“Understanding Structural Violence in Communities through a Systems Lens: Revisiting the ‘Work’ in Social Work”

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Peter S. Hovmand will discuss how to use community-based system dynamics as a way to unpack, understand, and ultimately redesign the systems underlying structural violence. Many scholars have noted the systemic nature of oppression and violence in communities as a way to distinguish the underlying structural inequalities from distributional inequalities (e.g., 1990). In doing so, the emphasis of analysis has shifted from individual choices to macro systems that tolerate and perpetuate psychological and physical injury. While public health, preventive medicine, health care, community psychology, and social work have all recognized, to varying degrees, the importance of addressing structural violence (e.g., Galtung, 1969; Gilligan, 1997), social work is uniquely able to bring a focus on the trauma from structural violence in marginalized communities.

However, there are comparatively few tools available to map the systems underlying structural violence, or design innovations that have the power to change what it means to live in a community or be in a social group. Social justice is not just about changing the disparities or the underlying structures that generate the inequalities, but also about changing the meaning of our social lives toward something better.

Drawing on ten years of work in both domestic and international settings, Hovmand will illustrate both the feasibility and applicability of community-based system dynamics for addressing structural violence. One implication of this research is that structural violence can be understood as increasing the uncertainty within a complex social system, and social work then becomes a profession focused on reducing the social complexity. While the emphasis is on structural violence in the marginalized communities, the conclusion is that social work has much to contribute by enhancing the contributions across many other fields and professions, but that this only comes from learning the hard work of social work in managing social complexity.

Peter S. Hovmand is the founding director of the Brown School’s Social System Design Lab. His research and practice focus on using participatory group model building methods to engage and build systems-thinking capacity in communities to understand and address inequities in health, education, and social well-being. His work has been funded by the National Science Foundation, National Institutes of Health, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Robert Woods Johnson Foundation, Lupina Foundation, Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Substance Abuse & Mental Health Services Administration, and St. Louis Federal Reserve Bank.

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Faculty and doctoral students are invited.
Conversation over lunch (provided) will follow the talk.

Please R.S.V.P. by November 8.