Critical Social Work

School of Social Work
University of Windsor
401 Sunset Avenue
Windsor, Ont.
Canada N9B 3P4
cswedit@uwindsor.ca

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information can be found at: <http://uwindsor.ca/criticalsocialwork>

Link to article:

<http://www.uwindsor.ca/criticalsocialwork/progressive-until-graduation-helping-bsw-students-hold-onto-anti-oppressive-and-critical-social-work#top>

Critical Social Work, 2010 Vol. 11, No. 2

Online publication date: August 2010

Progressive Until Graduation? Helping BSW Students Hold onto Anti-oppressive and Critical Social Work Practices

Critical Social Work 11(2)

Jennifer M. Poole ¹

¹Ryerson University

Acknowledgements: I would like to thank Dr. S. Wehbi for her feedback on this text and the class of SWP 50/51 (2006-2007) for pedagogical inspiration.

Introduction

Former BSW student: I'm really worried about this job interview. I know they are going to think I am too critical, too passionate, too much. How can I dumb myself down Jennifer? How do I get in the door so I can do the work I want to do? Maybe staying quiet will get me the job I need...maybe I should shut up about AOP?

This was part of a conversation I had last week, with a passionate, anti-oppressive and critical former undergraduate student who had been told, on more than one occasion, that she was just “too much” for the ‘mainstream’ social work organizations to which she had been applying for employment. It was not the first time one of my graduates had shared such worries, for many had reported negative workplace reactions to their critical and anti-oppressive stance, nor would it be the last. As the literature reminds us, social workers are now labouring in a post-welfare context where critiques of power, racism, ageism, sexism, heterosexism and ableism will not make ‘best practice’ lists unless they also save money and increase productivity (Baines, 2007; Hugman, 2001). As Donna Baines writes,

...neoliberal management models emphasize the importance of ‘efficient’ and ‘effective’ work practices, ‘flexible’ workforces, and the application of measures aimed at improving individual workers’ performance. The way these goals play out in everyday social work practice is through standardization, fragmentation, deskilling, increased stress and higher workloads. (Baines, 2007. p. 11-12).

Poole

She adds, practices that do not serve these functions, practices that may be critical and anti-oppressive, “are discouraged or penalized” (Baines, 2007. p. 14).

Given this context, how do social work educators teach not only to transgress (hooks, 1994), but to weather the “discouragement” and “penalty” that may face the social work graduate steeped in anti-oppressive (AOP) and critical practices once they enter the workforce? Inspired by authors Wehbi and Turcotte (2007) as well as Sinclair and Albert (2008), in this paper I will think through this question along with some concerns about the process attached to teaching AOP and critical social work practices. I ask, what will my students hold onto ‘out there’ in this post-welfare world? Will they go on and use critical and anti-oppressive notions in their work or will they become what I call P.U.G.S., progressive until graduation only to be beguiled by post positivism, dragged down by managerialism and silenced by the corporate culture that seems to permeate many social service agencies these days.

I approach these questions as a critical post structuralist (Harris, 2001). Following social work scholars such as Jan Fook, Bob Pease, Adrienne Chambon and Ken Moffatt, my stance demands a particular philosophical lens. This is not the morally relativistic, “anything goes” lens often equated with ‘pomo’ but one that pushes me to disrupt the familiar, to ask questions about power, how things come to be possible and who benefits. It also means I have read far too much Foucault.

In addition, I approach these questions as a critical community worker, one who earned her stripes working with the new social movements that drive grassroots self-help/mutual aid organizing in this country. That work was always fuelled by what is now known as anti-oppressive social work practice. It was also driven by a lifelong concern with issues that sit under the umbrella of mental health and social exclusion.

With these lenses made clear, the paper has been organized into four sections; a brief tour of the terrain that is anti-oppressive and critical social work practice, some of the challenges and strengths that are attached to this way of work, what some former BSW students had to say on the issues and finally, suggestions for a pedagogical plan that may better help students hold onto anti-oppressive and critical practices whether as researchers, community organizers, policy makers or even outside the ‘discipline’ that is social work.

A Brief Tour of the Terrain

The literature on anti-oppressive practice is rich, as is that on critical social work (Fook, 2002; Healy, 2000; Ife, 1997; Rossiter, 1996). Elsewhere, scholars have provided detailed explanations of what this practice entails (see Adams, Dominelli and Payne, 2002 or Baines, 2007 for example). They have provided definitions of oppression as any inhumane treatment based on affiliation to a group. They have also outlined anti-oppressive practice as:

...a form of social work practice which addresses social divisions and structural inequalities in the work that is done with people whether they are users or workers. AOP aims to provide more appropriate and sensitive services by responding to people’s needs regardless of their social status. AOP embodies a person-centred philosophy...

methodology focusing on both process and outcome; and a way of structuring relationships between individuals that aims to empower users by reducing the negative effects of social hierarchies...” (Dominelli, 1994, p. 3)

Arguing that a critical social work approach begins with these ideas but then adds pieces developed by post structuralists, scholars such as Fook (2002) have made clear that critical social work practitioners are not only concerned with domination, oppression and inequality but also recognize that knowledge is always socially constructed and that positivism must be critiqued. In my classroom at an urban university in Toronto, these critical and anti-oppressive social work practices take centre stage, their combination meant to more thoroughly prepare graduating BSW students for what may be to come in the field.

Reflecting on the texts I teach and take up, I have come to understand critical and anti-oppressive social work practices as broad, relatively new and frequently attacked. I understand them as a stance, a process, an ethos birthed by structural, anti-racist and feminist work, a reaction to neoliberalism and what the British call ‘competency-driven social work’. They are organizing tools, social work identities, discourses both dominant and subversive (Millar, 2006). Through their concern with the use and abuse of power in relation to individuals and broader social structures, I understand them as space making, change creating but according to psychiatric survivors Wilson and Beresford (2000), sometimes flawed and exclusionary. In fact, I see the field of ‘critical AOP’ as a contested terrain, and if we look to the work on hierarchies of oppression (McDonald & Coleman, 1999), the institutionalization of AOP and the jockeying around how to do it ‘right’ (Barnoff & Moffatt, 2007), we come to understand why some students might let it all go once they have crossed the convocation stage.

Thinking through the very same before I began to teach anti-oppressive practice in the academy, I went to the literature, to what had been put to paper. Speaking to the strengths of the approach, I found comfort in Mullaly’s (2001) article on “confronting the politics of despair”. Making clear what “the new anti-oppressive discourse and framework” can do, what its strengths are, he argues that it “offers an explanation for social problems that fits the lived reality of millions of people who find themselves in difficult circumstances because of social forces that are beyond their control” (2001, p. 313). “It eliminates any claim or pretence that social work is not a political activity”, it helps to expose the “euro-centric biases of traditional welfare and social work, and it “depathologizes” seemingly “psychotic behaviours on the part of members of subordinate groups by understanding that such behaviours are often defence and coping mechanisms” (Mullaly, 2001, p. 313). Most intriguing is the possibility that this framework can be the bridge between structuralists and post structuralists. It might be big enough for us all.

However, far more common in the literature was talk of the tensions and challenges that AOP presents, especially with respect to teaching. Burke and Harrison (2002) argue “the driving force of anti-oppressive practice is the act of challenging inequalities, as opportunities for change are created by the process of the challenge” (p.133). However, these confrontations are not always successful and may be painful for those being challenged or doing the challenging. Similarly, Gillespie et al. (2002), tackle the issue of white women teaching about privilege and social action. I keep coming back to their admission that doing this kind of social work involves a particular kind of labour, the courage to sensitively sift through various acts of resistance to the

material but also the courage to be on guard around the desire to be ‘liked’ by your students. As Heron argues (2005), we want to be seen as particular kinds of women, particular kinds of social workers and particular kinds of anti-oppressive educators. Who does that really benefit? Additionally, I come to Razack’s writing about the classroom where she admits;

Many articles tell us what to teach but tend not to deal
with the major challenges the teacher and students face...
what about the anger students display, the guilt, the
competitiveness, the feelings of the minority students in the
classroom...What support does a staff member need in order
to continue to face such emotions in herself and others? (Razack 1999, p. 233).

Then there is Audre Lorde (1994) and her reminder that the focus of change must be “that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within each of us” (cited in McDonald & Coleman, 1999, p. 24). That writing leads me back to post structuralism and what often happens when resistance becomes power, when experts are made, pedagogical rules put in place and the oppressed ask if some marginalized communities are actually being left behind by anti-oppressive practice (Wilson and Beresford, 2000)? It is why Chambon (1999) suggests we take the time to break “self-evidence” and explore the ways in which progressive, resistance based discourses can be controlling. All of these challenges and more sit with me in the classroom.

Former BSW Students Speak Out About Anti-Oppressive and Critical Practices

Yet how do they sit with (former) BSW students once they *leave* the classroom? In hopes of addressing this question, I have been asking former students, long after the marks are in and convocation is over, to speak back to the field of AOP and critical social work, to the strengths, weaknesses and what they have taken with them.

On the strengths I have heard that this approach to social work “made space for my personal experience”, and “it made clear privilege, raising my own consciousness, however hard”. I have been told that “it starts to push at the traditional student/teacher binary, setting a climate where we can teach each other”, and “it allows us to resist the image of the ‘nice, feminine and suitably dressed’ social worker”. For a graduate now working in gerontology, she argued that practicing social work without the anti-oppressive framework would limit clients from receiving truly holistic care. Another claimed that the most useful piece has been Fook’s (2002) critical social work question, “who is the problem a problem for?” (p. 119). A third argued that the grounding in critical self reflexivity had been central, second only to her new found theoretical awareness. Wherever I am she said, whatever I do, I now think “things can always be otherwise”.

On the challenges of holding onto critical and anti-oppressive practices, former students have talked about “the neglect of the margins within the margins”, “the competitiveness” and “the dissonance between classroom performance and actual belief change”. They also talked about fear, fear of sounding naïve, calling oppressive acts when others have turned a blind eye and selling out when the job market is so fierce and finances are so fragile. In the words of one

my graduates, “AOP taught me how to fight however it did not give me the first aid kit with which to clean my wounds once I have been boxed to the ground”.

Helping Undergraduate Students Hold On: Towards a Pedagogical Plan

Clearly, the field that is critical and anti-oppressive social work practice is far from perfect, nor is it going to ‘stick’ with every student or educator, but it is the ethos with which many critical educators work at this time. Thus, in the hopes of making available both the “boxing gloves” and a small first aid kit, in this section I share teaching practices that could help students hold on to some of the notions that critical and anti-oppressive practitioners hold dear. Informed by my post structural stance and guided by ‘road tested’ suggestions from Fook’s text, *Critical Theory and Practice* (2002), these are steps towards a pedagogical plan that acknowledges the probability of “discouragement and penalty” on the road to social change.

That road begins with clarity, for I must make visible to students why we are using/teaching/ working with AOP and critical practices at this point in social work’s long history. Thus we begin our course with discussions around where these practices came from, why they came, what birthed them, what they have produced and what they entail. We go to history, to theory, to social movements, neoliberalism, resistance and discourse, to name a few destinations. We acknowledge that to take up the social construction of knowledge is to turn our attention to the social construction of critical and anti-oppressive thought.

Then we talk about the talk. In the classroom, I must elucidate the words that are attached to AOP discourse, the theoretical positions that inform how those words come to be and the deeply material effects of those words. We must take up the term ‘AOP’ itself, hold it up to the light, examine its power and effects. The discursive formation of AOP has produced certain phrases, metaphors, practices, ‘rules’ and texts, so, following Radford’s (2003) explanation of discursive formation, I ask my students to;

...imagine yourself standing in front of [a] library bookshelf. Just by looking at the titles on the spines, you can see how the books cluster together. You can see which books belong together and which do not. You can identify those books that seem to form the heart of the discursive formation and those books that reside on the margins...you see those books that tend to bleed over into other classifications and that straddle multiple discursive formations. You can physically experience the domain of a discursive formation... (Radford, 2003 p. 3)

In the same vein (and however introductory it may appear), I must teach students how to do a critical reading of a text. Demonstrating a critique of positivism and objectivity, I must ask who funded the article/project/report we read, what do we know about the author/social worker and what theory appears to be driving the analysis? Making clear that authors are not untouchable gods tucked behind glass walls, I have also encouraged students to contact scholars directly with concerns, challenges and questions.

Poole

I do this because I welcome arguments in the classroom. As a post structuralist, I maintain that papers, presentations, proposals, policy analyses, research findings and class lectures are essentially arguments, little performances crafted for specific audiences. If I am teaching students to be critical, to, according to Thomas (1993), “describe, analyze and open to scrutiny otherwise hidden agendas, power centers, and assumptions that inhibit, repress and constrain” (cited in Glesne, 1999 p. 12), then I must make space for the same process in the classroom. The ‘gaze’ must be turned on all texts and practices, including my own.

I also make clear that there is no one way to ‘do’ critical and AOP practice. There is no set format, just a collection of texted practices, hits and misses in the name of challenging inequality (Burke & Harrison, 2002). Neither are AOP and critical practices specific to social work. With my own professional ‘story’ I show students how these practices can be taken outside traditional disciplinary borders and into policy analyses in public health for example. In return, students show me how they ‘challenge inequality’ in retail, marketing and even manufacturing.

Indeed, the broader the definition of what social work is, the less pain and burnout there may be (Fook, 2002, p.158). Yes, the work includes community organizing and advocacy, but it is also possible through clinical, policy, research and teaching practice in addition to community education, program development and fundraising.

Central too is assuming the work of social change will always be unfinished. Indeed the task of challenging inequality is intrinsically unmanageable, so *transcend* helplessness and *ground* action by choosing a piece to focus on now (Fook, 2002 p. 159). My students tell me it might be working with one client, crafting one critical paragraph in a paper or sharing one ‘smoke’ with a consumer/ survivor outside the drop-in, but each moment counts towards an anti-oppressive and critical approach to the work.

Then there is paying special attention to what Belenky et al. (1986 cited in Fook, 2002, p. 154) call texts and subtexts because naming disconnects between them is central to challenging inequality and modeling how to hold onto AOP. If texts are lecture notes, performance evaluations and policies, subtexts are the messages, the climate and tones that attach themselves to how those texts are presented. They also leave the most lasting impressions and can be the most ‘cutting’, so in our effort to make anti-oppressive and critical social work practices applicable, we must examine the subtexts and details of our teaching such as the ways in which classrooms and offices are arranged, what we do with our bodies, artifacts and voices, the way we silence with a cough or boost with a look.

Additionally, I teach a re-theorizing of the crusader. Fook (2002) asks us to consider if, on certain topics, we might think of ourselves as correct crusaders, as the sole inhabitants of the “moral mountain” (p.152). From this stance, blaming ‘the enemy’ (such as psychiatry) may protect us from doing the messy, fractious work of education across difference, yet re-theorizing the crusader means we must critically reflect on what we gain from being ‘right’, and what we lose from being let “off the hook”.

Most important however is the creation of microclimates (Fook, 2002), warm fertile greenhouses of allies in the “discouraging” storm. Because I could not continue without the friends I made during my social work education, because we still meet each month, I encourage students to do the same, to carve out the space and time to ‘grow together’. I also model how to show weakness and uncertainty in this process, those moments of unknowing when I have silenced, made mistakes or simply not seen, moments which, if unpacked collaboratively, can become central critical incidents brimming with pedagogical and practice possibilities.

Concluding Thoughts

After presenting some of these ideas at a recent social work conference, I was asked a variety of questions. Could I speak to the elements of ‘good’ AOP teaching, could I outline what should be included in an AOP-guided curriculum and most intriguing of all, could I sketch out what the *ideal* AOP student looks like? As a post structuralist, I quietly balked at the questions, knowing full well that to box anti-oppressive and critical social work into a set of ‘best practices’ or ‘characteristics’ is to succumb to the neoliberal forces I attempt to resist. I also felt a touch of what Baines called ‘discouragement’ and ‘penalty’. Yet these questions forced me to consider a number of issues. First, they confirm that although many educators work in critical and AOP spaces, those spaces are often ringed, threatened and infiltrated by interests that welcome evidence-based and other modernist inventions meant to limit, control and prescribe. Consequently, when reflecting on how I present my pedagogical process, I realize that to modernist ears, these flawed, unfinished and subjective ponderings read like a list, a recipe for certain pedagogical success. It follows that those listeners (and readers) would want me to box the work, making it easier to translate and of course, test and apply. It is what we do in the name of science and productivity, what we have all been taught to accept as ‘normal’.

In addition, I am mindful of how my list looks. Going back to my own admission about post structural performativity, how is my own desire to be liked by students informing how I teach? How is my desire to appear critical and anti-oppressive informing how I write these lines? Do students sense the same in so-called critical and anti-oppressive classrooms?

In response, I will say that although I certainly believe in critical and AOP approaches, I argue that this work is not above critique itself. It brings with it multiple opportunities for resistance but also for the perpetuation of power imbalances, privilege and the benefits that come from knowledge territories. However, discourses such as AOP are always productive and repressive. Indeed,

Poole

Discourses are not once and for all subservient to power or raised up against it... We must make allowance for the complex and unstable process whereby discourse can be both an instrument and an effect of power, but also a...point of resistance and starting point for an opposing strategy... (Foucault, 1988b p. 102).

Indeed, if critical and AOP social work is part of an 'unstable' discourse-a point of resistance and an 'instrument' of power- then so are the pedagogical practices that go along with this discourse. We cannot ensure that students hold onto 'it' after convocation nor guard against the production of 'P.U.G.S'. We can only continue to examine our practices, dialogue with our students and 'challenge inequalities' where we find them, both in and outside the classroom.

References

- Adams, R., Dominelli, L. and Payne, M. (2002). *Anti-oppressive practice*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Baines, D. (2007). Anti-oppressive social work practice. In D. Baines (Ed.) *Doing anti-oppressive practice: Building transformative politicized social work*. Halifax: Fernwood.
- Barnoff, L. and Moffatt, K. (2007). Contradictory tensions in anti-oppression practice in feminist social services. *Affilia*, 22 (1): 56-70.
- Burke, B. and Harrison, P. (2002). Anti-oppressive practice. In R. Adams, L. Dominelli and M. Payne (Eds.) *Anti-Oppressive Practice*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan: 227-236.
- Chambon, A. (1999). Foucault's approach: Making the familiar visible. In A. Chambon, A. Irving and I. Epstein (Eds.). *Reading Foucault for social work*. New York: Columbia.
- Chand, A., Clare, J. and Dolton, R. (2002). Teaching anti-oppressive practice on a diploma in social work course: Lecturers' experiences, students' responses and ways forward. *Social Work Education*, 21 (1): 7-22.
- Dominelli, L. (1994). Anti-racist perspectives in the social work curriculum. In L. Dominelli, N. Patel and W. Bernard (Eds.). *Anti-racist social work education: Models of practice*. UK: SSSU.
- Dominelli, L. (1996). Deprofessionalizing social work: Anti-oppressive practice, competencies and postmodernism. *British Journal of Social Work*, 26: 153-175.
- Fook, J. (2002). *Social work: Critical theory and practice*. London: Sage.
- Foucault, M. (1988). *The care of the self: Volume 3 of the history of sexuality*. Translated from the French by Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage.
- Gillepsie, D., Ashbaugh, L. and DeFiore, J. (2002). White women teaching white women about white privilege, race cognizance and social action: Toward a pedagogical pragmatics. *Race, Ethnicity and Education*, 5(3): 237-253.
- Glesne, C. (1999). *Becoming qualitative researchers: An introduction*. Don Mills, Ontario: Longman.
- Harris, P. (2001). Towards a critical post-structuralism. *Social Work Education*, 20(3): 335-350.
- Healy, K. (2000). *Social work practices*. London: Sage.
- Heron, B. (2005). Self-reflection in critical social work practice: Subjectivity and the possibilities of resistance. *Reflective Practice*, 6(3): 341-351.

Poole

hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. New York: Routledge.

Hugman, R. (2001). Post-welfare social work? Reconsidering post-modernism, post-Fordism and social work education. *Social Work Education*, 20(3): 321-333.

Ife, J. (1997). *Rethinking social work: Towards critical practice*. Melbourne: Addison-Wesley Longman.

McDonald, P. and Coleman, M. (1999). Deconstructing hierarchies of oppression and adopting a 'multiple model' approach to anti-oppressive practice. *Social Work Education*, 18(1): 19-33.

McLaughlin, K. (2005). From ridicule to institutionalization: Anti-oppression, the state and social work. *Critical Social Policy*, 25(3): 283-305.

Millar, M. (2006). 'Anti-oppressiveness': Critical comments on a discourse and its context. *British Journal of Social Work* :1-14

Mullaly, B. (2001). Confronting the politics of despair: Toward the reconstruction of progressive social work in a global economy and postmodern age. *Social Work Education*, 20(3): 303-320.

Radford, G. P. (2003). Trapped in our discursive formations: Toward an archaeology of library and information science. *The Library Quarterly*, 73(1): 1-18.

Razack, N. (1999). Anti-discriminatory practice: Pedagogical struggles and challenges. *British Journal of Social Work*, 29: 231-250.

Rossiter, A. (1996). A perspective on critical social work. *Journal of Progressive Human Services*, 7(2): 23-41.

Sinclair, R. and Albert, J. (2008). Social work and the anti-oppressive stance: Does the emperor really have new clothes? *Critical Social Work*, 9 (1).

Wehbi, S. and Turcotte, P. (2007). Social work education: Neoliberalism's willing victim? *Critical Social Work*, 8(1).

Wilson, A. and Beresford, P. (2000). 'Anti-oppressive practice': Emancipation or appropriation? *British Journal of Social Work*, 30: 553-573.