Oppression Theory and Social Work Treatment

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Oppression theory is derived from several different disciplines and theoretical traditions and encompasses a broad array of concerns related to power, privilege, domination, stratification, structural inequality, and discrimination. However, due to oppression theory’s varied foundations, it is probably more accurate to speak about oppression theories, because the primary concern of each theory generally focuses on different aspects of oppression or specific oppressed groups, often to the exclusion of others. To a large degree, oppression theory shares similar conceptual frameworks with sociological conflict theory, critical social theory, feminist theory, and the empowerment approach to social work practice, based on their overlapping interests in power and inequality. Drawing on these theories, anti-oppressive social work practice is primarily concerned with the social, political, and economic structures as well as social and psychological processes that initiate, maintain, and enforce oppression.

Historical Context

The current use of oppression theory and the newly emerging field of anti-oppressive social work practice are based on the profession’s long-standing commitment to social justice. According to Heinonen and Spearman (2001), social justice is “an abstract and strongly held social work ideal that all people should have equal rights to the resources of a society and should expect and receive fair and equal treatment” (p. 352). Although the development and articulation of anti-oppressive practice is relatively new, concern for social justice has been prominent.
in both earlier and contemporary radical, progressive, structural, feminist, and liberatory frameworks (Campbell, 2003).

The ideal of social justice can be traced to the work of the Settlement House Movement and its corresponding advocacy for progressive social reforms at the beginning of the 20th century. Social workers during this era were actively involved in social policy initiatives to improve the conditions of the immigrant poor, women, and children. Spurred by collapse of the economy and the ensuing Great Depression, the Rank-and-File Movement of the 1930s brought with it an awakening of political activism that had all but vanished in the 1920s. This movement's affiliated journal, Social Work Today, advocated progressive legislation, labor organizing, and other measures that would be seen today as radical or anti-oppressive practice (Gil, 1998; Reisch & Andrews, 2001; Wenocur & Reisch, 2001). Progressive social work did not re-emerge again for several decades, despite the fact that professional social work organizations continued to espouse official rhetoric that reflected anti-oppressive sentiments. However, Reisch and Andrews (2001) note that while advocating social justice ideals, they also promoted practices that reinforced the status quo. This is not surprising, because the ideals of progressive social work have never been held by the majority of those in the profession (Mullaly, 2006). Thus, conventional social work, which seeks to preserve the prevailing social order, has been the mainstay of social work practice through much of the profession's history.

The social movements of the 1960s brought about a renewed awareness and interest in structural factors that influenced people's lives, and the radical social work movement of the 1970s embraced a neo-Marxist class analysis with a focus on reducing poverty and inequality, effecting structural change, and influencing social policy. Specific concern about social class and economic forces can be seen in the materialist approach to social work practice (Burghardt, 1996). Embracing the radical social work heritage, but critical of its narrow focus on class analysis, structural social work theory proposed a broader framework that examined all forms of oppression, including inequality based on race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ability, and age (Campbell, 2003; Mullaly, 2006; Rose 1990). Campbell credits structural social work as a key development in articulating an anti-oppression stance. However, subsequent feminist, anti-racist, cross-cultural, and postmodern theorists voiced concerns that anti-oppressive theory failed to adequately address issues related to their specific interests. In response to this critique, oppression theory today more clearly incorporates the multiple dimensions and expressions of oppression.

Basic Assumptions and Concepts

Although theorists have proposed varying definitions of oppression and its dimensions, Marsiglia and Kulis (2009) have noted that two basic ingredients are necessary for oppression to exist: "a group that is being oppressed and an oppressor who benefits from such oppression" (p. 33). For one group to oppress another, there must also be differential power between the two that results in inequality and injustice. There are many ways to define and conceptualize power, and there is variation and disagreement within and among oppression theorists. Some portray power as relational, as something that people "use and create" (Fook, 2002), while others define it as the ability to control collective actions and decisions (Robbins, Chatterjee, & Canda, 2006). The element of control does not necessarily depend on physical coercion, but may be accomplished through unjust policies and practices that lead to and enforce discrimination, exploitation, and marginalization of devalued groups of people. These variations of definition will be discussed in more detail below in relation to specific theories.

Privilege, domination, and exploitation are central features of oppression, and theorists have started to examine multiple levels of oppression and, in particular, the ways in which oppression is linked to interlocking systems of privilege or domination. Privilege can be understood as the flip side of oppression and is an unearned structural advantage that allows those with power to dominate and exploit the powerless. In essence, oppression cannot exist in the absence of privilege, as they are interdependent on one another. Further, domination is not necessarily a conscious act, and those with privilege need not be aware of their relative privilege in order to be

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part of an oppressive system. Importantly, oppression takes place within specific historical contexts, and oppression theories typically include this in their analysis.

Social stratification plays an important role in oppression as well because it places entire groups of people into categories and, based on these categories, systematically allows or denies them access to social and economic rewards. Oppression theory proposes that the way in which these categories are created and maintained is based on power, privilege, and domination. Those in power have the ability not only to define these categories, but also to control which groups have access to the rewards. Due to this, inequality is seen as a structural feature of society because those in power arrange economic and social relations and rewards to benefit themselves. Thus, power and privilege are structurally rooted in the economic and political system.

An important mechanism by which structural inequality is maintained is discrimination. Discrimination involves actions on the part of dominant groups that have a differential and negative effect on people who are devalued and marginalized due to their group membership. Like domination, discrimination may not always be intentional or overt but is a necessary prerequisite for exploitation. Concomitant with discrimination are the processes of stereotyping and prejudice, which are used to justify the exploitation of others.

Oppression, domination, and exploitation exist on multiple levels of social interaction, and contemporary oppression theory examines the ways in which social and cultural categories of differentiation interact or intersect to create a system of oppression. The term intersectionality is used in oppression theory to address the experiences of people who are subjected to multiple forms of oppression and domination.

Oppression Theory

As noted above, authors in diverse academic fields have written about oppression, and there is an extensive literature on various aspects of power, privilege, domination, discrimination, and inequality. Oppression can be based on a variety of factors, including social class, race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability, or other categories by which people are defined as "lesser than." This, in turn, provides justification to treat them as objects of discrimination, exclusion, and domination. Oppression occurs not only at the institutional level, but at the intergroup and individual levels as well. This chapter reviews some of the theories that have been most prominently used in anti-oppressive social work practice.

Theories of Class Oppression

Theories of class oppression examine the ways in which social class is used to oppress and marginalize people based on their class status. These theories most typically emphasize the institutional nature of oppression and see power as the ability to dominate other groups or individuals, often referred to as "power over.

All contemporary versions of oppression theory have their roots in the work of Karl Marx, a 19th-century German philosopher, revolutionary, and theorist who integrated works from a variety of disciplines, including economics, political science, history, and sociology. Although best known for The Communist Manifesto (1848/1955), he was a prolific writer who was profoundly concerned about the transition of Europe to an industrial, manufacturing economy. This transformation irrevocably changed the nature of labor, products, consumption, as well as the economic and social structure of society. Such changes, according to Marx, created a polarization between two dominant classes—workers (the proletariat) and capitalists (the bourgeoisie)—and led to exploitation, inevitable class conflict and struggle, and alienation.

Although class antagonism and struggle over resources had existed in previous eras, industrialization created a new class system as well as new forms of oppression. Because the machinery necessary for mass production was now concentrated in the hands of a very few, workers were forced to sell their labor for wages that were set by the owners whose primary interest was in maximizing their own profits. According to Marx, this created an inherent form of exploitation because the wages paid to the laborers did not reflect the true value of the wealth created by their labor. This was compounded when items...
they produced were later sold back to them at inflated prices (Perdue, 1986). Capitalist exploitation also led to the pauperization of the working class and created hostility between owners and laborers, who struggled against their exploitation. In turn, owners further consolidated their interests and developed an awareness of their class position, which Marx termed class consciousness.

The exploitation of workers also created alienation in three interrelated spheres of social life: political, religious, and economic. According to Marx, when people become alienated, they become estranged, demeaned, depersonalized, and powerless. The economic monopoly of the bourgeoisie was evident in the political arena and, by consolidating their interests, they transformed their economic power into political power and dominated the political institutions as well (Abraham, 1983).

The bourgeoisie also controlled the dominant ideologies and, in this manner, controlled the ideas by which workers came to understand themselves and the world around them. According to Marx, the religious, political, and economic ideologies of the wealthy legitimized and reinforced the status quo, which favored their interests. Further, ideology was used as a form of social control to disguise and subdue class conflict. He believed that exploitation, alienation, and ideological domination were intricately interwoven with one another. Ideological domination by the ruling class could be seen in common and pervasive aspects of people's lives such as religion and nationalism.

Calling religion the “opium of the people,” Marx argued that the emphasis on rewards in the afterlife focused people's attention away from the inequality and oppression they experienced in their lives here. When people believe that their lot in life is preordained, religion becomes a form of social control that thwarts attempts at rebellion. This, according to Marx, was a central feature of religious alienation. Political ideology and political alienation function in a similar manner because the ideology of "nationalism" disguises the inequalities inherent in a capitalist system.

Marx believed that the struggle for both the proletariat and bourgeoisie was to free themselves from false consciousness, an unquestioning acceptance of a prevailing social order that supported an inherently oppressive system. In Marx's utopian vision, he believed that workers worldwide would eventually unite, become politicized, and organize to overthrow capitalist exploitation by means of a violent revolution. The political and economic order that he predicted would emerge would be socialism, followed by communism, the hallmark of which was the end of private property and social classes. Although Marx's prediction of worldwide revolution did not come to fruition, his theory represents an important sociological and economic analysis of society that provided the conceptual basis for subsequent theories of oppression. Importantly, Marx laid the groundwork for an examination of both the structural features of oppression as well as the social and psychological processes by which people come to accept their own domination and subjugation.

Drawing on Marxist theory and Catholic liberation theology, Paulo Freire, a Brazilian educator and theorist, sought to liberate people from the domination of the ruling class through a critical pedagogy that would prepare students to challenge and break the prevailing cycles of injustice, exploitation, and oppression. Freire, like Marx, believed that the ruling class imposed its values and culture on others and that knowledge was used by dominant groups to oppress and subjugate the masses. He proposed that oppressed people experience life as "objects" being acted upon, rather than as "subjects" who are in control of their own lives. Due to this, they lack skills that are essential for influencing the institutions that have control over their lives. Freire proposed that one of the primary institutions used as a tool of subjugation is standardized education.

Best known for his criticism of "banking" education, Freire held that through repetition and memorization, teachers deposit knowledge into students, who are treated as empty accounts, or receptacles. According to Freire (1993), banking education indoctrinates students to adapt to oppression, subverts their creative abilities, and reduces them to manageable beings who adopt the oppressive view of reality deposited in them. The more the oppressed adapt to their situation, the more easily they can be dominated. In addition, banking education fosters ideological control that serves the interests of the oppressors by diverting the attention of the oppressed away
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from the situation that oppresses them. In essence, the insidious nature of oppression prevents the oppressed from recognizing the reality of their circumstance. According to Freire, their perception of themselves is impaired by their submersion in the reality of oppression (p. 45). Many of Marx's themes are apparent in Freire's work and, like Marx, Freire also believed that the problem is not only with the oppressed, but the oppressors as well, who subvert their own humanity by turning everything around them into objects to be dominated.

Another characteristic of the oppressed is self-deprecation, which results from internalizing the opinion the oppressors hold of them. Through this process the oppressed become convinced of their own unfitness and suffer from a duality that becomes established in their innermost selves: "They are at one and the same time themselves and the oppressor whose consciousness they have internalized" (Freire, 1993, p. 49). This consciousness becomes so ingrained that people come to identify with and imitate their oppressors. Freire believed that in order to free themselves from oppression, people must first recognize that they have been destroyed, eject negative images of themselves, replace such images with those of autonomy and responsibility, and begin to transform themselves from objects to subjects.

To combat the fatalism experienced by the oppressed and to actively involve them in their own liberation from object to subject, Freire proposed a dialogical method that consisted of identifying problems, analyzing the root causes, and initiating action plans. This represented a significant change from traditional banking education and required that educators and learners be equal participants in order to engage in continuous dialogue with each other. Through mutual dialogue, the oppressed become better able to analyze their conditions, develop a critical consciousness or conscientização, and subsequently engage in action to become liberated from their external and internal oppression. According to Freire, this requires collective strategies that include the liberation of the oppressors as well as the oppressed. Goldenberg (1978) aptly sums up the condition of the oppressed: "Oppression, in short, is a condition of being in which one's past and future meet in the present—and go no further" (p. 3).

Theories of Racial Oppression

In contrast to class oppression theories, theories that examine racial oppression emphasize both the institutional nature of oppression as well as the intergroup dynamics that sustain it. Thus, the focus is on both the oppressive structures as well as the intergroup processes of prejudice and discrimination. Much of the literature on racial oppression in the United States emerged in response to the history of black slavery and, due to this, examines the history and contemporary experiences of black Americans, the system of racial oppression in America, and the oppressive dynamic of white privilege (Blauner, 2001).

Blauner suggests that Marxist theory and the dominance of European social thought that guided many successive generations of American theorists diverted attention from race and race relations. This was due to the incorrect assumption that race and ethnicity would become irrelevant as societies matured. Contrary to this stance, Blauner believes that race, racism, and racial oppression occupy a central and independent role in American economics, politics, and culture, and white privilege and domination are critical components of the dynamics that give rise to pervasive inequality. Relying on the framework of colonialism, as seen in the broad context of the expansion of white European control, he proposes that racial oppression and conflict today are based on white Western dominance over non-Western people of color (p. 22). Thus, contemporary ethnic and racial divisions are, in part, a product of our colonial past. This alone, however, is insufficient to understand the complexity of racial oppression, and he proposes that racial oppression theory must include the "combined existence" and "mutual interpenetration of both colonial-racial and capitalist class realities" (Blauner, 2001, p. 23). Even though white privilege is pervasive in all social institutions, he sees its expression in the labor market as the primary factor that determines people's lifestyle and social status.

In their examination of the history of the oppression of black Americans, Jonathan H. Turner, Royce Singleton, Jr., and David Musick (1986) propose that oppression can be defined as "a situation in which one, or more, identifiable segments of the population in a social system
systematically and successfully act over a prolonged period of time to prevent another identifiable segment, or segments, of the population from attaining access to the scarce and valued resources of that system" (pp. 1–2). This definition underscores several important dimensions of oppression and proposes that it requires more than one group simply exerting “power over” another group. In their formulation, oppression must not only prevent access to resources, it must also be systematic, it must be prolonged, it must target an identifiable group, and it must be successful. According to Turner et al., oppression is “both a process and a structure” (p. 2). As a process it involves attitudes and acts, such as prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination, that place and keep others in the lower ranks of the social structure. At the structural level, a hierarchical system is created by this process, and identifiable groups are placed at the bottom of this structure. These groups then organize their lives and identities around their place in the social structure.

Importantly, Turner et al. point out that oppression varies by degree and does not always lead to people being placed in the lowest ranks. Drawing on Max Weber’s three dimensions of stratification (power, property, and prestige), the authors stress that some groups may be allowed access to material well-being (property) but denied access to power and prestige. Thus, oppression can be selective and differentially applied. However, when groups, such as black Americans, are systematically and successfully denied access to all three resources, they become trapped in a caste-like structure and experience greater oppression than those who are allowed to occupy the middle ranks.

Other racial oppression theorists and authors have examined the structural and behavioral manifestations of racism and internalized oppression, and their work adds to an important body of literature that informs antiracist and diversity practice in social work (Batts, 1998; Dominelli, 2008; Williams, 1999).

Theories of Gender Inequality and Oppression

The fields of women’s studies and feminist theory have provided an extensive literature related to women’s inequality and oppression, and the theories briefly summarized here examine the social and psychological processes that lead to the power disparities that undergird oppression. The primary focus of feminist theories is on the subordination of women and, due to this, draws less from Marxism than do other oppression theories. However, feminist theory has made a significant contribution to oppression theory by expanding the scope of analysis to include an examination of the intersectionality of sexism with other forms of subordination, such as racism, heterosexism, and class oppression.

Feminist theory has also expanded the definition of power to include four forms of power that many contemporary feminist authors use in their understanding and analysis of oppression: power over, power from within, power with, and power to do (see Townsend, Zapata, Rowlands, Alberti, & Mercado, 1999). As discussed above, power over refers to institutionalized power that allows people to dominate others. Power within is a form of personal power that develops when oppressed people join together to share their struggles. Power with emerges in work with others, as people collectively and cooperatively organize to change their conditions, and power to do (also called power to) refers to the capacity to act and the concrete actions that people take to effect change (Finn & Jacobson, 2008). Many see this as a more nuanced approach to power, but the shift to seeing power as relational rather than a structural feature of society has significant implications. Lukes (2005) has suggested that the way in which power is conceptualized is, itself, shaped by power relations: “how we think about power may serve to reproduce and reinforce power structures and relations, or alternatively it may challenge and subvert them” (p. 63). In fact, some feminist scholars contend that the concept of power over is a product of a male worldview of domination. Many believe that redefining power from a relational perspective provides a sounder theoretical base for practice with transformational possibilities.

Writing from a feminist perspective and influenced by Foucault’s (1980) concept of power, Iris Marion Young (1990), rejected the static concept of power over as being the primary force in oppression and proposed five forms, or “faces,” of oppression that she believed better explained
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the interactive nature of oppression: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. She also held that racism, sexism, ageism, and homophobia can operate separately from the dynamics of class and, therefore, are distinct forms of oppression.

Exploitation is “a steady process of the transfer of results of the labor of one social group to benefit another” (Young, 1990, p. 49). Accordingly, the two aspects of gender exploitation include the transfer of the fruits of labor to men as well as the transfer of sexual satisfaction and emotional nurturing (p. 50). Although this is exploitive, it is not necessarily coercive because it arises from, and is supported by, ongoing social relations and processes. Marginalization, which Young saw as the most dangerous form of oppression, is the process by which categories of people are excluded from participation in social life and may also be severely, materially deprived or exterminated (p. 53). Powerlessness, according to Young, is a relative phenomenon for most people, in that they may have some degree of power in relation to others, even if they do not have the power to decide policies that affect their lives. People who are truly powerless have no power at all. Cultural imperialism establishes the dominant group’s experience and culture as universal norms, and those who do not conform to these norms are labeled as the “Other.” Violence, the fifth face of oppression, includes not only unprovoked physical attacks, but also harassment, intimidation, and ridicule, when used intentionally to stigmatize others. Young sees violence as a social process that is systematic.

Although these five types of oppression, or combinations of these, may be experienced by a specific oppressed group, Young does not believe that any of these is a necessary condition of oppression for any specific group. Nonetheless, the presence of any one of these is sufficient to determine that a group has been oppressed. She believes that by examining these systems of oppression separately, it is possible to compare the specific types of oppression that are experienced by each oppressed group.

In a feminist, phenomenological examination of the psychological dimensions of oppression, Sandra Lee Bartky (1990) incorporates insights from Freire and Young, and, more directly, from Frantz Fanon’s (1967) study of the psychic alienation of black men. While recognizing the fact that economic and political oppression can be psychologically oppressive, she proposes that psychological oppression has its own distinct modes that operate to produce internalized messages of inferiority. She examines three social processes, as set forth by Fanon, which are used to deliver messages of inferiority to women: stereotyping, cultural domination, and sexual objectification. In describing these processes she is particularly concerned about the ways in which fragmentation and mystification are present in all three. Fragmentation is the splitting of the person into parts, while mystification obscures the reality of psychological oppression and produces a depreciated self and corresponding guilt or neuroses.

Stereotypes are used to sustain both racism and sexism and prevent people from achieving an authentic choice of self. Female stereotypes also limit women’s independence and autonomy by portraying them as beings that cannot and should not be as autonomous as men. Cultural domination and depreciation also rob women of an authentic sense of self because male characteristics are portrayed as the norm for personhood. Finally, sexual objectification reduces women to their sexual parts and also distorts their ability to see themselves as whole persons. As these negative messages become internalized, women are placed in a double bind, in that it is “psychologically oppressive both to believe and at the same time not to believe that one is inferior” (Bartky, 1990, p. 30). Bartky sees a strong similarity between psychic alienation and Marx’s alienation of labor: in both, human functions are split from the person and prevent people from engaging in activities that are essential to leading a full human existence.

As noted above, extensive feminist literature has addressed many of the concepts that are central to oppression theory. Given the differences in the way that power is conceptualized, one of the challenges for future research and scholarship in this area will be achieving a better theoretical integration regarding the nature of power.

Social Work Contributions to Theories of Oppression

Over the past several decades there has been an emerging literature in social work on anti-oppressive practice (see, for example, Appleby,
Colon, & Hamilton, 2007; Baines, 2008; Clifford & Burke, 2009; Dominelli, 1996, 1998, 2002; Fook, 2002; Gil, 1998; Marsiglia & Kulls, 2009; McLaughlin, 2005; Mullaly, 2002, 2006; Sinclair & Albert, 2008; van Wormer, 2004). However, no social work authors have developed unique theories of oppression, and most have relied on frameworks related to feminist, antiracist, critical, conflict, empowerment, or social justice theories.

David Gil (1998), for example, provides an in-depth analysis of the evolution of thought related to exploitation and oppression, strategies to overcome injustice, the importance of radical policy analysis, strategies for social change practice, and the dilemmas faced by the social work profession in fully embracing a social justice stance toward practice. Katherine van Wormer (2004) reviewed a range of social, political, and psychological theories and concepts that undergird anti-oppressive practice and proposes an excellent model for anti-oppressive policy analysis. She also delineates various methods for achieving restorative justice. Bob Mullaly (2006) offers a conceptual framework for structural social work that incorporates many of the elements of theories discussed in this chapter, and his work is often cited as a useful theoretical base for anti-oppressive practice.

One of the leading proponents and authors advocating anti-oppressive social work practice is Lea Dominelli (1996, 1998, 2002, 2008). Her classic book on theory and practice for anti-oppressive social work draws heavily on feminist and antiracist theory and provides a contextual framework for effecting change at the intergroup and structural levels. Her work in this area reflects theoretical sources that also can be seen in her earlier writing on feminist and antiracist practice.

Anti-Oppressive Social Work Practice

Anti-oppressive social work practice includes a variety of approaches and theories related to social work’s commitment to social justice. The tenet that social workers engage in anti-oppressive practice can be found in the Code of Ethics of both the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW). Concomitant with professional values and principles related to the concepts of social justice and political action, social workers are expected to address social injustice by pursuing “social change, particularly with and on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups of people” as well as prevent and eliminate domination, exploitation, and discrimination (NASW, 2008). Similarly, a basic principle of the IFSW (2004) is that social workers challenge unjust practices and policies that are “oppressive, unfair or harmful.”

Due to the fact that anti-oppressive practice is an “umbrella term” for diverse approaches, it is best seen as a stance, or perspective, toward practice rather than a particular method (Campbell, 2003). Despite variations, Campbell lists core values and principles embodied in anti-oppressive practice to include:

- Shared values of equity, inclusion, empowerment, and community
- An understanding that the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of individuals are linked to material, social, and political conditions
- Recognition of the link between personal troubles and public issues
- Recognition that an unequal distribution of power and resources leads to personal and institutional relationships of oppression and domination
- The necessity of promoting critical analysis
- The importance of encouraging, supporting, and “centering” the knowledge and perspectives of those who have been marginalized and incorporating these perspectives into policy and practice
- The importance of articulating the multiple and intersecting bases of oppression and domination while not denying the unique impact of various oppressive constructs
- Conceiving of social work as a social institution with the potential to either contribute to, or to transform, the oppressive social relations that govern the lives of many people
- Supporting the transformative potential of social work through work with diverse individuals, groups, and communities
- Having a vision of an egalitarian future.

These values and principles can be seen in a variety of practice approaches, all of which seek to challenge oppressive conditions and redress
social injustice. Approaches that are most commonly associated with anti-oppressive practice include structural social work, critical social work, feminist practice, antiracist practice, Afri-centric practice, practice with Aboriginal and indigenous peoples, and disability practice. Campbell has noted the one factor preventing the adoption of a generic, anti-oppressive model of practice is concern that unique and specific expressions of oppression will be minimized or lost in such an approach. Thus, some have deliberately retained, for example, a feminist or anti-racist approach to practice to ensure that their specific concerns are fully addressed.

This trend can also be seen in the abundant literature on feminist, antiracist, diversity, and radical social work practice in the United States. Although this is true in other countries as well, much of the emerging scholarship on anti-oppressive practice has come from Canada, England, and Australia (Dominelli, 1996, 1998, 2002; Fook, 2002; Mcloughlin, 2005; Mullaly, 2002, 2006; Sinclair & Albert, 2008).

Anti-oppressive practice addresses the eradication of oppression at the multiple levels in which it occurs: the personal, interpersonal, structural, and cultural. Because oppression involves attitudes, behaviors, intergroup relations, as well as institutional and cultural norms and policies, associated practice techniques and methods are similar to activist approaches used in the structural and empowerment approaches. These include, but are not limited to, education, participation, community and neighborhood organizing, consciousness raising, advocacy, policy practice, and practice aimed at eradicating structural inequalities. At its core, anti-oppressive social work is social justice-oriented practice (Finn & Jacobson, 2008).

Research Challenges

Due to the fact that oppression theory is based on a series of assumptions and premises that do not lend themselves to empirical verification, quantitative research on oppression theory is difficult, if not impossible, to conduct. One can readily examine, for example, the degree of inequality by examining a variety of concrete conditions such as income, health, or educational attainment through census data and studies on mobility.

The sheer existence of inequality, however, cannot explain why or how it occurs, and it is this very explanation that is at the heart of all theories of oppression. Not surprisingly, oppression theories most typically rely on qualitative methods, due to their ability to provide a rich description of the lives and realities of the oppressed. Qualitative methods can be also be used to examine the way in which policies can create unequal or unjust situations or examine the ways in which policies are differentially applied to create injustice. Katherine van Wormer (2004), for example, contends that policy analysis is inherently political and discusses the necessity for conducting historical, international, economic, and political analysis of policies that affect people's lives. She also outlines a specific process for examining policies that is consistent with anti-oppressive practice and discusses how emphasis on structural barriers differentiates it from traditional policy analysis.

A central tenet of oppression theory is that there are multiple truths about society, social relationships, and the nature of reality and, thus, it is important to embrace research methods that accurately describe these multiple truths. Although this stance is philosophically consistent with the theory itself, it presents challenges in a profession that increasingly calls for evidence based on quantitative methods and. Due to this, it is unlikely that this tension will be resolved. This is unfortunate, because qualitative methods may ultimately provide the most appropriate form of research for these theories.

Conclusions and Future Prospects

Anti-oppressive practice encompasses a variety of practice approaches that are concerned with social justice. The unique and particular interests of those who embrace a model of practice based on a social justice perspective have prevented the broad adoption of a more general anti-oppressive framework. This is likely to continue due to the specialized interests that people bring to the practice of social work. Finally, as Gil (1998) has so aptly pointed out, despite the profession's commitment to social justice, most social workers see their practice as apolitical and rarely challenge systemic sources of oppression. Not surprisingly, those invested
in the system are the least likely to engage in its liberation.

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