**Political Ideologies in Harm Reduction**

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Political ideologies have a direct impact on every aspect of society. The impact and affects of political ideologies and policies on the Harm Reduction sector will be discussed and analyzed throughout this paper. The beliefs, values, and ideologies, within the Harm Reduction field will be defined in detail, as well as the approach that the writer would take given the chance to be in a power of position. The reader will be provided with an enhanced knowledge regarding the Harm Reduction sector and the key aspects of how political ideologies have affected such sector. The reader will also develop enhanced knowledge regarding the stance that the writer would take in a position of power and how the writer would attempt to make beneficial and effective policy changes to enhance the Harm Reduction sector.

**Political Ideologies in the Human Services Sectors**

Graham, Shier, and Delaney (2017) define ideology as a common way of thinking amongst particular individuals and/or groups regarding ideas that reflect values, beliefs, attitudes and even experiences; political ideology in particular focuses on the role that government should have in relation to social and economic matters. Correspondingly, ideologies survive on a spectrum in regard to political stances ranging from the far left (communism) to far right (fascism) and often encompass specific terminology such as individualism, collectivism, egalitarianism, and elitism as a means of defining the perspectives of the related ideological stance (Graham, Shier and Delaney, 2017). Ideologies are heavily influenced by values, beliefs, social theories, and ideas, which are also heavily influenced by the environment that such concept(s) thrive in and the social policies that are implemented as a result of the mentioned ideological contributors.

**Harm Reduction**

Harm Reduction encompasses the values and beliefs that drug prohibition is not an appropriate solution for the fatal risks that are often associated with illicit drug use and is based on values of pragmatism or realism rather than idealism – Harm Reduction aims to support individuals by reducing harms such as disease transmission and drug overdoses that are often a critical outcome of drug misuse (Petrie, 2019). Harm Reduction is not a new perspective or sector, nor are the umbrella organizations and services of Harm Reduction. Safe injection sites are one of many umbrellas of Harm Reduction; although extremely controversial within the United States and Canada, SIF’s have shown promising results for the prevention and reversal of accidental drug overdoses, especially in relation to opioid drug use (Leary, 2019).   
 Perhaps the most critical aspect of analyzing how and why certain ideologies (both political and non-political) impact Harm Reduction as a successful outreach and human services practice within society, is not only understanding what harm reduction is, but also understanding the controversial differences in opinions and perspectives. On one end of the spectrum individuals tend to victim blame/shame those who use drugs while holding a purely abstinence-based perspective. While on the other end, those who support and advocate for Harm Reduction policies and practices, tend to hold a more trauma informed, person centered perspective that ultimately aims to remove blame and stigma from such population. The aspects remain at the forefront, as they are essential pieces in understanding the impacts of political ideologies on the Harm Reduction sector.

**Impacts of Political Ideologies**

As previously mentioned, the values and beliefs that are instilled within Harm Reduction organizations are primarily that of pragmatism. Harrison and Boyd (2003) identify pragmatism as an approach that is largely based on desired outcomes, rather than principles that belong to specific ideologies, regarding decision making efforts in the specified sector. Therefore, the assumption that a clash between outside ideologies, such as those held by a more liberally political society, and the strong beliefs and values of pragmatism happen quite often within the Harm Reduction sector, which becomes highly impactful. From a liberal point of view, individual sovereignty is highly appreciated as opposed to other political views and/or eras such as feudalism, where individual citizens and their independence is much less appreciated and possibly even frowned upon (Machan, 2006).

**Harm Reduction vs. Abstinence**

The differences in ideologies within Harm Reduction-based communities and abstinence-based communities are significant. As noted by Henwood, Padgett, and Tiderington (2014) abstinence-based approaches to supporting individuals with addiction(s) is primarily focused on an “all-or-nothing” ideological stance whereas Harm Reduction-based approaches are primarily focused on “housing first” ideologies (pp. 81), which ultimately aims to meet clients where they are at and remove the notion that individuals are only able to obtain stable housing granted, they are sober, and remain sober. Additionally, Henwood, Padgett, and Tiderington (2014) highlight the significance of potentially non-effective support and outcomes that the abstinence-based all-or-nothing approach has for individuals who are explicitly susceptible to chronic homelessness.

Ideology differences in Abstinence-based programs versus Harm Reduction-based programs are significant; one approach holds the ideology of rewards versus punishments in relation to sobriety, while the other holds the ideology of a pragmatic approach that emphasises the stages of change model and recognizes that although individuals still actively use drugs and/or alcohol, they may still be aiming to achieve recovery (Henwood, Padgett, and Tiderington, 2014). Essentially, the relief and ultimate outcomes that both approaches attempt to provide individuals who struggle with drug and/or alcohol misuse are similar. However, the way in which such aspects of the ideological stances are achieved is significantly different.

From a more political point of view, the differences between such sectors are substantial; a normative enquire of which is right or wrong, good, or bad, is highly prominent within political culture and speaks through political ideologies (Machan, 2006). When it comes to liberalism or political ideologies that exist mainly consisting of liberal points of view, in a sector such as Harm Reduction where sovereignty and individual rights are highly respected, the named politics and ideologies impact not only the organizations and the overall effectiveness of the supports and services themselves, but also those who seek refuge and assistance from such. Canada withstands a largely liberalistic political stance, although not entirely liberal in nature, the concept of immoral human beings posing as threats to the rest of society is where government bodies and political policies are expected to step in (Machan, 2006). Often individuals who struggle with things like addiction, mental illness, homelessness, or poverty are viewed as being apart of the immoral population within society, which leaves room for assumption and discrimination amongst vulnerable and marginalized populations like those belonging to Harm Reduction. The notion that immortality is harmful to the rest of society presents itself with barriers and obstacles for these individuals and organizations that those who may not be considered as immoral within society are typically not subjected to. This is but one of the most negatively impactful misconceptions or beliefs that has been developed by liberal political ideologies in regard to the sector of Harm Reduction as being an effective and supported sector within the Human Services field. Machan (2006) states that John Locke, a historical normative classical liberal theorist, believed that conventional adults are free to live and interact with others as they deem fit. However, because some human adults fail to ‘act accordingly’ government bodies are expected to intervene to ensure the basic rights of individuals are being met and not put at risk (Machan, 2006). Although this aspect of political ideology may seem rather rational, the issue that is then brought to question is whether or not the individuals who are deemed immoral, and a threat to the sovereignty of those deemed moral, are having their individual needs met – a double standard is presented with the sovereignty of both moral and immoral individuals being respected equally.

Although Machan (2006) mostly speaks about the importance of individual rights to property in particular, the importance of generalized individuality, human rights, and the power of free will as well as the dimensions of standards and values that are connected to free will is also discussed. This all coincides with the political ideology affects that are experienced by the Harm Reduction sector as it helps us to understand the differences in opinions and value systems. “It is our capacity to choose that gives rise to individual responsibility; the issue of values is not only a matter of what is better and what is worse, but also whether we should act according to certain standards” (Machan, 2006, pp. 85). The fine line between what is right and what is wrong, as highlighted, is not only a political ideological concern, but also a morally appropriate concern.

Within society, the question of whether or not Harm Reduction is morally, ethically, economically, and/or politically appropriate as it pertains to society as a whole, is often at the forefront of all related considerations and debates. As discovered so far, the impact that sovereignty, individual rights, or lack thereof, and a mostly liberalistic country has on a sector of the Human Service field that is significantly based on core values and beliefs of pragmatism and realism, goes far beyond whether or not individual basic rights are being met on both sides of the fence. The overstepping of boundaries related to individual rights and sovereignty for those belonging to individuals practicing Harm Reduction are often overlooked and isolated. Overstepping individual rights boundaries of those who feel threatened by values, beliefs and overall existence of the Harm Reduction field seem to be more debatable and of greater importance than those that benefit from the supports and services that are provided by the Harm Reduction sector.

**Policy and Practice Issues in Harm Reduction**

The war on drugs and the fight for decriminalization in attempt to decrease the ongoing drug related overdose crisis has been prominent within Canadian society for a number of years. The fight against the opioid crisis is significant within the human services field and has ultimately resulted in various sectors and human services professionals taking part in the development and progression of Harm Reduction practices and procedures. For instance, The Canadian Association of Social Workers actively advocates for a more inclusive public heath approach to the illicit drug crisis and illicit drug use, which puts emphasis on the decriminalization of illicit drugs (Wallace and Kennedy, 2020). Wallace and Kennedy (2020) also identify other organizations such as the Canadian Harm Reduction Policy Project and the Canadian Association of People who Use Drugs as active advocates for Harm Reduction policies and practices. Although various organizations and agencies within the human services field hold a strong belief that Harm Reduction can be utilized as an appropriate solution to the overdose crisis, there are noticeable gaps in the system as far as policies go. Wallace and Kennedy (2020) briefly discuss a lack of formal policies being put into place to guide the implementation of Harm Reduction programs as well as a lack of ethical guidance at the provincial and territorial levels as it directly relates to the intervention and support of social workers within the human services field.

Within Canada different levels of government involvement in the implementation and regulation of policies directly related to drug laws, health care systems, and Harm Reduction practices exist. Drug laws are determined at a federal level in Canada, while anything that is directly related to health care delivery, regulations, professions, and even social work is determined at a provincial level (Wallace and Kennedy, 2020). Although majority of drug related instances that affect laws are determined at a federal level, federal political ideologies along with provincial political ideologies are direct impacts of how such laws and interventions are established, communicated, and implemented.

The gap between the federal implementation of drug enforcement laws and the provincial responses to the overdose crisis is massive – from province to province the rules and regulations that specific human services professionals must abide by varies. In British Colombia, Registered Social Workers are allowed to distribute and administer naloxone in certain circumstances, whereas in Alberta, social workers who are employed by the provincial health care system are not authorized to actively participate in the administration and distribution of naloxone (Wallace and Kennedy, 2020). Moreover, in Ontario, there are no specified distribution and/or administration regulations for social workers, and in Quebec, social workers are only permitted to administer naloxone in the case that a first responder or Emergency Medical Services member are absent (Wallace and Kennedy, 2020). With all that has been stated, the gap between the provincial policies specifically related to social work professions and Harm Reduction strategies such as naloxone distribution and administration is made evident. Federally, the whole country is cohesive with the understanding of drug laws, despite the controversy surrounding decriminalization and the positive impacts it could have on society and the drug overdose crisis. Provincially, the country is at a divide, where one province believes that Harm Reduction strategies and procedures such as naloxone accessibility should be widely available, the next province believes that such access should be more restrictive. Perhaps this divide in political ideologies from province to province regarding Harm Reduction protocols and procedures is what is keeping us in the vicious cycle of drug overdoses and a country wide drug epidemic.

**Response to Impacts: Advocacy and Policies Changes**

First and foremost, three key aspects should be noted: (1) the need for a broader spectrum of policies as it pertains to the implementation and delivery of Harm Reduction supports and services is crucial, (2) more intensive advocacy is needed to help reduce the stigma surrounding Harm Reduction and the concept of immoral human beings and, (3) individual rights and discrimination against individuals who access Harm Reduction programs needs more intensive advocacy. Initially, the engagement and collaboration with community organizations to support the advocacy of Harm Reduction would be one the first steps to take. With the engagement of supporting community organizations, advocacy would have the potential to become more widespread and common misconceptions about drug users being immoral would be easier to tackle. Constant victim shaming/blaming that is put upon individuals who are active participants in Harm Reduction procedures would become minimized, thus compassionate understanding would become maximized, thus, advocacy and understanding regarding the benefits of proper Harm Reduction procedures, practices, and protocols would be greater. Additionally, in attempt to tackle the issues of individual rights and sovereignty, an increased amount of community organizations and advocacy would assist in enhancing the fight against discrimination and isolation of basic rights.  
 Being in a power of position and having the ability to making policy changes, would allow enhancement of laws and regulations at the federal level. The divide between the federal and provincial policies would then be addressed with the ultimate goal of federal policies to enhance Harm Reduction strategies country wide, rather than differing from province to province. Lastly, policies centered around intensive training and programming for all human services professionals (not only those who work in Harm Reduction) would be beneficial. This would address the drug overdose crisis and Harm Reduction implementation, practices, and procedures in a more widespread, extensive manner, thus potentially provided more successful outcomes for the sector overall.

**Conclusion**

The impact of political ideologies on the Harm Reduction sector is multidimensional and multifaceted, as is the affects that such has on the ongoing drug overdose crisis. There is no doubt that the gaps in the system and difference in ideologies are direct factors of regression, rather than progression, in the matter. In a country that survives largely based on a liberalistic ideology, a set of beliefs and values that *should be* dependant on the respect and integrity of individual rights, beneficial supports and services like Harm Reduction remain highly controversial, and the sovereignty of our most vulnerable populations is more often than not, compromised.

This paper has highlighted key factors in political ideology disturbances in the Harm Reduction sector such as the differences in federal and provincial stances and the involvement/restrictions of specific human services professionals regarding Harm Reduction procedures. In addition, individual rights and sovereignty, moral versus immoral human behaviours, as well as the affect that political ideologies have on the overall abilities and approaches that are permitted within not only the Harm Reduction sector, but the human services sector overall are all key implications of political ideologies. The changes that are needed are centered around advocacy, a higher level of community organization engagement, stigma diminishment and new/revised policy implementation. This multifaceted issue is not something that can be analyzed completely through the use of one 10-page essay, nor is it an issue that can be completely revised or changed over night. However, without doubt, it can be concluded that the Canadian political ideologies impact the field of Harm Reduction significantly and change is needed more than ever, in more than one way.

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