

Reflections from the Guest Editors: Unraveling Care and Control: The Limits of Professional Helping Within Conditions of Belonging

Anh Ngo and Maryam Khan

Abstract: This Special Issue of *Reflections: Narratives of Professional Helping* delves into the complex interplay between professional helping and nation-state belonging, critically examining how these constructs intersect with power, privilege, and oppression. This collection unravels the conditions of “professional helping”—encompassing fields like social work, healthcare, and education—which often operates within a framework of care that subtly reinforces existing power structures rather than truly empowering marginalized communities.

Keywords: benevolence, oppression, belonging, marginalization

Introduction

Disciplines within the broad field of “professional helping” have long been critiqued as operating within the discourses of charity, paternalism, surveillance, and benevolence (Chapman & Withers, 2019). Importantly, such discourses and their accompanying practices have their roots in racism, sexism, colonialism, white supremacy, capitalism, heteropatriarchy, cisgenderism, sanism, and ableism, to name a few axes of privilege and oppression. Within North American nation-states, professional helpers are concurrently functioning as purveyors of care and control of marginalized individuals and groups in society. The extant social sciences literature has documented how care and control discourses and practices play an insidious and significant role in building the nation (Gibson, 2015). This Special Issue contributes to the critical and intersectional social science scholarship by addressing contradictions, negotiations, possibilities, and the im/possibilities of providing professional care within the broad nexus of nation-state belonging. Historically, professional helping has been intertwined with colonial and neo-colonial agendas, often serving to control and regulate marginalized populations. This can manifest in various ways, including the following:

- Benevolent charity: Charity operates as an extension of the state which needs to be interrogated as a site and technology of power and dominance in nation-building, rights-conferring, belonging, borders-patrolling, and homecare.
- Surveillance and control: Data collection and intervention strategies can be used to monitor and control marginalized communities, reinforcing social inequalities.
- Discourses of charity: Framing assistance as charity can obscure underlying power imbalances and reinforce the notion of “deservingness” among beneficiaries, thus perpetuating social divisions and undermining the agency of those they aim to assist.

As social work educators, this is a crucial area of inquiry because it challenges the often-unexamined power dynamics inherent in helping professions. The call’s emphasis on critical perspectives, including Indigenous, postcolonial, and intersectional approaches, requires a

commitment to addressing systemic issues and amplifying marginalized voices. This Special Issue encourages critical examination of these issues and a fostering of dialogue about more equitable and just approaches to professional helping. It is a timely conversation given the growing awareness of systemic inequalities within benevolent institutions, particularly regarding race, Indigeneity, and immigration. At the same time, we are in a paradoxical period where we are seeing creative and mass movements for social justice and decolonization where these issues are more readily acknowledged and challenged accompanied by a fervent disavowal of these same social injustices in all levels of society. Against a backdrop of ongoing global crises related to migration, displacement, and social unrest, the questions of how care is being provided and meted out against dominant and discursive conditions of belonging and citizenship are even more urgent.

This topic is significant for social work practitioners, researchers, and educators for several fundamental reasons. It forces social workers to confront the ways in which their practices, even when intended to help, can perpetuate inequalities and undermine the autonomy of the people they serve—which is in direct conflict with social work professional values and ethical obligations. Understanding how these power dynamics play out is crucial for social workers, who often serve as agents of the state and work within state policies with state resources, to avoid complicity in oppressive systems. At the same time, this topic is important given social work's complex history of creating and upholding discriminatory and paternalistic approaches. Recognizing this history and critically reflecting on the potential for current practices to replicate past harms is vital for the profession to move forward to identify areas for improvement in its practice. This might involve adopting more empowering approaches, challenging policies that perpetuate inequality, and advocating for systemic change. Finally, this topic is central to the profession's mission of promoting social justice through the provision of culturally responsive and effective services to people, whose experiences are shaped by the complex interplay of various social identities. By addressing the tensions between care and control, social workers can work towards creating a more equitable society where all individuals can thrive.

In alignment with our professional ethics and values, as well as the urgency in which we critically examine professional care, this Special Issue features complex works that contribute to reflective scholarship in several ways. The focus on narratives from diverse communities can provide valuable insights and perspectives that are often excluded from mainstream literature. The call's explicit interest in submissions from Black, Indigenous, racialized, sexually and gender diverse, and disabled individuals highlights a commitment to centering lived experience and challenging dominant narratives. Scholars, community builders, and activists answered this call and provided rich narratives that connect academic research with real-world experiences and practices. The inclusion of creative expressions like poetry and visual art offers powerful and nuanced ways of communicating lived experience and challenging dominant narratives. This approach recognizes that knowledge and understanding can be conveyed through various mediums, not just academic writing. Conversantly, these works center marginalized voices, explore the intersections of oppression, examine the role of nation-state belonging, and finally reimagine care through alternative models of care that prioritize community-led solutions, emphasize self-determination, and challenge existing power structures.

Highlights of this Issue

The narratives submitted for this Special Issue offer compelling glimpses into these complex realities. Amanda R. Fraser's narrative highlights the importance of decolonizing personal and professional practices, emphasizing the need to center Indigenous knowledge and worldviews. Her narrative is a deeply personal account of her journey of decolonization. This suggests a focus on how individuals can dismantle internalized colonial beliefs and embrace their Indigenous identities. By emphasizing the need to center Indigenous knowledge and worldviews, Fraser argues for a fundamental shift in how we understand and approach various aspects of life, including professional helping. This could involve incorporating Indigenous perspectives into curriculum, policymaking, and service delivery models.

Delving into the complexities of subjectivities structured by nation-state identifiers, Brenda Polar Aliaga's research underscores the need for meaningful collaboration between Indigenous and immigrant communities, recognizing the limitations of simplistic notions of inter-Indigenous solidarity. By acknowledging the limitations of existing frameworks, Polar Aliaga highlights the need for nuanced and culturally sensitive approaches to collaboration between different Indigenous groups. This could involve addressing pre-existing biases and stereotypes, fostering meaningful dialogue and exchange, and recognizing the unique histories and experiences of each community.

Unmasking the hidden power dynamics even within progressive spaces, Ranjith Kulatilake's critical autoethnography exposes the inherent contradictions of settler-colonialism and neoliberal capitalism. This critical autoethnography is a powerful exploration of the complexities of settler-colonialism in the context of neoliberalism. By examining his own experiences as a racialized and sexualized settler-immigrant, Kulatilake reveals how even progressive spaces and activist efforts can be implicated in the ongoing dispossession of Indigenous Peoples. This analysis provides valuable insights into the ways in which capitalism and colonialism intersect to shape individual identities and social structures.

At the same time, Jess Kumordzie-Gyasensir and Scilla Owusu-Amoah's photo essay challenges the performativity of "belonging" and the ongoing surveillance of Black bodies both within and across national borders. By examining the surveillance of Black bodies and the constant questioning of their identity ("where are you really from?"), the authors highlight the ways in which systemic racism and colonialism continue to shape the experiences of Black people globally. This work contributes to a deeper understanding of the psychological and social impacts of racial discrimination and the importance of dismantling systems of oppression.

Finally, Saman Farah's narrative, focusing on the experiences of Afghan refugees, highlights the importance of cultural humility and ethical reflexivity when working with each unique marginalized community. By highlighting the power imbalances and ethical divides that often exist between international communities, Farah underscores the importance of listening to the voices of those affected, acknowledging their lived experiences, and working in solidarity with them towards meaningful and sustainable solutions.

These narratives, taken together, provide a diverse and compelling set of perspectives on the complex challenges and opportunities facing professional helping in the 21st century. They highlight the need for critical self-reflection, decolonization, and a commitment to social justice even when, or especially when, working in progressive and benevolent spaces of professional helping. We invite readers to engage with these critical reflections and contribute to the ongoing conversation about the ethics and politics of professional helping in a complex and interconnected world.

References

Chapman, C., & Withers, A. J. (2019). *Violent history of benevolence: Interlocking oppression in the moral economies of social working*. University of Toronto Press.

Gibson, M. F. (2015). Intersecting deviance: Social work, difference and the legacy of eugenics. *British Journal of Social Work*, 45(1), 313–330. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bct131>

About the Authors: Anh Ngo, PhD is Associate Professor, Faculty of Social Work, Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo, ON, Canada (ango@wlu.ca); Maryam Khan, PhD is Assistant Professor, Faculty of Social Work, Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo, ON, Canada (mkhan@wlu.ca).

With Gratitude...

We would like to recognize and thank the reviewers who contributed their time and invaluable assistance this Special Section, V31(1).

We appreciate your commitment to *Reflections* and its authors!!