Abolitionist Disjuncture: Reducing Police Violence in Frontline Social Work

Sparrow A. Preston
Independent scholar, Montréal, Québec

Abstract

In the summer of 2020, two life-altering currents swept across North America: COVID-19 and the call to "defund the police." During this time, I worked at an emergency overnight shelter that was created as a pandemic response. This article is an attempt to reconcile the ethical disjuncture I felt between the popular call to move police funding into social services and the shifts I spent watching frontline workers use the police to intervene in the lives of service users. I explore this disjuncture through a case study from July 2020. The case study is followed by a series of practical harm-reduction strategies for when frontline workers interact with the police. My hope in writing this article is twofold: (a) to encourage the field of social work to demand that its professionals interrogate their relationship with and usage of police, and (b) to reckon with the abolitionist purity of "never call the cops" with the reality that frontline workers will likely continue to use the police, and that that these interactions can and must change in order to reduce harm for service users.

Keywords: critical social work, police, frontline, COVID-19, abolition

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In the summer of 2020, with COVID-19 as a backdrop, North America experienced its largest anti-police movement in decades. Black Lives Matter co-founder, Patrisse Cullors, described this uprising as "seven years in the making" (Black Lives Matter, p. 4), with protests erupting following George Floyd's murder at the hands of Minneapolis, United States, police on May 25, 2020. "Freedom Summer" (p. 4) was driven by a collective demand to defund the police, because police violence and brutality, particularly against the Black community, would be reduced by instead investing in "teachers & counsellors [,] mental-health & restorative services [, and] community-led harm reduction" (p. 11).

During the summer of 2020, I worked nights at a series of emergency shelters put in place by the city of Montréal, Canada. These shelters, a rapid response to the pandemic, were in vacant hotels, former sports arenas, and closed recreation centres: anywhere you could put up 100 army cots six feet apart. There was no organizational infrastructure: no mandate or vision statement, no defined policy or guidelines for intervention, and no supervisory body on site in case of crisis. Frontline staff were hired via an online application or recruited from other shelters, and they worked alongside security guards, who themselves were poached from shuttered bars, movie theatres, and amusement parks.

This article is meant to trouble the dichotomy between the anti-police/abolitionist movement happening during the day, which demanded increased funding for social services and positioned social workers as a viable alternative to calling the police (Black Lives Matter,

2020; Kaba, 2020; Kwon, 2020; Lowrey, 2020) and the nights I experienced, surrounded by frontline workers who readily and seemingly without hesitation forced law enforcement into the lives of some of Montréal's most vulnerable people. Theoretical writing about the way in which social work itself acts as a form of policing has existed for decades. What is new—and perhaps ultimately more troubling—is the increasingly popular belief that social work can be propped up as an *alternative to* policing. I will tease apart this idea by asking where and how frontline social work understands itself in relation to police forces.

This article depicts mental-health crisis, physical restraint, and police intervention. It may be upsetting to read. As Chapman (2010, p. 2) said, "I could never know for you whether or not you should proceed." In my experience, this is true, and our own lived experience continuously impacts our reception of information. However, as a white social worker grappling with my own usage of police, I encourage other white people in the field to read and to resist retreating from feelings of discomfort. As a social work practitioner, I have worked under many supervisors who have encouraged me to manage these feelings of discomfort and to continue practising anyway. Within the relative safety that comes from reading articles, I instead encourage readers to *use* the discomfort as a starting point for interrogation and conversation within their practice.

I will begin by sharing the perspective from which I write. This will be followed by a case study, allowing for the examination of current narratives surrounding the intersection of social work and police abolition. All names and identifying features have been changed in the case study to protect confidentiality. The subsequent section will offer a series of specific suggestions for frontline workers who frequently interact with police. These suggestions are not a solution; they are a harm-reduction response designed to be implemented now, as the struggle for a police-free future continues. I present these suggestions as a nod to the complexity of visionary abolitionist politics and against the notion that we must—or even can—be politically pure (Dixon, 2014; Shotwell, 2016).

I write this piece as a white, queer social worker and settler living on occupied Kanien'kehá:ka land. I am grateful to live here and will do what I can to be a respectful guest and to live in right relations (Hart et al., 2009), including being attentive to mechanisms—like social work and policing—used to control Indigenous Peoples, communities, and land (Blackstock, 2009; Chapman & Withers, 2019; Maynard, 2017; Maynard, 2021; Tuck & Yang, 2012). My understandings of police abolition are intertwined with anti-colonialism and decolonization, as articulated by Tuck and Yang (2012). Beyond calling for land repatriation for Indigenous Peoples, Tuck and Yang (2012) urged action beyond "settler moves to innocence" (p. 10). Their claim that Indigenous Peoples' advances for justice can only come through an "unsettling [of] innocence" (p. 28) helped drive the anti-colonial analysis of this work. As I seek to disrupt the benevolent reputation of social work by shedding light on both its alliance with and reliance on policing, the interrogation of innocence is a consistent question throughout.

I have worked in community-based, frontline services for close to a decade. I work alongside individuals who have achieved various levels of social work education. In my work, as in this article, I use the term *frontline worker* to identify anyone in direct contact with service users. My political orientation as an anti-colonialist and prison/police abolitionist infuses the ways in which I practise "social working": the vastly diverse interventions into the social world that are found at all times and in all places, which include caring, sharing

community work, and activism" (Chapman & Withers, 2019, p. 3). Although I learned the term "social working" from these authors, they themselves borrowed it from de Montigny (2018); see also Anucha (2008). I thank these three authors for this useful expression.

Throughout this article, I position myself in opposition to my colleague who called 911. Before continuing, I must acknowledge that this is not done with the goal of joining the "race to innocence" (Fellows & Razack, 1998, p. 1) or of placing myself in what Chapman and Withers (2019) refer to as "normative white evasions of responsibility" (p. 179). While working in frontline services, I have called the cops many times. I have also been the person to give the go-ahead to my colleagues to call 911. I have been an active participant in increasing police presence within frontline services. These experiences have caused some of my greatest internal dilemmas as I witnessed a lack of congruence between my personal and professional values. This "disjuncture" between "belief and behavior" (DiFranks, 2008, p. 170) is the murkiness from which I write.

Finally, I write this article from a place of urgency: not only are marginalized people significantly more vulnerable to catching COVID-19, but also they are dealing with the reality that the pandemic has *increased* the level of interactions, violence, and profiling by the police. Simultaneously, there has been a *decrease* in availability and access to support services (Perri et al., 2020; We Can't Police the Pandemic, 2020). In nearly every way possible—physical and mental health, housing, employment, social relationships, and more—the pandemic has demonstrated the scale of inequality and the depths of vulnerability impacting people living in precarious situations (Rendon et al., 2021), a reality that positions COVID-19 as both backdrop and centre stage for understanding the content of this article.

Part One: Social Work Will Not Save Us

It is June of 2020, and I am on the phone discussing the increasingly common narrative that defunding the police should involve increased funding of social workers and frontline services (Black Lives Matter, 2020; Kaba, 2020; Kwon, 2020; Lowrey, 2020). I am talking to Andrew, one of my closest social work friends and one of my favourite thinkers. They share my concern with this proposed move away from police and toward social work. Andrew says, "What people don't get is that … social work won't save us."

Meaning that social work is only as good as the workers and organizations practising under this title. Meaning that social work is only as good as the training, ethics, and policies shaping workers and organizations. Contemporary social work has been written into existence by decades of violence against marginalized communities (Blackstock, 2009; Chapman & Withers, 2019; Maynard, 2017). This violence, both direct and indirect, has positioned social work as a discipline responsible for cultivating moral goodness; social work has demanded that its practitioners encourage white, middle-class norms largely through participation in capitalism (Chapman & Withers, 2019). Social work's hypersurveillance toward marginalized communities (Chapman & Withers, 2019; Maynard, 2017) has positioned it as a natural ally of police forces. Contemporary social work practice must be understood as the current iteration of this violence, not as departing from a place of neutrality.

This acknowledgement—that there is no neutral point of practice in social work, that there is no "starting over"—is my effort to write ethically, that is to say, to hold many complex truths at the same time. I do not celebrate social work, and still I acknowledge that frontline

workers have real impact on the lives of individuals. As the case study below will outline, if individual workers, teams, and organizations do not hold values that demand alternatives to policing be mobilized, it becomes much easier to rely on the socially dominant, white-supremacist narrative that calling 911 is the solution.

Case Study

> I arrived at the shelter at 11:45 pm to begin the shift change. This particular shelter was housed in a sports arena. Individuals slept on cots, separated on three sides by mesh pop-up walls, creating small cubicles. Each cubicle had one outward-facing wall, visible to staff from the main entrance. One hundred fifty cubicles were positioned back to back on the floor of the arena. Stadium seating rose up on all sides, an unintentional panopticon (Foucault, 1975).
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> During the shift change, the evening staff informed the night staff that there was a young man, Pierre, approximately 30 years old, who was in mental-health crisis. The evening team specified that he was "not dangerous or aggressive" but that he was "not doing well."
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> At 2:30 a.m., there was a sudden thud. Shouting was audible from our office—a former ticket-sales window. Three security guards were restraining Pierre, shouting for the police to be called. One guard was kneeling on his neck; the other two were sitting on his back. My co-worker, Janine, arrived in the hallway first and, responding to the security staff's requests, immediately called 911. Pierre continued shouting, his face pressed sideways against the tile floor. This was less than one month after George Floyd was murdered as a result of police restraint.
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> When the police arrived, their first response was, "We've already dealt with this person today." They stood, watching the security staff continue to physically restrain Pierre and asked them—not Janine or myself—for details. They explained that Pierre had knocked over a chair and then, after being asked by a guard to be quiet, spit at him. The guard wanted him arrested, claiming that in the time of COVID-19, spitting was a form of assault.
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> I stood parallel to Pierre, positioning my body to both bear witness (Razack, 2003; Tagaq, 2018) and to turn away. My attention split in two: an even divide between the police and Pierre. The police pulled Pierre to his feet with a firm yank to the shoulder. At this point, he had been bound to the ground for over 15 minutes. The police refused to arrest him for assault and planned to drive him far from the shelter and drop him off on a random street, a removal tactic Montréal police use frequently when they deem service users "too difficult" to reshelter for the night. Out of sight, out of mind: it solved our problem, and it solved their problem. The person, of course, who was not solved, managed, or cured (Clare, 2017; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018) was Pierre. In crisis, he had sought services. In reality, services were not provided; he was physically restrained and disposed of.
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> Later, in the office, I asked Janine what she thought of the situation. Her response was, "It's not really my place to have an opinion about this. I was asked to call the police and I did. I did my job."

In this moment, according to her own narrative, Janine had done her job: by following direction and implicating law enforcement, she had practised social working. During our debrief later on, and then again during our following shift together, she never wavered from this decision. Janine did not personally hold anti-police politics, the shelter we worked at—in its hasty creation—provided no guidelines regarding crisis response, and there were no structures in place to hold the workers or security staff accountable for their decision to implicate law enforcement.

A key component to Freedom Summer (Black Lives Matter, 2020) was the demand toward the general public to question their relationships with law enforcement and to explore alternatives to police intervention. Simultaneously, social workers were seemingly both exempt and exalted. While individual social workers may have reflected on their own opinions and allegiances, organizations did not demand it. In North American popular media, social work was repeatedly positioned as a legitimate avenue for defunding the police (Kwon, 2020; Lowrey, 2020), and it was accepted without interrogation that those working in the field would have political allegiances that refrained from police collaboration. These calls to fund social work failed to connect to the field's past practices, presumably because these calls were made by those working outside the field. What is not justifiable, however, is the field's failure to respond to or to use this moment as an opportunity to be publicly accountable about its complex history and (present-day) practices.

The case above offers an example of my current preoccupations within the field of social work. It is precisely the frequency of these kinds of scenarios—nice worker, difficult client, police intervention, removal tactics—that shows that social work does not merit the exalted status it was given during Freedom Summer.

When I began working at these pop-up shelters, unbound by policy, administration, historical precedents, etc., I had imagined them as the ideal laboratory to practice critical social work (Fook, 2003). With the Defund the Police movement at the forefront of my mind, I—however naively—assumed that my colleagues would be similarly averse to relying on the police to support interventions. What I found instead, was that this environment, without guidelines or mandates, led to *more* police interventions, not less. Incidents like the one described above were the norm. As I witnessed with my colleagues, it was not that they (we) were mandated to use the police, but rather that they (we) felt it was an acceptable part of "doing their job." From this perspective, to use the police was to legitimately practise social working.

I am tempted to say that this is because we did not have a unifying mission statement or set of values. We were not hired because of a commitment to creating a low-barrier shelter that offered people protection from the increase in policing during the pandemic (We Can't Police the Pandemic, 2020). We were hired because of the urgent danger of COVID-19. However, I have held a number of frontline positions and have never once directly been asked how I decide when I would call the police. Organizations function under the assumption that a "good worker" will deploy good judgment—that is, call the police when deemed necessary. But when, and what is "necessary"? I will not pretend to be able to answer this question: thresholds for stress, danger, discomfort, and risk are deeply personal. Instead, I address this question to the discipline of social work at large; there must be a cultural shift requiring that those in the field understand their relationship to policing and consider how this impacts their practice. This shift must occur at all levels: in the classroom, in the field, in policies, and in decisions regarding funding. The

demand for social work to interrogate its relationship to law, power, and police must be as multi-tiered as the field itself.

Maylea (2021) wrote, “Social work is stuck” (p. 6). If social work wishes to be considered in discussions around defunding the police and wishes to receive the societal celebration, support, and funding attached, the field must respond. Not only individuals practising social working but also organizations, funders, educational and licensing bodies, and those in institutional power must begin to interrogate the possibility of practice that actively fights against police involvement. As social work experiences the ever-increasing effects of neo-liberalism and managerialism, no level of practice can remain neutral about its engagement and collaboration with law enforcement.

Part Two: Dreaming A Different Practice

The second section of this paper is designed to explore the reality surrounding police interventions within frontline services. As demonstrated in the case study, practices surrounding police interventions must change *now*. I am not disconnected from the realities of frontline work. There are, every day, situations that involve risk. It would be simplistic to claim that this presence of risk is a result of organizations failing to protect or properly train staff. Organizations providing frontline services face ever-increasing needs for service, strict procedures to access funding, and pressures toward managerialism: such organizations exist in a pressure cooker that is beyond the scope of this article to explore.

Practices For Reducing Harm Among Service Users, Frontline Workers, and Police

For individuals who are social working in these environments, it is not unusual to feel that police are the only option; as stated in the beginning of this article, I too have felt that police were the only option. The suggestions found below are for those moments.

I present these suggestions with the full acknowledgement that I can never know the depths to which my identity impacts my ability to interact with the police. Without question, my white, able body has a tremendous impact on the ways in which I am able to work and communicate with law enforcement. I offer these suggestions explicitly for the many white frontline workers who have yet to examine their response to and use of law enforcement, and I offer them humbly to those of other identities, with the invitation to take only what is helpful and safe to use.

Know The Risks

As proven in any number of cases in 2020, calling the police elevates the risk that harm, particularly physical violence, will occur. Some Canadian examples—from 2020 only—include Chantel Moore, an Indigenous woman who died during a police wellness check; Ejaz Choudry, a father diagnosed with schizophrenia, who died after his family called the police when he was in crisis; and D’Andre Campbell, a young Black man, who called the police *on himself* when he was in a mental-health crisis and died at their hands (Lamoureux, 2020).

Know that you are facilitating the involvement of the individual with the legal system. Know that this singular call may result in a ticket, detention, physical/mental violence, and any number of other unpredictable outcomes.

Be certain that the current situation requires this level of risk. Know that your identity, the identity of the police, and—most importantly—the identity of the individual in crisis will profoundly shape the situation's outcome. Know that to be a white worker calling the police on a Black or Indigenous person will cause harm beyond what you are capable of understanding. Know that any number of intersecting marginalized identities—including Disability, mental illness, gender identity, immigration status, and more—will predispose an individual to police violence (Ben-Moshe, 2014). Do not shy away from these truths.

Know What You Want

Why are you calling the police? I ask this question not in a rhetorical, abstract sense but in a direct and specific way:

> What do you want the police to do? Do you want the person removed? Arrested? Ticketed? Transported? What can their presence do that yours cannot?

Frontline workers must understand the possible outcomes of police intervention in advance of crisis, and calling the police should have at least the same standards as any other professional referral. Frontline services must debunk the idea that the police have access to magical solutions and must reckon with the reality that there are often situations that are messy and unresolvable.

Remain Engaged

Almost always, I have witnessed the following sequence of actions:

1. Crisis erupts, and worker(s) intervene.
2. Worker(s) are overwhelmed, and the crisis is not diffusing on the timeline that they want. Things feel messy, unresolved, unpredictable. They call the police.
3. Police arrive on site. Workers point to the situation and then step back. Police assume control.
4. Worker(s) write some form of incident report, and it ends with "The police were called." The individual is often subsequently barred from the organization—for whatever reason prompted the police intervention—and the situation is considered closed.

This sequence of actions has the outcome of removing the frontline worker from the crisis by granting complete control to the police. Those involved in social working at all levels must consider to what extent they are responsible for the outcomes after they have willfully involved the police. Organizations must open conversations about accountability, relationship rupture, and repairing damage relating to police interventions. When organizations call the police on service users, they are responsible for "the obligation and needs that are created through violation" (Kaba, 2021, p. 148).

Be Directive

If you have called the police, and you know what you want (that is, for the person to be peacefully escorted off premises), you should be prepared to take leadership. When police arrive, meet them and explain not only the situation but also *exactly* what you expect their role to be. Frontline workers must refuse the too-common desire to surrender control to police and must recognize that calling the police in a professional context is profoundly different from placing a call outside of employment.

With this in mind, I offer the following scripts that I have used, and which have achieved the desired outcome of de-escalating the crisis at hand. De-escalating the crisis moves the overall energy surrounding the situation closer to calm, rather than it remaining elevated, frenetic, and inflammatory. In this way, de-escalation itself is a harm-reduction practice. These scripts are written from a worker's perspective and directed toward police.

The first script responds to a mental-health issue, given the frequency with which the police are contacted in these situations, often when individuals are in psychosis or displaying unpredictable or erratic behaviours.

> There is an individual in mental health crisis. Please walk behind me as I escort them out of the building. Do not touch them. Drive them to the nearest hospital, and call me to confirm that they have been dropped off. Pass this business card with my contact information to the hospital intake team.

The second script responds to an individual who has posed physical threat to others—either staff or other service users. Experiencing a threat to one's physical safety can have lasting damage on the well-being of individuals and the feeling of safety within an environment. These situations require responses. However, social work must resist the dominant narrative that punishment is a form of justice. Displays of threatening behaviours often have root in traumatic experiences, substance use, or mental-health issues. These conditions do not excuse behaviours; they simply contextualize them.

> This person needs to be removed from the property because they have been physically aggressive. Please stand outside our building until they have left the property. It is not necessary to arrest them or speak to them. I will speak to them if they question your presence.

The final script responds to conflict between two individuals using the same resource. Organizations should not necessarily be expected to manage crisis occurring outside of the building, but they are responsible for what happens inside the building.

> There has been an altercation between these two people. I believe your presence will be enough to defuse the tension further and encourage them both to leave the premises. We will debrief the situation when they return—both are too agitated currently to discuss.

As awkward as it may seem to practise scripts for communicating with the police, I believe it is the most effective way to prepare for interactions. From my perspective in frontline social working, recourse to police usage is a present reality; therefore, as service providers in positions of power working with vulnerable people, it is the responsibility of frontline workers to adopt practices that will reduce harm. Similarly, this responsibility permeates beyond those working directly in frontline practice. Managers and organizations are inherently role models for their staff. Those teaching social work practices are uniquely positioned to invite those entering the field to reflect on their relationships to policing. Policy makers, particularly those doing research, have access to resources that can drive the dialogue around how social work can rethink its relationship to policing. Abolitionist scholar and activist Ruth Wilson Gilmore said, "Abolition is about presence, not absence. It's about building life-affirming institutions" (as cited in brown, 2020, p. 1). Arguably, social work is also about presence, about "life-affirming institutions." Practitioners at all levels should be reminded of this.

Part Three: Stories I Wish I Could Have Written

Here is the story I wish I could have written about Pierre:

> At 2:30 a.m., three security guards were restraining Pierre, shouting for the police to be called. One guard was kneeling on his neck; the other two were sitting on his back. My co-worker, Janine, arrived first. She asked why they were restraining Pierre and learned that he had spit at a security guard. Janine called me for backup and explained the situation. Knowing that crisis often diffused once the person was outside, we agreed that our top priority was to get Pierre out of the building. With the goal of providing a direct exit, we closed all doors except for the front doors, which were propped open.
>
> Together, Janine and I asked the security staff to coordinate a safe physical release for Pierre. Janine, who generally had a good relationship with Pierre, knelt to make eye contact with him and explained that he was required to leave the building. She said, "Pierre, you are not able to stay here tonight. We are going to let you go, and you need to go outside. We will go with you. and once we're outside you can explain what happened. We will help you make a plan for tonight."
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> Pierre was released and left the building.

However, as anyone working in frontline services knows, things rarely go as planned. So here I offer the more realistic scenario, filled with disjuncture and ethical impurity:

> At 2:30 a.m., three security guards were restraining Pierre, shouting for the police to be called. Janine agreed to call 911 and then briefed me on the situation. She said she would stay with Pierre, and I should meet the police. Before I left to go out front, we asked the security staff to reduce contact with him. They readjusted their physical positions to minimize pressure on his body.
>
> While I waited for the police, I called another shelter. They had a bed available and said that they would reserve it. I explained that he wasn't "doing well." I texted Janine from outside, so she could let Pierre know his options.
>
> When the cops arrived, I briefed them by saying,
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>> There is an individual being physically restrained inside the building. He is in mental-health crisis but has not demonstrated physical danger to others. Do not touch him unless he poses imminent physical threat to you. He has been informed that he can either leave the premises for tonight or can take a ride with you to X shelter, where a place is confirmed for him.

Any critical reader and worker will note that there are endless variables that could have changed the outcome: I might not have found another shelter; Janine might have insisted on calling the police, Pierre might have had a violent reaction upon release or upon seeing the police, a different security team might never have restrained him, and on and on, endlessly. These variables do not even begin to explore the role that our identities played in this situation. It is impossible to predict every scenario or outcome. This reality, however true, should not distract from the need to properly prepare for police involvement, including planning for how to enact the best possible outcome.

Of course, I can never go backwards. I do not know where Pierre spent the rest of that night or any subsequent nights. I never saw him again. Rather, his case—his life—became hugely influential on my understanding of the way in which I practise social working and the way I consider police interventions. This paper is written for him, and for all those who have, in crisis, reached for help, and instead been violently displaced.

Conclusion

This article is nothing if not demonstrative of the complexity that frontline workers are faced with constantly. Although I am actively imagining an abolitionist future, I am also cognizant of the overwhelming circumstances frontline workers face and the way that police are used as a security blanket. I write to empathetically raise the standards and to inspire confidence in my comrades. Police ability to intervene is not above ours: we can—and must—do better.

That said, the structures behind individuals must also do better. Social work educators must wade into the waters of abolitionist theory and be willing to link it to field practice. Licensing bodies and policy makers must be willing to devote time and resources to reflecting on the historical and present-day harm caused by police involvement. Placing the pressure to change on individual workers creates non-sustainable change and fails to see the picture at large: the field of social work is both culpable and stuck in its benevolence (Maylea, 2021). Arguably, no other discipline—besides, ironically, policing—receives the same simultaneous societal applause while causing so much harm.

As Shotwell (2016) wrote, "We are compromised and we have made compromises, and this will continue to be the way we craft the worlds to come, whatever they might turn out to be" (p. 5). I offer this quote as an olive branch for all willing to deeply interrogate their work and the way it may move from a police-infused reality toward the abolitionist future we ourselves can practise into existence.

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Author Note

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Sparrow A. Preston, c/o Prison Radio Show, 3647 University Street, Montréal, Québec H3A 2B3, Canada. Email: annierose.3643@gmail.com