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1 | Introduction

During the late 1980s social work education became increasingly aware of the impact of oppression and discrimination on clients and communities. There was a growing awareness and recognition of the relative neglect of such issues in traditional approaches to social work. For example, in 1989, the former governing body for social work education, the Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work (CCETSW), laid down its regulations and requirements for the then newly formulated Diploma in Social Work (DipSW) and included these references to anti-discriminatory practice:

Social workers need to be able to work in a society which is multi-racial and multi-cultural. CCETSW will therefore seek to ensure that students are prepared not only for ethnically sensitive practice but also to challenge institutional and other forms of racism . . . CCETSW will also seek to ensure that students are prepared to combat other forms of discrimination based on age, gender, sexual orientation, class, disability, culture or creed.
(CCETSW, 1989, p. 10)

This emphasis on combating discrimination is part of the process of establishing these issues as fundamental building blocks of qualifying training and subsequent practice. They were therefore seen as an essential part of the curriculum and the evaluation process and continue to be regarded as such, as is shown by their inclusion in the curriculum for the degree in social work which has replaced the diploma as the primary qualification.

This major development in social work education and training has also been reflected more broadly, to a certain extent at least, in social work policy, theory and practice (although it would be naïve not to acknowledge that much progress remains to be made in these respects). Anti-discriminatory practice has therefore been featuring as a regular and high priority item on the social work agenda for

some time now, although there sadly continues to be a great deal of misunderstanding and oversimplification of the issues (see Thompson, 2003a, Chapter 5, for a discussion of this).

But it is not only students as new entrants to the profession who need a grounding in the theory and practice of anti-discriminatory social work. There remain very many practitioners, managers and trainers schooled in more traditional approaches to social welfare who want or need a better understanding of the theory base and practice implications of a social work based on the principles of anti-discrimination. For example, it is not uncommon for practice teachers to experience a degree of anxiety about anti-discriminatory issues because of this 'generation gap'. They are working with students who are likely to have had a far greater amount of teaching on these issues and may therefore, at times, feel relatively ill-equipped to deal with these matters (Thompson *et al.*, 1994a).

The primary aim of this book is to provide just such a grounding – for qualified staff, for those seeking qualification, for practice teachers, trainers and managers and for others with a general interest in modern social work, equality and diversity or related issues. The text seeks to clarify and to answer, in part at least, a number of important questions:

- What are the factors underlying discrimination and oppression, especially as they relate to social work theory and practice?
- What are the common concepts and issues across the various forms of discrimination – sexism, racism, ageism and so on? What are the key differences?
- Why is the development of anti-discriminatory practice so important?
- What are the necessary steps towards constructing a social work practice based on principles of anti-discrimination and the promotion of equality?

Before beginning to tackle these questions, it would be helpful to outline the recent history of anti-discriminatory practice in order to be able to locate the analysis which follows within its historical context. I shall therefore sketch out some of the broad issues which have contributed to the current emphasis on anti-discriminatory practice in its various forms: anti-racism, anti-sexism and so on.

The historical background

The 1960s was a significant decade in a number of ways. Feminist thought took major steps forward (for example, Friedan, 1963) and also gained major recognition in popular consciousness as the 'Women's Liberation Movement'. Issues of equal rights and equality of opportunity for women became much more firmly established on the political agenda. At this stage, however, evidence of the impact of this on social work is rather hard to find.

Also during the 1960s issues of racial discrimination and the oppression of ethnic minorities achieved a higher political, media and public profile. This was particularly the case in the United States of America, especially in relation to such issues as segregated transport and schooling (Polenberg, 1980). A similar process of consciousness raising also occurred in the UK, although again there is little evidence of the impact of this on social work.

Indeed, it was a decade characterised by the notion of 'consciousness raising' in terms of both increased political radicalism and the emerging psychedelic drug culture. The radicalism was particularly apparent in the latter part of the sixties, as evidenced by student protest, occupations and so on. It was a time of idealism and anti-establishment challenge of the status quo. This was accompanied by an increased emphasis on humanitarian values and liberation. It was a time in which progressive movements flourished and the breaking down of traditional barriers was being pursued on a large scale.

The liberated, flower-power sixties also saw the growth in popularity of writers such as R. D. Laing (1965, 1967), who challenged orthodox notions of psychiatry and propounded a radical alternative – an alternative vision which did seep in to social work thinking (Thompson, 1991a). This further contributed to a spirit of liberation and a cry for the removal of oppression (Cooper, 1968).

Whilst this process was underway in wider society, social work continued to be dominated by the influence of psychodynamics, although the beginnings of a sociological approach were starting to become evident (Leonard, 1966). Rojek *et al.* (1988) wrote of:

the deep influence of psychoanalytical thought with a focus on the relationship to the external world and the ego reactions to the drives of the id and the demands of the super-ego. Psychoanalytic ideas were seen as the only effective

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method of altering personality structure; and insight at that time was seen as primary goal and major strategy of intervention.

(p. 21)

The grip of psychodynamic influence was indeed strong, but was already beginning to yield, to a certain extent at least, to the wider focus of sociology, with its emphasis on social processes and institutions (Heraud, 1970). The 'sociological imagination' (Mills, 1970) was beginning to be recognised as a valuable approach to social work education and practice.

practice focus 1.1

Lynne was a psychology graduate who had recently begun her social work training on a postgraduate course. From the sociology component of the course, she began to appreciate how narrow her perspective had previously been. She began to realise that, although her psychological perspective was very important and valuable, she also needed to understand the wider sociological issues that were so relevant to the life experiences of social work clients, relationships between social workers and clients and so on. She had begun to develop the 'sociological imagination'.

This 'imagination' was more than a widening of the focus to include social, as well as psychological, factors. It embraced a new emphasis, a more critical approach geared towards 'debunking' taken-for-granted assumptions (Berger, 1966) and questioning dominant views and values. Sullivan (1987) exemplifies this in relation to poverty:

The worker . . . may have exploited a sociological imagination to question commonsense understandings of poverty and to perceive poverty's objective and subjective meanings. The result may be to lead him/her to a conceptualization of poor people as victims of a social system predicated on inequality.

(p. 161)

The influence of sociological thinking had the effect of producing a more critical and socially and politically aware social work with a stronger emphasis on social structure, deprivation and inequality. The seeds of a radical social work were being sown.

The second half of the 1960s also saw the introduction of anti-discrimination legislation in Britain – for example, the Race Relations Acts of 1965 and 1968. These acts constituted a recognition, partially at least, of the discrimination experienced by black and ethnic minority people in, for example, employment and housing. They were an attempt to outlaw unfair treatment of people on racial/ethnic grounds, although, as many critics have pointed out, they amounted to a very limited and largely ineffectual attempt.

In 1989 Solomos expressed condemnation of the functionalist emphasis in the race relations literature, with its implied goal of integration and assimilation. In this context, anti-discrimination laws can be seen as a ‘mixed blessing’ – on the one hand, a move in the right direction towards anti-racism but, on the other hand, a potentially oppressive policy premised on the denial or abandonment of cultural identity (assimilation). Solomos links this mixed blessing to the two different interest groups reflected in the legislation: ‘Legislation is a compromise between demands of those who are worried about immigration and those worried about racial discrimination’ (1989, p. 81).

The 1970s saw the introduction of further anti-discriminatory legislation – another Race Relations Act (1976) plus, in relation to gender discrimination, the Equal Pay Act 1970 and the Sex Discrimination Act 1975.

Again, as with the 1960s legislation, there has been much criticism of sex discrimination laws for failing to address the fundamental bases of discrimination. They were also criticised for being unduly complex and for having too many exceptions (Pannick, 1985).

These legislative changes were part of a liberal programme of reform. They were liberal in the sense that they sought to humanise or ameliorate the existing social system without calling for a radical change in the structures and social arrangements in which racism and sexism could be seen to operate. There was therefore a significant gap, both politically and conceptually, between the class focus of the radicals and the race and gender focus of the liberal reformers. Both sets of people were striving for a less oppressive

society but were approaching the issues from different angles and with different long-term aims.

It was not surprising, therefore, that the school of radical social work, which began in the late 1960s but emerged in a more influential form in the mid- to late seventies, focused primarily on a class-based analysis (the critique of capitalism) and only tangentially covered issues of race and gender. For example, two of the key radical texts clearly display this pattern: Bailey and Brake (1975) is a collection of eight essays but none relates primarily to race or gender (although one, Milligan, discusses what would today be referred to as 'heterosexism' – see Chapter 7 below); Brake and Bailey (1980) do, however, reflect some movement forward and, within their ten essays, include one on feminism (Wilson) and one on racism (Husband).

Peter Leonard, in his foreword to Dominelli and McLeod (1989) acknowledges the failure of earlier radical social work, premised on classical marxism, to take account of issues of gender and patriarchy. Issues of race/ethnicity and racism were similarly paid little or no attention. The critique of capitalism, a central plank of radical social work, necessarily hinged on notions of class conflict and exploitation. This was not to deny the oppression associated with race and gender; the problem was the lack of scope within the analysis to incorporate these concerns.

The emergence of radical social work drew attention to the structural and political context of social work and the key part played by concepts such as ideology, oppression and discrimination:

In assessing their clients and delivering their services, social workers are undertaking a profoundly ideological task on behalf of the established structures: at the same time they are often trying to help clients to resist the most oppressive and discriminatory features of the welfare system.

(Corrigan and Leonard, 1978, p. viii)

Radical social work was therefore premised on the following arguments (amongst others):

- Social workers need to recognise the sociopolitical context of the life experience of their clients and of their agency role and function;

- The dangers of social work practice contributing to and reinforcing oppression and discrimination must be recognised and guarded against; and
- Opportunities for emancipation of clients from oppressive and damaging circumstances should be seized upon as part of a project which alerts clients to the social and political basis of their problems and difficulties.

As we shall see below, these are also essential building blocks of anti-discriminatory practice.

practice focus 1.2

Tim had many years' experience as an unqualified worker before commencing his professional training. That experience, though, was entirely in a fieldwork team where he dealt exclusively with individuals and families on a casework basis. On the first placement of his course, however, he worked on a community development project where, for the first time, he was able to see the shared problems, the commonalities of poverty, deprivation, racism and so on. With the help of his practice teacher he was able to understand the structural dimension of social problems and to appreciate the need to go beyond individual or family problems.

Although radical social work achieved a higher profile in the mid- to late 1970s, there were elements of such an approach apparent before this time. Hearn (1982) sees its roots as extending back to the previous decade, to the 'protest and alternativism of the sixties' (p. 22). Simpkin (1989) is more specific in linking the movement to the political upheavals of 1968:

The events of 1968 released an energy which manifested itself in a variety of social and cultural forms, one of which was a political activism which became more and more independent of the traditional parties. This consciousness was fed by a generalised sense of injustice which sought both inspiration and justification from the now burgeoning academic industry of social analysis. A growing acquaintance with the hypocrisy, injustice and repression which characterised

the machinery of the state created a wider and more receptive audience for class-based doctrines of revolt.
(Carter *et al.*, 1989, p. 160)

The radical social work of the 1970s was therefore a development of the emancipatory and progressive ethos of the 1960s but linked specifically to class analysis and class struggle.

The increasing influence of sociology on the social work education curriculum had also no doubt made inroads into the traditional, psychologically based infrastructure of social work theory and practice and thus paved the way for a more radical approach.

But even this sociological influence was primarily class-based and lacked much of the width of other forms of sociology which also noted the relevance of gender, race, religion and so on. In short, despite the impact of sociology, the radical social work of the 1970s centred on the critique of capitalism, but with only the faint beginnings of a critique of patriarchy and imperialism.

Simpkin (1989) relates this to the specific political tactic, dating from 1974, of concentrating on trade-unionism and class struggle which entailed 'downgrading' issues of women's and gay rights (*ibid.*, p. 166). For this reason, amongst others, radical social work remained locked into class without acknowledging the role of other social divisions in the oppression and dehumanisation of social work's clients.

It was only in the 1980s that the primacy of class was seriously challenged and issues of gender and race began to be taken firmly on board by radical social work – by this time a much weakened movement made distinctly less popular by the emergence, and dominance, of New Right ideology with its promotion of individualism and its mistrust of all forms of collectivism.

The influence of feminism in sociology was now beginning to extend to social policy in general and social work in particular. A number of key anti-sexist texts became available – including Ungerson (1985) and Pascall (1986/1997) on social policy; Brook and Davis (1985) and Gittins (1985) on the family and welfare and Hanmer and Statham (1988/1999) and Dominelli and McLeod (1989) on social work practice from a feminist perspective (for developments in the literature base since then, see the 'Guide to further learning' sections at the end of this chapter and also Chapter 3).

For a profession whose basic grade workforce and clientele are both predominantly female and in which a major focus is on 'the family', the feminist plea for an anti-sexist approach to social work was long overdue. It is an indication of the strength and dominance of patriarchal ideas that the 'gendered' nature of social work should have been neglected for so long.

The development of interest in issues of race and racism within sociology has also permeated into social work and the thrust towards an anti-racist social work has steadily gained ground. The Association of Black Social Workers and Allied Professionals (ABSWAP) was formed in 1983 and consistently argued for more black social workers, a greater understanding of the nature and impact of racism and a firmer commitment to the development of anti-racist social work.

But this is only one example of the increased recognition of racism as a social problem and the dangers of an uninformed social work practice reinforcing its effects. As with anti-sexism, the 1980s saw the publication of a number of key texts which have played a part in the strengthening of the anti-racist movement, with further developments in the literature base in the 1990s – see the 'Guide to further learning' sections at the end of this chapter and also Chapter 4).

A further aspect of the historical development of anti-discriminatory practice is the movement away from an individualistic, pathological approach to disability towards a social model which takes account of the wider social context in which disability is experienced and indeed constructed (see the discussions in Chapter 6).

Radical social work has therefore taken on wider issues of race and gender and, albeit to a lesser extent, age, disability and sexual identity. However, as these become more established, they also become less radical – they become part of the establishment framework. This is an example of the reform versus revolution dilemma highlighted by Pritchard and Taylor (1978) in which piecemeal reformist improvements, whilst welcome in their own right, may reduce the impetus towards more radical solutions. Jones and Novak (1980) argued that social reformers have bolstered ruling class interests by introducing measures which, though reducing discontent, inhibit or obstruct radical social change. Whether anti-discriminatory practice can keep in touch with its radical roots or whether its potential for social change will become diluted (by its

incorporation into mainstream policy and practice) remains an open question (see Penketh, 2000, for an interesting discussion that touches on these issues). In the 1990s we reached the stage where greater consciousness of oppression and discrimination had been achieved, as reflected in the range of literature and training courses available, the development of equality and diversity policies (in embryo form at least) and the regulations relating to social work qualifying courses (CCETSW, 1989, 1991a, 1995).

One unfortunate development that accompanied the growing awareness of, and commitment to, anti-discriminatory practice, was a strong tendency towards oversimplification or ‘reductionism’ – reducing a complex, multi-level phenomenon to a simple, single-level issue. For example, to many people, the complexities of the relationship between language use and discrimination became reduced to ‘political correctness’ – a reliance on a list of taboo or ‘non-PC’ words (Thompson, 2003b). This was also accompanied in many quarters by a very crude approach to education and training in relation to discrimination and oppression, a point to which we shall return in Chapter 2. This crude reductionism, while a significant problem in its own right, also led to another major concern – the development of a culture of fear and blame in which defensiveness became a very common response. It is understandable that, if students and in-service course participants were being told in effect that they were ‘oppressive’, they were likely to perceive this as an attack and thus respond in a defensive manner. Key features of this defensiveness have been:

- A tokenistic ‘lip-service’ approach caused by people’s understandable reluctance to engage firmly and closely with what they perceived as such dangerous, threatening issues.
- A tendency to avoid the subject where possible – a ‘Let’s not go there’ mentality.
- A tense and anxious approach which in itself could lead to oversimplification (when we feel tense, anxious and threatened, we are not likely to be eager to engage with very complex and intricate concepts and issues).
- In some cases, a long-standing lack of confidence in dealing with these issues as a result of the painful experiences of being exposed to some very crude and ill-thought-through approaches to teaching and learning.

In running courses on the subject of anti-discriminatory practice I have come across large numbers of people who have given me very worrying examples of earlier experiences that were extremely unhelpful in contributing to their understanding of the complexities or in equipping them to deal with such issues effectively in practice. This is a sad legacy of a rapid change from an education and training system which largely neglected discrimination and oppression to one in which such concerns very quickly became central. It is to be hoped that we have managed to learn the lessons from that period and are now adopting much more sophisticated approaches not only to anti-discriminatory practice itself, but also to how such matters are addressed through education and training.

One development in recent years that has given us a foundation from which to counter such defensiveness is the emergence of the ‘diversity approach’. This new way of addressing inequality has become a mainstream approach in many areas, both within and outside social work. It is characterised by two main themes:

1. It adopts a *positive* approach by emphasising that diversity (that is, variety and difference) is not only a very real characteristic of contemporary social and organisational life, it is also a *valuable* characteristic. Diversity is seen as an asset, a positive feature of society that enriches our experience – it is something that should be valued, affirmed and even celebrated. The fact that there are different ethnic groups, different identities, different approaches and perspectives should be seen as a good thing, a source of learning, variety, stimulation and interest, rather than a source of unfair discrimination based on ‘punishing’ some people for being different from the perceived mainstream.
2. It adopts a broad approach by arguing that any form of unfair discrimination is a problem to be tackled (this is a point to which we shall return below), regardless of whether the discrimination in question is illegal or not. In this respect, the diversity approach goes far beyond the traditional equal opportunities approach which tends to limit itself largely to ensuring legal compliance with anti-discrimination legislation.

By adopting a positive focus and not limiting itself to legal compliance, the diversity approach has the potential to offer in part at least an ‘antidote’ to the negative and defensive approach which

has been allowed to develop in many organisational settings. In this respect, it can be seen as a positive step forward.

However, we should not too enthusiastic in our embracing of this approach, as it has its down sides too. First, it has the potential to become a return to multiculturalism, in emphasising the positives of cultural diversity but without acknowledging the realities of how oppressive discrimination can be – that is, it rightly values *diversity* but without paying adequate attention to the realities of *adversity* for those people subjected to unfair discrimination.

Second, the diversity approach has so far tended to have a very individualistic focus. There is a danger that the gains made in moving away from a psychological approach based on notions of prejudice to a more sophisticated sociological one, based on personal, cultural and structural factors (see Chapter 2) will be lost by an overemphasis on individual factors.

To be fair to the diversity approach, there is nothing inherent within it that makes these problems inevitable – they are dangers rather than necessary flaws. It has to be recognised that the diversity approach is still in its infancy and is in a relatively underdeveloped state. How it develops in the coming years will be very significant.

Another development in the recent history of anti-discriminatory practice in the UK is a new wave of anti-discrimination legislation. This includes: the introduction of the Human Rights Act 1998 which is part of a broader movement towards a culture based on human rights (Crompton and Thompson, 2000); the implementation of the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000; and the regulations governing discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation and religion, which were implemented in December 2003. While these are positive developments and very much to be welcomed, we have to bear in mind that the role the law can play is quite limited. As we shall see in the chapters that follow, a genuine commitment to anti-discriminatory practice must go far beyond the confines of a narrow, legalistic approach.

What is discrimination?

The literal meaning of to discriminate is to identify a difference. As such it is not necessarily a negative term. For example, being able to discriminate between safe food and harmful poison is clearly a

good thing. However, when the term is used in a legal, moral or political sense (as in this book), it is generally used to refer to *unfair* discrimination. That is, it refers to the process (or set of processes) through which (i) a difference is identified; and (ii) that difference is used as the basis of unfair treatment. To use the technical term, a person or group ‘suffer a detriment’ (that is, experience a disadvantage) because they are identified as ‘different’ (in terms of gender, race/ethnicity, sexual identity and so on).

Instead of differences between people being seen as positive (as per the diversity approach discussed above), they become the basis of unfair discrimination, a basis for disadvantaging certain groups of people. This discrimination then becomes the basis of oppression. It is through the process of identifying some people as ‘different’ that they receive inhuman or degrading treatment (see the definition of oppression in Chapter 2) and are thus oppressed.

While this is a satisfactory basic definition of discrimination, what it does not do is indicate the important role of power involved. Anyone can discriminate against anyone else. However, where the impact will be of major proportions will be in those cases where relatively powerful groups will be in a position to discriminate systematically against those in relatively powerless groups. Such power can arise because of personal circumstances or characteristics, cultural norms or structural position (see the discussion of PCS analysis in Chapter 2). This is where established *patterns* of discrimination have become ingrained in social practices – racism, sexism, ageism and so on, and are not simply examples of individual preference or prejudice. Discrimination is therefore a sociological and political phenomenon as well as a psychological one.

Note that, in referring to power, I was very careful to use the term ‘relatively’. This is because, as we shall see below, there has been a tendency to oversimplify issues of power and reduce them to a simple dichotomy of two groups in society: the powerful and the powerless. Power is a much more complex phenomenon than this, and so it is important, at this early stage in our discussions, not to fall into the trap of presenting it too simply.

A key point to note is that the model of anti-discriminatory practice presented here is not a narrow one that ignores wider sociopolitical concerns. Differences between this book and the work of authors who distinguish between anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice are primarily semantic rather than theoretical

or ideological. In order to promote forms of practice that are genuinely *emancipatory*, it is necessary to address the processes of discrimination that give rise to oppression. So, whether we refer to such endeavours as anti-discriminatory or anti-oppressive practice, is in my view not a significant issue. What is significant is that we seek to reduce oppression by tackling the processes of discrimination that give rise to it.

Good practice is anti-discriminatory practice

Social workers can be seen as mediators between their clients and the wider state apparatus and social order. This position of ‘mediator’ is a crucial one, as it means that social workers are in a pivotal position in terms of the relationship between the state and its citizens.

The relationship is a double-edged one, consisting of elements of care and control. It is also double-edged in the sense that it can lead to either potential empowerment or potential oppression – social work interventions can help or hinder, empower or impress. Which aspect is to the fore, which element or tendency is reinforced depends largely on the actions of the social workers concerned. As long ago as 1975, in the era of radical social work, Peter Leonard captured this point in relation to class and capitalism, although much the same can be said of gender and patriarchy, race and imperialism and so on:

In capitalist society, social work operates as part of a social-welfare system which is located at the centre of the contradictions arising from the dehumanising consequences of capitalist economic production. Social workers, although situated in a largely oppressive organisational and professional context, have the potential for recognising these contradictions and, through working at the point of interaction between people and their social environment, of helping to increase the control by people over economic and political structures.

(in Bailey and Brake, 1975, p. 55)

What this entails, in effect, is that there can be no safe middle ground, no liberal compromise. Social work is not, as Halmos (1965) would have it, a matter of the personal detached from the political (Pearson, 1975).

As I have argued previously (Thompson, 1992a):

There is no middle ground; intervention either adds to oppression (or at least condones it) or goes some small way towards easing or breaking such oppression. In this respect, the political slogan, 'If you're not part of the solution, you must be part of the problem' is particularly accurate. An awareness of the sociopolitical context is necessary in order to prevent becoming (or remaining) part of the problem. (pp. 169–70)

In short, a social work practice which does not take account of oppression, and the discrimination which gives rise to it, cannot be seen as good practice, no matter how high its standards may be in other respects. For example, a social work intervention with a disabled person which fails to recognise the marginalised position of disabled people in society runs the risk of doing the client more of a disservice than a service (see Chapter 6 below).

I hope this principle – that good practice must be anti-discriminatory practice – will become more clearly and firmly established in the chapters that follow.

Multiple oppressions

There are many texts available which concentrate on a particular aspect of anti-discriminatory practice, whether this be anti-racism, anti-ageism and so on. This book, however, is not intended simply as an introduction to each of the discrete areas. There is an underlying thread of 'multiple oppression', the interaction of various sources and forms of oppression.

Oppression and discrimination are presented as aspects of the divisive nature of social structure – reflections of the social divisions of class, race, gender, age, disability and sexual identity. These are dimensions of our social location (where and how we fit into society) and so we need to understand them as a whole – facets of an overall edifice of power and dominance, rather than separate or discrete entities. To use an existentialist term, they are 'dimensions of our lived experience'.

At the Critical Social Policy conference on 'Citizenship and Welfare' (London, March 1991) two of the papers presented made reference to the need for an integrated approach, a framework

which recognises the interactions of multiple oppressions. Amina Mama stressed the need for a ‘politically holistic approach – a politics of alliance’ based on an integrated analysis. Race, class, gender and so on are separated out for analytical purposes but they are not entirely separate processes; they occur simultaneously and affect people in combination. They are related dimensions of our complex existence rather than discrete entities.

Fiona Williams expressed similar views in advocating a wider analysis which goes beyond class, race and gender to include marginalisation on the grounds of age, disability and sexuality. She argued for a theoretical approach which recognises diversities in patterns of power and inequality, but one which does not fall into the trap of establishing a ‘hierarchy of oppressions’. The task, she affirmed, is to relate the diversity and differences between forms of oppression, on the one hand, to a need for an anti-oppression alliance on the other (see also Williams, 1992).

Both Mama and Williams were advocating an *integrated* approach, one which recognises the reality of multiple oppressions but which seeks to concentrate on the commonalities and shared aspects of alienation, marginalisation and discrimination. In short, political energies should be directed towards fighting oppression in its various forms rather than in-fighting between different anti-discrimination interest groups.

This is, of course, more easily said than done, but the argument does have implications for social work policy and practice, as Chapters 5–7 will indicate. The notion of an integrated analysis is a central one to this book, as my focus will be very clearly on the conception of anti-discriminatory practice as a unitary whole (rather than simply the sum total of anti-sexism plus anti-racism plus anti-ageism and so on). It has to be recognised that the combination of oppressions and their interaction is a complex, intricate and relatively under-researched area (Stuart, 1992; Morris, 1991; Williams, 1992) but one which none the less needs to be addressed (see Thompson, 2003a). This is a topic to which we shall return in Chapter 7.

Discrimination and oppression are multifaceted phenomena and so it is important to gain an understanding of both the common themes across areas and the key differences between them.

practice focus 1.3

Sue was keen to work in an anti-discriminatory way in assessing Mrs Desai's needs under the NHS and Community Care Act 1990 and therefore paid close attention to Mrs Desai's cultural background and needs and her experiences of racism. However, it was only in a subsequent supervision session that she realised that her anti-discriminatory focus had been one-dimensional. That is, she had neglected to consider issues of gender and sexism or, indeed, the profound effects of ageism on Mrs Desai. Sue was fortunate in having a team leader who had a good understanding of anti-discriminatory issues, and who was able to help her develop her understanding and skills in this demanding aspect of practice.

Structure and outline

Chapter 2 examines the theoretical concepts and framework which underpin anti-discriminatory practice. The major themes will be explained and links with social work practice drawn in order to begin to build a bridge between theory and practice. Indeed the need for a clear practice focus, illuminated by theory, will be a primary concern throughout the book (Thompson, 2000a). This chapter will also tackle the thorny issue of language. The topic will be approached from two angles; first to understand the role played by language in constructing and reinforcing discrimination; and, second, to clarify the terminology used in this text – that is, to define the key terms and concepts.

This chapter sets the scene for the following analysis of the various forms of oppression and processes of discrimination. This is achieved by explaining the common theory base which acts as a framework for understanding the complex issues discussed in ensuing chapters. Chapter 3 is the first of four chapters to explore a specific area of discrimination, in this case gender. The theory of patriarchy is explained and the steps towards an anti-sexist practice are sketched out. Chapters 4 to 6 follow a similar structure and pattern. Chapter 4 addresses issues of race/ethnicity and racism. Imperialist ideology and notions of cultural superiority are explored and rejected as a first step towards building a social

work practice based on principles of anti-racism. In Chapter 5 the less publicised and less well-established concept of ageism is the object of our attention. The issues of discrimination on the grounds of age are considered and a framework for developing anti-ageist practice is presented. Chapter 6 adopts a similar approach in exploring the marginalisation of disabled people. Discriminatory attitudes, policies, structures and practices are identified and the oppression inherent in catering only for the able-bodied majority is recognised as a target for change.

In addition to these four main areas, there exist a number of other, less well-publicised forms and sources of oppression and discrimination. These are the subject matter of Chapter 7, in which attention is paid to discrimination on the grounds of sexual identity (heterosexism), culture and language, religion and so on. A major feature of this chapter is the need to emphasise the point that unfair discrimination is something that needs to be tackled in all its forms and not only the more well-established ones or more fully documented ones. Anti-discriminatory practice is a matter of a principled commitment to social justice rather than simply following political or other fashions.

Chapter 8 is the concluding chapter. It summarises seven main themes and examines possible ways forward, divided into seven positive steps to be taken and seven pitfalls to avoid. The focus here is on the need to develop critically reflective practice (Thompson, 2000a) – that is, forms of practice that incorporate a critical evaluation of our own actions. This is necessary, as was suggested above, to ensure that social work is part of the solution rather than part of the problem.

points to ponder

- > Have you ever experienced unfair discrimination?
- > How might your experience(s) help you as a social worker?
- > What problems would you envisage if a social worker were to ignore or disregard clients' experiences of discrimination?
- > How confident do you feel about tackling discrimination and oppression?
- > Who can help and support you in developing your knowledge, skills and confidence in this area?

Guide to further learning

The historical development of radical social work and its more modern manifestations are covered in a number of texts, including the following: Langan and Lee (1989); Mullaly (1993); and Langan (1998).

The law relating to discrimination is well covered in Preston-Shoot (1998) while Blakemore and Drake (1996) provide a useful discussion of related matters. The Human Rights Act 1998 is covered in a training pack form in Crompton and Thompson (2000) and in book form in Wadham and Mountfield (1999) and Watson and Woolf (2003). Useful information on the Act can also be downloaded from www.dca.gov.uk/hract/hramenu.htm

The regulations relating to discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation and religion are helpfully explained in documents that can be downloaded from the ACAS website: www.acas.org.uk

In terms of gender issues, the 1990s saw a further development in the anti-sexist literature base: Elliot (1996) on the family; Arber and Ginn (1991, 1995) in relation to old age; Busfield (1996) in relation to mental health and Cavanagh and Cree (1996) on the subject of sexism and men. This has now continued into the new century – see, for example, Fawcett *et al.* (2000); Pizzey *et al.* (2000). See the ‘Guide to further learning’ section at the end of Chapter 3 for further details.

In relation to race and racism, Ahmad (1990) provides a very useful text with a clear practice focus, as does the set of readings produced by CCETSW (CD Project Steering Group, 1991); Dwivedi and Varma (1996) address child care issues, Littlewood and Lipsedge (1997) mental health and Blakemore and Boneham (1993) old age. Robinson (1995) provides an anti-racist perspective on psychology for social workers and Bowser (1995) provides an international perspective on racism and anti-racism. A longstanding classic text on racism (Solomos, 1989) is now available in a revised third edition (Solomos, 2003). Also, Luthra (1997) is a useful information source on demography and related issues. See the ‘Guide to further learning’ section at the end of Chapter 4 for further details.

For a general introduction to issues relating to discrimination and oppression, the following are relevant: Jordan (1990); Mullaly

(1993); Braye and Preston-Shoot (1995); Dalrymple and Burke (1995); Adams (2003); and Tomlinson and Trew (2002). Fook (2002) is an exceptionally good book that is highly recommended. More advanced treatment of the issues is to be found in Humphries (1996); Lešnik (1998); and Thompson (1998a; 2003a).

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