

Anti-Oppressive Social Work Practice

Fighting for Space, Fighting for Change

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This introduction discusses the changing context of social work practice, including the following: globalization and neoliberalism; the growth of poverty; human migration; welfare state and workplace restructuring; licensure; and historical and contemporary themes in social work theory. The chapter also includes ten core insights that have stood the test of social justice oriented practice and discusses problematic trends addressed by anti-oppressive practice such as liberal pluralism and authoritarianism.

As you read this introduction, ask yourself the following:

1. What forms does restructuring take in front-line social work?
2. What are some of the gaps in historical and current writings on anti-oppressive practice and its predecessors? What are some of the points of agreement?
3. What are some of the new challenges facing social justice oriented social workers?
4. What are some of the problems associated with liberalism and authoritarianism in anti-oppressive practice? _____

An Indigenous social work student spends her week comforting neighbours traumatized by events on the barricade at Caledonia, Ontario. She asks for extensions on her final papers, wondering whether her professors will see the links between anti-oppressive theory and her involvement in the front-lines of activism.

Initially full of enthusiasm, a student doing a placement in a child welfare agency soon becomes disillusioned. She feels that she does little more than fill out forms and complete computerized assessments. She never has time to challenge oppressive practices, or even think about them. Workers in her agency are sympathetic, but tell her to get used to it because “there’s no room for theory in the real world.”

An anti-oppressive therapist who doesn’t use the title “social worker” is told that she will lose her job at a family counseling centre because she hasn’t registered with the Social Work College. Primarily providing services to very poor women of colour, many of whom are survivors of abuse and torture, she wonders whose needs are being served by the College.

Charity and Band Aids versus Social Justice and Transformation

Oppression

Oppression takes place when a person acts or a policy is enacted unjustly against an individual (or group) because of their affiliation to a specific group. This includes depriving people of a way to make a fair living, to participate in all aspects of social life or to experience basic freedoms and human rights. It also includes imposing belief systems, values, laws and ways of life on other groups through peaceful or violent means. Oppression can be external, as in the examples above, or internal, when groups start to believe and act as if the dominant belief system, values and life way is the best and exclusive reality. Internal oppression often involves self-hate, self-censorship, shame and disowning individual and cultural realities.

The vignettes above describe real life conflicts and tensions that social work students and practitioners experience in everyday, front-line practice. Although details have been changed to protect confidentiality, these vignettes are based on real events and people. They highlight the complexity of struggles in the world of social work practice, the need for models that advance social justice at multiple levels and the kinds of struggles in which social workers find themselves. Social work is a unique field in many ways. Social work contains a number of distinct approaches and philosophies regarding care, what constitutes care and how to stop or slow the social problems that generate the need for care. Social work is generally thought to have first emerged from charitable roots (see, for example, Carniol 2005; Mullaly 2002; Abramovitz 1988). Employed by groups such as the Charitable Organizations Society, Victorian-era social workers frequently provided the poor with enthusiastic lectures on morality and hygiene, as well as infrequent but much-needed food baskets or clothing boxes (Abramovitz 1988). These interventions did little more than place leaky band aids on deeply rooted social problems, failing to challenge systems that exploited the poor and sustained the wealthy (Carniol 2005; Withorn 1984). Yet today this tradition continues in social work, in the form of interventions that aim to provide a subsistence level of support to clients but leave the social systems that generate such problems untouched.

Fortunately, more social justice oriented approaches to social work also exist. Throughout the history of social work, workers, clients and average people have asked: what are the causes of social problems, and, crucially, what can we do to address those causes and prevent social problems, rather than merely treating the victims? These questions have been central to the development of a strand of social work emerging from social movements and aimed at fundamentally transforming the political, economic, social and cultural factors underlying and generating inequality and injustice. Groups such as the Rank and File Movement, the Settlement House Movement and

the Canadian League for Social Reconstruction called on social work to serve those in need, while simultaneously working to fundamentally reorganize society (Hick 2002; Withorn 1984; Reynolds 1963, 1946). In other words, politicized, transformative approaches to social work have a long history.

Social Movements

Social movements are one of the major roots of politicized, transformative social work. Social movements are groups of people who come together to enact change on specific political, economic, cultural or social issues. While they are normally thought of as progressive in nature, they can also be regressive and work to halt or revoke social reforms and transformative policies. The authors in this book use the term social movements to refer to the collective action of individuals with reform and transformative agendas of social justice, equity and fairness.

Within the field of social work, social justice oriented practice happens in a number of ways, including education and consciousness-raising among clients and co-workers; the development of social justice based therapies such as feminist therapy and First Nations interventions; community development and organizing; political activism and workplace resistance; and broad-based organizing around policy changes, world peace, international equity and the development of social systems based on fairness and social justice.

Transformation

In this book, transformation refers to ways of relieving people's emotional pain and immediate difficulties while simultaneously working to change the larger dynamics that generate inequity, unfairness and social injustice. These forces include racism, sexism, colonialism, capitalism, ableism, ageism and other hierarchical, authoritarian relations. With somewhat different emphases, these forces are often referred to interchangeably as social relations, social forces, social systems, social structures and social factors. These social relations are shaped by and shape the social, political, economic, and cultural norms, structures, systems, discourses, forces, policies, organizations and practices of our everyday lives and societies.

Anti-oppressive practice and other social justice oriented social workers seek to transform these larger social relations through direct practices that incorporate liberatory approaches within specific interventions and interactions, as well as through larger actions aimed at macro or structural level change such as activism, scholarly work, resistance, advocacy, collective organizing, mass actions and long- and short-term mobilization of individuals, groups and societies.

Anti-oppressive practice (AOP), which will be discussed in greater detail later in this chapter, is one of the main forms of social justice oriented social work

theory and practice today. It is a promising and exciting approach to the complexity of today's social problems, an approach that recognizes the context of multiple oppressions and responds to the growing need for fundamental reorganization of all levels of society. Anti-oppressive practice attempts to integrate the search and struggle for social change directly into the social work experience. This can take the form of new practices, new sources for and ways of understanding and building knowledge and practice, and new ways of building activism and opposition. Rather than a single approach, AOP is an umbrella term for a number of social justice oriented approaches to social work, including feminist, Marxist, post-modernist, Indigenous, post-structuralist, critical constructionist, anti-colonial and anti-racist. These approaches draw on social activism and collective organizing as well as a sense that social services can and should be provided in ways that integrate liberatory understandings of social problems and human behaviour. As part of larger movements for social change, AOP is constantly refining its theory and practice to address new tensions and social problems, as well as underlying structural factors.

Mainstream Social Work

Mainstream Social Work

This term refers to social work that identifies with professionalism, career advancement and workplace authority, rather than with clients, oppressed communities and agendas for social justice. Although often claiming the opposite, mainstream social work tends to view social problems in a depoliticized way that emphasizes individual shortcomings, pathology and inadequacy. Interventions are aimed largely at the individual with little or no analysis of or intent to challenge power, structures, social relations, culture or economic forces.

AOP differs from mainstream approaches in a number of ways. Some people think that mainstream social work is a kind of workplace or series of places in which social work is practised. For example, child welfare and hospital social work are often referred to as mainstream practice sites. However, mainstream social work is not a place; it is a perspective or way of looking at social problems and their solutions. While AOP is more difficult in some workplaces, especially those that are closer to state power and coercion such as the correctional system, welfare provision and child welfare services, it is possible to practise social justice oriented social work in any organization.

AOP offers a number of critiques of mainstream practice. In particular, AOP is critical of mainstream approaches for *depoliticizing* social work. Depoliticization refers to processes that take politics and political awareness out of issues in order to control these issues and those seeking social change.

Depoliticization

Depoliticization refers to processes that take politics and political awareness out of issues in order to control the issues and those seeking to make social change. However, nothing is neutral; there are no politics-free zones in life. Everything involves struggle over power, resources and affirming identities. In social work, issues are often depoliticized by defining them as individual shortcomings, medical or psychiatric diagnoses, criminal activities or other forms of deviance, and/or by using existing bureaucratic understandings of social problems and their solutions.

However, nothing is neutral and nothing is apolitical. Especially in social work, there are no politics-free zones: everything involves struggle over power, resources and affirming identities. In social work, social problems are often depoliticized by defining them as the failings or shortcomings of individuals, rather than ways that people cope with or react to the oppressive and difficult situations generated by society. One of the ways that wider social problems are individualized and depoliticized is by giving them medical or psychiatric diagnoses or criminal labels. While mainstream social work tends to accept medical and criminal labels uncritically, social justice oriented perspectives remain skeptical of diagnoses and labels and try to use these designations in strategic and critical ways. For example, many people were harmed for many years when queer sexualities were labeled as deviant and a form of psychiatric illness. Social work's role in perpetuating this oppression is now seen as very wrong, although in the past it was simply a professional norm. Hence, caution, critique and skepticism are important in addressing the social problems on which social workers act. Social justice oriented social workers may use medical or psychiatric diagnoses to describe a set of problems encountered by an individual or group, while simultaneously maintaining an awareness of the ways that medical and psychiatric labels oppress and marginalize people. However, if housing, social assistance, child care supports or counseling are available to individuals based on a given diagnosis and will be denied to them otherwise, AOP social workers may encourage people to use their diagnosis strategically to improve their lives and to access needed resources.

Mainstream social work tends to accept existing narrow, individually focused interventions as acceptable or the best that can be done at this point in time. In contrast, social justice oriented social workers attempt to address immediate crisis and emotional pain while keeping in mind the bigger picture of oppressive policies, practice and social relations. For example, anti-oppressive practitioners would argue that what we call "clinical depression" cannot be fully addressed separately from the poverty, sexism, racism, social alienation and other oppressive forces experienced by many people bearing this label. Temporary relief may be provided in the form of medications and verbal therapies, but the social problems and struggles in which many suf-

ferers find themselves must also be analyzed and addressed through actions such as critical consciousness-raising, advocacy, radical therapy, mobilization for policy and economic change, and broader reorganization of society and social relations.

Another way that social work has been depoliticized and remade as a neutral professional practice is by taking struggle out of practice. Social work is generally presented as an apolitical, technical form of professional work undertaken by well-educated and kindly people. In actuality, social work is a series of acute, ongoing, political struggles over what services and resources will be provided, to whom, by whom, in what amount and to what end. Mainstream social work also tends to promote the idea that social work is a united, apolitical body of expert knowledge. In reality, social work is a number of distinct, disparate and intensely political *bodies* of knowledge that have a long history of conflict based on real-life struggles within our everyday worlds. As noted earlier in this chapter, much of the struggle for social justice in social work currently takes the form of anti-oppressive practice. Perhaps in an attempt to appeal to as broad an audience as possible, anti-oppressive practice has a tendency to ignore its more radical, political roots or dismiss them as misguided, asserting instead that its theory invented itself independently of earlier social justice oriented social work theory. Within this context anti-oppressive practice can be easily absorbed by mainstream agendas so that it becomes just another form of liberal, pluralist practice, rather than a political project informed by and based on struggles over resources, power, identities and strategies for social justice.

Pluralist

The notion that society consists of various ethnic, political and religious groups which all have equal access to power, resources and affirming identities. The role of government is to adjudicate their competing claims. This framework ignores differences that are woven into our social, economic, cultural, and political systems and that are shaped and reproduced by race, gender, class, disability, and so forth.

Liberal pluralism refers to an understanding of the world as a series of groups competing for resources and power. The various groups composing society are thought to possess equal power, status and rights; where differences in opportunity or outcome exist, it is the task of governments or other large institutions to resolve those differences. While acknowledging that oppression exists, liberal pluralism believes that additional programs and services can produce equality. In contrast, anti-oppressive perspectives argue that service delivery is not enough. A more fundamental restructuring of social relations and processes is necessary in order to replace the forces that generate oppres-

sion with new, more equitable ways of meeting needs (Mullaly 2002). Liberal pluralism, with its emphasis on inclusion, diversity and attention to multiple voices and identity, can look like AOP. However, reflecting a certain elitism, liberal pluralism is not interested in actually connecting with the real-life struggles of oppressed people or explicitly aligning with their social movements and struggles. Nor is it interested in doing much to fundamentally reshape, reorganize and redistribute resources, power and affirming social identities. Often giving lip service support to movements of oppressed peoples, liberal pluralists tend to promote professionalized, narrow, top-down, bureaucratic solutions to everyday struggles and global problems.

For example, I once worked in a hospital that held a multi-lingual forum to ask parents and their sick children about their needs. Parents told the social workers and doctors present that they were worried about how to pay their rent and meet their bills. They wondered if their children would ever get jobs or be able to afford to have a family. The hospital saw these issues as far beyond its mandate and made it clear that there was no point in even raising the issues. The hospital could have suggested a number of strategies for addressing these concerns. For example, they could have formed a social policy committee in conjunction with the families to undertake research, policy analysis and lobbying, especially since research shows that these types of issues have a link to health and well-being (Navarro 2004). They could have gathered the families' stories and published them in order to educate the public and decision-makers about the real living conditions and concerns of families living with childhood diseases. Or they could have linked the families with anti-poverty organizations. Instead, the tension in the room grew as people's concerns were discounted. The discussion fizzled into frustrated silence and the forum ended early and without any plans for future action. In this situation, despite a bold start at multi-language, multi-cultural discussion, the hospital staff confined the consultation to a narrow range of issues and interventions that they saw as appropriate. Consistent with a liberal-pluralist model, they clung to bureaucracy and their own sense of expert professionalism rather than discuss or become involved in the real priorities of the community. As such, the consultation did nothing more than confirm the belief that service users have no place in program planning or evaluation.

The liberal-pluralist perspective often melds with various manifestations of authoritarianism. By authoritarianism, I am referring to individuals and processes that enforce strict adherence to authority, while simultaneously trying to control and repress alternative views and dissent. In social work, authoritarianism sometimes takes the form of elitist professionalism, or claiming legitimacy, status, wage levels and exclusive rights to jobs on the basis of claims to authoritative skills and knowledge of social work problems and their solutions. Professionalism is an ideology and set of practices used by skilled

workers to improve job security by defining their skill set and knowledge as unique and deserving of greater legitimacy and financial rewards than others doing similar work. Professional elitism is most common in sectors of social work in which practitioners experience stiff competition from other professionals such as nurses, psychologists, marriage counselors and therapists of various types. In these situations, social workers often try to stake out their piece of professional turf through strategies such as licensure or registration, wherein only those who meet particular educational criteria and pay certain fees are permitted to use the title “social worker.” These strategies may exclude workers who have years of practice experience but less formal education, or a formal education outside the first world that is not recognized in the global North. Social workers excluded by the licensure process are more likely to be women and people of colour, often employed in street-front or grassroots services where new issues and challenges emerge. Excluding these groups from licensing bodies denies them the protection offered to others doing similar work. Excluding these groups from professionalized social work also cuts social work practice and theory off from this important source of new ideas in an attempt to gain ground relative to other more powerful and dominant professions. As Akua Benjamin discusses in her Afterword in this book, social work is at its best when it is rooted in egalitarian, activist models such as the Settlement House Movement of the 1890s or the social movement based resistance of the 1960s. Social work limits its capacity to develop theoretically or politically when it erects protections for itself that split the field and aligns its interests with other elitist professions rather than with grassroots struggles.

For decades, licensure and registration found support mainly among a small group of private practice and hospital based practitioners (although many organized against it). It is not mere coincidence that it was in the 1990s that Canadian governments agreed to introduce legislation on this issue. The 1990s was an era of intense neoliberal restructuring in social services. Rather than provide services themselves, neoliberal models of government contract out social, health and education services to private and voluntary organizations. The process of licensure neatly transfers a whole range of supervisory responsibilities from government bodies that employ social workers to voluntary colleges, readying government services for privatization and contracting out. Thus, while licensure may have provided increased professional authority to social workers in their turf wars with other professions, it prepared a range of public services for privatization, in effect lining social work up with forces it has historically opposed and undermining social work values of accessibility, inclusivity and support for a healthy public sector (Baines 2004a).

Anti-oppressive practice is a social justice-oriented practice model or approach embraced by a wide swath of social workers in clinical, community and policy settings which is taught in a number of schools or departments of social work around the world (Adams et al., 2009; Clifford and Burke, 2009; Cocker and Hafford-Letchfield, 2014; McLaughlin, 2005; Mullaly, 2002). Such entrenchment of social justice orientation to practice underscores the import of an anti-oppressive perspective in social work practice. Why anti-oppressive practice? The anti-oppressive practice offers a viable alternative to the prevailing remedial or mainstream social work practice in the continent. Courses: Social Work Law | Social Work Theory and Practice. January 2021 | 248 pages | Learning Matters. Download flyer. Grounded in principles and values of fairness and equality, anti-oppressive practice (AOP) lies at the heart of social work and social work education. This book will equip your students with the tools and knowledge to address the concepts of diversity, oppression, power and powerless, and practice in ethically appropriate ways for contemporary social work practice. Available Formats. ISBN: 9781526476883. The following sample essay on Anti Oppressive Practice In Social Work discusses it in detail, offering basic facts and pros and cons associated with it. To read the essay's introduction, body and conclusion, scroll down. Anti-oppressive theory and pattern in societal work seeks foremost to recognize oppression in communities, societies, and civilizations, and thenceforth to extinguish the force per unit area and undo the sway of such subjugation. Anti-oppressive pattern is by and big understood to be an omnibus term that includes, but is non limited to, diverse pattern attacks like feminist, anti-racist, critical, extremist, and structural models. Anti-oppressive societal work bases as such for a assortment of theories and patterns that adopt the position of societal justness. Doing Anti-Oppressive Practice introduces students to the emerging tradition, the historical and theoretical roots and the specific contexts of anti-oppressive social work practice. Using practice vignettes, personal experience and case work examples to The book not only introduces "anti-oppressive practice" as a current form of progressive social work, but also provides helpful illustrations on topics such as indigenous pathways to anti-oppressive practice, bridging the practice-activism divide, anti-oppressive practice in child welfare, and restructuring and everyday resistance. Lyn Ferguson, Faculty of Social Work, University of Manitoba "Now, more than ever, we need to commit ourselves to anti-oppressive, transformative social work practice. Anti-oppressive/discriminatory social work practice. 211. bedeviling the country, oppression, depression, inequalities and inequities. Social work interventions in tackling oppression and inequality. Basic principles of the anti-discriminatory practice include working in partnership, empowerment and focus on rights, as well as affirming diversity. The following strategies should be considered by social workers in the face of.