Critical Social Work

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

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

Link to article: http://www1.uwindsor.ca/criticalsocialwork/use_of_metaphors

Critical Social Work, 2013 Vol. 14, No. 2

The Use of Metaphor as an Important Tool for Understanding Oppression

Critical Social Work 14(2)

Susan Hillock¹

¹University of British Columbia, Okanagan

Abstract

Using an anti-oppressive practice (AOP) theoretical framework and an exploratory qualitative research design, featuring semi-structured interviews and written assignments, a group of ten social workers were asked to describe their understandings of the concept of oppression. The study found that, in the case of these particular social workers, they used metaphor as a key conceptualization process to more vividly describe and understand the concept of oppression within their social work practice. This article analyzes eight categories of metaphor themes the participants used to explain their understanding of oppression: (a) pressure; (b) earth; (c) quest; (d) nature of society; (e) seeing; (f) building; (g) dancing; and (h) water. The research findings are intended to open up dialogue and thinking about the concept of oppression, increase our knowledge base and understandings of oppression within social work practice, and assist the social work profession to build a stronger conceptual framework for understanding and naming oppression with the end goal of assisting social workers to better respond to and resist systems of domination.

Keywords: oppression, anti-oppressive practice, metaphor, social justice, and resistance

Using an anti-oppressive practice (AOP) theoretical framework and an exploratory qualitative research design, featuring semi-structured interviews and written assignments, a group of ten social workers are asked to think about, reflect upon, and describe their understanding of the concept of oppression. The study was designed to answer the following qualitative research question: How do social workers understand and make sense of the concept of oppression within their social work practice? As the interviews were conducted, it became evident that the participants all used metaphors when attempting to explain, describe, and make sense of their understanding of the concept of oppression. At the time, I remarked in my research notes that, “if something is difficult to grasp, we seem to use metaphors to explain or understand it.” Consequently, I started to become interested in the idea of the use of metaphor as a key conceptualization process social workers use to more vividly describe and understand the concept of oppression within their social work practice. This article explores eight major metaphor themes that the social workers in this study utilize to understand and apply their experiences and understandings of oppression to social work practice. The eight categories are as follows: (a) pressure; (b) earth; (c) quest; (d) nature of society; (e) seeing; (f) building; (g) dancing; and (h) water. The research findings are intended to open up dialogue and thinking about the concept of oppression, increase our knowledge base and understandings of oppression within social work practice, and assist the social work profession to build a stronger conceptual framework for understanding and naming oppression with the end goal of assisting social workers to better respond to and resist systems of domination.

Anti-Oppressive Theory and Practice

Since the beginning of the social work profession, social workers have been concerned about making change and achieving social justice. Change has been viewed from many dimensions including efforts directed at helping and changing individuals, families, communities, organizations, policies, cultures, as well as larger harmful structural social forces, such as racism, patriarchy, and classism (Bailey & Brake, 1975; Baines, 2007a; Carniol, 2005a; Lundy, 2004). A key concept in the discourse concerning transformation and social justice in the social work literature is oppression (Agger, 2006; Baines, 2003; Bishop, 2005; Brown, 1988; Carniol, 2005b; Collins, 2000; Gil, 2002; hooks, 1994; Lundy, 2004; Mullaly, 2010; Razack, 2002). For the purposes of this article, oppression is viewed as systemic and structural patterns of disadvantage and privilege, operating through multiple axes of power (e.g., sexism, racism, classism, ageism, and so on) for the particular benefit of specific dominant groups. These unequal social and power relations not only involve relations of subordination and domination but also occur as, “interactions between people, not only at the interpersonal level but the cultural and institutional levels as well” (Dominelli, 2002, p. 39).

It has also been suggested that social workers share an ethical obligation to engage in acts of personal, cultural, and structural resistance to oppression and work towards achieving the conditions necessary for social change (Fook, 2002; Ife, 1997; Mullaly, 2007; Razack, 2002; Sisneros, Stakeman, Joyner, & Schmitz, 2008). Benjamin (2007) defines resistance as, “all those acts or actions in which an individual or individuals take a stand in opposition to a belief, an idea, an ideology, a climate, a practice, or an action that is oppressive and damaging to an individual and social well-being” (p. 196). Resistance at personal, cultural, and structural levels is seen as particularly important as intersectional forces, such as race, gender, class, and so on,

operate to communicate and reproduce dominant – subordinate relations and oppressive discourses. Thus, oppression and resistance manifest as forms of power that operate in complex ways and influence people's everyday lives.

These necessary acts of resistance are predicated on the assumption that social workers have been educated to recognize oppression and that once aware, we will then act to educate others, work toward dismantling our own privilege and oppressive systems, and build oppression free socio-political alternatives. Critical theories, such as feminism, structural, and Marxism share these assumptions, an understanding of key concepts, similar views of social work practice and social justice, analysis of structural oppression, goals to dismantle oppressive structures, a call for social change/ action, and are also closely aligned with a broader framework known as “anti-oppressive practice” (AOP). Baines (2007a) elaborates further:

...AOP is an umbrella term for a number of social justice oriented approaches to social work, including feminist, Marxist, post-modernist, indigenous, post-structuralist, critical constructionist, anti-colonial and anti-racist. These approaches draw on social activism and collective organizing as well as the sense that social services can and should be provided in ways that integrate liberatory understandings of social problems and human behaviour (p. 4).

The 1980's and 1990's saw a proliferation of articles and books, written from critical, structural, feminist, anti-racist, and anti-discriminatory perspectives, which can be seen as giving birth to AOP (Bishop, 2005; Bailey & Brake, 1975; Brake and Bailey, 1980; Carniol, 1992; Dominelli, 1988; Dalrymple & Burke, 1995; Mullaly, 1993; Thompson, 1997). Indeed, Wilson and Beresford (as cited in Barnes & Moffat, 2007) argue that, “... an anti-oppression approach has become the dominant social work practice model” (p. 57). Even if this conclusion is accurate in terms of preferred theoretical formulations of practice, how AOP looks or should be practiced in the field has not always been clearly articulated or demonstrated. Some authors have attempted to fill this gap by emphasizing AOP theory and application within social work theory and practice (Baines, 2002; Barnoff & Coleman, 2007; Barnoff & Moffat, 2007; Dominelli, 2002; Dumbrill, 2003; Gil, 1998, 2002; Marsiglia & Kulis, 2009; McLaughlin, 2005; Mullaly, 2007; Preston-Shoot, 1995; Thompson, 2006; Weaver, 2009).

Definitions of Oppression

Definitions of oppression have evolved historically from the 14th century's Latin word “oppressus” meaning “to press down” (Funk & Wagnell's, 1980, p. 457), to discussing the oppressive behaviors of dominant individuals and groups, to analyzing how oppressive societies develop, to identifying what Ward (2007) calls the “triad of race, class and gender oppression or ‘triple jeopardy’” (p. 194), and finally, to exploring the complexity of intersecting axes of multiple oppressions, privileges, and resistance. To “oppress” is simply defined as, “to burden or to keep down by harsh and unjust use of force authority; to lie heavy upon physically or mentally” (Funk & Wagnell's, 1980, p. 457); and, “burdensome; tyrannical; harsh; cruel” (Funk & Wagnell's, 1980, p. 457). Freire (1970) defined oppression as, “any situation in which ‘A’ objectively exploits ‘B’ or hinders his (sic) pursuit of self-affirmation as a responsible person” (p. 41).

Young (1992) went further, explicitly linking the concepts of oppression and justice, and suggesting that the public generally associates the word oppression with the exercise of tyranny by a ruling group, for example, former apartheid in South Africa. She pointed out, however, that in the new left social movements of the 1960's and 1970's, oppression, "designates the disadvantage and injustice some people suffer not because a tyrannical power intends to keep them down, but because of the everyday practices of a well-intentioned liberal society" (Young 1992, p. 175-176). Hardiman and Jackson (1997) identify, "social oppression," as one of the primary features of the structural dynamics of domination and oppression (p. 17). In social oppression, "one social group dominates or exploits another social group, whether knowingly or unconsciously, with social, political, and material consequences" (p. 17). In this sense, then, oppression is viewed as systemic and structural, with patterns of disadvantage and privilege, operating through multiple axes of power, for example, in sexism, racism, classism, and ageism, for the particular benefit of specific groups.

Hardiman and Jackson (as cited in Hillock & Profit, 2007) further analyze how systems of domination and oppression work by highlighting four key factors: (a) the dominant group has the power to define and name reality and what is normal; (b) forms of differential and unequal treatment, such as harassment and exploitation are institutionalized and often carried out without conscious thought by the dominant group as part of 'the way it is'; (c) subordinate group members may internalize their oppression; and (d) the subordinate group's culture, language, and history are distorted, obliterated, and misrepresented while the dominant group's culture is imposed. These elements of oppression help us understand oppression in more complex terms than a simple division of oppressors and oppressed – privilege as a member of a dominant group and the penalty of oppression can exist in the same person (Hillock & Profit, 2007, p. 42). In addition, McMullin (2004) concludes that oppression occurs when:

(a) The welfare of one group of people depends upon the deprivation of another; and (b) the deprivation of the oppressed group depends upon the exclusion of the oppressed group from access to resources, rewards, and privileges (p.129).

Tilly (1998) furthers this analysis of resource control by explaining how oppressive relations are produced within social groups. First, exploitation produces oppressive relations when dominant individuals and groups control resources, hoard opportunity, and use these to their advantage by mobilizing the efforts of subordinate others for their own gain. Second, the group ensures, through its actions, social processes, and laws, that they maintain their monopoly over those resources and opportunities.

Furthering this analysis, the recognition of the simultaneity and non-synchronistic nature of different forms of oppression has been a significant contribution of Black feminist thought (Collins, 1991; hooks, 1993). Collins (1991) explains that this "intersectionality" of oppressions "refers to particular forms of intersecting oppressions, for example, intersections of race and gender, or of sexuality and nation (p. 18). She (as cited in Hillock & Profit, 2007) also theorizes that people experience and resist multiple, interlocking oppressions at three levels: (a) personal biography; (b) the group or community situated in a cultural context; and (c) the systemic level of social institutions (p. 43). In addition, Collins suggests that intersecting oppressions originate, develop, and are contained within a matrix of domination (1991, 2000). This analysis has often

been referred to as intersectionality theory and has been adopted in much of the social work literature (Carniol, 2005a; Dominelli, 2002; Gil, 1998; Marsiglia & Kulis, 2009; Mullaly, 2007; Thompson, 2006). According to Collins (2000), “intersecting paradigms remind us that oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type and oppressions work together in producing injustice” (p. 18).

Resistance to Oppression

From an understanding of the definitions of oppression, it is also important to consider how societies become oppressive over time, that is, how oppressive behaviours, attitudes, and practices are produced, reproduced, and institutionalized in society. Gil (2002) provides an excellent description of how particular societies evolve into oppressive systems of domination. He suggests that:

The story of social revolution reveals that oppression and injustice did not become institutionalized until the spread of agriculture and crafts, about 10,000 years ago. These major changes in ways of life resulted gradually in a stable economic surplus, which was conducive to the emergence of occupational and social classes, differentiation into rural and urban settlements, and centralized forms of governance over defined territories (Eisler as cited in Gil, 2002, p. 38).

Gil makes the case that these social changes, which produced an economic surplus, perhaps for the first time in history, created the conditions for and emergence of oppression and domination. These conditions permitted ‘wealthy’ communities to have power over other communities. However, Gil also notes that not all wealthy communities developed into oppressive societies. Some communities made different choices, for instance:

Rather than developing patterns of oppression and injustice, they used the economic surplus from their increase productivity toward enhancing the quality of life for all their members... Illustrations of this tendency have been identified among native peoples in the Americas, Africa, and elsewhere (Gil, 2002, p. 40).

This point is important as it illustrates the human capacity to make decisions that are life enhancing. As well, along with the coercion and domination required to institutionalize oppressive values, attitudes, and deprivations, a history of resistance also emerged. Benjamin (2007) defines resistance as, “all those acts or actions in which an individual or individuals take a stand in opposition to a belief, an idea, an ideology, a climate, a practice, or an action that is oppressive and damaging to an individual and social well-being” (p. 196). Gil (2002) explains how resistance emerged in response to state sponsored coercion:

However, the emerging tendency to legitimate, institutionalize, and increase minimal inequalities did require coercion. This resulted usually in resistance from victimized groups, to which privilege groups reacted with intensified coercion. The vicious circle of oppression, resistance, and reactive repression intensified the time (p. 42).

Thus, parallel processes of oppression and resistance emerged from particular social, economic,

and political constellations. Wade (1997) supports this conclusion, stating that:

There is always a history of struggle, resistance, and protest against the oppression of the problem and of the dominant story ... along-side each history of violence and oppression, there runs a parallel history of prudent, creative, and determined resistance (p. 23).

Historically, these acts of resistance by oppressed peoples have often been ignored or dismissed (Hillock & Profitt, 2007). Indeed, this social denial is a feature of oppression (Hillock & Profitt, 2007). It therefore becomes essential that social workers uncover and value everyday acts of coping and survival and reframe these behaviours and choices as resistance. Thus, from an AOP perspective, social work practice, education, and field instruction can be viewed as potential sites of social and cultural resistance (Fook, 2002; Ife, 1997; Mullaly, 2010; Razack, 2002; Sisneros et al, 2008; Weedon, 1997). In terms of potential for resistance, Kumsa (2007) reminds us that we need to consider that "power is not just the top down force that oppresses. It is also the bottom up and sideways resistance that liberates. More importantly, power and resistance are not mutually exclusive but interwoven and embedded in each other..." (p. 124). A notion that individuals, groups, and social structures can each exercise power is significant because it debunks the view that, "individuals or subordinate groups are helpless to do anything about the dominant discursive practices that subjugate and oppress them" (Mullaly, 2010, p. 27).

However, there is a danger in assuming that all subordinate individuals and groups have equal power, opportunity, or capacity to resist oppression. Moreover, it is inaccurate to assume that each person belonging to a subordinate group is equally oppressed, recognizes oppression, or experiences oppression in the same way as other members of the group. Nor can we assume that all or most social workers choose to resist oppression or act to recognize and minimize their own oppressive potential. Indeed, people choose differential responses to oppression, at different points and times in their lives, for a variety of complex reasons. McMullin (2004) explains the interconnected parallel processes of conformity and resistance:

...a complexity of resistance and conformation emerges as individuals negotiate their interests within the various domains of social life. The choice to conform or resist as well as the specific strategies one uses in these processes are influenced by the structured sets of social relationships...tensions, contradictions and paradoxes result from the complexities of resistance and conformation. Individuals then act to negotiate the ambivalence created by these tensions, contradictions, and paradoxes in everyday life (p. 131).

Similarly, Smith (2007) notes that, "most social workers are neither revolutionaries nor passive robots. They generally lead complex lives that both reveal and conceal contradictions due to the intersections of power, privilege, and oppression" (p. 150). Considering the non-monolithic nature of the social work profession, and that social workers represent a multiplicity of situated positions vis-a-vis their socio-economic-political locations, there are also different levels of personal and professional commitment to resistance work and little agreement on the best methods to achieve social change and social justice. Indeed, Ellsworth (1989) cautions us that depending upon social locations, specific historical contexts, and situations, no individual or group is exempt from potentially becoming oppressive to others. Kimmel and Ferber (2003) also

maintain that it is easier for those in power to ignore the implications of their social locations of dominance than it is to critically think about, recognize, and dismantle their own power and privilege.

Rojek, Peacock, and Collins (1988) also warn that, even with radical intentions, social workers actually have limited power and freedom to transform the state. Indeed, Barnoff, George, and Coleman (2006) conclude that it is very difficult for social workers to engage in broad mezzo and macro level social justice work as many agencies are operating solely in survival mode. As well, the reality is that most social workers are often required to work in traditional, bureaucratic state sponsored social welfare organizations. The structure of these systems and organizations are seen as limiting the potential for social change and resistance. As Hartmann (1981) claims:

Structure produces action, but the particular action that is produced lies within the realms of structure itself. Only under exceptional circumstances does human agency push structural barriers to the extent that structure itself is changed (p. 112).

Thus, awareness and empowerment may be necessary but insufficient to create the conditions for social change and the achievement of social justice. One could also argue that AOP theories have not developed sufficiently effective mobilization tools or that, even if the right tools exist, the greater populace is unwilling to dismantle the systems of privilege from which they benefit (Carniol, 2005b; Piven & Cloward, 1979).

Research Rationale

Clearly, as seen above, a sophisticated understanding and recognition of oppression is central to anti-oppressive practice. However, from a review of the literature, there has been limited research into how social workers conceptualize, understand, define, or apply the concept of oppression in their social work practice. As well, there has been little work related to exploring what the concept of oppression means to individual social work practitioners. In general, how social workers articulate and use their knowledge has also received minimal attention in the literature. Indeed, Osmond and O'Connor (2004) found that, "largely absent from the discussion on social work knowledge is how practitioners actually express and explain what they know and use in their practice to another" (p. 678). Barnoff and Coleman (2007) write about a variety of methods utilized by feminist practitioners to integrate AOP approaches at the direct service level but they do not discuss social workers' individual processes of meaning making about the concept of oppression or the impact of these understandings on their professional choices. The same could be said of Strega (2007) who writes about the challenges of applying anti-oppressive theory and practice in child welfare and Baines's (2007b) work on social workers' reports of their resistance and radical practices.

These gaps, in the research and literature, result in social workers' meaning-making and conceptualization processes generally, and how they make sense of the concept of oppression specifically, seldom being explored or documented. I argue that the profession of social work benefits from an analysis of the conceptualization processes social workers are using when they speak of oppression. In this case, an exploration of this study's respondents' use of metaphor to

describe and understand oppression may be useful in helping us understand more about how social workers believe, understand, know, and actually act “on the ground”, so to speak, which hopefully, will eventually assist all social workers to develop effective responses to oppression.

Method

Social Constructionism

From a social constructionist perspective, there is recognition that what we know, perceive, and even identify is socially constructed and depends upon the social, cultural, and geographical locations of the knower (Charmaz, 2003; Mullaly, 2007). Although this study is based on an ontological assumption that reality is out there, that oppression actually exists outside of the subject and knower and as an object fixed in our social structures, the study was not about discovering, measuring, or proving that oppression exists. Instead, I was more interested in how individual social workers construct, define, interpret, make sense of, and understand the concept of oppression in their social work practice. This necessitated a more relativist and constructivist epistemological stance that assumes that oppression exists as an external object but recognizes that it can only truly be known or understood through the process, discussion, and shared exploration of individual localized subjective meaning-making.

Sample

This study met internationally accepted ethical and professional guidelines and received full ethics approval from a recognized accredited university. As a way of reaching as many social workers as possible living in the author's region (i.e., the British Columbia interior), an invitation asking for volunteers was sent to an extensive list of local social workers. All potential participants were asked to read and sign an Informed Consent form. Issues of risk and informed consent were addressed and discussed with potential participants before they signed the consent form.

Of those who volunteered, the author used a purposive snowball convenience sampling method to select five men and five women to be interviewed for the research study. They were also asked to complete a written assignment and demographic form after the interview. Nine of the social workers chose to complete the demographic form. Seven of the nine social workers identified themselves as Caucasian. Of the remaining two social workers, one identified as South American and one as First Nations. In addition, eight of the nine respondents came from middle class families of origin (earning \$21,000- \$40,000 annually). Eight out of the nine social workers were over the age of 40. All nine of the social workers identified as heterosexual and able-bodied. Four respondents had over 20 years of social work experience, one person had between 11- 19 years of experience, and the remaining four respondents had less than ten years experience. Seven of the social workers had a Bachelor of Social Work (BSW). One person also had a Bachelor of Arts (BA). Two social workers had Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) and a Masters of Social Work (MSW). In terms of social work positions, four of the social workers identified themselves as clinical workers, one as a manager, and four others had combined clinical and management responsibilities. In terms of work sites, three of the social workers were

Hillock

employed in healthcare, two in government Ministry positions, three in the non-profit sector, and one in private practice.

Limitations

Because this study depended on recruiting volunteers, I thought this sampling method would attract participants who were interested, motivated, available, and willing to take the time to explore the concept of oppression in their professional lives. The disadvantage to this sampling method, in contrast to a random sample from a complete social worker registration list, is that I may have missed valuable input and data from people I was unable to reach. Another potential limitation of this study is that the respondents' perspectives on oppression reflect their consciousness and are therefore influenced (perhaps even limited) by their accumulated life experiences and life-long socialization from within their particular work sites, culture, and social locations and identities.

Data Analysis

Grounded theory methods were used in this study to analyze the interviews and written assignments, manage data sets, pick out emerging patterns, and classify, interpret, and perform thematic coding of data sets (Allan 2003; Charmaz 2003; Padgett 2008). Grounded theorists suggest that researchers start their analysis by looking at smaller units of data and then later identify similarities and differences between these units to begin to formulate how they fit together as themes and patterns (Allan 2003; Charmaz 2003; Padgett 2008). They argue that this approach is more likely to allow the results to emerge from the data (Tutty, Rothery, & Grinnell Jr., 1996). The findings were thus informed by these thematic units of meaning born in the respondents' constructions about the concept of oppression. I then used Atlas.ti software, a computer software program, to assist in the data analysis (Muhr, 1997). This program seemed most fitting for my research as it simplified the process of analyzing and coding data units from the interviews and written assignments.

Results

Understanding Oppression Through The Use Of Metaphor

Bernard and Blair (1989) define metaphor as, "a figure of speech in which a word or phrase is used to describe something in a way that does not fit it in reality, as a method of suggesting likeness" (p. 656). Furthermore, the metaphor, "can assist in making an experience more understandable—an experience which cannot always be captured and represented by formalized means" (Osmond & O'Connor, 2004, p. 683). In this study, respondents relied on the use of metaphor to describe and explain their understanding of the concept of oppression. In the following section, I have grouped the respondents' choices of metaphor about the concept of oppression into eight broad categories—pressure, earth, quest, nature of society, seeing, building, dancing, and water—that seem to represent significant areas of agreement and understanding about the conceptualization of oppression within social work practice (see Figure 1 below). These eight metaphor categories describe individual processes of conceptualization about the

concept of oppression, the nature of oppressive societies, as well as respondents' descriptions of their social work practice with service users.

Figure 1. Metaphor Themes: Conceptualizations of Oppression in Social Work Practice

For the purposes of this article, I have selected examples of each type of metaphor which best demonstrate common themes from the research findings.

Pressure. The first general metaphor theme involved respondents' descriptions of visual images of someone or something pressing, stopping, restricting, harming, or physically exerting pressure (sometimes violently) on another subject:

The visual image comes to me of someone is sitting on you. That very physical very simple concrete image if you've ever been bullied by someone, if you've ever been sat on or held down. I mean that to me is a very concrete image of being oppressed (Participant J).

An image comes to mind - one of a dog who has just been scolded or beaten, cowering and creeping away with her tail between her legs (Participant C).

Earth. The second broad theme involved respondents' metaphors related to earth images, such as sand, soil, planting, tilling soil, fertilizing, agriculture, and growth:

We play a part, we plant a seed. Because we are planting seeds that in whatever way they will grow and they'll shape how that person thinks...It's like sand in your hand, it kind of slips through your fingers. You try to nail it down, make it solid, so you can say, "Okay that's oppression". Yeah well for some people it is. For many people it is. For the vast

majority of people it is. But there will be one or two for whom they say, “No, it’s not” (Participant G).

I have a core belief that when clients come in and walk out, they hopefully will walk out with at least seeds to help grow those tools or strategies that will help them deal with their oppressions (Participant D).

Quest. The third group of the respondents’ metaphors described traditional quest, journey, travel, and movement images:

It’s the classic QUEST kind of story. In terms of taking our journey and facing our challenges and that’s one of our biggest challenges and I think as we overcome it and have our victories with it, we become stronger and better people I guess. I look at things in terms of a journey (Participant A).

There is something known in physics as the Doppler Effect. The Doppler Effect is something that is approaching, it sounds different than when it’s moving away from you. So for instance, as a train’s coming you can hear it coming and then as it’s going away from you, it has a different sound. So he uses this Doppler Effect and says “I want to hear your life as it sounded as it was approaching you. And I want to know what that was like. I don’t want to just see it now as I am seeing it as it is now receding from you with all the grief and the tragedy and the lost expectations and seeing”. What he wanted to know was what their life was like before that happened and how did they understand that. And I wanted to understand that too (Participant J).

A metaphor that kept coming up in terms of movement particularly related to social workers who had personally experienced oppression was an image of footsteps – our walk and how we move – and the need to tread lightly. In particular, for those of us from marginalized groups, our journey as “other” is very different from the dominant group’s lived experiences. The metaphors, whether they are about sand, planting a seed, movement, a journey, or treading lightly are symbolic. There is a sense that, as oppressed peoples, we have little choice but to tread lightly. The earth is not ours to leave large footprints on. We are not allowed to occupy space in the same way as the dominant group (Burstow, 1992).

Nature of society. There was a fourth group of metaphors related to the cultural and structural nature of oppressive societies and the hidden aspects, the invisible characteristics, of what is seen as covert oppression. These metaphors referred to webs, tapestries, fabrics, and circles:

I assume for example that we’re all racist, we’re all sexist, we’re all homophobic, because I think those are just parts. I think of society like a woven carpet with tons of threads in it, they’re just threads that we weave our life that you can’t always sort out. A client that comes to me I see, bell hooks talks about it, a matrix of oppression. I almost see a tapestry. A person like a tapestry that is kind of woven in and out of their life are all these experiences of oppression and maybe oppressiveness. They have the capacity to be oppressive. I think we have choices; we make individual choices depending on our own

resiliency and whatever but...yeah so I can't ever see a client without seeing that tapestry. That's my lens and I can't assess without it, it filters through everything I do (Participant B).

It's like a huge circle, it just depends where you punctuate it, where you're going to start with an assumption of equality or an assumption of access, opportunity, those kind of things are affected. You can look at it before or after one individual's experience but I would see it on a continuum almost a circular continuum. The concept itself doesn't exist in a vacuum (Participant I).

Seeing. The fifth group of metaphors involved respondents describing choices, strategies, and responses to oppression in their social work practice. Central to these metaphors was the dominant theme of seeing: watching; witnessing; vision, lenses; and helping others to see. These vision words reinforce the ideas of enlightenment or perhaps consciousness-raising which are central to anti-oppressive social work practice:

Most clients really grasp on to this. Really go, "What, you mean there's other people that have felt this, what do you mean it's not my fault, I'm not crazy" and you can see the power in them when they do that when that light bulb goes off and they make that connection. So I have found that in practice, it seems to be this practice approach is supported by the clients' feedback about it. Like an opening. You can use a lot of different images. Like a door opening that they can step through or not, a light bulb going off that they continue to explore or not (Participant E).

It's where you find that little flashlight...It's what direction is the light as far as what direction you point the light. I mean light usually means something in form of life, or strength or through to darkness. I mean people generally have attachments to light that are generally positive and so then you are able to go with that as far as what direction in a positive direction do you want to start making the changes? They gotta hold the flashlight, they gotta point the light otherwise it doesn't work. So I never hold the light. I never point the light. I might give a hint to say "hey try over there" (laugh). Whether they follow me or not is whether or not you're really successful (Participant H).

Building. The sixth group of metaphors that came up in this study was building metaphors: the idea of layering, adding on, stepping up, progressing, and constructing. Social work, with an understanding of oppression, is conceived so to speak as laying bricks:

My metaphor is that someone is standing in the muck and through the therapeutic helping process they get to the first rung of the ladder. Their feet are dry now they're not standing in the muck, "Holy smokes, is this much better. Now I realize that there's rung 2, 3, and 4 that you could get to". I mean hey what you're able to do is incredible. So but just being out of the muck is so much better and drier. They don't even care about rung 2, 3, and 4. So who am I to impose upon them rung 2, 3 and 4 (Participant F).

If a client comes and sees you and doesn't change, I don't think you're not being effective necessarily. Whatever that is they're building on their experience within it. They

come and see you and they're able to talk and do this and that. And if they go back to the abuser, they go back to the abuser. I wouldn't say you've been ineffective if because they've gone back. But I mean you might've put that next cog in the wheel so the next time it works out (Participant C).

Dancing. The seventh metaphor group represented social work practice, with an understanding of oppression, as dancing with service users. As this respondent stated:

I would characterize it as a dance (laugh). If it wasn't real and I wasn't experiencing my personal tweaks that would be an interesting experience, to counsel people without my own values. Without that little dance, duet that I'm doing between the client and myself cause we're kind of leading the dance (Participant A).

With caregivers, when they talk about being selfish, one of the things I gently do and it's like a dance, that I am trying to point out, maybe oppressive notions. I kind of gently challenge them a little bit on where they got the ideas. So that is part of my process of trying to make people see (Participant F).

Water. Finally, water metaphors were used to describe respondents' understandings of cultural and structural levels of oppression:

I think of it like a fish swimming in water. You don't really know that you are swimming in polluted water until you start getting sick and you know that it's just there, it's just all around you (Participant E).

In other words, the fish swims every day in this water but may be completely unaware that the water is polluted or that there is air and sky above the water or that there is a world and universe beyond the water. All the fish knows is that this is home and this feels like normal. Like the polluted water, respondents spoke about how the structures of oppression remain invisible or become invisible or are made invisible overtime. Del Gandio (2008) offers an explanation for this invisibility:

We commonly forget that we ourselves create our realities. This forgetfulness directly contributes to social oppression, marginalization, and the pressure to conform....Most people just do not consider how the process works. We do not sufficiently think through the situation. Most people just accept, never question their culture and society. This is partially due to mental laziness. However, it mostly occurs because the creative /rhetorical process hides itself. Once a social norm has been created, it appears as if it has always been there (p. 22).

Discussion and Contribution to Social Work Practice and Knowledge

Although Wilson and Beresford (as cited in Barnes & Moffat, 2007) conclude that anti-oppressive practice is a dominant model in social work practice and many would agree that a sophisticated understanding and recognition of oppression is central to anti-oppressive practice, the reality is that there has been limited research into how social workers conceptualize,

understand, define, or apply the concept of oppression in their social work practice. We really do not know what most social workers know and understand about the concept of oppression. As mentioned previously, there has been little work related to exploring what the concept of oppression means to individual social work practitioners and how social workers articulate and use their knowledge within their practice. This study is an attempt to start filling these gaps in the scholarship, research, and literature.

I argued earlier that the profession of social work benefits from an analysis of the conceptualization processes social workers are using when they speak of oppression. From this study, it is evident that the use of metaphor as a key conceptualization process is a useful concept as it assisted these particular social workers to more fully explain and describe their understanding of the concept of oppression within social work practice. Consequently, the participants articulated eight common categories of metaphor themes – pressure, earth, quest, nature of society, seeing, building, dancing, and water – that described individual processes of conceptualization about the concept of oppression, the nature of oppressive societies, and respondents' descriptions of their social work practice with service users. The importance of narrative in terms of how people make sense of their own and other peoples' experiences was highlighted in the findings. Indeed, social workers often use an informal storytelling process, through case examples, metaphors, and stories to suggest, name, and share their theoretical and practice understandings (Osmond & O'Connor, 2004). In this vein, social work educators may want to incorporate the use of metaphor as a teaching tool in terms of developing andragogical methods and assignments to deepen students' understanding of the concept of oppression.

In terms of defining oppression, respondents used “pressure”, “water”, and “nature of society” metaphors to explain their stories and experiences with oppression. Several respondents also reported that the use of metaphors assisted them and service users to experience “Aha” moments in terms of gaining a deeper understanding of oppression. Furthermore, “seeing”, “dancing”, “layering”, “building”, “quest”, “journeys”, “earth”, and “planting a seed” metaphors helped respondents describe, make sense, and story-tell both about their social work practice and service users' personal transformation and growth. In addition, “layering”, “building”, and “planting a seed” metaphors were chosen to describe how these particular social workers practice (i.e., helping service users take small incremental steps and build on successes).

As mentioned previously, the findings of this study are also intended to assist the social work profession to build a stronger conceptual framework for understanding and naming oppression with the end goal of assisting social workers to better respond to and resist systems of domination. This exploration of the use of metaphor also takes us one step closer in helping us understand more about how social workers believe, understand, know, and actually act “on the ground”, so to speak, which hopefully, will eventually assist all social workers to develop effective responses to oppression. Thus, it is important to reflect on what the findings suggest about respondents' resistance work. As mentioned earlier, social workers may have difficulty addressing and resisting oppression because of the nature of social welfare work. In addition, the type of agencies we work in can be viewed as limiting the opportunity, motivation, and choice to resist oppression and create the conditions for social change. Despite these challenges, these research findings seem to indicate that social workers have not given up. As demonstrated in these respondents' “nature of society” and “fish in the water” metaphors, they continue to

consider the context of oppression in society to analyze the harm it creates for marginalized people and they include these factors within their assessments and social work practice. Thus, through metaphor, they are able to identify what Ife, Healy, Spratt, and Solomon (2005) describe as commonalities of critical theory:

larger social relations, whether we call them social structures, large-scale social processes or society, contribute to personal and social dislocation or personal problems; a self-reflexive and critical analysis of the social control functions of social work practice, and social policies (p. 21).

According to Mullaly (2010), this level of structural and critical analysis resists the status quo, decreases victim blaming, and lays the groundwork for a social work practice that emphasizes social change. This more sophisticated analysis can also help social workers strategize about resistance options from within the real lived context of bureaucratic and controlling welfare agencies.

Additionally, metaphor was useful in terms of how these particular social workers described their motivation to resist oppression. Mullaly (2010) and Shragge (2003) outline processes that are central to resistance and social action. Mullaly (2010) states that the first step necessary before social action is consciousness-raising. The implication is that awareness precedes social action and resistance. Shragge (2003) also concludes that many people become involved in social action after they experience an “aha” moment. This awareness then compels them to become involved in specific social action work. In the case of this particular study, respondents used metaphors, such as “light bulb” and “seeing” to describe the “aha” moments that first catapulted them into resistance work. Thus, social work educators may want to develop curriculum content, classroom exercises, and homework assignments targeted to reveal and support metaphors related to consciousness-raising (i.e. “aha” moments) to motivate students to resist oppression. This awareness and discourse can then assist students and practitioners to explore practical social action strategies to resist oppression. Overall, the findings are important as they suggest that metaphor can be used to help deepen social workers’ understanding of oppression, more fully capture their experiences and understanding of oppression, as well as explain and support their motivation to resist.

References

- Agger, B. (2006). *Critical social theories: An introduction* (2nd ed.). Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Allan, G. (2003). A critique of using grounded theory as a research method. *Electronic Journal of Business Research Methods*, 2(1), 1-10.
- Bailey, R., & Brake, M. (Eds.). (1975). *Radical social work*. New York, NY: Pantheon Books.
- Baines, D. (2002). Radical social work: Race, class, and gender. *Race, Gender, and Class*, 9(1), 145-167.
- Baines, D. (2003). Race, class, and gender in the everyday talk of social workers: The ways we limit the possibilities for radical practice. In W. Shera (Ed.), *Emerging perspectives in anti-oppressive practice* (pp. 43- 64). Toronto, ON: Canadian Scholars Press.
- Baines, D. (2007a). Anti-oppressive social work practice: Fighting for space, fighting for change. In D. Baines (Ed.), *Doing anti-oppressive practice* (pp. 1-30). Halifax, NS: Fernwood Publishing.
- Baines, D. (2007b). Bridging the practice-activism divide in mainstream social work: Advocacy, organizing, and social movements. In D. Baines (Ed.), *Doing anti-oppressive practice* (pp. 50-66). Halifax, NS: Fernwood Publishing.
- Barnoff, L., & Coleman, B. (2007). Strategies for integrating anti-oppressive principles: Perspectives from feminist agencies. In D. Baines (Ed.), *Doing anti-oppressive practice* (pp. 31-49). Halifax, NS: Fernwood Publishing.
- Barnoff, L., & Moffat, K. (2007). Contradictory tensions in anti-oppression practice in feminist social services. *Afflia: Journal of Women and Social Work*, 22(1), 56-70.
- Barnoff, L., George, P., & Coleman, B. (2006). Operating in survival mode: Challenges to implementing anti-oppressive practice in feminist social services agencies in Toronto. *Canadian Social Work Review*, 23(1-2), 41-58.
- Benjamin, A. (2007) Afterword-doing anti-oppressive social work: The importance of resistance, history, and strategy. In D. Baines (Ed.), *Doing anti-oppressive practice: Building transformative politicized social work*. (pp. 191-204). Halifax, NS: Fernwood.
- Bernard, J. R. L., & Blair, D. (Eds.). (1989). *The pocket macquarie dictionary* (2nd ed.). Republic of Singapore: The Jacaranda Press.
- Bishop, A. (2005). *Beyond token change: Breaking the cycle of oppression in institutions*. Halifax, NS: Fernwood Publishing.
- Brake, M., & Bailey, B. (1980). Contributions to radical practice in social work. In M. Brake, & B. Bailey (Eds.), *Radical social work practice*. (pp.7-25). London, UK: Ed Arnold.
- Brown, C. (1988). Social work education as empowerment. In E. Chamberlain (Ed.), *Change and continuity in Australian social work* (pp. 129 – 141). Melbourne, AU: Longman Cheshire.
- Burstow, B. (1992). *Radical feminist therapy*. New York, NY: Sage Publications.
- Carniol, B. (1992). Structural social work: Maurice Moreau's challenge to social work practice. *Journal of Progressive Human Services*, 3(1), 1-20.
- Carniol, B. (2005a). *Case critical: Social services and social justice in Canada* (5th ed.). Toronto, ON: Between the Lines.
- Carniol, B. (2005b). Analysis of social location and change: Practice implications. In S. Hick, J. Fook, & R. Pozzuto (Eds.), *Social work: A critical turn* (pp. 153-166). Toronto, ON: Thompson Educational Publishing, Inc.

- Charmaz, K. (2003). Qualitative interviewing and grounded theory analysis. In J.A. Holstein & J. F. Gubrium (Eds.) *Inside interviewing: New lenses, new concerns* (pp.311-330). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Collins, P. H. (1991). *Black feminist thought*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Collins, P. H. (2000). *Black feminist thought: Knowledge, consciousness, and the politics of empowerment* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Dalrymple, J. & Burke, B. (1995). Some essential elements of anti-oppressive theory. In J. Dalrymple, & B. Burke (Eds.), *Anti-Oppressive practice: Social care and the law*. (pp. 7-21). Buckingham, UK: Open University Press.
- Del Gandio, J. (2008). *Rhetoric for radicals: A Handbook for 21st-century activists*. Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers.
- Dominelli, L. (1988). *Anti-Racist social work*. London, UK: McMillan.
- Dominelli, L. (2002). *Anti-oppressive social work theory and practice*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Dumbrill, G. (2003). Child welfare: AOP's nemesis? In W. Shera (Ed.), *Emerging perspectives in anti-oppressive practice* (pp. 101-120). Toronto, ON: Canadian Scholars Press.
- Ellsworth, E. (1989). Why doesn't this feel empowering? Working through the repressive myths of critical pedagogy. *Harvard Educational Review*, 59(3), 297-324.
- Fook, J. (2002). *Social work: Critical theory and practice*. London, UK: Sage Publications.
- Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York, NY: Continuum.
- Gil, D. G. (1998). *Confronting injustice and oppression*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Gil, D. G. (2002). Challenging injustice and oppression. In M. O'Melia, & K. Krogsrud Miley (Eds.), *Pathways to power: Readings in contextual social work practice* (pp. 35-54). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Hardiman, R. & Jackson, B.W. (1997). Conceptual foundations for social justice. In M. Adams, L.A. Bell, & P. Griffin (Eds.), *Teaching for diversity and social justice: A source book*. (pp. 16-29). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Hartmann, H. (1981). The unhappy marriage of Marxism and feminism: Towards a more progressive union. In L. Sargent (Ed.), *The unhappy marriage of Marxism and feminism: A debate on class and patriarchy* (pp.103-144). London, UK: Pluto Press.
- Hillock, S., & Profitt, N. J. (2007). Developing a practice and andragogy of resistance: Praxis inside and outside the classroom. *Canadian Social Work Review*, 24(1), 39-54.
- hooks, b. (1993). *Sisters of the yam*. Toronto, ON: Between the Lines.
- hooks, b. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as a practice of freedom*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Ife, J. (1997). *Rethinking social work: Towards critical practice*. Melbourne, AU: Longman.
- Kimmel, M., & Ferber, A. (Eds.). (2003). *Privilege: A reader*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Kumsa, M. K. (2007). A resettlement story of unsettlement: Transformative practices of taking it personally. In D. Baines (Ed.), *Doing anti-oppressive practice* (pp.111-127). Halifax, NS: Fernwood Publishing.
- Landau, S. (Ed.). 1980). *Funk and wagnell's standard desk dictionary*. USA: Lippincott & Crowell Publishers.
- Lundy, C. (2004). *Social work and social justice: A structural approach to practice*. Toronto, ON: Broadview Press.

- Marsiglia, F. F., & Kulis, S. (2009). *Culturally grounded social work: Diversity oppression and change*. Chicago, IL: Lyceum.
- McLaughlin, K. (2005). From ridicule to institutionalization: Anti-oppression, the state and social work. *Critical Social Policy*, 25(3), 283-305.
- McMullin, J. (2004). *Understanding social inequality*. Toronto, ON: Oxford University Press.
- Mullaly, R. (1993). *Structural social work: Ideology, theory and practice*. Toronto, CA: McClelland & Stewart.
- Mullaly, R. (2007). *The new structural social work* (3rd ed.). Toronto, ON: Oxford University Press.
- Mullaly, B. (2010). *Challenging oppression and confronting privilege*. Toronto, ON: Oxford University Press.
- Muhr, T. (1997). *Atlas.ti*. Berlin, DE: Scientific Software development.
- Osmond, J & O'Connor I. (2004). Formalizing the un-formalized: Practitioners' communication of knowledge in practice. *British Journal of Social Work*, 34, 677-692.
- Padgett, Deborah K. (2008). *Qualitative methods in social work research* (2nd ed.). Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications.
- Piven, F. F., & Cloward, R. A. (1979). *Poor people's movements: Why they succeed, how they fail*. New York, NY: Vintage Books.
- Preston-Shoot, M. (1995). Assessing anti-oppressive practice. *Social Work Education*, 14(2), 11-29.
- Razack, N. (2002). *Transforming the field: Critical antiracist and anti-oppressive perspectives for the human services practicum*. Halifax, NS: Fernwood Publishing.
- Rojek, C., Peacock, G., & Collins, S. (1988). *Social work and received ideas*. New York, NY: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Shragge, E. (2003). *Activism and social change*. Toronto, ON: Broadview Press.
- Sisneros, J., Stakeman, C., Joyner, M.C., & Schmitz, C.L. (2008). *Critical multicultural social work*. Chicago, IL: Lyceum Books.
- Smith, K. (2007). Social work, restructuring and everyday resistance". In D. Baines (Ed.), *Doing anti-oppressive practice* (pp. 145-159). Halifax, NS: Fernwood Publishing.
- Strega, S. (2007). Anti-oppressive practice in child welfare. In D. Baines (Ed.), *Doing anti-oppressive practice* (pp.67- 82). Halifax, NS: Fernwood Publishing.
- Thompson, N. (1997). *Anti-discriminatory practice* (2nd ed.). London, UK: McMillan Press.
- Thompson, N. (2006). *Anti-discriminatory practice*. New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan.
- Tilly, C. (1998). *Durable inequality*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Tutty, L. M., Rothery, M. A., & Grinnell Jr., R. M. (1996). *Qualitative research for social workers*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Wade, A. (1997). Small acts of living: Everyday resistance to violence and other forms of oppression. *Contemporary Family Therapy*, 19, 23-39.
- Ward, J. (2007). Not all differences are created equal: Multiple jeopardy in a gendered organization. In M. Texler Segal, & T.A. Martinez (Eds.), *Intersections of gender, race, and class: Readings for a changing landscape* (pp. 194-208). Los Angeles, CA: Roxbury Publishing Company.
- Weaver, A. (2009). *Choosing to be brave: A journey of mindfulness from an anti-oppressive perspective* (Masters Thesis). University of Manitoba, Manitoba, Canada
- Weedon, C. (1997). *Feminist practice and poststructuralist theory* (2nd ed.). Oxford, UK: Blackwell.

Hillock

Young, I. M. (1992). Five faces of oppression. In T. E. Wartenberg (Ed.), *Rethinking power* (pp.174-195). Albany, NY: State University of New York.