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# Introduction

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## **Oppressive social relations: a concern for social workers**

Eradicating oppression and asserting their right to self-expression in a world that they control has become a key concern of peoples<sup>1</sup> across the globe as they engage with one another to realise their hopes for a better tomorrow. Their demands for autonomy and empowerment, coupled with the creation of more egalitarian social relations amongst and between different populations, have challenged prevailing definitions of citizenship and participation within the nation-state, including its welfare component, and civil society (Dominelli, 2000). Together, these forces have had a major impact on the theories and practices of the caring professions, of which social work is one.

Consequently, the world of caring professionals in Western societies is in flux as *clients*<sup>2</sup> challenge the taken-for-granted assumption that scientific expertise qualifies practitioners to intervene in their lives whilst their own experiences and wishes count for little (Belenky et al., 1997). This state of affairs can be attributed to the growth of the ‘new’ social movements and the rise of a consumerism that has been linked to globalisation, for these have resulted in a questioning of traditional professional responses to the needs of a range of client groups – women, elders, black people, gay men, lesbian women, disabled people and people with mental health problems (Dominelli, 1999). The demands of people in these groups have exposed the unacceptability of many aspects of expert-led professional practice and have caused practitioners to rethink their traditional relationships with them, with the intention of revising the services they deliver to reflect more closely the aspirations

of their clients (Ahmed, 1990). The concepts of seamless services, user empowerment and anti-oppressive practice have been developed to provide guidelines that inform the responses of professionals attempting to take seriously user-led agendas (Craig and Mayo, 1995).

Additionally, their employers, in the form of politicians and civil servants running welfare states, have demanded greater accountability for the public resources expended in service provision. The employers' demands can also be attributed to worries about competitiveness engendered by a globalising world economy and the ascendancy of a New Right populism that requires value for money in public expenditures alongside the demand that people look after themselves. Their proponents have engaged in discourses in which economics have become political ideology. Ironically, alongside these developments, practitioners and policymakers have mainstreamed the concerns of those seeking empowerment in their daily lives. In Britain, for example, the promotion of equal opportunities policies in the social domain, the ideas contained in the political philosophy of the 'Third Way' and the raft of policy initiatives that have emanated from its implementation have meant that at least the rhetoric associated with anti-oppressive practice is one familiar to all those working in the caring professions and the lay public alike.

The combined interaction of these forces in the welfare state has shaken the certainties that practitioners once had in their profession, whether this was in how they did their work, or in the nature of their career prospects. Former 'givens' are now being replaced by uncertainties and paralysing guilt for some, and opportunities for exercising real choices and developing new alternatives for others. At the same time, the ensuing developments have ruffled the complacency that both professionals and users have had about the previous consensus that has underpinned the welfare state and its assumed existence in perpetuity (Mishra, 1990). Indeed, in the more optimistic 1960s and 70s, countries such as the United States were considered welfare laggards and conceptualised as anomalies with welfare systems that would in time converge around the ideal institutional model that was represented by Nordic states or, more specifically, the Swedish social democratic model of welfare (Wilensky and Lebeaux, 1965; Mishra, 1990). Today, in a reversal of its previous position, the United States is leading the choir in singing a different tune, as countries that formerly espoused publicly funded welfare regimes pursue market-driven, residual welfare state forms that compel individuals and families to look after themselves (Mishra, 1995; Teeple, 1995).

The neo-liberal mantras of targeting, means-testing, stigmatised services and demonised client groups have now become the order of the day on the political agenda (Jones, 1993), regardless of whether the government running the show is an allegedly leftwing one or not. Thus, for example, in the United States, the Clinton administration endorsed Reaganite policies that culminated in the Personal Responsibility and Work Reconciliation Act 1996 (Zucchini, 1997). In Britain, Tony Blair's New Labour government has adopted the former Tory proposals of introducing part tuition fees for university students, imposing more stringent workfare-type conditions on mothers of small children on welfare, reducing lone-parent benefits and restructuring many parts of the welfare state in accordance with market priorities (Kilkey, 2000). In Germany, the Social Democratic government led by Gerhard Schroeder has adopted a centrist path. The times, therefore, are not propitious for either advancing the cause of client liberation or ensuring that caring professionals commit themselves to an empowering practice that prioritises the needs of clients over meeting economic and political exigencies (Humphries, 1996).

A key worry of those espousing anti-oppressive practice is that neo-liberal welfare policies will increase social exclusion, as a growing weight of evidence reveals the growth in poverty and marginalisation of those who survive at the edges of society, and exacerbate the varied forms of oppression that characterise their lives (Cochrane, 1993). For example, with regard to economic oppression, the world has seen a widening gap between rich and poor. In 1960, the wealthiest 20 per cent of the population globally disposed of 70 per cent of world income. It rose to 86 per cent by 1994. During that same period, the poorest 20 per cent saw their income share drop from 2.3 per cent to 1.1 per cent (Wichterich, 2000, p. 125). As poverty and hunger mount, people's capacities to develop and interact with their world have become dominated by the struggle for basic survival and they have had to work harder to get those who are better off to listen to them and prioritise their concerns.

This task becomes immeasurably harder in a world that has made profits rather than people its key obsession. With the loss of the consensus upon which social democracy was predicated, we have a new economic ideology guiding the planet into increasingly dangerous terrain. Instead of a paternalistic capitalism, we are being overwhelmed by a predatory capitalism which greedily ingests those who do not subscribe to its tenets and then spews them out as worthless garbage. Its caricatures of poor people encourage others to demonise, despise

and fear them, and greed replaces respect for other peoples and the planet that we all share.

Social workers have a responsibility to challenge this grotesque image of poor people and, besides bringing to public notice the strengths of those who battle to transcend social exclusion, to work to empower those who are engulfed by the weight of circumstances in which they are embedded. Promoting social justice and human development in an unequal world provides the *raison d'être* of social work practice, and is a key way of discharging society's contract in assisting vulnerable people in its midst. Finding ways of countering oppression by understanding its dynamics and developing empowering forms of practice is the major preoccupation of this book.

Oppression, of course, is not solely the condition of the dominated. There are many forms of oppression and even rich and powerful people may experience their own particular ones, for example the tyranny of the workplace, leading empty spiritual lives. But these are different from those that affect people who are excluded from participation in the fundamental social, political and economic institutions within which their lives are located. So, their concerns will not be considered directly within these pages.

This book is aimed at assisting practitioners to achieve the goal of providing more relevant services to clients whose life experiences have been shaped by the forces of oppression. That is, it focuses on those who are excluded from realising their creative potential as a result of the disadvantaging contexts that they contend with daily. It seeks to go beyond the additive approach to oppression whereby each social division, be it class, 'race', gender, age, disability or sexual orientation, is considered separately from the others while the effects of each different form are 'added on' to the one initially under consideration. At the same time, it asks social workers to understand that being oppressed is only one aspect of a reality that both they and their clients are embedded within. In other words, the people that they are working with may be playing key roles in oppressing others. And, moreover, they as social workers may be oppressed themselves whilst both oppressing and attempting to empower people at the same time. In taking this more complex theoretical position, this book attempts to go beyond the formulations of oppression implied by authors such as Thompson (1993) in his well-known PCS (personal, cultural and structural) model, where a focus primarily on discrimination, I would argue, emphasises only one element in the web of oppressive social relations.

Moreover, the additive approach to the complexities of oppression casts the resolution of conflict in both intellectual and practical terrains, in competitive terms resulting in a winner and a loser. This approach tends to be unhelpful in that it usually produces an unstable outcome whirling around an ever-extending spiral of conflict in which the losers seek to become the winners while those in the ascendancy attempt to (re)entrench their position. Moreover, additive approaches rank oppressions in a hierarchy that prioritises one form over another. I intend to transcend the problematics of a competitive approach to resolving the contradictions that surround various forms of oppression in social work practice by developing a holistic framework that enables users to play a greater role in the design and delivery of the services they require and professionals to respond more appropriately to the agendas that they set.

## **The structure of the book**

This book has as a major aim the linking of theories of oppression to the realities and dilemmas of practice in order to suggest ways of improving services for clients through anti-oppressive approaches to practice. In Chapter 1, I embark on considering the types of theories and understandings that would enable us to develop an anti-oppressive framework for practice that goes beyond the additive approach. This draws upon some of the insights that have been developed in the 'classical' literature that focuses on oppression from the point of view of a particular social division. I examine the social, political and economic contexts in which social work has had to carve out its status as a profession. But I also conceptualise the world as interdependent, for in interpersonal relations the behaviour of one individual affects others, and what happens in one country impacts upon another. Handling the subsequent implications requires reformulating national welfare considerations within a global concern for others. The ideas of solidarity, reciprocity and mutuality are posited as ways of securing a globalised citizenship that transcends the divisions between low-income and high-income countries. I continue arguing for anti-oppressive practice as a legitimate part of social work in Chapter 2. This requires me to address the ethical and moral issues that arise when social work becomes a political entity. In Chapter 3, I focus on identity as a crucial issue for the development of an empowering social work practice.

Demonstrating the use of anti-oppressive practice in work with individuals forms the backbone of Chapter 4. Exploring the operation of anti-oppressive practice in action within group and community settings becomes the basic preoccupation of Chapter 5. In Chapter 6, I highlight the importance of engaging in organisational changes that can sustain the development of anti-oppressive practice across time and space. Chapter 7 argues for a universal, citizenship-driven welfare state that transcends the limitations of the fragmented welfare provisions that characterise market-driven approaches to welfare, although the latter are more in keeping with the postmodernist world favoured by politicians in the industrialised societies. I conclude the book in Chapter 8 with guidelines for practice and affirm the arguments for a globalised citizenship in which the interdependencies between and within individuals and countries provide the basis for welfare states that are rooted in social solidarity, reciprocity and mutuality.

### Notes

- (1) Language is a tool that we use to communicate. But, our choice of words also reveals the ideologies that underpin our views of the world and the power relations inherent within these. I use the plural version of 'people', which is itself a plural noun, to indicate that I wish to draw attention to the diversities that exist within this category.
- (2) 'Client' is a contested term. It is currently being replaced in the United Kingdom by the phrase 'service users', which I think is equally problematic. In this book, I retain the word 'client' as it is understood more clearly worldwide, although I occasionally refer to 'users' to avoid constant repetition of the word 'client' when one use of it follows another in close proximity. I intend both terms to mean simply the person or persons that approach professional social workers for services or assistance.

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