Use of Critical Consciousness in Anti-Oppressive Social Work Practice: Disentangling Power Dynamics at Personal and Structural Levels

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Summary

One of the limitations of anti-oppressive perspectives (AOPs) in social work is its lack of focus at a micro and individual level. AOPs should entail the social worker's addressing the needs and assets of service users, challenging the oppressive social structure and, most importantly, critically challenging the power dynamics in the service-provider/service-user relationship. Critical consciousness challenges social workers to be cognizant of power differentials and how these differentials may inadvertently make social-work practice an oppressive experience. The authors contend that critical consciousness fills in some of the gaps of AOPs, and argue for a fuller integration of critical consciousness into teaching and practice of AOPs. The methods to work toward critical consciousness, such as inter-group dialogues, agent–target distinctions and empowerment, are detailed.

Introduction

As helping professionals, social workers inevitably bring more power to their interactions with service users than vice versa. As a result, the following question seems warranted: Is anti-oppressive social work ever truly anti-oppressive? In an attempt to address this question, the authors suggest the use of critical consciousness in the application of anti-oppressive social work in practice. Developing critical consciousness would help social workers to challenge themselves to be cognizant of power differentials. Originally described by Freire in the 1960s (1997), critical consciousness (Pitner and Sakamoto, in press; Reed *et al.,* 1997) is a concept more recently refined by social-justice-oriented multicultural social work theories in the USA; thus, it was developed under a different historical and political context from anti-oppressive social work. Nevertheless, it has similar goals of eradication of oppression and working toward social justice. Before discussing critical consciousness in depth, let us review what we mean by anti-oppressive perspectives in social work, to lay ground for further discussions.

Brief review of anti-oppressive social work

In the recent years, anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory perspectives have had significant impact on social work theory, practice and education in the UK (e.g. Burke and Harrison, 1998; Dalrymple and Burke, 1995; Dominelli, 2002; Hatton, 2001; Langan and Day, 1992; Lynn, 1999; Payne, 1997; Thompson, 1997; Williams, 1999; Wilson and Beresford, 2000), as well as in Canada, Australia, New Zealand and other European countries (e.g. Connolly, 2001; Mullaly, 2002; Razack, 1999; Shera, 2003; Valtonen, 2001). Some common features of these anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive approaches include the influences of Marxist, socialist and radical ideologies, structural/sociological understanding of intersecting oppressions and emancipatory and feminist perspectives (Dominelli, 2002; Payne, 1997). Based on these theories and perspectives, eradication of oppression through institutional and societal changes is seen as an ultimate goal. In fact, these features are the cornerstone of anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory perspectives, despite there being no consensus among scholars and practitioners on a definitive model of anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory practice (Lynn, 1999). Focusing solely on the various semantic differences of these perspectives goes beyond the scope of this article. Thus, we forgo this discussion and, instead, use the term 'anti-oppressive perspectives' (AOPs) to refer to those approaches with the aforementioned common features.

Promises of anti-oppressive perspectives

Anti-oppressive approaches in social work emerged in response to the struggles of ethnic minorities, feminists and people with disabilities to challenge the

power structures (Langan, 1992; Payne, 1997). Typically, social work practice has been more micro/individually focused. The ability for such a focus to address issues related to oppression was called into question with the rise of radical social work in the late 1960s and early 1970s; radical social work laid the groundwork for AOPs (Lynn, 1999; Payne, 1997). With AOPs, the *structure* of oppression and discrimination has become the centre of analysis. AOPs, as the name suggests, draw attention of social workers to the more focused objective of challenging structural power dynamics in order to eradicate various forms of oppression. In comparison to micro-social work perspectives, AOPs offer a clearer linkage between social work practice and social justice. Most importantly, however, it offers a better conceptual model for understanding the multiplicity of oppression, privilege and power dynamics at a structural level.

AOPs ultimately aim to change the structure and procedures of service delivery systems through macro changes, including legal and organizational transformations (Dalrymple and Burke, 1995; Dominelli, 2002). Unlike more micro-oriented approaches of social work, AOPs suggest that social workers should not buy into the thinking that they are the only ones assuming responsibilities to transform society; rather, it is the state that must assume a much greater role than social workers (Dalrymple and Burke, 1995). In its sociological and structural focus, AOPs provide an effective avenue for analyzing issues at a macro and mezzo level.

Another contribution of AOPs is that it focuses attention on the *diversity* of oppression, unlike radical social work approaches of 1970s, which focused solely on classism, with little or no attention given to sexism or racism (Langan, 1992). AOPs endeavour to incorporate the demands from the autonomous movements by women, ethnic minorities and other oppressed groups.

Limitations of anti-oppressive perspectives

Despite the many promises of AOPs, there are also some limitations. Foremost, as alluded to earlier, the terminology used to describe AOPs is a critical limitation. For example, while some scholars argue about the problems that arise from aggregating anti-oppressive practice and anti-discriminatory practice (Dalrymple and Burke, 1995), others contend that their differences are merely semantic (Thompson, 1997). It seems that the more currency that AOPs acquire domestically and internationally, the more confusion there is about what exactly AOP connotes. Does it refer to a social worker's attempt to eliminate racism, sexism and classism on behalf of service users? Does it refer to a social worker's attempt to eliminate *any isms* in working collaboratively with service users? Does it refer to an attempt to eliminate power differentials across the board? Or, does it create a hierarchy of oppression by viewing one form of oppression (e.g. racism) as more important than another (e.g. ableism)? Clearly, there needs to be greater clarification on what AOPs entail. Similarly, for some social workers, radical social work and AOPs may mean the same thing, whereas for others, empowerment approaches may be regarded as part of AOPs.

Given that it is not entirely clear as to what exactly constitutes anti-oppressive practice, practitioners may not be certain whether their practice can be labelled as such. This lack of 'agreed upon' terminology can invite potential reluctance of practitioners to engage in anti-oppressive work. Furthermore, this could inevitably lead to a 'reliability issue' in our practice, education and research. For example, several articles with anti-oppressive practice/services in their titles do not define exactly which version of AOPs they refer to (Cemlyn, 2000; Langley, 2001; Valtonen, 2001), making it difficult to compare with or build on each other. How can we approach practice, teaching and research from an AOP perspective if we do not have a consensus on the concept?

Moreover, the connotations of anti-oppressive social work can be so negative that, when imposed on practitioners, it could potentially alienate frontline social workers who believe that they have always been practising social work directed at eradicating oppression. Some practitioners may even feel that they are blamed for not doing enough to change social structures. There is, indeed, a criticism that AOPs have been too ideologically and scholarly driven and have not sufficiently incorporated ground-up knowledge, e.g. service users' viewpoints (Wilson and Beresford, 2000). In addition to the negative connotations of the terminology, the ultimate objective of AOPs (i.e. eradication of all forms of structural oppression) can be seen as discouragingly lofty, especially for practitioners who may already have too much on their plate. This could ultimately lead to apathy on the part of the practitioner.

Another major critique of AOPs is its lack of explicit focus on micro practice (Payne, 1997). Although AOPs offer many examples of societal and organizational changes and strategies, it is not as clear how social workers that work directly with individuals and families can utilize AOPs in their daily practice. Some have argued that AOPs have more potential to address 'individual' and 'societal' issues than did radical social work approaches (Lynn, 1999). However, our position is consistent with Payne's (1997) in that we believe that AOPs do not offer enough prescriptions to 'immediate' problems of individuals and families. Clarification in this area will guide training of social work practitioners in micro areas.

Can anti-oppressive social work truly be anti-oppressive?

As mentioned earlier, social workers inevitably bring more power to their interactions with service users than vice versa. Although anti-oppressive social work aims to achieve partnership with service users, one must wonder whether such a partnership is attainable. Dalrymple and Burke (1995) posed the following question: 'Can social work practice *ever* be based on equal power relationships?' (p. 67). If not, then another question becomes pertinent: *Is anti-oppressive social work ever truly anti-oppressive*? Social work, like other helping professions, is, by nature, 'top-down'. By top-down, we refer to the social worker as the expert who imparts knowledge and skills to the service user. In fact, the very nature of the training that social workers receive predisposes them to such power

differentials. Although social workers have been reluctant in acknowledging this, social control based on these power differentials has been well embedded in social work since the inception of the profession (Dominelli, 1997, 2002; Margolin, 1997; Matahaere-Atariki *et al.*, 2001; Neubeck and Cazenave, 2001; Payne, 1997; Piven and Cloward, 1993; Sakamoto, 2003; Thompson, 1997; Wenocur and Reisch, 1989). It is our contention that, as an approach of social work, anti-oppressive practice, by default, is vulnerable to the teacher/student trap, i.e. the service user is seen as the student, while the social worker is viewed as the teacher. As Freire (1997) contends:

> The teacher teaches and the students are taught; the teacher knows every-thing and the students know nothing; the teacher confuses the authority of knowledge with his or her own professional authority, which she and he sets in opposition to the freedom of the students (p. 54).

Thus, instead of moving toward social justice and partnership, the teacher/student trap has a way of forcing social workers to perpetuate and re-inscribe power differentials and social injustice.

When social workers automatically frame service users' problems in terms of oppression (e.g. racism, sexism, heterosexism, ageism, classism, ableism), they may inadvertently do so to the detriment of the needs of the service user. In fact, service users may not define their problems in these same terms. Thus, the service users' (i.e. students') problems become transmuted into a *mission* that social workers (as the teachers) accept in order to address social injustice. If social workers (teachers) impart their knowledge on oppression to teach the 'uneducated' service users, it raises a further question: Who knows more about oppression? Those who teach it or those who live it? In the context of popular education, Freire (1997) contends that helping practice which begins 'with the egoistic interests of the oppressors and makes of the oppressed the objects of its humanitarianism, itself maintains and embodies oppression' (p. 36). Similarly, in her research on deconstructing professional expertise, Fook's observation (2000) was that new social work students tend to be more detached from the service user and to seek 'correct' solutions, 'rather than seeing their own involve-ment as crucial to the outcome' (p. 113). How can anti-oppressive social workers avoid the teacher/student trap and work in a more anti-oppressive manner?

In the post-colonial context of New Zealand, Matahaere-Atariki *et al.* (2001) argue that in order to overcome our 'false sense of neutrality', social workers must start from the admission that we have failed to be 'anti-oppressive' and maintain that discomfort (p. 131). Continued experience of discomfort signals to social workers that there is more work to be done in order to be anti-oppressive. Such discomfort may also be experienced as anger and, as Bishop (2002) and Mullaly (2002) have suggested, it could be used as a constructive force to make changes toward social justice in various ways. Similarly, Wong (2004) contends that instead of reacting to or combating discomfort itself, social workers' discomfort should be greeted 'with a gentle smile and a friendly hello' (http://www.criticalsocialwork. com) so that social workers can stay in touch with their discomfort.

One way of maintaining discomfort and acting toward changing the oppressive situations is by critically examining the power dynamics within our own profession (cf. Fook, 2000). Instead of the traditional and linear notion of 'therapeutic alliance' between the clinician and the client (Marziali and Alexander, 1991), we believe that anti-oppressive practice could benefit from having a tripartite focus, which would entail the social worker's addressing the needs of the service user, critically challenging social systems and critically challenging his or her own assumptions about the worker's professional role. Such a focus would allow social workers to work toward addressing the needs of the service user, as well as remain cognizant of the potential power differentials in the service-provider/service-user relationship. It also would make them more aware of how their own biases and assumptions affect their interactions with service users.

In the UK and Canada, diversity, social inequality and power differentials have often been addressed in terms of AOPs. However, in the USA, these same issues have generally been framed in terms of multicultural social work (Spencer *et al.*, 2000). Multiculturalism in the UK and Canada may be perceived as an approach in which the dominant group acknowledges only superficial cultural differences, without addressing power differentials (e.g. Bannerji, 2000; Williams, 2001). Moreover, this perspective tends to allocate all aspects of racism to culture and ignore post-colonial influences—by post-colonial, we mean racism as interpreted in the historical contexts—and critically examines the essentialized view of the 'Other' (e.g. Mullaly, 2002). In the USA, multiculturalism encompasses a much broader spectrum of political positions, including radical and critical ones (Bowen and Bok, 1998; de Anda, 1997; Green, 1999; Kivisto and Rundblad, 2000; Spencer *et al.*, 2000; Takaki, 1994). Many authors on multicultural social work analyse racism from historical contexts, although not necessarily articulated in post-colonial terms (e.g. Devore, 2000; Lum, 2004). Further, some authors do view colonialism and neocolonialism at the core of oppression, e.g. for First Nations Peoples (Yellow Bird, 2000). Moreover, the influence of feminist thoughts, Freirean ideology and post-modern perspectives is evident in Gutiérrez and Lewis' work on empowering women of colour (1999). Thus, we believe that a parallel can be drawn from AOPs to some of the more progressive multicultural social work approaches in the USA.

Progressive multicultural social work approaches tend to place heavy emphasis on achieving social justice through overcoming prejudice and discrimination at mainly a micro level (Pinderhughes, 1989; Spencer *et al.*, 2000; Van Soest, 1995). We acknowledge that multicultural social work and anti-oppressive social work practices originate from different historical and political backgrounds. Nevertheless, there are aspects of multicultural social work that can inform our theorizing and pedagogical efforts of anti-oppressive social work. One of those areas is the ways in which a sociological understanding of oppression can be linked to a psychological understanding, thus offering one possibility to enhance micro level practice using AOPs. We believe that critical consciousness offers an avenue to a micro level focus of AOPs.

Critical consciousness

Critical consciousness is the 'process of continuously reflecting upon and examining how our own biases, assumptions and cultural worldviews affect the ways we perceive difference and power dynamics' (Pitner and Sakamoto, in press, p. 2). As was discussed by Reed and her colleagues (1997), this continuous self-reflection must be accompanied by action to address social injustice. The notion of working with the 'consciousness' of oppressed clients, followed by moving this consciousness into practice, is not new, as it was popularized by the feminist movement in the 1970s and thereafter (Fook, 1993). In fact, some scholars have discussed critical consciousness in terms of clients' attempt to understand the structure of oppression that they are experiencing (Fook, 1993). On the other hand, in other scholars' work, this discussion on consciousness has mainly been focused on the social worker's learning to critically interrogate how his or her own identity has been shaped by the dominant ideology. These particular scholars have discussed ways in which an individual can develop critical consciousness (e.g. Gil, 1998; Leonard, 1997; Mullaly, 2002; Schön, 1983). Leonard (1997), for example, refers to this self-interrogation process as reflexive knowledge, suggesting that individuals are gaining more in-depth knowledge about themselves. According to Taylor and White (2000), reflexivity and reflectivity are two different ideas, contending that 'reflective knowledge' is mainly an 'individualized action of separate practitioners' (p. 198), while '(practicing) reflexivity' is a 'collective action of academic discipline or occupational group' (p. 198) through which health and welfare practitioners interrogate their knowledge base and practice. However, articulating the differences between reflexivity and reflectivity is beyond the scope of this article. Thus, we adhere to the brand of critical consciousness that is similar to reflective/reflexive knowledge suggested by Schön (1983), Leonard (1997) and others, since, we believe, such a process is necessary if the social workers are to move toward social change. Within the framework of AOPs, some writers have presented similar concepts, suggesting that social workers need to also develop critical self-knowledge (e.g. Dominelli, 1997; Dalrymple and Burke, 1995).

In the anti-racist practice framework, for example, Dominelli (1997) uses the term 'anti-racism/anti-racism awareness' as 'a state of mind, feeling, political commitment and action' that white people should aim to achieve. On the other hand, in an anti-oppressive framework, Dalrymple and Burke (1995) use the words 'critical self-analysis' (p. 92), which is a process whereby an individual becomes cognizant of his or her own value position in relation to others. Other writings on AOPs have also used words such as 'critical self-reflection' (Mullaly, 2002) and 'reflexivity' (Dominelli, 2002, p. 184) to identify similar processes and concepts. Although these ideas (critical self-knowledge) are often introduced as a significant step in AOPs, it is nevertheless treated briefly and/or at the very end of the books on anti-oppressive social work, suggesting a somewhat marginal treatment within the larger conceptualization of AOPs. Moreover, the

ways in which social workers examine him or herself with an analytic lens from multiple identities and oppression are often not articulated in detail, leaving social workers (and students) a challenging task, with few tools. Thus, discussing *how* the *social worker* can also begin to engage in this critical self-examination process is imperative.

When social workers enter helping relationships, they enter with their own biases and prejudices. It is these biases and prejudices that can, and often do, affect how they listen to the problems of their service users and, ultimately, how they proceed to address them. In order to prevent such cognitive biases, social workers must first critically examine their own cultural backgrounds and worldviews. By examining their own assumptions and biases, the social workers may be less likely to impose their own values onto their service users. This self-reflective process has become the mantra in multicultural social work (see Pinderhughes, 1989 and Reed *et al.*, 1997, for examples). In writing this article, it is our hope that this concept will become more fully incorporated in AOPs.

The first step in developing critical consciousness requires an examination of one's various identities, locations and standpoints (Pitner and Sakamoto, in press). We have many *social identities* (race, gender, social class, etc.), which are influenced by historical, socio-cultural and political factors (Reed *et al.* 1997). How we *position* ourselves within these various identity groups affects the way we perceive ourselves and others. These multiple identities also accompany statuses. We are privileged by some identities, yet oppressed by others. For example, a male may be privileged because of his gender, yet oppressed because of disability status. *Standpoint theory* suggests that individuals in oppressed groups develop a different perception of reality than those in non-oppressed groups (Pitner and Sakamoto, in press). Thus, males and females have different perspectives on reality, and disabled and able-bodied individuals have different perspectives. This is because socio-cultural perspectives cause each group to have different narratives about their reality. Standpoint theory suggests that oppressed groups are often more cognizant of their narratives than are non-oppressed groups.

There have been a plethora of writings in the multicultural social work literature that discuss ways in which a social worker can develop critical consciousness (or critical reflexive knowledge) (e.g. Anderson, 1992; Chau, 1990; Iglehart and Becerra, 1995; Pinderghughes, 1983, 1989; Reed *et al.*, 1997; Ridley *et al.*, 1994; Van Soest, 1994, 1995). Comprehensively applying this knowledge base to an anti-oppressive social work paradigm is both instructive and necessary. As social workers, we have received professional training, which has provided us with a level of expertise to help our service users. Moving toward critical consciousness challenges social workers (i.e. the teachers) to question how the dominant ideology has shaped their perspectives about their professional role and about their service users. Moreover, it challenges them to examine how this professional role, itself, may be perpetuating power differentials in the helping relationship.

Critical consciousness and anti-oppressive practice

Scholars contend that liberation of both the social worker and the service user should be the ultimate goal of social work practice (Hopkins, 1986; Pinderhughes, 1989; although not from the social work, Freire, 1997, is useful for the basis of this idea). This requires social workers' overcoming the teacher/student trap. As mentioned, critically reflecting upon one's identities, positionality and stand-points is the first step in this process. However, in any helping relationship, we carry our *professional training schema* with us. Professional training schema may be thought of as a cognitive roadmap that predisposes us to attend to information in a certain way. With AOPs, that schema often guides us to listen for oppression. In order to overcome this, social workers must separate them-selves from their professional training. We refer to this as taking a one-down position (Pitner and Sakamoto, in press).

A one-down position means that the social worker recognizes the power differentials in the service-provider/service-user relationship. Thus, the social worker actively becomes a naive investigator, making the service user the narrator of his or her own experiences. In many ways, the social worker becomes the student and the service user becomes the teacher. This requires the social worker's suspending preformed judgments and listening to how their service users describe their own situation. In other words, the social worker truly starts with where the service user 'is' (which is one of the core tenets of social work), instead of starting with where the worker thinks they 'should be'.

Practical ways of moving toward critical consciousness

What steps does an anti-oppressive social worker need to take in order to begin the journey toward critical consciousness? In this article, we present three prac-tical ways of achieving this. First, social workers can start by framing power/ oppression issues in terms of target/agent groups (Adams *et al.*, 1997, 2000). Secondly, the training of social work students should utilize classroom exercises that challenge individuals to develop critical consciousness. One procedure that we find very promising is the use of inter-group dialogues. Thirdly, empowerment of social workers should be considered an important step toward reducing social workers' sense of powerlessness, which, in turn, would help them to link their critical consciousness to effective anti-oppressive actions in order to work toward social justice.

Target/agent distinction

As mentioned earlier, the term 'anti-oppressive' has negative connotations. In fact, it is so strong that instead of helping people with privileged social group

memberships to understand how they are privileged and how they may become allies to those who have oppressed social identities, it may make them feel guilty and defensive. Inevitably, this could lead to maintenance of status quo and domination. To counter this, it may be useful to identify a focus of change (i.e. what are social workers and service users trying to change?) in a precise yet more neutral way, so that people with certain privileged identities can have a larger societal perspective on their privileges, without just feeling guilty or defensive. This would also potentially increase the chances for people in both privileged and oppressed statuses to work collaboratively toward the goal of social justice.

As mentioned, we have multiple social identities—some privilege us, yet others oppress us. The *agent* is a group of people with greater access to social power and privilege based upon their group membership (e.g. being white or male) (Adams *et al.*, 2000). The agents have been described as the oppressors, or the privileged. The *target* groups, on the other hand, are groups whose access to power is limited due to their group membership (Adams *et al.*, 2000). These groups have often been described as the oppressed. Understanding how one can be both in the agent group and in the target group is important in two ways. First, it helps agent group members to examine power differentials at a structural level and, thus, lowers their resistance to acknowledgement of their own privilege. Secondly, for target group members, this analysis identifies a common goal with the agent group (i.e. eradicating all forms of oppression at every level). It also makes the target group responsible in that they are able to see how their various social group identities may also place them in the agent group role (depending on the social context). Thus, target groups do not simply blame agent groups for owning social power; they join them in working toward social justice. Being able to critically examine how we are both targets and agents allows individuals to feel less threatened and more responsible for working toward social action.

Some may argue that changing the language in AOPs waters down the nature of oppression and privilege. However, we would argue that, as Bishop (2002) and Mullaly (2002) posited, 'the process of becoming an oppressor is hidden from the person' (Mullaly, 2002, p. 208) and that because of our own cognitive and affective limitations, critical self-consciousness may not necessarily allow us to see oppressive parts of our identities (see Pitner and Sakamoto, in press, for a more detailed discussion). It is perhaps important to note that those who promote the words 'agent–target groups' are higher-education teachers in diversity and social justice, who themselves had struggled to teach these concepts to undergraduate students (Adams *et al.*, 2000). Many of us social work practitioners and academics teaching in the area of anti-oppression and diversity are aware that recognizing and continuously confronting oppression is a painful and exhausting process, not only for students 'who don't get it', but for all of us who have long been in the social work profession. Framing this issue in terms of agent and target groups is one way of making the language more accessible and of more readily raising awareness on oppressed and privileged

statuses. Needless to say, the use of the terms 'target–agent groups' in no way detracts from the realities of oppression, nor our own responsibilities in interrogating and changing our own oppressive values, attitudes and behaviours. On the contrary, these terms should be seen as a pedagogical and strategic tool for elucidating the complexities of our multiple identities and for increasing alliances between those in oppressed and privileged statuses. Thus, the use of the terms 'agent–target groups' would help social workers and social work students to further develop critical consciousness, which involves a move toward social action.

Inter-group dialogues

There are various pedagogical practices designed to teach cultural diversity and power differentials, and to raise critical consciousness in social work training (Anderson and Carter, 2003; Diller, 2004; Latting, 1990; Lewis, 1993; Nakanishi and Ritter, 1992; Reed *et al.*, 1997). The inter-group dialogue is one technique among them that has been used with different student populations (Schoem, 2003). A model of inter-group dialogue adopted in many universities in the USA (e.g. Arizona State University, University of Illinois, University of Maryland, University of Massachusetts–Amherst, University of Washington) was first developed for undergraduate students at the University of Michigan in the 1980s in response to 'heightened racial and ethnic tensions' on campus (University of Michigan, The Program on Intergroup Relations, Conflict and Community, 2003; Zúñiga and Nagda, 1993). This programme's underlying assumption is that 'systematic education, sustained interaction and dialogue across boundaries' will bring about socially just communities (University of Michigan, The Program on Intergroup Relations, Conflict and Community, 2003). Inter-group dialogues typically provide a learning environment in which an equal number of two self-identified social group members participate in didactic sessions and directed dialogues over a course of a semester (some programmes also offer triad dialogues, such as Latino/African-American/White; and African-American and White inter-group dialogues; Schoem, 2003, p. 219). Often, these dialogues are interracial/interethnic; however, they could comprise any two social group members (e.g. lesbians, gay men, bisexual, transsexual and heterosexual people; women and men; black people and Jews; Schoem, 2003; Zúñiga and Nagda, 1993).

Two peer facilitators who represent both social identities lead the face-to-face dialogue processes and help participants to develop an understanding of their own social identities, learn about how the dynamics of oppression and privilege impact individual lives and develop a commitment to greater personal and social change (Nagda *et al.*, 1999, p. 444; also see University of Michigan, The Program on Intergroup Relations, Conflict and Community, 2003; Zúñiga and Nagda, 1993). The focus of dialogues is on their own social group membership, identity and social position, which produce different statuses of oppression and privilege (Nagda *et al.*, 1999).

Conflicts are seen as part of the dialogue process and students are directed to work constructively through them (Nagda *et al.*, 1999; Schoem, 2003). Through the process of dialogue and conflict resolution (or conflict management), students learn to understand and acknowledge differences within and across groups, form alliances across differences and think creatively about bridging the power differentials toward achieving more socially just communities (Schoem, 2003; University of Michigan, The Program on Intergroup Relations, Conflict and Community, 2003).

Inter-group dialogues have been applied to train social work students at the MSW level (e.g. at the University of Washington, University of Michigan in the USA). In the model used at the University of Washington, the dialogue groups consist of different racial/ethnic groups and teaching modalities include didactic and experiential learning activities, individual and small group discussions and dialogues (Nagda *et al.*, 1999). Several empirical studies have found the inter-group dialogues to be an effective tool for raising critical consciousness (e.g. Yeakley, 1998) and fostering skills necessary for constructive inter-group relations (Nagda and Zúñiga, 2003).

Empowerment

Critical consciousness can contribute to anti-oppressive social work practice and training in that it allows social workers to help to examine not only how they see the world from certain lenses, but also how they themselves may be perceived by the people whom they work with/for, such as service users, communities and organizations. Different parts of social identities will have different saliencies, depending on the contexts for both social workers and service users. For example, complex power dynamics may be played out in a treatment group comprising mostly middle-aged, heterosexual, lower-class, white men and led by a young, lesbian, middle-class, black female social worker. In this example, the social worker has power over the service users because of her professional status and class, but other statuses may or may not discount her credentials in the eyes of the service users and agencies for which she works.

We have discussed earlier that existing literature from AOPs and structural perspectives often, and rightfully, assume that the social worker has absolute or relative power over their service users (e.g. Dominelli, 2002; Mullaly, 2002). However, multiple social identities, with their accompanying multiple privileges and oppressions, could also affect the social worker on professional and personal levels. Social workers can bring with them different vulnerabilities and challenges because of racism, sexism, heterosexism and many other factors. For example, in assuming professional roles, some social workers (more so than others) may be scrutinized under the gaze of the service users and agencies whom they are working with/for.

We believe that social work's mission includes empowerment and liberation of both service users and social workers (Garvin, 1997; also see Freire, 1997). Authors on AOPs often contend that promoting empowerment is an integral part of anti-oppressive/anti-discriminatory practice (Dalrymple and Burke, 1995; Dominelli, 2002; Thompson, 1997). However, empowerment of social workers has not been fully addressed in the AOPs context. Power does not operate as a zero-sum game, i.e. empowerment of social workers does not mean aggravating power differentials between the worker and the service user—it means social workers' being able to choose *when* and *how* to negotiate, relinquish and exercise their power to help service users to empower themselves.

How can social workers who feel vulnerable or marginalized learn to empower themselves? Mullaly (2002) suggests the use of support groups with like-minded people for those social workers and academics who feel marginalized because of their support of sometimes unpopular views on anti-oppressive social work. Similarly, social workers who may feel marginalized or disempowered in their professional capacities because of their social identities could make use of support groups, caucuses of professional organizations, e-mail groups and other forms of group to process their experiences, build coalition with each other, strategize for the next steps and/or take actions to fight against oppression (e.g. for more ideas of empowerment strategies, please see Gutiérrez *et al.*, 1998; Lewis *et al.*, 2001).

In sum, critical consciousness makes social workers aware of power in their professional role which may be oppressive to service users. Used consciously and carefully as allies, this power can help to promote emancipatory changes for service users. At the same time, critical consciousness may also highlight vulnerability of social workers who have certain target group memberships. We argue that empowerment of social workers is crucial because it will help disempowered social workers to (re)gain personal and professional power to effectively perform their role to help service users. Further, if social workers with marginalized identities engage in developing their own critical consciousness and empowerment, then they can be more prepared to turn their dissatisfaction/pain/anger into social action, thus working on anti-oppression.

By utilizing classroom exercises, such as inter-group dialogues, by framing power dynamics in terms of agent/target groups and by explicitly linking critical consciousness to empowerment of both service users and workers, we believe that AOPs can begin to truly be anti-oppressive.

Looking into the future

AOPs in social work should entail the social worker's addressing the needs and assets of the service user, challenging oppressive social systems and, most

importantly, critically challenging the power dynamics in the provider/user relationship. Anti-oppressive social work should not start with the social worker's defining oppression of the service user. Rather, 'starting with where the service user is' requires the social worker to relinquish preset beliefs and professional training in order to effectively listen to how their service users describe their own issues. Critical consciousness challenges social workers to be cognizant of power differentials and how these differentials may inadvertently make social work practice an oppressive experience. It is also imperative that social workers link critical consciousness to empowerment within the framework of anti-oppressive social work. Empowerment of both service users and social workers is needed to effectively challenge oppression and bring about positive changes at different levels.

When do we know that we have a sufficient level of critical consciousness? As described earlier, critical consciousness is a process; thus, there is no end point for us to say that we are now a 'good' person, free from oppressive attitudes, thoughts or actions. Critical consciousness inevitably encompasses not only cognition and values, but also actions to correct oppressive conditions. Thus, our work toward critical consciousness is an endless process. As uncomfortable as it may sound, if we are not part of the solution, we are part of the problem; there is no comfortable middle ground where one can be 'neutral' in any of the multiple continua of being oppressed versus privileged (e.g. Thompson, 1997). Accepting this discomfort and taking responsibility for whatever small part of challenging oppression one can take is a significant part of working on critical consciousness (also see Wong, 2004). Effective use of one's privilege as an ally to challenge oppression (Bishop, 2002) is important and often needed for successful systemic change.

As already mentioned, it is important that we have a consistent conceptualization of what AOPs entail. Clarifying this will help us to move toward an evidence-based, anti-oppressive social work practice. Thus, the first step in developing research studies will be to operationalize this term. In doing this, we will have a set criterion for what AOPs should entail. As we have argued, critical consciousness must be considered one important component of AOPs. However, although multicultural social work scholars in the USA contend that critical consciousness is an important practice component, virtually no empirical studies have been conducted to test this claim. As a result, we are left to theorize about the promises of critical consciousness, without much empirical support. More studies need to be focused on examining the role that developing critical consciousness has on anti-oppressive practitioners and practice outcomes.

Our goal for this article was not to construct a research agenda for measuring critical consciousness. Rather, it was to raise the important discussion about the role that critical consciousness plays in anti-oppressive social work. Social workers must remain cognizant of the power dynamics that are inevitably part of the service-provider/service-user relationship. Anti-oppressive social work practice should begin with the social worker's being vigilant of

the potential role that such dynamics play in making anti-oppressive practice an oppressive experience for their service users. Critical consciousness, as we have argued, is an effective avenue for examining and understanding such dynamics.

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