

Considering the impact of social assistance on Occupation

Dr. Nedra Peter, [PhD](#), Adjunct Professor and Research Associate at Schulich School of Medicine & Dentistry, Toronto, Canada

Please note: These are Nedra's speaking notes and, as such, do not have the requisite citations.

It is an honour for me to have been invited to present for the University of Brighton's All About Occupation Seminar Series.

The aim of this session is to show how social assistance recipients experience lack of opportunity and resources to make everyday choices and to have decision-making power as they participate in occupations.

The specific objectives are: 1) to broadly understand social assistance policy; 2) to produce an account of how people on assistance live their lives and what they see as possible in their doing; 3) to consider how the occupational possibilities for these individuals are influenced by social assistance policies.

This presentation will also consider my research from a lens that moves away from individualised Western epistemologies and discuss how race/culture has a significant influence on occupation.

In Canada, poverty is defined in relative terms. One way that countries like Canada deal with the problem of poverty is to create programs which provide a monthly payment to people with little or no income.. Social assistance policy involves an effort to balance the objectives of alleviating poverty and promoting self-sufficiency, while remaining consistent with underlying public values about the importance of work.

From 1966-1995, Canada utilized the Canada Assistance Plan whereby all citizens were entitled to a base level of benefits based on a model of social citizenship.

During the 1980s and 1990s, neoliberalism began to inform social policy leading to vast economic and political changes to the welfare system. Neoliberalism is an ideology that privileges individuals as responsible, independent, self-reliant and self-sufficient and thereby should refuse public or social interventions in their life.

After 1996, the Canadian welfare system was transformed, entitlements became contingent on labour market attachment. The state no longer was obligated to defend the rights of the poor and disadvantaged or to promote greater equality; instead social assistance was redesigned as a means of social control intended to integrate recipients within the frameworks and values of the free market. Each province became responsible for social assistance.

Ontario Works (OW), implemented by the Harris government, is a compulsory, work-first program that focuses on rapidly matching recipients to available local jobs.

Ontario Disability Support Program provides income and employment supports to people who qualify as living with a disability. However there is no obligation to engage in job training activities.

Laliberte Rudman proposes that social and political processes shape expectations and possibilities for occupations. These forces differently shape marginalized populations by influencing what these populations view as what they can and should do in everyday life, which then produce occupational inequities. Thereby, Occupational possibilities refer to the occupations that are supported and promoted by various aspects of the broader systems and structures in which people live.

Bacchi's (2009) WPR methodology was used for to analyse social assistance policy as it is intended to critically examine how problems (social issues) are represented in public policy. Public policy is defined as a "broad framework of ideas and values within which decisions are taken and actions, or inaction, are pursued by governments in relation to some issue or problem"

The (WPR) approach was first presented by Carol Bacchi in 1999 to "provide insights into the ways women's inequality has been understood in Western policy interventions, and the implications for feminist theorists" (Bacchi, 2009, p. vi).

Bacchi's approach draws upon a conception of critical discourse analysis described by Foucault. Bacchi (2009) contends that to uncover deep-seated presuppositions entails recognizing that "policies are elaborated in discourse" (p. 7). In drawing on Foucault, Bacchi understands power as productive as well as prohibitive.

Power is also embedded in "knowledge-power relationships; i.e. the ways in which power is involved in producing forms of knowledge, and in which knowledges exercise power or influence in shaping people's lives" (Bacchi, 2009, p. 276).

Therefore, according to Bacchi (2009) it is "useful to think about both the power of discourses to limit the meanings of topics of analysis, and the power to make and/or to deploy discourses" (p. 236). Through governmental practices and programs and the construction of policy, uneven power relations are created in the production of discourse (Bacchi, 2009). Although there may be many competing constructions of a 'problem', governments are said to play a privileged role through their creation of policy problems, because their understandings of 'problems' stick and are constituted in the mechanisms used to govern.

Neoliberalism highlighted the notion of the "deserving poor," a group unable to contribute to the economic system and in need of ongoing income support versus the "undeserving poor", able-bodied persons who do not work, and hence are to blame for their poverty. The difference between a binary distinction of "poor persons" is rooted in ableness and employability. Ableness and employability have become important conditions of full citizenship and participation in society.

The "deserving poor" are those who cannot be blamed for their poverty and their inability to contribute to the economic system: Their impoverishment is not due to individual behavioral or character flaws, but rather to structural or macro forces well outside of an individual's Control. Employable citizens who "choose" not to work are therefore they are responsible for their poverty, and are not deserving" of, or "entitled" to state support without conditions or restrictions,

. The undeserving are not entitled to a basic level of support but can only receive support based on abiding by the rules and regulations set out by social assistance policies.

OW became a compulsory, work-first program that focused on rapidly matching recipients to available local jobs/ Individuals who are able to work must sign a contract called a participation agreement (PA), as a condition of receiving social assistance. To qualify for ODSP, a medical professional verifies that the applicant is unable to work and therefore are deserving of support. ODSP recipients are not required to sign a PA.

The distinction between deserving and undeserving is also present in the distribution of financial assistance. Although meager, ODSP recipients receive higher income than OW.

While people with disabilities are considered the deserving poor, critical analysis of ODSP policies point to similar shortcomings such as insufficient benefits, increasingly restrictive eligibility criteria a host of rules regulating individuals' lives and violation of the dignity and rights of people living with disabilities.

Recipients are forced to survive on minimal income, which dwindles with inflation on cost of living in Ontario. This process makes it difficult for a person to save, limiting the ability to become self-sufficient. Social assistance earnings leave recipients well below any recognized measure of poverty. Overall, restrictions on gifts, assets and other income do not allow welfare recipients to build a financial safety net. The basic income gap remains the largest for single employable (undeserving) recipients who must draw on other resources, mainly their wage-earning capabilities.

The main discourse of inadequate income concerned the inconsideration of inflation. For ODSP participants, the incomplete coverage of medical expenses was a common complaint. Recipients also spoke about being unable to get things they saw and wanted, first having to think of something else they will have to live without. This process did not allow for spontaneity in their lives. Some participants described their lives as full of compromising, sacrificing one necessity for another. Hannah felt that despite receiving OW her life was a struggle.

Social assistance policies act as a method of control and discipline based on the underpinnings that support workfare and which assume welfare recipients to be lazy, unmotivated, and lacking a proper work ethic/ The implication that an active citizen is one who exercises their rights and responsibilities in a balanced way has the potential to add blame to poverty, justifying exclusion rather than inclusion.

representation of the unemployed as inactive, functions to blame poverty as a consequence of individual failure to self-manage and find employment. The responsibility falls on the individual to resist this categorization by finding all means necessary to survive, relying on the state only as a last resort. Conceptualizing someone as inactive seems to give the government and policy makers permission to exert much more control over the lives of these individuals, as well as produces value statements about the worth of their lives and contributions to society

One aspect of lack of choice more specific to OW, related to the requirement of the participation agreement (PA), leading to limited choices in vocation and education. Hannah constantly had to participate in vocational training or educational programs that she was not interested in, in order to continue receiving an income from OW.

Participants also discussed their inability to own a house or have any significant savings. Jacob described the stress he endured when having to explain that he gave up the house that he previously owned so that he could live in the more accessible city of Toronto.

Participants also described how strict case workers were with extra incomes in the bank statements, for example Aria being asked for a letter from a friend verifying that the extra \$300 dollars in the bank statement was sent as a gift.

Claw back is the recovery of money already disbursed. In the OW and ODSP program, you can earn up to \$200 a month without having your income support reduced. If you earn more than \$200, half of the remaining earnings will be subtracted from the income support you receive that month. Claw back arose as a significant complaint among participants, and in some cases a deterrent to working. The most significant impact was on Aria who lost her support for several months due to non-reporting of work. Her OW worker became upset when he saw this unreported income on her notice of assessment and automatically cancelled her support, after charging her with an overpayment. For the next several months, Aria struggled with making enough income through her part time job, credit card and loans from friends. From an odsp perspective working and potentially making too much money to qualify would mean losing additional benefits which are necessary.

Several policies were put into place to ensure that receiving OW was temporary and that employable individuals got back to work as soon as possible.

The income exemption policy is founded on the belief that people living in poverty are not motivated to work and recipients will not take initiative to find work without incentives,."

On the other hand The income which a recipient is entitled to is determined by the government, does not allow individuals to be financially secure or acquire savings and therefore assumes that financial restrictions are necessary to decrease reliance on social assistance.

Increasing labor force attachment, and thereby decreasing state dependency, was the main proposition for clawback policies The income exemptions policy was developed from the Supports to Employment Program an initiative where working welfare recipients can keep a portion of their employment income through a variety of earning exemptions.. This financial incentive was created as a way to encourage recipients to find employment without facing an immediate full reduction of their benefits.

The program also removed economic disincentives to employment within the social assistance system In effect, welfare recipients who also work, potentially increase their net income while gaining "valuable" work experience, which they may use to acquire future fulltime employment.

Earning exemptions have been described as particularly effective at encouraging part-time employment, which helps maintain basic job skills and provides access to information on future employment opportunities. The policy therefore assumes that recipients may thereby be more motivated to work, as they gain additional income as well as skills, they may leverage for full time employment which would then move them out of poverty

It appears that the program intended for recipients to improve their incomes and move toward self reliance, thereby linking work to independence in contrast to dependence when accessing government support.

In actuality, the intent was to decrease welfare rolls and reduce government expenditure. Regardless, the assumption of clawback policy was that, with incentives that minimally penalize gaining income through work, people would be motivated to find work.

According to the OW and ODSP Acts, someone is only eligible if the budgetary requirements of the person and any dependents exceed their income and their assets are depleted to the allowed

maximum. In addition, other forms of support are encouraged and sometimes necessary to be fully pursued before reliance on the state. Income exemption policies also set limits on the amount of outside income which can be acquired without affecting one's monthly allowance. Overpayments are charged if monthly employment income exceeds the allowable income. . Overall, these forms of clawback are meant to reduce or deter reliance on social assistance. .

Therefore, an additional problematisation is the assumption that financial restrictions are necessary to decrease reliance on social assistance.

WPR approach also asks what is silent in the specified policy.

Clawback is created as an incentive to work. However work related expenses such as childcare, transportation and clothing are not considered in income exemption. Childcare is subsidized only if the parent works fulltime and during weekdays.

Housing authorities and social assistance base their 'clawbacks' on the same dollar of employment earnings, therefore as income increases, rent also increases. These additional costs may therefore exceed the financial benefits which are derived from working.

Support for single parents is also lacking as these parents have less choices about entering the labour market and selecting less stressful employment

Secondary education is completely silent in all social assistance policy as this responsibility falls to another ministry.

Governmental institutions which are the principal duty bearers of human rights have not embedded a human rights framework into social assistance policies, allowing citizens' rights to food, housing and an adequate standard of living.

Another silence is the consideration of race or culture which is more concerning in a country which boasts the highest percentage of foreign-born citizens than any other G8 country (Statistics Canada, 2011). As reflected in the many languages spoken, plurality of life experiences, and the diversity of occupational engagements, Canada is indeed a cultural mosaic...

Culture, race and ethnicity are terms associated with the global history of colonisation. Race is often thought of as an immutable characteristic of an individual. However, it is immutable environmental forces, namely social conditions, that give rise to this social construction (Cooper, 1983). Individual social status and achievement which grew out of colonialism and the enslavement of Africans and native Americans gave rise to racial differences.

Culture reflects the shared norms, beliefs, and values of a people in a social group (Markus, 2008).

Diverse sociodemographic identities, including race, culture, ethnicity, and gender, are important influences on one's occupational patterns and choices. People from underrepresented populations have unique cultures which impact occupational opportunities and well-being (Hammell, 2013).

Recipients, hannah in particular also spoke about feeling that to get some opportunities she had to assimilate in terms of appearance. She describes herself as a natural girl who likes to wear natural hairstyles. In one circumstance, she was given an opportunity to interview for a job through OW workshops. However, a staff member, also black and natural approached Hannah and told her that she respects that she is also a natural girl, but the job is looking for something different; suggesting that Hannah straighten her hair in order to have a better opportunity to get the job. Ultimately, she

did not get the job and the person who did get the job was also black but had weaved, straight hair. Now Hannah's thinking has changed. Although she loves being natural, when she goes in for interviews, she wears straight wigs. Hannah's experience of conforming to predominantly Caucasian beauty standards of long straight hair during job interviews, demonstrated the racial nature of the labour market.

. Through welfare-to-work policies, there is a clear demonstration of the role that gender and race play in the labour market. Women are more likely than men to be employed in the part-time labour market and racialized women are more likely than their counterparts to be precariously employed (Agócs, 2014).

Occupational imbalance, is used as a population-based term to identify populations that do not share in the labour and benefits of economic production due to experiences of segregation associated with gender, disability, race, or other forms of difference (Townsend & Wilcock, 2004).

Hannah felt that her race played a significant role in how she has been treated. When she became a teen mom although her 'white' step-mom had also been a teen mom she felt that she could not relate because of the colour of her skin. As her step-mom had moved out of housing and was then well-off living in a nice neighborhood, Hannah questioned whether her life would have turned out differently if she was black. Would she have had the same opportunities? She also feels that being black means that there is additional struggle. according to hannah black children and women are often misunderstood:

These feelings come from her own experience as a child in care and having her own child but not being allowed to raise her while other white teen moms were given housing and the chance to raise their children. She believes CAS is excessively concerned with black children and families. She had heard of non-black parents mistreating their children with no action by CAS, while CAS was overrepresented in black homes. However, despite the greater proportion of black children in the care of CAS, she recalls a lack of promoting successful black stories, as the majority of success stories she encountered were of white adults. Like her stepmom, most of the success stories she was presented of children in care growing up to have degrees and careers were of white women.

Given the significance of food preparation to Rachel, her main request is to receive assistance from community services, in the form of a designated worker to help her cook and prepare healthier and cultural meals. For now, she just has to "stick to what [she] has", frozen food.

Social assistance also monitors what recipients do and punishes recipients for not following rules and regulations. . Any significant changes in income is monitored and scrutinized through monthly checkins.

Travelling for longer than 7 days without permission leads to being charged an overpayment. More importantly, recipients fear being questioned on how they can afford to travel if social assistance is the only income they are supposed to have. Clawback policies place restrictions on how many hours a person can actually work due to the low exemption limit. In conjunction with childcare policies, weekend work or school is not possible.

Social assistance policy also promotes a narrow range of occupations, most of which are connected to contributing to society through employment. For people who are underserving poor, policies privilege employment and people cant see possibilities for engaging in other occupations .

Other occupational possibilities that may be suitable for other people living in Ontario are neglected, such as leisure, self-care, cultural activities and general wellbeing.

This research hence broadened awareness of the aspects of social assistance policy that shape and perpetuate inequity which lead to occupational injustice for people living in poverty.

Social assistance policies promote occupations associated with entering the labour force. Other occupational possibilities which are tied to positive health and well-being are neglected, such as leisure, and self-care and community participation. Occupational science can further explore this form of occupational marginalization. Occupational scientists can take an active stance to bring up questions of justice, participation and identity which all become fore fronted in poor populations

Occupational scientists play a role in raising the consciousness about need to acknowledge a wider range of occupations as well as the right for every citizen to be able to participate fully in society.

However, in the occupational science literature, alternative ways of doing and being, that diverge from hegemonic white, middle-class, EuroAmerican conceptualizations, continue to be underrepresented (Hammel, 2011; Huff et al., 2018).

Recent publications in the Journal of Occupational Science (JOS) such as Beagan, 2020, and Johnson & Lavalley, 2020 have acknowledged the lack of diversity in Occupational Science. Beagan (2020) calls for anti-racism focus in occupational science through “fundamental change to the institutionalized Whiteness that pervades Western societies, rooted in histories of colonial racism and slavery” (p. 2).

Johnson & Lavalley (2020) call for more nuanced critical inquiry and reconceptualization of occupation as a site where racism is enacted and sustained. However, it is further acknowledged that the paucity of voices from non-White racial and cultural groups limits the possibility for anti-racist responsiveness in scholarship (Restall et., 2019, Zuberi & Bonilla-Silva, 2008; Johnson & Lavalley, 2020).

Magalhães et al. (2018) challenges the discipline to “undertake research that challenges, acknowledges, and celebrates the diversity in which people live and ‘do’ (p. 477) to represent the plurality of life experiences.

I recognize my own status of being an immigrant, a woman and belonging to a racial minority group which directly influences how I see the world. As a black woman, I had to think about how my perception of race may influence interactions with participants and how participants’ perception of me may influence how they interact with me. For example, I automatically understood cultural references of participants from the west indies because of our similarities and was better able to engage in conversation based on my own experiences.

As a BIPOC OS researchers, witnessing OS’s prioritization of research that moves beyond a Western paradigm and the hegemonic white discourse, and the encouragement of perspectives from researchers located outside the Western contexts has been encouraging. But as a BPOC researchers located within a culturally heterogenous and globally interconnected Western society, I feel the need to lay bear the knowledge production processes within OS and engage in critical reflection on the nature of the knowledge (why, what and whose knowledge), as well as the production of the knowledge (how and by whom) within the OS discipline by centralizing race, culture and the experiential knowledge of people of colour.

