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Anti-Oppressive Research in Social Work: A Preliminary Definition

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Summary

In comparison with other helping professions, social work claims to embrace a very distinctive mission: to oppose the roots and effects of social oppression. This article examines social work research from an anti-oppressive social work perspective. It argues that in order to match the liberating mission of the profession, social work research should defy the dominant traditions of social science research. The paper first outlines a definition of anti-oppressive research in social work and then suggests a relevant set of criteria for assessing it. A case study is described and analysed according to these criteria, followed by a discussion of some ethical and methodological issues involved in the development of a more inclusive inquiry in social work.

Keywords: anti-oppressive social work, action research, participatory research, emancipatory research

Introduction

According to a joint statement of the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), one of the main priorities of the social work profession is 'the liberation of people to enhance well-being' (IASSW–IFSW, 2001). Nevertheless, the multiple and conflicted loyalties of social workers, the duality of roles as helpers and controllers, and the institutional framework mandating the actions of social workers all point to the need for a heightened ethical awareness in the profession. This sense of ethical awareness should be oriented 'to encourage social workers across the world to reflect on the challenges and dilemmas that face them and make ethically informed decisions about how to act in each particular case' (IASSW–IFSW, 2001, Preface).

Echoing this concern to protect the ethical core of the profession, scholars have voiced the need to liberate the profession from expressions of discrimination, authoritarianism, and arbitrariness (Dalrymple and Burke, 1995; Leonard, 1995, 1997; Dominelli, 1988, 1994, 1996, 1998; Campbell, 2002; Campbell and Ungar, 2003). In line with this growing awareness, the quest for anti-oppressive social work has become a central theme in current social work literature, primarily in the examination of practices, services, social work education and policies. This article seeks to critically examine whether the distinctive ethical nature of the profession is reflected in social work research as well. It first proposes a definition of anti-oppressive research in social work, then analyses a case study from an anti-oppressive perspective, and finally discusses some of the methodological and ethical implications involved.

Liberating practice from oppression

Social work is a profession highly conditioned by institutional inequalities. The encounters between the client and the worker, the worker and the agency, and the agency and the state are all shaped within the context of unequal power relations (Garcia and Melendez, 1997; Pollack, 2004). Given this power imbalance in social work relations, it is not surprising that the social work arena is a prolific ground for the emergence of oppressive practices. In order to decontaminate social work from expressions of oppression and bias, some researchers (Dominelli, 2002; Durham, 2002; Ferguson, 2003; Hooper and Koprowska, 2004) have adopted an approach, known as anti-oppressive social work (AOSW), for analysing social problems that affect traditional social work target populations. AOSW aims to change the structure and procedures of service delivery through macro-systemic changes at the legal and political level.

In the last decade, AOSW left an impressive mark on social work literature, and a comprehensive review of its development goes far beyond the limits of this article (Burke and Harrison, 1998; Lynn, 1999; McLaughlin, 2005). Some studies focused on the strategies needed to overcome systemic constraints that social workers face in building liberating agendas with clients (Wilson and Beresford, 2000; Valtonen, 2001, 2002; Beresford and Croft, 2004; Clifford and Burke, 2005), while others concentrated on the impact of symbolic and discursive constructions on practices of oppression (Langley, 2001). For example, Dominelli (2002) warns against the ways in which hegemonic discourses affect exclusionary practices and suggests ways in which interventions with oppressed populations can be undertaken in a more egalitarian way. In addition, some voices urge social work to discard the cultural sensitivity approach to cultural diversity and to adopt a more committed, active and critical anti-racist and anti-discriminatory perspective (Butler *et al.*, 2003; Adams *et al.*, 2005). AOSW literature is centred mainly on social work practice, social service delivery and social work education (Campbell, 2003; Sakamoto and Pitner, 2005). Although there have been numerous critiques of the so-called 'dominant research traditions',

oppressive practices embedded in social work research have received limited attention (Butler and Pugh, 2004).

Liberating social work research from oppression

Some scholars call for the democratization and humanization of social work research (Mullender and Ward, 1991; Clifford, 1994; Humphries and Truman, 1994; Broad, 1999; Humphries *et al.*, 2000; Truman *et al.*, 2000; Butler 2002; Butler and Drakeford, 2005). For example, Butler (2003) warned that social work research may be in danger of being dispossessed of its potential to contribute to emancipatory and transformative ideals. Denzin (2002) suggested the need to examine new ways of making the practices of critical qualitative inquiry central to social work research. Nevertheless, the overall trend is towards more empirical, scientific, evidence-based practice research, which characterizes the bulk of research in social work (Lawler and Bilson, 2004; Jenson, 2005).

The quest to liberate social work research from oppression is based on the assumption that any intervention or research project, regardless of the benevolent and progressive nature of its goals and intentions, may replicate the structural conditions that generate oppression. The power exercised by those who initiate a particular research project can be immense if they conceptualize a project in ways that affirm their position as those in charge. The power that accrues to those who bring a research project into being as well as funding agencies' control on setting research priorities cannot be ignored (O'Connor, 2002). Indeed, the principal beneficiaries of the research might be the researchers themselves, rather than the subjects of the inquiry (Oliver, 1999).

Social work research agenda and methodologies have been strongly conditioned by government interests. Policy formation and modification 'are ultimately controlled by those who have the power and authority to implement their beliefs and value positions' (Hudson and Nurius, 1994, p. 173). Dominelli (1997) states the need to liberate the emancipatory potential of social work research in terms of policy impact. Trinder (2000) suggests that in order to boost the impact of research on policy, researchers should first understand the political and ethical assumptions and implications of their work.

Anti-oppressive social work research (AOSWR): theoretical foundations

Despite its transformative character, AOSWR is not a new paradigm (D'Cruz and Jones, 2004). It is anchored in the participatory, action-oriented and emancipatory approaches of social science research (Humphries and Truman, 1994). Based on the concept that people must have equal opportunities to participate in society, participatory research is oriented towards encouraging underrepresented populations to participate in the course of the inquiry process. Such active

inclusion is aimed at developing the skills and knowledge needed to increase the level of access to participation in cultural, economic and political life and to have more influence on the functioning and decision-making processes of organizations and institutions from the context in which they act (Boog, 2003).

According to its original definition, action research is understood as 'comparative research on the conditions and effects of various forms of social action and research leading to social action' (Lewin, 1948, pp. 202–03). Participants are seen as experts of their own lives who are capable of self-determination. Action research is designed as a cyclical process of experiential learning and action, committed to the production of knowledge that is useful for improving the lives of the research subjects. Furthermore, action research should be organized in ways that are 'conducive to the formation of a community—the common unity of all participants—and that strengthen the democratic, equitable, liberating, and life-enhancing qualities of social life' (Stringer, 1996, p. 25).

A third tradition, embodied in the emancipatory approach, promotes the production of knowledge that supports freedom from oppression. Conventional, mainstream research is a microcosm wherein the relations of oppressions of the larger society are reproduced. In order to foster the empowerment of oppressed populations, emancipatory research recommends transformation of the material and social relations of research production. Accordingly, social work research design should engender a platform for social liberation through the radical transformation of researcher–participant power relations (Barnes, 2003). Emancipatory research requires the facilitation of political processes for confronting oppression at the research, dissemination and implementation stages of the inquiry (Oliver, 1992), as well as for transforming the relations between knowledge and action.

Anti-oppressive social work research: a preliminary definition

A preliminary definition of AOSWR can be delineated along nine analytical categories: goals, populations, methodology, research environment, role of participants, researcher–participant relations, knowledge ownership, knowledge–action relationship and research boundaries:

- 1 *Goals:* AOSWR's main goals are the systemic study of oppression and the development of knowledge that supports people's actions to achieve freedom from oppression. Social oppression refers to the systemic subordination of specific social groups through the institutionalized use of unjust power and authority.
- 2 *Populations:* AOSWR focuses purposively on the study of the most oppressed populations that are largely excluded from main spheres of public and economic life and disconnected from social services. The outcome of oppression is mistrust and gradual loss of identification with social and political institutions and the values and goals they represent. In order to hear silenced voices, the

study of the oppressed requires multiple strategies to connect these groups to research projects and to overcome barriers of mistrust and alienation.

- 3 *Methodologies:* Social work research should reject the dominant traditions of social science research, which 'reduce research into mere technical evaluation and replaces intellectual and creative efforts with rules and regulations' (Butler and Drakeford, 2000, p. 2). AOSWR should combine methodologies that are able to address the complex, multifaceted character of oppression, with its objective, structural aspects as well as its subjective, phenomenological dimensions. Whereas quantitative methods may be used to provide measurable, empirical data regarding the structural expressions of oppression, more qualitative, 'bottom-up', interpretive methods may be suitable for reflecting the experience of oppression. The study of oppression should also address the prevalent cultural images that underpin the inferior status of the oppressed, whether consciously or unconsciously. The reproduction of these symbolic constructions strengthens hegemonic discourses in ways that demonize, dehumanize and stigmatize the oppressed. Narrative, constructivist research may be conducive to revealing internalized oppression among the oppressed themselves.
- 4 *Research environment:* AOSWR proposes a methodology that is responsive to the long-term traumatic nature of oppression. Oppression is a painful experience based on the systemic negation of the right of self-determination. Therefore, the research environment should establish a safe space for reflection and self-inquiry, and should provide ongoing therapeutic support through the different stages of the research.
- 5 *Role of participants:* AOSWR research is participative and provides room for active participation. The study of oppression may represent an informed arena for participation, in contrast to the lack of opportunities available to the oppressed for participation in society.
- 6 *Researcher-participant relations:* AOSWR promotes a subject-subject, power-balanced encounter entailing a serious and profound commitment by researchers and participants to exploring their respective social roles and the potential of their shared actions towards overcoming oppression. Aware of the power differences built into the research process, researchers strive to design research procedures and methodologies that can make research a more egalitarian endeavour. Genuine participation is more likely to flourish in the presence of egalitarian power relations between researchers and participants.
- 7 *Ownership of knowledge:* AOSWR endorses the view that research knowledge is the property of the oppressed. Based on their expertise, researchers usually hold the monopoly over the means of knowledge production. This monopoly is supported by the broader societal legitimacy ascribed to the scientific community in the production and implementation of knowledge. As a result, the participants, who are the main source of this knowledge, are dispossessed from ownership. Acknowledging the interdependency and

intersubjectivity between the researchers and the participants involved in the research process, researchers in AOSWR voluntarily renounce the privileges associated with their hegemonic status in favour of shared ownership of knowledge. Given that research is in fact a shared journey, researchers are called upon to reduce the exclusionary barriers to genuine participation and to provide participants with a sense of real control over the research process.

- 8 *Knowledge–action relationship*: AOSWR is committed to the production and implementation of actionable knowledge, i.e. knowledge that generates action used to counter oppression. The alteration of oppressive relations implies structural changes in power relations. The dialogical nature of the inquiry fosters a sense of critical consciousness of researchers and participants and sets the foundation for shared, informed action based on the outcome of the process.
- 9 *Boundaries of research*: AOSWR extends the scope of the research from the study of oppression to the dissemination of knowledge and the creation of opportunities for social change. The study of oppression requires long-term involvement. However, formal research commitments typically end with the publication and dissemination of the research report. AOSWR makes a new commitment to including social change as the core of the social research agenda. It is highly committed to taking an active role in organized efforts to disseminate and advance social change by confronting inequalities in the research and social change processes.

The following case study illustrates some of the basic elements present in this definition.

Case study: small business entrepreneurship of women living in poverty¹

The case study, which focused on low-income Jewish women, employed a research methodology anchored in the participatory, emancipatory and action-research traditions of qualitative research. The findings challenged the assumption that small entrepreneurship generates social mobility for poor women. However, the study clarified the complexity of the issues involved and recommended changes in legislation that would considerably improve the effectiveness of small entrepreneurship as an anti-poverty strategy for women. The case is described and discussed according to the nine dimensions outlined above.

Goals. The study investigated the attitudes, perceptions and needs of the participants regarding self-generated employment and small business entrepreneurship. Special emphasis was placed on the cultural, social and economic aspects related to women's endeavours to break the cycle of poverty through individual economic initiatives. This included an investigation of the structural

aspects that impede small business initiatives as a viable, accessible and legitimate option for impoverished women. In addition, the study intended to look at some of the gender and cultural factors associated with women's secondary economic status in society.

Participants. This study reached out to the most excluded sectors of women living in poverty in Jerusalem. In total, thirty women participated in the project, half of whom were single mothers. Participants' ages ranged from twenty-five to forty-five, with a mean of 2.8 children. In order to reach these strata, the study targeted populations unknown to social service agencies, making the recruitment of interviewees from these sectors extremely difficult. The researchers used multiple sources and invested much effort in locating potential participants. However, many of the women contacted initially refused to take part in the project. The main reasons for their hesitation were a deep sense of scepticism that any research could help to alleviate their situation as well as the fear that the data gathered could be used against them by welfare services, income tax and social security authorities.

Methodology. Due to the phenomenological focus of the study (perceptions and attitudes), the research adopted a constructivist perspective. The methodology consisted of conducting in-depth, face-to-face interviews for the collection of personal and economic background data, followed by focus groups with the interviewees. The interviews lasted two to three hours and were sometimes carried out in two different sessions. Individual interviews were mainly conducted at the participants' homes or at other locations in accordance with participants' preferences. On occasion, clients or neighbours (most of them women in the same socio-economic situation of the interviewee), who were present at the time of the interview, took an active part in it.

As a part of member checking procedure, two focus groups with the interviewees were conducted at the end of the first stage of the study in order to discuss the findings, analysis and recommendations. The meetings lasted two-and-a-half hours for each group. All of the interviews and focus group audiotapes were transcribed and coded by the two co-researchers and the research assistant. Themes were identified by the researchers, and member checking procedures were used to enhance rigour. Despite the use of multiple sources of data (informants and participants), the implementation of two data gathering methodologies (in-depth personal interviews and focus groups) and the exercise of techniques to increase trustworthiness and rigour (member checking and triangulation), the lack of quantitative data limited the generalization of findings. Later on, in the dissemination stages of the project, this limitation showed to be detrimental regarding the effectiveness of the study in terms of policy impact. This insight is in accord with D'Cruz and Jones's (2004) position on the paradigm debate, namely that in order to meet more broader political agendas, researchers should make pragmatic decisions about methods, 'for example, if key stakeholders are unlikely to be convince by a wholly qualitative study as they give greater credence to statistical analysis' (D'Cruz and Jones, 2004, p. 57).

Research environment. For many of the participants, the interview provided an opportunity to express their traumatic experiences for the first time. The women's narratives vividly reflected the painful experience of motherhood in poverty, including labour market abuse due to lack of labour rights, financial and occupational uncertainty, physical and economic exploitation, sexual harassment, and domestic violence. In order to cope with the painful nature of oppression, the research team included a trained clinical social worker, whose specialty was in issues of trauma and whose role was to periodically maintain contact with the interviewees and assist them throughout the study as needed. Participants were given the phone numbers of the researchers and were encouraged to call and to share with them their thoughts and feelings along the different stages of the research process.

Role of participants. The research put into practice a participative approach, as participants took an active role in the interpretation and analysis of data as well as in the elaboration of conclusions and formulation of recommendations. The active participation of participants transformed the nature of the research. However, clients' engagement also opened up some critical concerns. The participatory process was extremely demanding in terms of researchers' time and personal involvement. At different stages of the process, researchers felt overwhelmed by intra and interpersonal issues of participants (Whitmore, 1994).

Researcher-participant relationships. The research process generated a space in which participants and researchers could come together to understand their relationships to each other and to the problem under study. Despite the fact that researchers initially had a preconceived timetable and research plan, the engagement of participants changed the planned sequence of events. In a journey of self-critical discovery, participants engaged together with researchers in a dialogical sequence based on a process of study, reflection and action. This joint experience evolved into a growing consciousness of the different ways in which oppression was present in both participants' and researchers' minds and lives. In the later stages of the process, the research actually turned into a co-production of researchers and participants, wherein they jointly questioned the tacit presence of the oppressor in themselves, in their relationships and in their perceptions of the problem under study, though these relationships were affected by conflicts built into the participative process. Participants' energy and willingness to take part in the process were clearly linked to what they saw as an imminent and radical change in their lives. Researchers, on the other side, though aware of the complexity of achieving concrete outcomes for the group, were inevitably seen as incapable to offer real solutions to the participants' plights. These clashing perspectives were the source of many tensions during the process.

Research boundaries. Long after the report and publication of the research findings, participants expressed the will to continue the meetings in order to discuss different aspects of their lives as 'independent working mothers' and to assess possible paths for implementing the recommendations made. For the following fifteen months, a group of six participants carried on bi-weekly meetings