). Social work perpetuates ableism especially through pathologization by diagnosing collective struggles and experiences of oppression as individual deficits in need of treatment, cure, and control. Practices of pathologization overshadow the politicization of

disability while shifting focus away from addressing social, political, and environmental facets of disablement, disability culture and identity, disability rights, and disability justice. Practices and discourses of pathologization are deeply enmeshed with institutionalization, as tactics of state control like incarceration (in all its forms) rely on constructions of disabled and Mad people as dangerous and/or criminal (Chadha, 2008; El-Lahib, 2016; Joseph, 2015; Poole, 2011).⁴ These ableist values are important to keep in mind as I discuss the representations of social workers and clients as distinct social categories and how these representations are shaped by ableism.

The social model of disability rejects the medical model, arguing that disability exists strictly as the result of social and environmental barriers rather than within a person's body. The social model is rooted in Marxist philosophies and focuses analysis on material facets of ableism/disablism; this model is generally credited to the work of Michael Oliver in the United Kingdom. Much of the theoretical discussion in early disability scholarship was occupied by distinctions between and conversations across the medical and social models of disability (Bailey & Mobley, 2019; Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009; Shakespeare, 2014). While critiques of the medical model are widespread within DS literature, there are equally critiques of the social model. Most notably, critiques of the social model argue that it does not sufficiently address the

⁴ In a forthcoming book chapter I have co-authored with Maimuna Khan and Dr. Yahya El-Lahib, we discuss in greater detail the relationship between pathologization and institutionalization as core mechanisms by which social work in Canada perpetuates ableism and disablism.

relationship between impairment and disability⁵, and in largely ignoring or casting aside issues of impairment, the social model minimizes individual experiences of pain, suffering, and mortality (Shakespeare, 2014; Wendell, 2001). The social model disputes the notion that disabled people are defective or in need of treatment as posited by the medical model, but critical disability social workers argue that the social model “does not go far enough in deconstructing disability and offering social workers, as well as people with disabilities, a way of moving forward in terms of practice anchored in individual, familial and societal change” (Carter et al., 2017, p. 155).

Critical Disability Studies (CDS) builds on and moves beyond the social model’s focus on materialism and rejection of the medical model to address the complexities and nuance of identity and impairment (Fox, 2011; Goodley et al., 2019; Meekosha & Shuttleworth, 2009; Minich, 2016). Moreover, CDS moves beyond the focus on disabled people as *subjects* of inquiry. Rather, it is a methodology or approach to academic inquiry, which:

involves scrutinizing not bodily or mental impairments but the social norms that define particular attributes as impairments, as well as the social conditions that concentrate stigmatized attributes in particular populations.... with the goal of producing knowledge in support of justice for people with stigmatized bodies and minds. (Minich, 2016)

I use CDS both as a theoretical and a methodological approach to my work, meaning that I am not interested in studying disabled people as the subjects of my research (Minich,

⁵ The meanings of the words impairment and of disability should always be read contextually, and I encourage people to challenge taken-for-granted or absolute definitions about what these words mean and how they are used. There are myriad definitions for these words, and I do not attempt to construct new boundaries for these concepts here. However, in the specific context of critiques of the social model that it does not sufficiently address the relationship between impairment and disability, writers are usually referring to impairment as “the medically defined condition of a person’s body/mind, and disability as the socially constructed disadvantage based upon impairment” (Wendell, 2001, p. 22).

2016; Schalk, 2017), but rather I analyze social work as a site of oppression that maintains ableism. CDS has roots in postmodernism and poststructuralism and emphasizes the value of deconstructing how ableism operates within and through language (Shakespeare, 2014; Spagnuolo, 2016). As such, CDS provides a complementary theoretical foundation for CDA research; there is a mutual focus on the significance of language in the operation of power, and both CDS and CDA share emancipatory aims aligning with those who have been systemically marginalized and oppressed.

There are many definitions and descriptions of ableism, a term often used synonymously with disablism, although CDS scholars like Dan Goodley contend that they are different, but “co-terminous” and that the phenomena of disablism and ableism depend on one another (2018, p. 7). My current preferred working definition of ableism is by Talila “TL” Lewis, which was most recently updated in January 2021:

A system that places value on people’s bodies and minds based on societally constructed ideas of normality, intelligence, excellence, desirability, and productivity. These constructed ideas are deeply rooted in anti-Blackness, eugenics, misogyny, colonialism, imperialism and capitalism.

This form of systemic oppression leads to people and society determining who is valuable and worthy based on a person’s language, appearance, religion and/or their ability to satisfactorily [re]produce, excel and "behave."

You do not have to be disabled to experience ableism.

The concept of ableism - and the specific meaning that this definition provides - is especially pertinent and relevant to my analysis of social work identity. There are myriad cases of explicit ableism in social work literature. There is no shortage of examples of social work literature that deviantizes and devalues disabled people, or that pathologizes experiences of disability. While there is some literature that explores the impacts of

ableism on *clients* of social workers (Fudge Schormans, 2010; Roulstone, 2012), our profession has yet to grapple with the impact of ableism on practitioners and the impact such systems of power have on constructing the very nature of what social work is. As such, the focus of my thesis is less concerned with this explicit deviantization of disabled people than it is the normative boundaries of the social work that are shaped by and continue to perpetuate oppression. To ground this inquiry, let us consider first some of the ways that professional social work ideology preserves and propagates ableism.

Often implicit, social work discourses disqualify the possibility that someone can be both disabled and a professional social worker at the same time. In the generalist social work texts that were assigned reading over the course of my social work education, disability is almost exclusively described as a “characteristic” of a client population, or a social issue requiring intervention and/or treatment by social workers (Hick & Stokes, 2017; Payne, 2015; Shebib, 2017).

A rudimentary literature search for disability (i.e. “disab*”) within social work journals reveals a clear discursive paradigm whereby disability is a social category reserved for clients, and the notion of disabled social workers seems unfathomable. Even critical social work texts typically refer to disability identity only in relation to clients, and at least omit an acknowledgement that social workers might be disabled, too. The very first social work text I was assigned to read during my undergraduate studies, *Social Work in Canada: An Introduction* (Hick & Stokes, 2017), has a chapter dedicated to disability content; in the introduction to the chapter, Hanes writes that “most, if not all, social workers will at some point in their careers have a client with a disability or deal with a family member who is faced with the onset of a disability in a loved one” (p. 407).

Disability is also sometimes referred to as an “area” of social work practice, or a specialization; for example, Simcock and Castle (2016) introduce their book *Social Work and Disability* by stating that “social work with disabled people is an area of practice that has seen significant change” (p. 11). In some more exceptionally ableist social work texts, disability is described as a problem for social workers to fix. For example, in a chapter exploring social work and learning disabilities in Scotland, Dumbleton (2011) writes about how “social workers address the social problem of learning disability” (p. 99) and that “if people who have learning disabilities did not exhibit the characteristics of requiring help to understand information, learn skills and cope independently, then it is unlikely that they would come to the attention of social workers” (p. 100).

I want to be very clear: disabled people are social workers, too. We are not only clients, and not only family members of clients to be “dealt with.” Disabled people are caregivers and counsellors and case managers and activists and scholars. Mia Mingus, a seminal author and activist reminds us that “unequivocally, disabled people are everywhere... even if you don’t know or don’t acknowledge that we are” (2017). As social workers, whether we already know it or not, whether we are willing to acknowledge it or not, disability is everywhere, and disabled social workers already *are*. Why is it that our literature, our pedagogy, and our licensing practices not only fail to acknowledge this, but often frame disability identity as mutually exclusive to professional social work identity? These clear categories are reflected in social work literature beyond the short excerpts above and extend to multiple categories of systemic subordination. In their 2012 article, Poole et al. critique mainstream and commonplace social work practices which:

have often led to a divisive ‘us’ and ‘them’ mentality in social work where ‘we’, the rational, well, social practitioners decide on and distance ourselves from ‘them’, the irrational, ‘ill’ users of ‘mental health’ and social work services (who may also want to be social work students). (p. 24)

Through this research, I wanted to explore how this “divisive mentality” that Poole et al. pinpoint is not only a feature of social work generally, but also how this discursive contrasting in relation to clients is an integral component of the “us” identity of social workers. In a qualitative study exploring the experiences of Australian social work and human services students, Newcomb et al. (2017) found that students with experiences as services users struggled to integrate their “dual” identities as both service users and providers. The authors note that students conceptualized service users and providers as mutually exclusive, and “students felt that due to the *undesirable characteristics* associated with [the role of service user] they could not reveal this with peers or academic staff” (Newcomb et al., 2017, p. 686, emphasis added). This excerpt inspires me to ask not only which “undesirable” characteristics are associated with the role of the service user, but also what makes the role of service provider “desirable.”

The ableist, exclusionary boundaries of social work are also operationalized through registration and licensing policies for social workers. In both Alberta and Ontario, social workers applying for registration are required to disclose medical diagnoses that “could affect [their] ability to practise social work in a safe manner” (Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Service Workers, n.d.). Of note, neither social work college provides an operational definition for safety on their registration pages, and both threaten to revoke licenses should the college learn that an applicant failed to disclose their diagnoses at the time of registration, encouraging participants to

disclose liberally without providing clarity on the consequences of disclosure for their professional licensure.

Ruth Wodak is one of the most prominent scholars in critical discourse studies and is especially well-known for her work on the discursive construction of identity. She argues that the discursive construction of identities “always implies inclusionary and exclusionary processes, i.e. the definition of ONESELF and OTHERS” (2012, p. 216, emphasis original). It is clear to me that the exclusionary processes that define social work are at least in part shaped by disablism, and the inclusionary processes by ableism, or, the systemic reverence of non-disabled status and identity. In this thesis, I explore what more we can learn about how domination and oppression shape the inclusionary and exclusionary processes of social work’s ideology by studying the boundaries of our professional identity discourse.

2.3 Methods

This study included two semi-structured interviews with 11 unique participants between July and October 2020, which culminated in 22 transcripts. In this section, I discuss in detail how I selected participants, conducted interviews, and analyzed the data.

2.3.1 Data Collection

I collected data by conducting semi-structured interviews with practicing social workers (>5 years) in Alberta. Rubin and Rubin (1995) describe the process of qualitative interviewing as “flexible, iterative, and continuous, rather than prepared in advance and locked in stone” (as cited in Babbie & Roberts, 2018, p. 293). The researcher sets the direction and purpose of the interview and has the flexibility to pursue specific topics or emerging themes during the interview if appropriate (Babbie & Roberts, 2018, p. 294).

Conducting semi-structured interviews allowed me to direct the conversations with participants in a focused way while also enabling the interview to flow naturally and potentially lead to unanticipated findings that could be missed using an overly structured approach. This method of interviewing is appropriate and consistent with the exploratory objectives and qualitative nature of the study. I conducted the interviews using online video conferencing software (Microsoft Teams and Skype) and audio-recorded the interviews using these softwares' built-in recording tools.

In the first interviews, I asked participants about their social work practice experience and preliminary questions about their professional identities (see Appendix A: Interview Guide). The first interviews lasted between 55 minutes and 91 minutes, with an average of 77 minutes. The second interviews consisted of follow-up and clarification questions that arose from the first interviews, and further questions about participants' professional and personal identities. The second interviews lasted between 17 minutes and 101 minutes, with an average of 69 minutes. The rationale for conducting two interviews with each participant was to build rapport and foster trust with participants (especially given the online nature of interviews), create opportunities for clarification, and to ensure rigour in the data collection/analysis process by "living with the data" (Potts & Brown, 2005, p. 275).

2.3.2 Participant Selection

The participant eligibility criteria (see Appendix B: Eligibility Criteria) and recruitment processes were shaped by considerations for feasibility and methodological suitability. In Canada, social workers are regulated at the provincial level. I chose Alberta as the site of data collection because of my familiarity with the province (including

practice contexts, policy contexts, social work education, and social work regulation), and because it has a regulating body for the profession which aids in clearly identifying and delineating licensed social workers. In Alberta, the practice of social work is regulated under the *Health Professions Act*; the Alberta College of Social Workers (ACSW) serves as both the regulatory body and the professional association. There were over 7,500 active registered social workers in Alberta as of March 2020 (ACSW, personal communication, March 9, 2020). There are approximately 50,000 practicing social workers across Canada (Canadian Association of Social Workers, n.d.). Practice settings and contexts vary widely across the country, and it would not have been feasible to collect sufficient data from multiple provinces and territories and conduct a rigorous analysis within the parameters of this study.

I started the initial design for my thesis project in January 2020 during a directed study course where I reviewed relevant substantive and methodological literature to inform the project. Prior to the implementation of public health restrictions amidst the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, I also limited the scope of study to be specific to Alberta in order to maintain feasibility. When I was planning on conducting interviews in-person, it would not have been feasible to interview social workers across the country. In addition, this specificity in situated scope helped to ground the project in a particular social, cultural, regional, and political context, which is important for rigorous CDA studies. In response to public health guidelines and in alignment with Carleton University's Research Ethics Boards requirements, I changed the design of my project in May 2020 to conduct interviews online using video-conferencing software.

I started recruitment and scheduling of interviews in June 2020 after receiving ethics clearance from the Carleton University Research Ethics Board-A (Clearance #113092). I conducted recruitment by sharing materials on my personal social media accounts as well as through contacting social work practice sites and organizations in Alberta, the Alberta College of Social Workers, specific social work education programs in Alberta (e.g. University of Calgary, Mount Royal University, Grant MacEwan University), and personal contacts in the social work sector (see Appendix C: Email Recruitment). Recruitment materials indicated that people who were eligible and interested in participating should self-identify and contact me by email directly. I provided potential participants who contacted me with the online Consent Form (see Appendix D: Consent Form) and the Interview Guide to review prior to scheduling the first interview. I scheduled interviews after participants completed the consent form.

I used purposive sampling methods for this study, which is a form of non-probability sampling appropriate for exploratory qualitative research. Purposive sampling involves selecting participants based on eligibility criteria predetermined by the researcher, in order to collect data that best addresses the research questions (Babbie & Roberts, 2018). Through recruitment processes, I asked eligible participants to self-identify/self-select and contact me by email for further information about the study. 15 people responded to my recruitment materials and contacted me by email about participating in the study. In the end, 11 people participated in the study.

2.3.3 Data Analysis

In concert with its hermeneutic roots, CDA inquiry is interpretive and inductive, and explicitly akin to a Grounded Theory approach (Meyer, 2001, p. 18). Dissimilar to

more deductive approaches to research from a positivist paradigm, the data collection and analysis phases of CDA are not mutually exclusive, and analysis “might be a permanently ongoing procedure” (Meyer, 2001, p. 18). Meyer (2001) goes as far as to argue that there is “continuous feedback between analysis and data collection” (p. 16) in CDA studies. Rather than providing a “ready-made, how-to-do approach to social analysis, [CDA] emphasizes that for each study, a thorough theoretical analysis of a social issue must be made, so as to be able to select which discourse and social structures to analyse and to relate” (van Dijk, 2001, p. 98); ultimately, CDA scholars stress that compatibility of all aspects of scholarly inquiry is extremely important, which includes choosing appropriate theoretical frames with which to analyze specific discursive events.

A CDA approach blends sociological and linguistic theories and methods; the data analysis process in CDA should illuminate how power is mediated through discourse, how discourse expresses and indexes power, and so on. When conducting CDA, a complete or full analysis of many/all of the discourses in a dataset is unrealistic and likely impossible (van Dijk, 2001, p. 99), as any number of discourses can (and likely will) be present and interesting, and compounding aspects of power/oppression may be hard to tease apart. Maintaining a feasible scope of analysis is extremely important in CDA, and, in my experience, is facilitated through clear theoretical foundations and research questions.

I have included here a detailed description of my analytic process. The data analysis process I used was primarily informed by Jäger’s (2001) CDA toolbox and van Dijk’s (2000, 2006) approach to ideology and discourse. Although I have organized it in a somewhat-linear fashion, the analysis stage of research is not at all linear in CDA

studies (Meyer, 2001, p. 16). This outline provides a general overview of the various steps I took to analyze the data; in reality, the process was not this concrete or straightforward, and the fine-tuning of codebooks required me to move fluidly through the process, sometimes taking steps back or re-doing sections of analysis.

The first stage of my analysis process involved a general structural analysis of the discursive material. This involved note-taking during and after the interviews. I used reflection prompts to guide this initial analysis, which included questions about a general characterization of the material and identification of semantic macrostructures or initial themes.

Throughout the first round of interviews, I transcribed audio data and reviewed transcripts as well as my notes and characterizations of the interviews to identify very broad emerging themes and discourse fragments. I kept an ongoing record of these themes, as well as key excerpts from interviews that I thought were representative of the concepts. In the first round of analysis, I focused on identifying patterns in the *content* of interview data, or substantive themes that were related to the interview guide questions, my overarching research questions, or topics that were unexpected or surprising to me. Some of the initial themes I identified included themes about identity, personal-professional dualism, and defining characteristics of the social work profession. Most of this process is similar to an initial stage of coding or analysis that I would conduct for a thematic analysis of the data. In addition to identifying and tracking themes in the

content, I included in this initial stage of analysis any discursive strategies that stood out to me in the interview process, especially of word choices and argumentative structures⁶.

The second stage of the analysis process is less linear than the first. While completing the second set of interviews, I revised and added to the initial thematic outline I established during the first interviews. I completed multiple re-readings of the dataset from first interviews to conduct a basic analysis and coding framework, using the content-focused themes that I identified during interviews. I then categorized the codes based on their discursive significance: that is, I re-organized the substantive patterns and themes I initially identified into discursive fragments⁷.

I reviewed this set of themes and discourse fragments with my thesis committee, who provided feedback to refine the codebook before I moved into the final stage of analysis. At this stage, I also reviewed my codebook with peers to get further feedback. Then, I added and coded the dataset of second interviews. I reviewed all of the *coded* data with the central purpose of finding excerpts which demonstrate the discourse being used, in addition to counter-discourses which challenge the dominant threads.

My third stage of analysis involved a far more detailed and fine analysis of typical discourse fragments. I analyzed the coded data and sought to identify and assess

⁶ For example, in one of my first interviews, I took note that the participant referred to “pockets” of social work colleagues who share similar beliefs and approaches, which is an interesting word choice and signals sub-categorizations of the profession within a larger whole. When other participants used the same word (pockets) in later interviews, I added it to the ongoing record of themes. I also used this ongoing record of concepts and substantive themes to structure parts of the second interviews. For example, because “pride” (in the profession) was a recurring discourse in the first interviews despite it not being included in the interview guide or as a question I routinely asked as a follow-up, I asked participants in the second interview about their sense of pride in social work (either for further clarification or to initiate the discussion).

⁷ For example, I categorized a number of preliminary themes into a code about the discursive enactment of the social work profession (i.e. what social work is, and isn’t); some of the sub-codes I included here included ‘epistemology: theory, knowledge, expertise’ and ‘axiology: values, social justice, ethics’.

discursive strategies being employed by participants. The strategies I discuss in this thesis include: pronominal structures, collective symbolism, metaphorism, and active and passive voice/implications regarding agency. In order to more comprehensively analyze the overarching characterization of social workers and clients as distinct social actors, I also use Halliday's (1984) typology of processes (verbs) to study transitivity, or, representations of what people do, to whom, and how (as cited in Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 105). The specific strategies and typologies used are described in more detail in Chapters 3 and 4.

2.4 Rigour and Trustworthiness

Attending to rigour and trustworthiness in critical qualitative research looks different than it would if this study was grounded in positivism. Traditional positivist approaches to research focus on notions of reliability and validity, value researcher objectivity and distance from the subject of inquiry, and ask researchers to strive to keep politics out of the picture (Hill Collins, 2000; Padgett, 2017; Potts & Brown, 2005). As I have already discussed in Chapter 2, these principles and values are inconsistent with the frameworks this study is grounded in. Anti-oppressive researchers, critical discourse analysts, and intersectional Black feminist scholars offer their own approaches to strive for high quality, rigorous, and trustworthy research practices and outcomes. Potts and Brown (2005) refer to the assessment of anti-oppressive research as a "theoretical, principled question as opposed to a technical concern" (p. 277) and suggest some prompting reflexive questions for researchers to consider and self-assess. In the following section, I highlight a few of the approaches that I practiced throughout this project.

Critical discourse analysts emphasize the transdisciplinarity of inquiry as a central component of rigour in CDA studies; this includes the blending of theoretical frameworks, as well as the inherent interdisciplinarity of methodology in CDA in using both sociological and linguistic analysis methods. Critical scholars, critical discourse analysts, and anti-oppressive researchers alike emphasize the impact and purpose of research as a central facet of its reliability, arguing that the process and outcomes of a study should be useful and emancipatory. It is important to me that this research has value and use beyond my own learning; this is reflected in my commitment to sharing findings in an accessible way with participants, social workers, social researchers, and community members.

Potts and Brown (2005) encourage researchers to reflect on the relationships they establish with participants, and how we “take enough time for authentic relationships to be built and (...) give people the time and respect to be truly honest” (p. 277). I designed my data collection methods in a way that provided me with multiple opportunities to connect with participants, particularly by conducting two separate interviews with each person. Although this research provided me with only a small glimpse into the worlds of participants, I felt that the multiple interview process did facilitate a greater sense of trust between us.

I kept a thorough audit trail throughout the research process, which included writing about all research decisions, journaling before and after each interview I conducted, and capturing reflections that emerged at any point in the process. Beyond the purpose of keeping a record of the research process to “prove” its rigour, this is an important aspect of reflexive research practice where I consistently consider my own role

within the project. This also includes an awareness and documentation of how the research project incites shifts in my own thinking and understanding of the world. I have incorporated some of these reflections into this thesis. As part of the reflexivity process, I also engaged in regular informal peer debriefing and support.

Patricia Hill Collins (2000) articulates four key principles of Black feminist epistemology that stand in contrast and resistance to positivist approaches to inquiry in her book *Black Feminist Thought*. One of the facets of the framework is considering lived experience as a criterion of meaning (p. 257). She argues that “individuals who have lived through the experiences about which they claim to be experts are more believable and credible than those who have merely read or thought about such experiences” (p. 257). While the concept of lived experience is, of course, nuanced and complex, I think it is important to this work that I occupy a shared positionality as a trained social worker and as a client. When it felt appropriate, relevant, and safe to do so, I disclosed personal information about myself to participants during interviews; in particular, I shared with some participants my experiences as a client in social work spaces, and my experiences as a queer and disabled person. I also think that it is important that I am aware of and acknowledge my status as a white person - in this white-dominated profession - and that I am reflexive about how this positionality informs the research that I do.

van Dijk’s sociocognitive approach to CDA encourages researchers to attend to context models of discursive data they are analyzing. Context models refer to the ways that a speaker or writer chooses which knowledge to share through discourse with their audience based on what the speaker/writer thinks that the audience already knows. van Dijk (2003) writes that “we only know what knowledge to express or to leave implicit or

presupposed when we know (or have reason to believe) what our recipients know” (p. 95). The participants I interviewed presumably see me as a member of the “epistemic community” of social workers (van Dijk, 2003, p. 85). In my communications with participants and throughout my recruitment materials, I included references to my role as a social work student so participants were aware of this positionality. My social work education grounds me in a similar context model as my participants (i.e. that both participant and interviewer might assume a shared understanding of what it means to be a social worker); it is important to consider this context while assessing the facets of social work ideology reproduced throughout interviews by participants. For example, on a number of occasions, when I asked about what social work is, or what it means to be a social worker, some participants laughed and said that although it seemed clear to them, they did not know how to articulate it to me.

Although my social work education grounds me in a similar ideological context as my participants (in addition to other shared contexts including living in Alberta), a number of participants referred to my age/relative youthfulness and status as a student to contextualize their responses to questions. As such, some responses had instructive or pedagogical undertones, indicated by statements such as “I can see that we have a huge age difference here” or “I should tell you this because you're a young woman, I'll give you a hint. Never, never say I didn't help you.” van Dijk (2006) argues that didactic (educational or instructive) ideological discourse is typically more explicit, and “formulates the general contents of the ideological schema of the group” (pp. 132-3). As such, I paid particular attention to discourse fragments where participants referred to my youthfulness and discuss these quotes in particular in section 4.2.

2.5 Participant Information and Context of Interviews

I conducted interviews with 11 practicing social workers in Alberta between July 3 and October 2, 2020. All participants were registered social workers in Alberta, with the length of their careers ranging from five years to 35 years of practice. Only three participants had less than 10 years' experience, with an average career length of 18 years.

Participants had varied practice experience. Current primary practice settings included local government (n=2), provincial government (n=1), non-profits (n=2), social work education (n=3), and Alberta Health Services (n=2). One participant had recently become unemployed at the time of data collection, with previous primary practice setting in the non-profit sector. Two participants expressed that they worked for multiple employers; their secondary practice settings included social work education (i.e. as a contract instructor), hospital practice with Alberta Health Services, and work with the federal government. Two participants had spent most of their careers employed by Alberta Health Services prior to their current roles (in non-profit and social work education, respectively). One participant had spent most of their career in local government prior to their current role in social work education.

At the time of data collection, six participants were working in Calgary, three in Edmonton, and two in other cities in Alberta. All of the participants had completed undergraduate studies. Seven participants completed undergraduate degrees in disciplines other than social work before completing their social work education. One participant held a Bachelor of Arts and a Social Work Diploma. The other 10 participants held Master of Social Work degrees as their highest completed level of education. Two participants were actively completing their doctoral studies.

Two participants were men, and nine participants were women. I did not solicit race-based demographic information from participants, but nine self-disclosed during the interviews. One participant (Francine) identified as a Black woman. One participant (Gabrielle) identified as a Métis woman. Seven participants (including both men, Charlie and Aaron) identified as white. I gave all participants the option to select their own pseudonym. In the event that they opted for me to select a pseudonym on their behalf, I also gave all participants the option of knowing or not knowing their pseudonym.

At the time when I conducted interviews, the COVID-19 pandemic was ongoing and actively threatening the lives and wellbeing of Albertans. Participants talked about how the pandemic affected their practice; generally speaking, participants talked about burnout, exhaustion, grief, loss of employment, and transitioning to providing services online. Participants described how clients – especially those who are unhoused and/or experiencing poverty – were disproportionately and massively impacted by disruptions to services, especially as, increasingly, social services were inaccessible without a phone or internet connection. In addition, the resurgence of Black Lives Matter protests in June 2020 occurred just before I started conducting interviews; most participants talked about the relationship between social workers and police, as well as the role of social workers in addressing racism.

Participants also described how the newly elected Conservative provincial government in Alberta unequivocally made their social work practice more challenging and compounded the already dire and deadly impacts of the pandemic on their clients. Some of the concerns that participants expressed about this government included funding cuts to health care, cuts to preventative social programming, and changes to the

implementation of provincial income support programs (“treating clients like they are criminals for needing support”)⁸. One participant described how this government has impacted the political climate in Alberta:

This Conservative government that we’ve just had has probably been the lowest point in the social sector in the entire time I’ve lived here. I’ve never seen the kind of lows that we’re experiencing now in the social service sector. It’s been devastating for our communities, devastating cutbacks that I don’t think Alberta has experienced in recent history. It’s been really bad. It’s been really bad. If we could leave this province – our family – we probably would. It’s been devastating for social workers, for communities, the unemployment, the devastation for families, for people living in poverty. It’s really bad. It’s bad.

As this quote clearly highlights, the political climate in Alberta at the time I conducted interviews was “really bad.” The participants I interviewed were experiencing a great deal of stress, especially stemming from the ongoing pandemic, losses to racist violence especially at the hands of police, and an exceptionally cruel provincial government which impacted many aspects of their personal lives and professional practice. These aspects of the social, political, and affective contexts at the time of data collection are important to consider in relation to the findings I discuss in the following two chapters, where I present the analysis of my interview findings.

⁸ Of particular relevance to this project and to my broader involvement in the disability community in Alberta, while I was conducting interviews, the government also announced that it was reviewing and restricting eligibility criteria for the province’s primary disability income support program (Assured Income for the Severely Handicapped [AISH]). In a forthcoming publication with Maimuna Khan and Dr. Yahya El-Lahib, we critique both these cuts to the AISH program as well as the overall reprehensible ableist rhetoric of the current Conservative Alberta government.

Chapter 3 “That’s Not What Social Workers Do”: Exploring Social Work Ideology

In this chapter, I discuss how participants construct and discursively enact what social work is. I apply van Dijk’s (2006) discourse theory of ideology to argue that the collective figuring of social work is representative of a professional social work ideology which serves to promote the profession and maintain its existence. Grounded in a critical theoretical foundation which critiques the domination and power enacted by social institutions, and an assertion that social work is itself an institution, I question throughout the following chapters how the legitimacy of the profession is reproduced through the discursive enactment of social work ideology. Then, I apply this notion to highlight processes of ideological squaring throughout the interview data, whereby social workers are constructed in structural opposition to other groups, reinforcing in-group and out-group dynamics and covertly legitimizing the profession. In particular, I discuss and challenge the ways that “advocacy” discourses serve to legitimate our institutional power.

I originally sought to understand the relationship between discourses of individual social work identity and collective representations of social work identity or culture; throughout my analysis, I realized that referring to both individual social work identities and collective representations as an “identity” was confusing and somewhat limiting. Although there are CDA studies and theoretical discussions about collective notions of identity (e.g. Wodak’s work on national identity), I believe that van Dijk’s sociocognitive discourse theory of ideology is a more compelling and appropriate framework to present these findings. Using van Dijk’s (2006) theory, I argue that discursive representations of social work “identities” elucidate boundaries of a professional social work ideology. While social workers may not be *primarily* or *singularly* organized as an ideological group (like feminists or Marxists, but rather, primarily as a professional group), van Dijk

(2006) asserts that professional groups do indeed develop ideologies which serve to sustain and promote the profession and its interests (p. 120). As such, I refer to individual participant “identities” and to the collective figuring of the social work profession as social work “ideology” throughout the remainder of this thesis. van Dijk (2012) contends that ideology is “one of the basic forms of social cognition” and therefore also structures “subjective feelings of social identity (belonging) of its members” (p. 18).

van Dijk (2000, p. 43) proposes that there are six components of an ideological schema that are relevant and useful in ideological discourse analysis:

- **Membership:** Who are we? Who belongs to us? Who can be admitted?
- **Norms and Values:** What is good or bad? What is allowed or not in what we do?
- **Activities:** What are we doing? What is expected of us?
- **Aims:** Why are we doing this? What do we want to achieve?
- **Relations:** Who are our friends and enemies? Where do we stand in society?
- **Resources:** What do we have that others don't? What don't we have that others do have?

In this chapter, I use this framework as a guide to discuss findings, especially related to the norms and values, activities, and membership of social workers.

3.1 Norms and Values: What Do We Stand For?

In this section, I analyze how broad references to shared values - specifically, social justice as a value - dominate participants’ representations of social work and are a central component of our professional ideological discourse. As I discussed in Chapter 1, discourses about values are pervasive in social work texts. References to professional values were similarly pervasive throughout participant interviews; in particular, participants often referred to “social justice” as the profession’s most important and relevant organizing value. For example, Martha said that “social work is a lot about advocacy and social justice.” Every participant, except for one, made explicit reference to the values of the social work profession. Many participants stated that the values of the

profession are both what initially appealed to them in their social work training, and what they see as the most important defining characteristic of the profession. In addition to the most common reference and use of social justice discourses, participants also referred to other social work values to describe the profession, including: service to humanity, self-determination, respect for the worth and dignity of people, confidentiality, genuineness, warmth, empathy, and equality. Most of the values that participants referred to are encoded in the CASW (2005) *Code of Ethics*.

Participants enacted social justice discourses in the interviews in a number of ways. In particular, participants referred to the pursuit of social justice as *the* distinguishing feature of social work as a profession, especially in contrast to other professions. For example, Alex said:

It is the **only** profession that explicitly - I *think*.. this what I've been told – **explicitly mentioned social justice**. And actually has it embedded into its code of ethics.⁹

Alex uses the adjective “only” to describe the profession of social work and its comparatively unique commitment of social justice. As such, the reference to social justice in this excerpt not only elucidates the norms underlying social work ideology but also the resources of the group; the pursuit of social justice responds to both ideological questions “what do we stand for?” (norms) as well as “what do we have that others do not?” (resources). Like Alex, Charlie also referred to the ways that “social change imperatives” are embedded into the social work *Code of Ethics*:

How many people base their practice, though, in ethics? And I'm not talking about the ethics of, don't sleep with a client and don't steal their money, and hit their dog and all those kind of things. **I'm talking about social change imperatives, which**

⁹ In all participant quotes, I use italics to indicate speaker emphasis. Any bolded text (like in this quote from Alex) is emphasis that I have added in, especially to indicate sections of the quote that I go on to further analyze and discuss.

I don't think are in any other code of ethics. And I think that's what gives us our **distinctiveness**. And it's not really talked about.

Again, similarly to Alex, Charlie refers to this component of the social work *Code of Ethics* as “what gives us our distinctiveness,” especially rationalizing the uniqueness of social work compared to other professions who also have ethical codes. Phoebe refers to the pursuit of social justice as a distinguishing feature of the profession in the following excerpt:

I think **what social work also brings to the table** is that **social justice piece**, and, and looking at areas of oppression.. ways in which kids have been marginalized because of their race or their class, or.. you know, their gender or sexual identity, anything like that.

Here, social justice is used discursively to signify the profession's jurisdictional claims in multidisciplinary contexts. Phoebe personifies the profession in the first sentence and uses the phrase “brings to the table” to not only refer to the pursuit of social justice as a value of the social work profession, but as rationalization of social work in this workplace context. The personification of social work is interesting in this excerpt because it situates social work as the acting subject of the sentence, rather than an individual as the acting subject. Phoebe similarly utilizes social justice as a signifier of both the norms and resources of social work as an ideological group.

Participants also employed social justice to categorize members *within* the profession; references to a “truer” adherence to the pursuit of social justice were used to define smaller sub-groups under the broader social work umbrella. Despite the enactment of social justice discourse as one of the most prominent methods to define the boundaries of the profession as a whole (both in this study and widely within social work literature), participants utilized the same discourse to reinforce two distinct groups of social workers, namely “micro” social workers and “macro” social workers. These labels (i.e. micro,

mezzo, and macro social work) are used to describe what kind of practice different social workers do: micro practice refers to social working with individual clients or families; mezzo practice refers to social working with groups or communities; macro practice refers to social working with political or other broad institutions (Hick & Stokes, 2017). However, participants employed micro-mezzo-macro categories to signify meaning beyond the explicit representations about type of practice. Participants used “micro” and “macro” in particular to signify social groupings within the profession. The “micro” group was characterized by references to “clinical” social work and the use of individual-centred approaches. The “macro” group was characterized by references to the values of the profession (namely, the pursuit of social justice), as well as “radical” theories and approaches, including anti-oppressive practice. Although “mezzo” social work technically refers to a level of practice distinct from the other two, participants most commonly referred to it in association with macro practice; in the interest of clarity, I refer to mezzo practice under the umbrella of the macro group, unless otherwise stated.

The discursive enactment of the separate micro and macro groups relies on comparisons between them and some degree of mutual exclusivity; that is, constructions of micro social workers rely on representations of being not-macro, and constructions of macro social workers rely on representations of being not-micro. This was sometimes enacted quite explicitly, for example when Alex referred to her experience as a social work student “choosing” which group to align with:

It was taught and it was experienced and the way the students reacted to it was in such a **binary**, it was such a **micro or macro**, that I just was like, well **I gotta pick one** (*laughs*), and I'm gonna pick this **other** [macro] piece.

In this excerpt, Alex represents the micro and macro categories by explicitly describing them as “a binary” and by referencing the requirement to “pick one” of the two options.

These categories were also enacted in less explicit ways using other discursive strategies. For example, in the following excerpt, Laura uses the conjunction “though” to signify opposition or contrast between the categories of micro social work and an understanding of and passion for justice:

Even though a lot of our students come into the program with.. with.. with intentions to do **clinical** work and **micro work**.. most of our students come to the program with a **solid understanding of** injustice and **justice**.. they have a very strong.. **passion for justice**.

In this excerpt, Laura reinforces the separation between students’ intentions to work in micro settings and their understanding of and passion for justice by utilizing the conjunction “though,” signifying the unexpected pairing between this category of social work (i.e. clinical and micro) and this characteristic (i.e. passion for justice) typically associated with macro social workers. The construction of these intra-profession categories also overlaps with discourses of belonging in participants’ narratives of their individual social work identities, which I explore later in Chapter 4. These intra-profession distinctions between micro and macro social workers mirror tensions in broader social work literature about the competing priorities of the profession and “Mary Richmond versus Jane Addams” debates (Margolin, 1997). It is interesting that references to micro and macro social work permeated discussions of values and social justice within these interviews, and I think it will be important to consider the wider discursive significance of the terms micro, mezzo, and macro in future studies about social work identity and ideology.

Despite the pervasive representations of micro and macro social workers at odds or in contention with one another, some participants explicitly rejected the notion that only macro social workers can contribute to the profession’s social justice aims. For

example, Alex talked about resisting the rigidity of these categories (especially of a micro and macro binary) within her own practice:

Before, I used to be so focused on macro social work, I thought that that was like the **only way to do justice-oriented work** (...) as I have experienced more, I really see the value of.. counseling and other, other forms of micro work, now, and I think they **can be done with social justice principles at play**. And I think it's actually very, very important for social change, it's kind of like that inner work that people need to be doing, before they can be doing or alongside the community oriented or the macro work that they want to be doing.

In this excerpt, Alex describes how she has come to understand how micro social work can contribute to the profession's social justice aims. While we may associate social justice most closely with macro social work, participants also acknowledged the possibilities to resist oppression and "do justice" in any social work role. Both Rose and Aaron referred to claims they heard as students, made by social work educators, that micro social workers or those working with individual clients "don't deserve to call themselves social workers." Rose rejected this claim and argued that there are opportunities to advance the social justice pursuits of the profession while doing micro work with individual clients.

There are myriad ways to define and represent an ideological group - defining a group by its norms and values is merely one. The most salient and explicit representation of the social work profession by participants foregrounds the axiological basis of social work ideology. References to social justice reinforce not only the moral goodness of social working, but also the resources of social workers and rationalization of social work compared to other professions. As such, other contents of the ideological schema of the group are concealed; by focusing on the normative value-base as the defining quality of the profession, descriptions of our power resources (i.e. institutional power), as well as normative inclusionary/exclusionary processes by race, disability, and Indigeneity (for

example), are concealed. The dominance of values-based discourse to define social work ideology both rationalizes the profession's existence and obscures other inclusionary and exclusionary processes that define our membership. By centring and prioritizing the shared belief system of social work, we veil that social work ideology is also rooted in whiteness and white supremacy, in ableism and sanism, in racism and imperialism. By centring the pursuit of social justice as one of the primary activities of the profession, we conceal the profession's function of legitimating the state and enforcing normativity. In the following sections, I explore some of the less overt facets of social work ideology and representations of social workers as an ideological group and how they are shaped by power.

3.2 Structural Oppositions and Social Actors: Social Workers and Clients

van Dijk (1998) describes ideological squaring as the discursive process whereby “opposing classes of concepts are built up around participants” (as cited in Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 40). This process relies on structural oppositions to categorize social actors, and the evaluation of such groups need not be overt (i.e. the speakers/authors need not state that one group is bad, and the other good) because the evaluation occurs through discursive oppositions. This concept provides a compelling framework to deconstruct one of the persistent representations of who social workers are: simply by differentiating ourselves from the people we serve, and by representing social workers as powerful and clients as powerless. For the most part, participants maintained (albeit mostly covertly) that social workers and clients are distinct social categories, identifiable by distinct attributes and distinct activities. In this section, I explore how participants enacted these categorizations of social actors and argue that social workers are represented in structural

opposition to clients. As such, I contend that a primary response to the ideological question “who are we as social workers?” is “not clients.”

3.2.1 Activities: What Do Social Workers Do?

In this section, I explore participant references to the activities of social workers and clients. This exploration of activities helps us to answer the ideological questions “what do social workers do?” and “what is expected of us?” More specifically, this exploration highlights how the activities of social workers contrast the activities of clients. Within CDA, the analysis of what people are represented as doing is referred to as transitivity analysis (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 105). Halliday’s (1994) system of functional linguistics provides critical discourse analysts with a typology of processes (represented by verbs) that help us to study transitivity, or, representations of what people do, to whom, and how (as cited in Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 105). First, I explore *material* processes, or the category of verbs which typically describe the processes of *doing*. Through my analysis of material processes, I demonstrate how participants activate social workers and passivate clients throughout the interviews.

Table 1 provides an overview of material processes where either social workers or clients are the acting participant. In the third stage of data analysis (as described in section 2.3.3), I analyzed all of the coded data and identified processes which participants used to describe both social workers and clients. In these tables, I only included processes where the actor of the sentence was clearly identifiable as either: the speaker/participant in their role as a social worker, other specific social workers that participants referred to, a general “social worker” or “social workers,” or clients. I included references to “patients” under the client category. I did not include processes where the

speaker/participant specifically referred to processes outside the context of their role as a social worker (i.e. “in my personal life, I...”). Where there are conditions or goals related to the process itself that help to contextualize its use, I have included them in the table using parentheses (e.g. instead of only including “building” in the table, I include “building (relationships)” to clarify this process). I did not conduct a temporal analysis of the processes; for the sake of clarity, I use the present participle version of each verb in all of these proceeding tables.

Table 1 demonstrates how participants largely represented social workers as agentic social actors throughout the interviews; most prominently, participants signified that social workers *do* a lot. Conversely, when participants referred to clients, they passivated them; that is, participants employed discursive strategies which situate clients as social actors who have things done *to* them, rather than the activated social workers who do things for themselves and to others. Further, when participants did use material processes in ways that situate clients as agentic social actors, it was largely to refer to negative actions like struggling, committing crime, misbehaving, or overdosing. Although the frequency with which participants used verbs to articulate the agency and active status of social workers could be attributed to the fact that these interviews were focused on social workers and social work (rather than on clients), it remains that the passivation of clients and activation of social workers was pervasive throughout the data.

Table 1 Analyzing Transitivity: Overview of Material Processes

	Social workers	Clients
Advocating	Giving (credit to clients)	Applying (for AISH)
Affecting (change)	Harming (others)	Committing (crime)
Building (relationships)	Helping	Dealing (with addictions)
Challenging:	Impacting (people)	Defrauding supports
(the status quo)	Influencing	Drinking (hand sanitizer)
(structures (i.e church))	Institutionalizing (people)	Dying
(other social workers)	Intervening (in crises)	Experiencing (racism)
(standardization)	Leading (case conferences)	Getting high
Compromising	Leveraging	Leaving (domestic violence)
Conducting (assessments)	Managing	Misbehaving
Connecting (with people)	Mediating	Overdosing
Counselling	Overseeing	Printing (bank statements)
Dealing (with clients)	Perpetuating (harm)	Smudging
Doing:	Planning (discharge)	Struggling
(outreach)	Practicing (social work)	Suffering
(good)	Protecting	
(paperwork)	Providing (emotional support)	
(presentations)	Running (groups)	
Empathizing	Taking (babies/children)	
Enforcing	Teaching	
Engaging	Treating (people)	
Fight (the good fight)	Writing and sending (letters)	
Fixing	Yielding (power)	

3.2.2 Membership: Who Are We?

In this section, I explore *relational* processes, or the category of verbs which typically encompasses the processes of *being* and *having*. First, I explore *intensive* relational processes which represent ways of *being*. Table 2 provides an overview of intensive relational processes where either social workers or clients are the “carrier” participant (i.e. social workers or clients are the ones “carrying” the attribute). Verbs that signify intensive relational processes include: be, am, is, are, was, were, being, and been; other references might include verbs like become, mean, define, represent, or exemplify (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 110).

Table 2 Analyzing Transitivity: Overview of Intensive Relational Processes

Social workers	Clients
Being a baby snatcher	Being a new Canadian
Being a flag-waving, justice-for-all (kind of person)	Being a single parent
Being a go-to person	Being ADHD
Being a helper	Being brain injured
Being a loudmouth	Being bullied
Being a rabble-rouser	Being challenging
Being a source of change	Being complex
Being a squeaky wheel	Being cut off (from income supports)
Being an expert	Being discharged from hospital
Being anti-establishment	Being disenfranchised
Being attentive	Being drug addicts, “our addicts”
Being confident	Being evicted
Being curious	Being fetal alcohol [spectrum disorder]
Being effective	Being homeless
Being embedded (in systems that have no interest in changing)	Being illiterate
Being honest	Being Indigenous
Being inspirational	Being low socioeconomic
Being intelligent	Being marginalized
Being neutral	Being nonverbal
Being open to change	Being oppressed
Being political	Being picked on
Being politically active	Being poor
Being present	Being queer
Being professional	Being sick
Being proud	Being targeted
Being really good people	Being trans
Being removed	Being vulnerable
Being respected	
Being respectful of boundaries	
Being serious	
Being stoic	
Being well-educated	

The attributes that participants employed to describe both social workers and clients are more overtly evaluative than the material processes I discussed in the previous section. While most attributes for social workers are quite explicitly positive, the most common attributes participants employed to describe clients were “vulnerable” and “marginalized.” Interestingly, we can also see the passivation of clients and activation of

social workers occurring again in Table 2; participants referred to clients having things done *to* them, including being “evicted,” “bullied,” and “targeted.” In contrast, participants referred to social workers as “intelligent,” “political,” and “professional.”

Table 3 provides an overview of *possessive* relational processes where, again, either social workers or clients are the “carrier” participant (i.e. social workers or clients are the ones “carrying” the attribute). Verbs that signify possessive relational processes include: have, has, having, and had.

Table 3 Analyzing Transitivity: Overview of Possessive Relational Processes

Social workers	Clients
Having a reputation (for speaking out and up)	Having a lack of access to technology
Having education	Having addictions
Having expertise	Having autism
Having power and privilege	Having challenges
Having pride (in the profession)	Having chronic health issues
Having resilience	Having cognitive impairment
Having responsibility/ies	Having “debilitating” chronic diseases
Having shared identity (with other social workers)	Having dementia
Having training	Having disabilities
	Having language barriers
Metaphor	Having limited access to internet
Having the social work gene	Having lived experience
Having the social work brain	Having lower income
Having an “innate ability to see”	Having mental health issues
	Having problems
	Having trauma
	<i>Not</i> having power
	<i>Not</i> having privilege
	<i>Not</i> having financial stability

Participants referred to numerous client attributes using the possessive verb “have.” I explore the metaphors included in Table 3 which participants used to describe their social work identities in greater detail in section 4.1 and examine how these metaphors represent some degree of determinism about who can be a social worker. It is particularly interesting that many of the attributes in the client column of Table 3 refer to

diagnoses, impairments, or disabilities. Participants commonly employed person-first language (e.g. client *with* a disability, client who *has* autism) rather than identity-first language (e.g. disabled client, autistic client). The exception to this trend was when participants referred to clients as sick, or when one participant referred to people “being” ADHD, fetal alcohol [spectrum disorder], or brain-injured. Person-first language generally requires either the preposition “with” or some form of the verb “have,” while identity-first language typically requires only the use of an adjective (e.g. disabled, autistic, queer), but often includes some form of the verb “be” (e.g. being sick, being disabled). Rather than conceptualizing and describing disability or impairment as something that clients *are* and can experience as *being* an identity, participants described disability and impairment as something that clients *have*. Rather than disability being described as an identity or quality of belonging, referring to *having* disability situates this attribute as something clients possess, as an individual property.

One of the other ways that participants enacted structural oppositions between clients and social workers as distinct social groups is through discourses of expertise and dynamics of epistemic privilege and subordination. More specifically, the structural opposition was enacted through the exaltation of practitioner training and education, and the devaluation of client expertise. Participants referred to social worker knowledge as *having* training, education, or expertise (possessive processes); relatedly, participants referred to social workers as *being* intelligent, well-educated, and curious (intensive processes). Participants used the coded phrase of having “lived experience” to refer to client knowledge; it is interesting that, broadly speaking, participants did not refer to client knowledge as expertise or even as knowledge itself. Further, some participants

evaluated lived experience as less important or valid than education or training, reinforcing dominant norms which prioritize certain types of knowledge as legitimate over others. For example, Scarlett talked about a community agency that employs a social worker who has both lived experience as a client and formal social work education:

So it's a little **scary**, we're actually quite nervous about referring people to this particular new place for those reasons, because we're not confident that the training and education **outweighs** the (*air quotes*: lived experience) of some of the staff, right?

In this excerpt, Scarlett explicitly evaluates social work training and education as more important than lived experience; she used the gesture of air quotes to signify the illegitimacy of lived experience as knowledge in relation to education. Interestingly, she used the word “scary” to describe her hesitation to refer clients to social workers with lived experience. Similarly, Aaron described how social workers sometimes feel as though they have to be “careful” around practitioners with lived experience, and how this knowledge is “disrespected.” This dynamic of professional distinguishing is explored by Nuttman-Schwartz (2017), and by Haug (2001) as an operation of colonialism regarding whose social work credentials are accepted and valued. It is important to recognize that fear-based attitudes and discourses about disabled and Mad people are foundational to tactics of state control and violence like institutionalization and incarceration; as such, both participants’ use of fear discourse is especially important to note. This devaluation of client knowledge and prioritization of post-secondary education, which is reproduced by participants, contributes to social work’s long-standing professionalization aims. Further, this epistemic hierarchicalism maintains relations of power about what “counts” as social work; the prioritization of post-secondary education for social workers discredits multiple ways of knowing as valid foundations for practice.

In this section, I applied van Dijk's (2006) theory of ideology and discourse and Halliday's (1984) typology of verb processes to discuss how participants construct social workers and clients as distinct social groups, and how this is a core component of social work ideology. I explored how participants constructed social workers as agentic social actors with mostly positive attributes (e.g. being professional, intelligent, and well-educated). I also discussed how participants passivated clients as social actors, who mostly have things done *to* them. Overall, participants represented social workers more positively than clients. Whether the structural oppositions constructed between social workers and clients are explicit, intentional, or conscious, these evaluative discourses can be traced to the colonial origins of the profession in Canada. Margolin (1997) contends that the "friendly visits" organized by Charity Organization Societies and the stories and photos the groups published about poor families established a division between "viewer and viewed, subjects and objects" (p. 17). Margolin (1997) even notes that news articles and books of the time that reported on poor living conditions after authors partook on "friendly visits" emphasized "passivity and nonreflexivity of the poor, and agency and reflexivity of the well-to-do" (p. 17).

In chapter 2, I discussed the *CASW Code of Ethics* (2005) and the use of the notion of professionalism to demonstrate how there is a deeply rooted connection between ethics/morality and professionalism within social work in Canada. When we construct clients as distinctly not-social workers, we maintain our professional status and the ethical authority associated with it. Maintaining this ethical authority is deeply connected to the process of asserting professional status, which evidently goes hand in hand with distinguishing between client and social worker and wedging as much space as

possible between these two social identities. Nuttman-Schwartz (2017) describes one such method of professional distinguishing whereby “social workers who are too close to their clients are not considered professional enough, and their role in the field is still marginal” (p. 3). In the next section, I discuss how participants represent social work ideology to promote the interests of the group and legitimate the profession, especially through the emphasis on positive representations and de-emphasis, denial, and mitigation of the negative properties of the in-group (social workers).

3.3 Legitimation and Promotion

van Dijk (2006) proposes that some of the functions of ideologies are to “self-represent the group and the membership and identification of its members, to organize their social practices or struggle, and to promote the interests of the group and its members with respect to other groups” (p. 132). In this section, I explore how participants employed “advocacy” discourses to legitimate the profession by emphasizing positive representations and discrediting negative properties of social workers and the broader profession.

Participants commonly referenced “advocacy” for the profession of social work throughout the interviews. References to advocacy for the profession hinged on repeated claims that those outside the profession do not understand and misrepresent what social work is, who social workers are, and what social workers do. For example, Phoebe said:

I would say that anything I **don’t love** about the profession of social work really comes from external factors, not from internal factors (...) I would say, you know, like, **the public understanding** of what, you know, social work is and what social workers do, is – that’s why **I feel like the need the – need to advocate**, because I think that there – you know, we still – **social work still struggles as a profession to advocate for ourselves to promote the profession, to have public awareness of what social workers do.**

As represented in Phoebe's statement above, one of the pervasive threats to social work ideology in the data was about public representations of the profession. More specifically, participants expressed concerns about the prevailing association between social work and child welfare, especially the belief that child welfare is the full scope or primary activity of social work practice (or that all child welfare workers are social workers). This association was characterized as a threat to the legitimacy of the social work profession in a number of ways. Participants used pejorative phrases and euphemisms to describe child welfare workers (i.e. "baby snatcher") and their practices, especially by referring to them as "taking children away." In one instance, a participant (Aaron) indicated that social work's association with child welfare makes it "a stigmatizing thing to be a social worker" and that child welfare is a "scary thing that scares people." Participants represented the threat of associating social work and child welfare as a danger to the values (and moral status) of the profession – the same values which, as I discussed earlier, are a central facet of social work ideology.

Participants also used a number of discursive strategies to distance both their individual social work identities and their representation of social work ideology from child welfare practice. For example, in the following excerpt, Rose characterizes the association between child welfare and the collective social work identity as false:

There's a number of people that, when I said I was going to be a social worker, they're like, "Oh, you're going to be a baby snatcher?" And I'm like, "**That's not what social workers do.**"

By contending that child welfare (or, "baby snatching") is *not* an activity that social workers do, participants discredited the negative representations this association bears on social work as a whole. Similarly to Rose, other participants described the relationship between child welfare and social work as a "myth," as a "misunderstanding," and as a

“stereotype”; ultimately, these characterizations of falseness serve to defensively address the threat of associating child welfare practices with the morally-focused representations of social work ideology. In some other instances, participants did not discredit the link between child welfare and social work, but distanced their individual identity from these claims:

I cannot tell you how many times when I say to people, "I'm a social worker," and the first thing out of their mouth is, "Oh, you apprehend--" or, "you take away people's children." I say, "**I don't want anybody's children.**"

In this excerpt, Francine refers to the persistent affiliation between social work and the activity of “taking away children.” Instead of discrediting the claim as an agent and representative of the profession by saying, for example, “we don’t want anybody’s children,” as Rose does in the previous example, she discredits the claim only in relation to her individual practice and identity. Notably, none of the participants worked in child welfare at the time of data collection, though three had previously worked for or completed practicum placements with Children’s Services in Alberta.

Participants suggested that one of the other threats to the profession is not just the disproportionate public focus on the wrongdoings of the profession, but insufficient representations of the “good” enacted by social workers. From an intra-textual context perspective, it is interesting that these suggestions to “highlight the good things” typically emerged during or soon after participants expressed concern about the association between child welfare and social work. For example, Rose discussed her frustrations with media representations of child welfare and social work, in particular the assumption that all child welfare workers are social workers:

And I get really angry at the media when they do those stories on child welfare. That they’ll put, “Well, the social worker did this.” And I want to be, like, **do you know that that’s an actual social worker?** Because about half of the staff that

work at Child and Family Services¹⁰ are not social workers. They have other types of degrees. They're not social workers at all. But they're continually called social workers, which... I feel like, **demeans our profession** (....) **There's this assumption that everybody that works for Child and Family Services is a social worker.** But they're not! (....)

Because I have pride in social work and know that those things exist like that's when I get **really angry and frustrated** and... Because I am proud of our profession and we don't do – **media doesn't cover us when we're doing the really good things.** They cover when bad things happen! And it's not even a social worker necessarily who did it!

In this excerpt, Rose argues that media coverage of social workers unfairly and falsely focuses on the harms caused by child welfare workers and neglects to mention successes or positive outcomes. She also describes how the title of social worker is used as a catch-all for staff at Child and Family Services, and that this trend “demeans” the profession. A number of other participants echoed Rose’s concerns about insufficient “good” representations of social workers, which fuels their desire to “advocate” for the profession. Interestingly, Martha described a proposed ACSW project which aimed to create more “good” representations of social workers. Martha described how the project proposed interviewing and video recording former clients of social workers “where they were speaking to how great their social worker was, and how impactful their social worker was.” Martha questioned the intentions and purpose of the project, and in contrast to most other participants, stated that “the public doesn't have to have a positive perception of social workers for us to continue doing good work.”

Although many participants also expressed concerns about the subordinate status of social workers relative to other health and helping professionals, as well as the

¹⁰ In Alberta, the ministry responsible for child welfare and protection was previously the Ministry of Human Services with a specific authority called Children and Family Services (as Rose refers to here). In 2017, the Government of Alberta restructured its ministries and established the Ministry of Children's Services.

feminization of the profession, the primary focus of “advocacy” on behalf of social work centred the denial or mitigation of negative representations of social workers and the need for more and better positive representations. Only a few participants questioned the lack of labour organizing conducted by social workers to protect and assert their rights as workers. For example, Martha noted that:

One thing I’m noticing is really missing from social work identity and mindset is **unionizing and organizing**, and labour movement knowledge and education. I see a lot of people feeling really helpless (...) you just see that people want that support, **they could be mobilized and they’re just not.**

Sharing similar concerns, Aaron asked why the ACSW is not a union, and noted that social workers are “fragmented” across Alberta which makes organizing difficult. I think it is interesting that most references to advocacy for the profession did not address the gendered dynamics of inter-professional hierarchies, or center potential actions like labour organizing, but rather targeted the prevailing association between child welfare and social work and shifting public perceptions of social workers. I think it is both true that social workers lack labour protections and are subordinated in the health and helping profession hierarchy *and* that we should be skeptical of a professional ideology which unilaterally exalts its members and denies the harms we conduct.

In this chapter, I introduced the notion of social work ideology and analyzed the findings to discuss how a central facet of such an ideology is the structural opposition of clients and social workers. I then discussed how participants promoted social work ideology by applying van Dijk’s (2006) concept of ideological squaring. It is evident that social work ideology serves to promote the interests of the profession at least in part by denying or mitigating the negative properties and actions of the group. As I discussed in the theoretical foundations section of this thesis, I reject the notion that doing social work

is a benign activity and adopt Margolin's (1997) view that "the more intense the belief in social work's essential goodness, the more immune it is to criticism, and the less clients are able to resist its ministrations" (pp. 6-7). As such, I believe it is important to carefully identify, assess, and challenge aspects of social work ideology which exalt practitioners or the profession. In the next chapter, I explore facets of social work ideology within individual narratives of professional identity, and discuss how participants articulated the processes of becoming a social worker and their nuanced expressions of belonging and affiliation with the profession.

Chapter 4 “Being a Social Worker is Ten Thousand Things and Nothing at the Same Time”: Exploring Social Work Identities

Against the backdrop of the previous section where I explored the enactment of social work ideology and representations of what social work is, this section focuses on individual practitioners’ professional social work identities. In addition, I discuss how participants situated their identities in relation to micro-mezzo-macro practice contexts. I conclude this chapter by discussing participants’ experiences across the boundaries of practitioner and client.

4.1 Becoming and Belonging as a Social Worker

Although the set of social actors that constitute social work as a group is enacted materially by processes like education and licensing (i.e. in Alberta, through legislation like the *Health Professions Act*), individual social workers may identify more or less with social work *ideology*. While one may accept some of the tangible implications of being a social worker with regards to, for example, occupational scope and jurisdiction or licensing standards, individuals might identify with the ideology of social work in complex and nuanced ways. van Dijk (2006) argues that “although ideologies by definition are socially shared.... not all members identify with an ideological group in the same way, and equally strongly” (p. 119). To this end, the 11 participants in this study described very diverse experiences of affiliation and identification with the profession.

Some participants suggested that apart from the education and licensing requirements that legitimize membership, *being* a social worker is intrinsic or innate, something simply you are or are not. The use of possessive processes (typically signified by the verb “have”) to describe social workers elucidates participants’ representations of social work membership as innate. One of the ways that this deterministic perspective to

social work identity was represented in the data was through the use of metaphors, especially with the body as source domain.

Metaphors rely on a target domain (i.e. what we are trying to describe) and a source domain (i.e. what we utilize or employ to create the metaphor); the use of metaphors can be important to analyze as part of CDA studies, because “when we use metaphors we can highlight one aspect of experience, while at the same time concealing others” (Machin & Mayr, 2012, p. 164). It is interesting, then, that a few participants described social work identity using a common conceptual source domain of the body. For example, Gabrielle said, “I think I **always** had that social work **brain.**” She employs a metaphor with a target domain of her social work identity and a source domain of a body part, namely the brain. In the same interview, when I asked Gabrielle about the core components of social work identity, she said:

I think, you know, like I said, maybe it’s, like I said, I always would be like, “That’s wrong,” like, you know, that sense of, like, wanting to know – or **wanting to challenge.. standardization**, or, like, just.. “People are just poor,” right? And so, “They just are,” right? And if you’re like, “Alright,” then maybe you don’t have **that social work gene.**

In this excerpt, Gabrielle refers to the “social work gene” and again, uses the conceptual source domain of the body to metaphorically describe social work identity. In both of these excerpts, Gabrielle describes social work identity using the words “gene” and “brain,” suggesting that one’s social work identity is both located as a part within the body, and that it is innate or intrinsic. Gabrielle’s use of the word “always” in the first excerpt also supports an underlying notion that social work identity is intrinsic. The repeated use of the body as a source domain reinforces some degree of determinism about the social work experience, that one is, or can be, born a social worker with a social work brain or gene; by contrast, this conceals or downplays the socialization and education

where one might *become* a social worker. This focus on the intrinsic nature of one's social work identity was stated explicitly by Scarlett when she said, "there's a certain amount of, to me, of being a social worker that **you're born with.**"

In addition to specifying that the social work identity is intrinsic, Scarlett also used the body as a source domain in a metaphor to evaluate "good" social work: "I would say a **really genuinely good** social worker has that **innate ability to see.**" The intra-textual context of this excerpt helps to situate this statement as a metaphor rather than a literal claim that good social workers must be able to see; Scarlett is referencing an earlier discussion about her ability to "see" and "know" a client's life story and experiences, whether they had been disclosed to her or not, based on only initial conversations with them. In the above excerpt, Scarlett uses the body as a source domain in this metaphor by specifically referring to the "ability to see" to describe not just the profession, but a "really genuinely good social worker." In this instance, the underlying notion that one's social work identity is intrinsic rather than socialized or learned (as an ideology might be) is reinforced. Further, Scarlett describes the intrinsic quality not only as a defining feature of any social worker, but of *good* social workers. Gabrielle also used an almost identical metaphor as Scarlett with reference to sight, describing social work identity as "**seeing** stuff that other people don't see." Janette also described a key component of her professional identity by referring to sight when she said, "I can't help but **see** things through that [social work] lens."

Other participants described more fluid and shifting journeys to conceptualizing their professional identities as social workers. Rather than "becoming a social worker" as a single moment or even a process that occurred within their social work education or at

the time of licensing, some participants described ongoing shifts in their professional identities and membership to the ideological group. In particular, participants referred to their first experiences as students in social work classes as transformative, impactful, or emotional; more specifically, participants referred to a sense of “belonging” that emerged in the early days of their social work education. Rose stated that during her first social work class, she felt that “this is where I need to be.” Phoebe likened the experience to falling in love when she said, “when I started social work school in my BSW, I was just – I think I fell in love with it. I felt like, OK, this is the place for me, this fits.”

Other participants referred to shifts in identifying as a social worker which occurred later in their careers. Alex stated that, when she was a student, she was “actually pretty resistant to calling [herself] a social worker.” She also described how her identification shifted when she became a social work educator:

It's been.. since I started teaching, where I have, first and foremost, seen social work as an identity.. more than anything else (...) Now, I actually see the identity as the, the overarching component, and everything else kind of comes down from it. So there's definitely been this **shift**, where like **I didn't identify at all as a social worker**, to like, I did, and now I actually see the identity pieces as the most important part of social work, in a lot of ways.

Similarly to Alex, two other participants who had experience as social work educators described how their identity as a social worker grew stronger since beginning in that role.

Phoebe described this shift in the following excerpt:

Teaching has completely changed me. Teaching, social work education... I-I, it's, it's a huge part of my identity as a social worker. Not that I'm a teacher of social work, but that it's changed me professionally as a social worker (...) It's **challenged me to integrate my personal and my professional life.**

Phoebe went on to describe how being a social work educator made her feel “really challenged in [her] professional identity” and how she changed parts of her life as a result. In particular, she talked about how prior to being an educator, she was “living two

separate lives... with my professional life being one stream, and my personal life being another stream.” Phoebe said that she made a number of changes to integrate the two “streams” of her life; she referred to this integration as “liberating,” and said that “it felt like living my truth.” Laura described how becoming a social work educator “brought [her] back to the roots of the profession” and “reinvigorated [her] understanding of what brought me to the profession, around social justice and our values.”

Multiple participants discussed how their identity as a social worker extends into many or all parts of their life. Charlie said, “being a social worker, for me, was all the time,” especially to refer to multiple opportunities for advocacy and resistance outside his workplace. Janette stated, “I just don’t know where my social work identity would stop and my personal identity would start (...) it just becomes integrated into who you are.” Gabrielle referred to the “complete holism” between her personal self and professional self, and particularly attributed this holism to her “cultural integrity and ethics” as a Métis woman. These holistic approaches to social work identity contrast normative notions of personal and professional dualism where practitioners are expected to separate their “selves” out.

Furthermore, Laura, Rose, Phoebe, and Scarlett described feeling a strong sense of belonging within the social work profession and inherent connection to other social workers. For example, Laura said:

I think when you meet a social worker across the room, you know, ‘Yeah. Yeah, we have that **shared vision.**’ Whether you’re in hospital practice, child welfare, non-profit, women’s shelters, I think we do have that shared vision.

Similarly to Laura, both Phoebe and Rose described feeling a strong sense of belonging that was especially related to the values of the profession. For example, Phoebe described how this sense of belonging started during her BSW education: “I felt like I belonged

because.. the values that are a part of and inform social work practice are also my personal values. And so, it was a very good fit for me.” Other participants described feeling a much weaker sense of belonging within the profession and inherent social connection to other social workers. This is clearly exemplified when Alex said, “I don’t feel comfortable in a large group of social workers... I just don’t feel.. I just don’t really feel a connection.” This description contrasts, in particular, Laura’s feelings about an inherent connection to other social workers regardless of the practice context. Alex also described feeling “disoriented” and “alienated” when interacting with other social workers.

For some participants, their sense of belonging within the profession was muddled by inconsistency in what it means to be a social worker. For example, Martha said:

I don’t think being a social worker is something I identify as holding a lot of distinct, specific meaning for me (...) I don’t think it aligns with who I am in a lot of ways. I think there are more substantial aspects of my identity that I bring to meeting with people.

Similarly, Aaron said that “being a social worker is ten thousand things and nothing at the same time.” Both Martha and Aaron also expressed concerns about the implications of identifying as a social worker because of the ways that other people take up the identity.

For example, Martha said:

It’s a complicated relationship to that title when you know you share it with people that you don’t align with, or, you know, that title is **used** to yield power in ways that are really harmful.

Interestingly, both Martha and Aaron referred to how other social workers “use” their identity to cause harm to describe their unease and concerns about adopting their own social work identity. Specifically, Aaron said that he has started to “see holes in the profession and how that identity can be **used** poorly by some folks.”

One of the other ways that participants described their sense of belonging with the profession was in relation to their affiliation with micro, mezzo, or macro social work. In particular, participants who identified as belonging to the mezzo-macro group signified that this group is non-normative in relation to the more dominant micro social workers. Participants signified the dominant status of the micro group by referring to it as the “majority” (and the macro group as the “minority”). Describing her experiences in graduate social work studies, Alex said:

Just kind of like that **macro-micro.. binary...** or... like, a charity-justice binary, like so many binaries. And I would often find myself on like, the, like the *other side* (*laughs*) of where **most people** in my [social work] classes were at. And there would be like a **small group** of us who were like **fighting for justice, or fighting for more**, like, **mezzo or macro practice**. So I sort of felt like I was in a **rogue group..** before the program in terms of, like the thoughts I had been developing and the way that I wanted to work, and then that was replicated within the program.

In this excerpt, Alex reproduces descriptions of the mezzo-macro group in particular (e.g. fighting for justice), including signifying its non-normative status in relation to micro social work. She refers to her sense of belonging in macro social work as being on the “other” side of the majority of her classmates, in a “small” and “rogue” group. Similarly, Charlie described how these categories were operationalized in his graduate social work studies by sorting students through “streams”:

It should have been called **clinical** and **everything else**. And I was in the everything else stream (...) Straight away, it’s categorized into clinical and **the rest**, the other **losers like me** who **don’t want to be a clinician**.

Charlie uses the pejorative phrase “losers like me” to refer to those who choose the non-normative stream in his MSW training which prioritized mezzo and macro social work theories and approaches. Charlie reinforces clinical social workers as the normative (and non-loser-esque) group. Similarly, Aaron describes how clinical social workers are prioritized in broader social work practice:

Yeah, being a **social-justice oriented social worker**, you're a **minority**. You're more of a minority than you think you are, because the ones that **tend to last** in our profession are the more **clinical**, or more—and they're also the ones that are **hired more**, and **given more stature**. So, not that they're not social-justice oriented, but their interest is more **clinical, therapy** oriented, more towards that **science, medicine**, kind of, aspect of social work, I guess. Yeah. So, it's.. it's different. Yeah. You can definitely tell if you work with social workers that work on psych wards or on hospital units that there's a **different orientation**.

Aaron reproduces the comparative (i.e. “different orientation”) representations of “social-justice oriented” social workers to micro social workers (i.e. clinical, therapy oriented, science, medicine, on psych wards or in hospitals). Beyond representing the group of social workers as different, Aaron refers to “social-justice oriented” social workers as a *minority* compared to the majority micro group (despite widespread representations that social justice is the primary organizing value of the profession); he also suggests that there are material benefits of affiliating with micro social work, including *more* job opportunities, *more* stature, and “lasting” in the profession. These descriptions of the competing priorities and perspectives within the profession align well with Carolyn Oliver's (2013) exploration of “highly contested identity scripts” (p. 775) for social work students. These complex negotiations of values and approaches within the broader social work profession permeated individual participant narratives of identity, belonging, and affiliation as a social worker.

4.2 “Apparently I’m Not That Good a Social Worker”: Negotiating the Space in Between Client and Social Work Identities

Despite the pervasive representations during interviews of social workers and clients as distinct (discussed in Chapter 3), some participants also discussed their experiences belonging to both of these social groups. Charlie's description of his experience as a client in addictions treatment provides a compelling example of the ways

that social work identity is constructed in opposition to client identity, even in narratives where the speaker belongs to both groups:

I was in addictions treatment a few years ago. One of the best things about that was sitting at a table with Indigenous people and **being Charlie, not a social worker**. And I learned more about them through our discussions, right? But getting that sense of **otherness**, I was in a group session once and then I was talking about it and one guy was being – the facilitator was kind of, I thought, unfairly treating this guy, so I said something. And he goes, “Why is it any of your business?” You know, **“You think just because you’re a social worker you can do that?”** You know, and I said, “Well, **apparently I’m not that good a social worker, because I’m here.**” (*laughs*)

In this excerpt, Charlie reinforces the structural oppositions between client and social worker by referencing his claim that by being “here” in addictions treatment, he must not be “that good of a social worker.” Charlie also notes the power imbalance between the two groups by referring to the sense of “otherness” that he felt during his time as a client. Later on, Charlie also reflected on how this power dynamic extends into his social work identity; he says how he “saw power” during his experience as a client, namely that no matter how much social workers may claim to be “equal” with their clients, this is not the case. In the above story, Charlie also referred to being himself in his experience as a client, and *not* being a social worker. As such, Charlie reproduces both discourses of personal-professional dualism, as well as the structural opposition of clients and social workers (despite his role as both in this excerpt). In this section, I discuss how participants blur the lines between clients and social workers that I discussed in the previous chapter.

I think that it is important to note that the discussions I had with participants about their experiences as clients almost always started when I shared about my experiences navigating social work education as a client. For example, in the second interview with Alex, I said:

In social work classrooms, when I was doing my BSW, there would be times where we'd be talking about CBT or DBT, whatever, like something, [Alex: *(laughs)*] you know, micro theory. And I would say, "Actually, you know, from my experience as a client, this, this is what I think about this thing," or whatever, and just the way that the **dynamic in the room shifts when I, I situate myself in that way**. Of, you know, **no longer is this a group of social work students who are all on the same kind of wavelength and in the same positionality, but now it's like, I'm a client**, [Alex: yeah] amongst a group of social workers, right? [Alex: yeah]

I shared a similar story with a number of participants when it felt relevant and safe to do so. The ensuing conversations about experiences as both a client and social worker were rich and complex. Martha shared about her experiences negotiating her role as a client in both social work education and in practice; more specifically, she described herself as "someone who has overlapping, lived experiences with the area of focus I have." She echoed my sentiments about shifting relational dynamics in social work classrooms in our first interview:

I felt that same thing. I felt that sort of shift. And it was almost like, it felt like I was - and this is probably mostly internalized - but it sort of **feels like you're a conversation ender**. It's not-- **people don't get curious** like you think they would, given the profession (*laughs*). They instead sort of shut down, and it's like, "Oh, I can't engage with that. **It's not safe**," or like, "I can't speak with someone who has lived experience (*laughs*), like that just **feels dangerous** and not what I thought we were doing here."

It is especially important to highlight Martha's use of the word "dangerous" in this excerpt, and relate this excerpt back to normative, ableist representations of disabled and Mad people as dangerous and in need of control, which I discussed in Chapter 2. In the conclusion of this thesis, I discuss the possibilities for social work when we move beyond disclosure and overlapping lived experience as "dangerous" towards "getting curious," as Martha describes. Martha also talked about how a social work ideology which assumes that clients and practitioners are mutually exclusive social categories has made her own practice more difficult.

Similarly to Martha, other participants also resisted the norms of social work ideology by relating their individual experiences of othering or exclusion from within the professional group. Fellows and Razack (1998) discuss the marking and unmarking of dominant and subordinate groups in their article on intersectional and hierarchical relations among women:

White people need not and do not define themselves as members of a race; heterosexual people do not define themselves as having a sexual orientation. Thus identity comes to bear an intrinsic relationship to subordination. Identity boxes contain those excluded from the dominant group. Conversely, to be unmarked or unnamed is to belong to the dominant group. The marking of subordinate groups and the unmarking of dominant groups leaves the actual processes of domination obscured, thus intact. (p. 341)

Fellows and Razack's (1998) notion of unmarked dominance and assumed innocence provides a useful framework for understanding how hierarchical dynamics are reproduced within and through social work ideology. We typically do not explicitly state that social workers should belong to dominant groups, leaving white, straight, non-disabled, or otherwise privileged social workers "unmarked," and obscuring the domination processes which categorize who is expected to be a social worker and who is expected to be a client. Participants who discussed tensions with their social work identities and complex feelings of belonging referred to their "marking" as members of subordinate groups - for example, as queer, Black, Métis, or neurodivergent. For example, when I asked Francine about how her personal identity connects with her professional identity as a social worker, she was explicit that both interpersonal and systemic racism shaped her sense of belonging within the profession.

So you're-- that's a very good question-- my personal identity, because I mean, identity is so very broad. And as a Black woman practicing as a social worker, I know the challenges that exist, and I know where I fit. **And sometimes I don't fit.** (...) And I'm going to be very honest with you, because I see that, you know, we

have a huge age difference here. So I can say to you: **I considered leaving the university, because of the racism that I encountered.**

In this excerpt, Francine refers to “challenges” of being a Black woman practicing as a social worker and alludes to where she “fits” within the profession. When I asked Francine to tell me more about where she fits within social work and the university, she said, “Kendal! It's very obvious! I'm a Black woman. I don't fit.” Throughout our interviews, Francine detailed a number of her experiences with racism, especially related to her role as a social worker; she referred to numerous experiences of tokenization on committees, of having her professional status questioned and challenged by colleagues and students, and of being penalized during her social work education in Alberta for discussing racism. Francine also recounted experiences of ostracization from other social work students during her training:

My experience was there was **ostracization** in the class. I had instructors who, whenever I used examples from the Caribbean, it was crossed out in red, in the, in the document. There were ongoing conversations in the class - and **I remember this to this very day** - where, when we started to talk about racism in the class-- **I recall students walking out of the class because they didn't want to talk about anti-racism.** They don't want to talk about diversity. They felt it was **our** problem, not **theirs.** **These are social workers!** Who are going out in the community, to practice social work.

Again, Francine is explicit and detailed about how racism shaped her experiences with identification with and belonging within the profession. Francine’s use of pronouns in this excerpt is notable. The use of personal pronouns like “we” or “us” and possessive pronouns like “ours” signify group belonging, and van Dijk (2006) argues that this group identification is fundamental to the social basis of ideologies (p. 119). In addition, “other” groups can be signified when speakers use personal pronouns like “they” and “them” and possessive pronouns like “theirs.” In this excerpt, Francine refers to her fellow social work students using out-group pronouns (they, theirs), and uses the in-group “our”

pronoun only once, likely to refer to racialized people or specifically racialized social workers. This is a rich example of a social worker's complex experience of identity and sense of belonging. Although Francine describes a strong affiliation with the profession in other parts of her interviews (including being proud to be a social worker), she also describes her ostracization by social work instructors and colleagues.

As explored above, Francine discussed the complexity and tension in being both a Black woman and a social worker. Further, in my interviews with Alex, she discussed the relationships across her identities as neurodivergent and as a social worker. In the following excerpt, Alex explores the dynamics of in-group and exclusionary marking, and the structural oppositions of clients and social workers as distinct groups:

It's like, "**No one here** [in a social work classroom] **has experienced any of the things that we're talking about.**" (...) It's so entrenched, but it's like this idea that, yes, we are, we are in a different class or level than, than the clients we work with, if that's going to be the reaction (*laughs*) in class. (...) **Whether it's around drug use, or if you've committed a crime, or if you yourself have been poor, it's like, or if you have mental health issues,** like it's like a whole other thing.

And so kind of, your idea of care.. I think for a long time, I've been critical of the idea of this.. idea of like, yeah, care in social work, because it makes it sounds very patronizing to me. But then on the other hand, I realized that I was, you know, very okay with supporting students with their mental health, or practicum students, or co-workers, employees, whatever.. **I've still sort of had this need to be up on this pedestal.** Where it was like, even though I suffer from these things, I'm still not going to, like-- and I'll reference, maybe, that that's been my reality, I'm not really going to get into it for you, because I need to be **up here** (*laughs*). **I don't want you to identify me too much with having problems.**

Alex describes her experience of the dynamic in social work classrooms, especially the assumption that social workers and clients are distinct social categories. As such, Alex makes a compelling case reproducing the structural opposition between clients and social workers. Not only does Alex discuss the structural opposition quite explicitly, but she also uses hierarchical language to describe the evaluation of the groups; she refers to

social workers as being “in a different class or level” than clients, as well as to her own comfort with being “on this pedestal... up here.” Further, Alex describes how, despite her willingness to support the mental health needs of others, she chooses not to disclose her own experiences of suffering to dispel any identification with “having problems,” a property typically reserved for clients. She describes her experience of being able to choose whether or not to identify and be marked by closeness to a subordinate group, namely clients and the qualities associated with them; in other words, Alex described being able to pass as a member of the dominant group and choosing when to disclose her identity as neurodivergent. The normative assumption is that social workers do not have “problems” and so remain unmarked as such, regardless of whether that they use drugs, experience poverty, or any other attribute associated with clients. In other words, it need not be stated that social workers (or Alex, in this case) are *not* drug users, or *not* experiencing poverty or mental health issues, or do *not* have criminal records, because that is the default assumption.

Professional ideology also shapes normative assumptions that social workers are heterosexual, unless otherwise stated. For instance, Martha discussed at length her experiences with heteronormativity as a social worker facilitating a group program for queer and trans people:

And then I was co-facilitating with someone who was straight, and they were kind of asking me to **not, over-identify as queer** because like I don't want to... I don't know, there was one, I came out of one session, I was just like, “I feel kind of strange, I feel like.. I don't get to be part.. of this, in a way that I am.” (*laughs*).. I feel like I'm having to like **actively subdue my queerness** in this space, **as a facilitator**, and that feels really strange and uncomfortable, and I don't know if it's like I'm telling myself it's to be more appropriate, because there's always like messages about not self-disclosing, and it's not about the facilitator. But also it felt like I wasn't **being myself** in that room (...)

I think it comes from a lot of messaging about what, you know, what counselors are supposed to be, what social workers are supposed to be. And there's this idea of like, you're just this **neutral** body coming into largely enforce or provide support or, whatever you want to call it, you know (*laughs*). But like, you're coming in and you're supposed to be this, like... **stoic expert** and... it... **it sits badly for me, as someone who has overlapping, lived experiences with the area of focus I have.** (...)

I think it creates a lot of comfort and safety-- like it did for my, you know, co-facilitator, where it was like, “Cool, you be silent about being queer, and then we’re on a level playing field, and we're just both facilitators. **My being heterosexual doesn't come into play, because your queerness doesn't come into play.**” Right? And, “**I don't want to have to contend with what that means of me being a heterosexual person in this room with a bunch of queer people,** and hearing these stories, and speaking to like, **building my practice.. on your pain.** And **if you bring up the fact that you're queer, then maybe I'll have to contend with that.** Maybe I'll have to confront that or disclose that myself.”

In this excerpt, Martha describes her experiences negotiating the space in-between structural oppositions of the construction of client and social worker groups, where the boundaries are blurred between queerness as a property of client identity, and normativity and straightness as a property of social work identity. Of note, Martha uses the attributes “neutral” and “stoic expert” to signify the unmarked, straight social worker as the norm. Interestingly, Martha describes how her “being silent about being queer” establishes comfort, safety, and a “level playing field” for her straight co-facilitator.

In this chapter, I explored how participants described their individual social work identities and how they negotiate their engagement with social work ideology. I discussed participants’ feelings of belonging and identification with social work ideology, as well as how selected participants navigate the space in between the roles of social worker and client. Charlie and Martha shared their thoughts on being a client and a social worker at the same time; Martha shared her experiences as a queer social worker facilitating a queer support group; Alex shared her reflections on choosing how and when to identify as neurodivergent; Francine shared how her social work identity is shaped by racism.

Whether they are conscious of it or not, these social workers are resisting normative boundaries of professional identity and ideology by virtue of being who they are. By claiming her role as a queer social worker, Martha contested social work's professional ideological boundaries which are enmeshed with straightness. In asserting her position as a Black woman, Francine resisted social work's rigid and racist ideological boundaries which are tangled with white supremacy. It is not my intention here to impose "identity boxes" - as Fellows and Razack (1998) or Anzaldúa might say - onto these participants' narratives or to lump them together into homogeneous categories; rather, I highlight these stories because they complicate normative beliefs about who social workers are. These challenges to the unyielding professional norms by the social workers before me, by the participants of this study, bring me hope that I will find a place in social work one day, too.

Chapter 5 Conclusion

In the preceding two chapters, I shared the findings of this study and discussed the normative boundaries of social work ideology and how participating social workers made sense of their identities. More specifically, I used Critical Disability Studies and Critical Discourse Analysis to challenge taken-for-granted beliefs about what social work is and who social workers are. One of the research questions guiding this study was: *How do social workers in Alberta negotiate and construct their personal and professional identities (in relation to normative professional boundaries)?* My findings demonstrate that social work identities are complex and that individual social workers may hold multiple – and sometimes contested – identities. I wish that the printed and published stories about social work identity I read in the earlier days of my training were reflective of this complexity. Many of the participants I spoke to held multiple identities which were tangled up with one another and were sometimes even conflicting. Some of the participants told me about feeling disoriented, alienated, marginalized, and subjugated within the profession – the same profession they might also feel a strong sense of pride to be a member of, and the same profession which claims justice as its defining value. In Chapter 3, I explored how participants discursively construct social workers and clients as distinct categories and argue that this role separation is a fundamental aspect of a social work ideology. In Chapter 4, I explored how participants bridge these categories and situate themselves across otherwise rigid boundaries. I discussed how individual social work identities are multiple and complex, and challenged some aspects of assumed normativity about who social workers are. These are the stories that I needed to hear as an undergraduate social work student – both with an acknowledgement that clients are unexpected in social work spaces, and also the validation and representation of other

people holding both identities in tandem. Hearing, analyzing, and writing about these complex stories felt like a tonic after consuming ableist narratives of professionalism over the course of my social work education.

Another research question guiding this study was: *How is normative social work ideology bound with multiple intersecting axes of oppression and power?* My findings demonstrate how, in many ways, the boundaries of social work ideology (both who is allowed in and who is celebrated within) are shaped by and reproduce broader social dynamics of oppression and subjugation. It is important to note that I am not claiming that the facets of social work ideology I identify in this thesis are universal, unchanging, or impenetrable. Seminal CDA scholar Ruth Wodak (2012) reminds us that “identities are always re/created in specific contexts... they are usually fragmented, dynamic and changeable – everyone has multiple identities” (p. 216). One of the fundamental aims of CDA studies is to explicitly state and make obvious that which is frequently hidden, assumed, or taken-for-granted (Meyer, 2001). While threads that hold the social work profession together may seem obvious to social workers themselves, I contend that many of them are frequently hidden or taken-for-granted – especially those that weave dominance, exaltation, and protection into the fabric of our collective identity. As such, the findings in Chapter 4 highlight threads of assumed normativity within narratives of social work identities; I discussed Martha, Francine, and Alex’s mixed feelings of belonging and identification with the profession of social work and how homophobia, racism, and ableism factor into their stories.

While I discussed some of the strategies I used to ensure rigour and trustworthiness of the study in section 2.4, it is also important to discuss the limitations of

this work as well as directions for future research. One such limitation is that I only recruited participants who were registered practicing social workers in Alberta, in order to maintain feasibility of the project and a similar situated context; future research should explore social work identities and ideologies across Canada and in transnational contexts.

The quantity of data I collected is large for a CDA project of this scope.

Thoroughly analyzing 22 transcripts is an enormous task, especially when applying the finer analytic methods of CDA which require detailed reviewing of, for example, word choices and grammar. On the one hand, analyzing a large number of texts provides intertextual rigour, which is important in CDA. On the other hand, the large quantity of data made it impossible to review every word of every transcript at the most detailed level of analysis within the scope of this project; however, this does leave a great deal of opportunity for future analysis and reporting on these data. As I discussed in section 2.3.3, a challenge for scholars conducting CDA is maintaining the scope of inquiry, as a complete analysis of all discourses in any given text(s) is not possible. By remaining grounded in a theoretical approach and keeping the research questions and aims at the fore, scholars can make analytic choices about which aspects of discourse are most important and relevant to analyze and report. I used my research questions and applied my chosen theoretical frameworks in order to make decisions about which data to analyze; in order to be as transparent as possible, I include a detailed outline of my analytic process for readers to review in section 2.3.3. I also hope to conduct continued and ongoing analyses of the data I collected for this study to explore other important aspects of the work (e.g. how racism and homophobia are enacted through social work ideology).

While I was working on writing the findings sections of this thesis, I reached a point in the process where I felt stuck – someone recently asked me how I was doing, and I said that my brain felt “sticky” through the analysis and writing stages. More specifically, I felt stuck because I was not sure how to account for all of the nuance in the stories that participants shared with me, in their own rich accounts of their identities, while also clearly articulating the normative boundaries that shape our collective narratives about professional identity. Sometimes when I feel stuck like this, I have an impulse to read the writings of people I know – friends, supervisors, classmates – and to search for how they tackle similar challenges in their work. This time, I picked up the dissertation of my undergraduate research supervisor (and now colleague and friend), Dr. Yahya El-Lahib. In his dissertation (2015), he includes a reflexive confession in the overview of his findings (pp. 120-1) about how at the outset of his study he already had in mind a clear outcome for the project, which he allowed himself to let go of as the study progressed by opening himself up and letting the data guide him to his findings. This was exactly what I needed to read. In this spirit, I have a reflexive confession to make, too.

I understand now that at the outset of this study, I wanted to articulate and define the normative boundaries of social work ideology and demonstrate unequivocally how they constrain and oppress social workers and clients alike. I wanted to explain how I felt like I did not belong in social work and to demonstrate how ruthlessly ableist the profession is. Now, I do still think that it is important to make explicit the boundaries of our profession often left unquestioned, and that these boundaries are indeed shaped by power. However, I have also come to realize that what is perhaps even more interesting than the boundaries themselves is all the ways that social workers make meaning of them,

the ways that people reject or redefine them, how they push and pull at their seams, or how their relationship to them changes over time. All of the social workers I interviewed shared rich stories about their identities that are far too intricate and complex for me to ever claim to represent fulsomely here – and I only had a short glimpse into their lives through the interview process. I expected to hear about all the ways that the unquestioned limits of a shared social work ideology were plainly restrictive, and I felt excited (and truthfully, surprised) by the complexity of participants' stories about social work identity. Within the same set of data, the same interviews conducted with the same participants, I concluded *both* that social workers and clients are constructed as oppositional groups, *and* that participants resist and challenge these norms. Participants *both* weaved dominance into the narratives of what it means to be a social worker *and* pulled at and rejected threads of ableism and other social hierarchies.

Although there are, of course, Black social workers, Indigenous social workers, social workers who are poor, who are disabled, who are Mad, who are queer and trans, dominant representations of social workers are bound with whiteness and wealth and being non-disabled and sane and cis and straight. Within the context of social work, I wonder about all that we lose when we neglect, discount, and overlook disabled, Mad, Black, Indigenous and queer wisdom (for example) as social work expertise. I think about all the wisdom and expertise lost to inequitable admissions processes, to harmful regulatory policies, and to hiring and employment inequity. I wonder about what is lost by coding some expertise as lived experience and categorizing it as unimportant. I witness these losses every time I walk into a social work classroom or conference room and count the ways the space is inaccessible, signalling that disabled people are not

expected or welcome here. I witness these losses every time I read a social work text that tells me disabled people are only clients – that disability is a problem that we fix or just a specialization for professionals to own. When we consciously or complacently accept normative social work ideology – who social workers should be, what social workers do, know, and believe – we fail to see all the possibilities of what social work could become.

I (clearly) have a strong tendency towards a critique of the ways social work is and has been – so much so that some of my close friends playfully call me an “anti-social worker.” Despite the intensity of my cynicism, I do sometimes feel hopeful about what the profession could be – like when Alex said this in her second interview:

You *could* see the history of social work and a lot of its present state – that, I think, is actually quite harmful – as being completely deterministic of what it is to be a social worker. And that the *only* thing you can do is perpetuate harm. *Or..* it could be sort of like a contested site that is—there’s also the potential of.. transformation, basically, *of* social work. And I think I latched on to the idea of the *potential* of social work, that I think has largely been.. not realized in its history.

I think that in all my doubts about where I fit within the profession, I have been missing this “idea of the *potential* of social work.” Alex (along with all of the participants of this study) moved me to lean more into wondering about what social work could become.

Even though I often see the history of social work as completely deterministic (as Alex critiques), I *want* (so desperately) to be hopeful about what it could become. I *want* to believe in the potential of social work. I want to see what social work could become when epistemic hierarchicalism is unraveled; when disabled and Mad wisdom is not only tolerated but celebrated and revered as an epistemological basis from which to practice. I want to see what social work could become when professional ableism is unraveled; when I no longer have to clarify and justify that disabled people are social workers too. I want to see what social work could become when those of us holding positions as both

practitioner and client feel comfortable moving fluidly between these roles, when we shed the shame of identifying *with* our clients, and when sharing our expertise inspires curiosity in our colleagues rather than fear.

Some of the important unraveling we need to do is clearly identifiable and actionable. Addressing material inequity and inaccessibility in social work education, licensing, and employment is an important first step in this transformation. Social work education admissions processes and program designs promote ableism by, for example, prioritizing GPA in admissions decisions, by structuring programs around unpaid field education placements, by holding classes in buildings that are not accessible (in myriad ways), and by being unprepared to fulfill accommodations for students in classes and practicum placements alike – just to name a few. As I concluded in my undergraduate research, disability content in social work education in Canada is abysmal. The social work licensing requirements I discussed in Chapter 2 explicitly exclude and marginalize disabled and Mad people. Again, I want so desperately to believe in the potential of social work. The dreams I have of this transformation cannot be realized when disabled people are very literally unable to access social work education and licensing. The dreams I have of this transformation cannot be realized when Black women like Francine are questioned in their roles as social work students and practitioners. The dreams I have of this transformation cannot be realized when queer social workers like Martha are asked to subdue their queerness to make their straight colleagues feel comfortable. Pulling at the loose threads of dominance that hold us together and creating more accessible social work programs and systems is an essential step toward a broader transformation of social work that I want to believe is possible.

As we approach the conclusion to this project, I continue to reflect on where I fit within social work and what I can offer towards this transformation. At the end of Chapter 4, I noted how impactful it has been to hear how participants challenge and redefine social work stories. I hope that sharing these stories brings needed nuance and complexity to scholarship about social work identity and ideology, and to discussions at the intersection of social work scholarship and Critical Disability Studies. I hope that this thesis is a meaningful contribution towards transformation and am eager to share this work in the coming months and years. I can say with certainty that when I think about the honour of hearing these stories, and my excitement for all of the conversations to come as I move through the next stages of this work - conversations about pulling at the threads of dominance in social work identities – I feel like I am right where I am supposed to be.

Appendices

Appendix A Interview Guide

Thank you for taking the time to participate in these interviews. The overall purpose of the interviews is to hear about your experiences as a practicing social worker in Alberta, in particular about your personal and professional identities. This document provides a guiding structure to the interviews; however, the interviews are intended to be conversational and flow naturally, so they may not follow the guide exactly as it is outlined here. The researcher will attempt to review most of these questions in the first interview. The second interview will consist of follow-up and clarification, as well as more detailed questions about specific information gathered in the first interview.

There are no right or wrong answers to any of the questions. You can choose to withdraw at any time during the interview, and/or choose to answer as few or as many questions as you want to. You can choose to stop or pause the interview at any time for any reason. You can ask the interviewer questions at any time.

Prior to beginning the interviews, the researcher will review the consent form verbally with all participants.

Before we proceed, are you comfortable? Do you need anything? Do you have any questions?

FIRST INTERVIEW

Introductions

- How/why did you first become interested in pursuing social work as a profession?
 - What was your experience with studying social work?
- Over the course of your social work career, in which practice settings have you worked?
- Where do you currently work, or what was your most recent practice setting?
 - How long have you been/were you employed there? In what capacities and roles?
 - What role do social workers play in your organizational context?

“Identity work” in social work

- When did you begin identifying as a social worker? Were there any pivotal or transformative moments when your identity as a social worker has shifted or solidified?
- Do you think that your practice setting/context is connected with your professional social work identity? If so, how?

Personal and professional identity

- I wonder if you could tell me about how your personal identity connects with your social work identity?
- Have you encountered tensions between identity as a social worker and overall identity/personal identity?
- In social work training, we are sometimes asked to “leave” parts of who we are “at the door” when we work with clients. Is this a practice you engage in?
 - If so, why does this feel important to you?
 - Which parts of who you are do you “leave at the door”?

Defining social work and professional identity

- What does being a social worker mean to you?
- Is the title of being a social worker important to you? How so?
 - How does this shift across contexts (in your personal life, various work settings)?
- How might you/do you describe social work to those outside the profession?
- In your experience, does social work have a cohesive collective identity? What unites social workers across vast and diverse practice contexts and theoretical foundations?
- What is the role of social justice in social work? In your social work?

Professionalism

- In your experience, what is the role of professionalism in social work?
 - What does professionalism look like in practice, for social work/social workers?
 - What has been your experience maintaining or not maintaining professionalism in your practice?
- In your experience, what is the role of expertise in social work?
- In your experience, what is the role of objectivity/neutrality in social work practice?
- What has been your experience with social work licensing, regulation, and accreditation?

The following demographic questions will be asked at the end of the first interview if they do not arise naturally through the interview process:

- Gender:
- Length of social work career:
- Pronouns (for use in reports from study):
- Primary practice sector currently/recently:
- Other practice sector experience:
- Location of social work training:
- Approximate date of social work training (decade):
- Level of social work education received (Diploma, BSW, MSW, PhD):

This will conclude our interview for today. Once again, **thank you** for taking the time to meet with me. Are there any questions that you would have liked for me to ask you? Is there anything you would like to add to our conversation? Do you have any questions?

After the first interview, I will contact you within 4 weeks to arrange a time for the second interview.

SECOND INTERVIEW

The second interview will consist of follow-up and clarification, as well as more detailed questions about specific information gathered in the first interview. If we missed any questions in the first interview from the guide above, we can revisit them in the second interview.

- How do you feel after completing the first interview?
- Are there any questions or answers that you would like to revisit from the first interview?
- Are there any questions that you would have liked for me to ask you?
- Is there anything that you would like to add to our conversation?
- Do you have any questions for me?
- Since we last met, I have transcribed and reviewed our conversation. I would like to ask you for further clarification on these specific topics/responses (this will vary person to person, and be specific to each individual interview).
 - Could you tell me more about...?
 - When you said... could you clarify for me what you meant?
 - What I understood when you said... Is my interpretation accurate? Could you redirect or clarify for me?

This will conclude our second interview and we are now done with all interviews. Once again, **thank you** for taking the time to meet with me. Are there any questions that you would have liked for me to ask you? Is there anything you would like to add to our conversation? Do you have any questions?

Appendix B Eligibility Criteria

To be eligible to participate, participants must:

- Be or have been a practicing registered social worker in Alberta for at least five (5) years since the year 2010;
- Have stable and secure access to internet and the necessary devices to participate in virtual, audio-recorded interviews with the researcher; and,
- Be comfortable completing interviews in English.

Exclusion criteria for participation:

- Social workers who have **not** practiced in Alberta while registered with the Alberta College of Social Workers (ACSW) for at least five (5) years since the year 2010;
- People with social work training/credentials/education who are/have not been practicing in a social work position that requires registration with ACSW;
- Those who do not have stable and secure access to internet and the necessary devices to participate in virtual, audio-recorded interviews; and
- Those who are not comfortable completing interviews in English

Appendix C Email Recruitment

Subject: Recruitment for research project on social work and identity
(date)

Hello,

My name is Kendal David and I am a Master's student in the School of Social Work at Carleton University. I am working on my thesis project under the supervision of Dr. Pamela Grassau. This research has been cleared by Carleton University Research Ethics Board-A (Clearance #113092).

I am writing to you today to ask if you would be willing to share my recruitment materials with your social work colleagues at [name of organization] **to invite them to participate in a study on social work culture and identity**. This study is seeking to understand how practicing social workers negotiate their personal and professional identities, and develop a critical understanding of their relationship to social work culture and identity in Alberta. Participants will be asked to reflect on how being a social worker has shaped their values and self-image in personal and professional contexts.

I am currently seeking participants who have practiced as a registered social worker in Alberta for at least 5 years since the year 2010. Participants will be asked to complete 2 interviews, on their own time, lasting 60-90 minutes each. Interviews will take place by a secure, encrypted web-based platform and will be recorded. More details about eligibility criteria and what participants will be asked to do is included in the attached Letter of Invitation.

I am hoping that you might pass along this email with the attached letter of invitation and recruitment poster to any registered social workers that you think may be interested. As indicated on the attached documents, interested participants can contact me by email for more information about the study and to set up an interview. If you do share the recruitment materials, please respond and let me know.

Should you have any questions or other concerns prior to distributing the study information please feel free to contact me.

Thank you in advance for your support!

Kendal David, BSW
MSW Student, Carleton University
Pronouns: She/Her
kendal.david@carleton.ca

ATTACHED: Letter of Invitation and Recruitment Poster

Appendix D Consent Form

Participants will be asked to review and complete an online consent form. They will be provided with the following link: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/RH5CZK3>

The content of the consent form is also included in this document.

Supervisor:

Dr. Pamela Grassau

Tel: 1-613-520-2600 ext. 6008

Email: pamela.grassau@carleton.ca

Researcher:

Kendal David (kendal.david@carleton.ca)

Project Title: Experiences Negotiating Personal and Professional Identities in Social Work

Carleton University Project Clearance

Clearance #: 113092

Date of Clearance: June 19, 2020 to June 30, 2021

Invitation

You are invited to take part in a research project because you are a practicing, registered social worker in Alberta. The information in this consent form will provide you with information about the study so that you can decide if you want to participate.

You do not have to participate in this study. You can refuse to participate and nothing will happen to you or to anyone that you may know. Even if you say yes to participating, you can change your mind for any reason, at anytime and refuse to participate.

As you read this form, please ask as many questions as you want. Take as much time as you need to read the form. You can ask for help reading the form and you can have somebody that you trust with you while you read the form.

What is the purpose of the study?

This study is seeking to understand how practicing social workers negotiate their personal and professional identities, and develop a critical understanding of their relationship to social work culture and identity in Alberta. Participants will be asked to reflect on how being a social worker has shaped their values and self-image in personal and professional contexts. This study builds from the researcher's previous work on the normative boundaries of social work culture, which revolves around the notions of care and dependence, professionalism, and moral transactions.

What will I be asked to do?

If you agree to take part in the study, we will ask you to:

- Complete two (2) semi-structured interviews with the researcher via video (using software like Microsoft Teams or Skype) to discuss your social work practice experience and professional identity.
- Each interview will take approximately 60-90 minutes. The interviews will be recorded. Both audio and video data will be recorded, but only audio data will be downloaded for the researcher to transcribe. Video recordings will be deleted immediately after the interview, and audio recordings will be deleted after they have been transcribed.
- You cannot participate without consenting to be audio-recorded.
- You can stop answering any of the questions at any time. You have the right at any time to refuse to participate in the study. If you refuse to participate, nobody will try to talk you out of your decision.

Risks and Inconveniences

During the study, some personal information about you will be collected, and this information might lead to a small risk to your privacy. There are rules and regulations to protect your privacy: once your interview recording has been reviewed and transcribed, it will be destroyed. The researcher will remove all identifying information, and replace your name with a pseudonym to protect your identity.

Any information stored on a computer or other electronic device will be carefully and securely protected. Anything that was written on paper will be kept in a locked cabinet in a secure place. Only the researcher and her supervisor will be able to use or see any of the information collected about you.

The researcher will only use your information for this study, and it will not be used for other research. Your information will not be shared with anybody who is not part of the study team. If information is shared between study team members, steps are taken to make sure that if it was lost, the data would not be identifiable.

Possible Benefits

You may not receive any direct benefit (i.e. money, gifts of appreciation) for your participation in the study; however, what is learned from the study may help advance social work research and education.

Compensation/Incentives

You will not be paid for participating in this study.

Your rights

By signing this form, you are not giving up any of your rights to the full legal protection of your personal safety, of your information, or of your privacy.

Leaving the study after it has started

You can leave the study at any time; you can say no to answering any or all of the interview questions at any time. You can refuse to participate and nothing will happen to

you or to anyone that you may know. Even if you say yes to participating, you can change your mind for any reason, at anytime and refuse to participate.

If you have decided to leave the study while it is still happening, you can ask that any of your information not be used in the study.

You may ask that your information be completely removed from the study by asking the study team member (named above) within 7 days after your interview.

Confidentiality

We will remove all information that might identify you personally from the study information as soon as possible. We will treat your personal information as confidential, although absolute privacy cannot be guaranteed. No information that identifies you will be released or published without your specific consent. Research records may be accessed by the Carleton University Research Ethics Board in order to ensure your privacy and treatment is being respected.

All information will be kept confidential, unless release is required by law (e.g. child abuse, harm to self or others). The researcher has a duty to report suspected child abuse or imminent harm to self or others. The results of this study may be published or presented at an academic conference or meeting, but the information will be presented with pseudonyms rather than identifying participants. You will be given a pseudonym so that your actual name and identity will not be directly associated with the information you have provided.

All information will be carefully protected on a secure computer. The information may be disclosed if required by legal order or if a data breach occurred. The study team will carefully protect and manage any research data that we store or transfer.

Data Retention

When the findings have been documented, all electronic information will be transferred to a secure computer storage device belonging to Carleton University and it will be kept for five years before being destroyed. All information and research tools in paper form will stored in a locked office at Carleton University for five years, after which they will be shredded.

New information during the study

In the event of any changes related to the study that might affect your decision to be part of the study, you will be promptly informed so that you can decide if you would like to stay in, or no longer be part of the study.

Ethics review

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

Statement of consent – print and sign name

I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. Yes No
 I agree to be audio recorded Yes No

Full Name of Participant:

If you would like to receive a summary of the study's results, please provide an email address: _____

Researcher statement

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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