

Incorporating Anti-Oppression and Anti-Racism Training During Field Placement: Lessons Learned

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Abstract

The goal of the present study is to explore pre-service social workers' perceptions of an anti-oppression and anti-racism curriculum consisting of a series of four training programs, including how the curriculum influenced their work, strengths and weaknesses of the curriculum, and additional training needs. This study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How do pre-service social workers who receive training in anti-oppression and anti-racism during their fieldwork placement respond to these training programs?
2. How can we construct effective anti-oppression and anti-racism curriculum to support social workers in the field?

Preliminary findings suggest that pre-service social workers participating in a series of anti-oppression and anti-racism training programs during field placement respond well to the content and readily utilize the presented concepts in their field work and broader life. Accordingly, they view curriculum as integral to furthering education and competency, both academically and in the field.

Keywords: social work education; field practicum; anti-oppressive practice, anti-racism education

Introduction

Across New York State, there are 42 Master of Social Work (MSW) programs, 15 of which are in New York City (NYC). A core requirement of MSW programs is field placement, alternately referred to as “field education” or “internship,” and broadly defined as a supervised internship in an organization that provides social work services (Lam, Wong, & Leung, 2006). Despite the notion that NYC is a racially and ethnically diverse hub, very few NYC-based MSW field education programs focus on anti-oppressive practice and anti-racist work. Anti-oppressive practice and anti-racist work guides practitioners' actions in the social services and health field and examines the impact of oppression and racism within an ecological framework (Harlow & Hearn, 1996) with the goal of social change (Dei, 1999).

While research has demonstrated the importance of anti-oppression in staff and faculty training programs, as well as in social work classroom discussions (Abramovitz & Blitz, 2015; Stewart, Cappello, & Carter, 2014; Razack, 2002), there is a lack of research about the impact of

anti-oppression and anti-racism training among pre-service social workers, particularly in their field placements.

In an effort to fill this void, this study constructs and tests a pedagogical approach to training pre-service social workers for work with and among marginalized and racialized communities. The approach is based on critical social and cultural theories pertaining to race and racism and colonization and social justice.

The anti-oppression and anti-racism curriculum was developed by mental health professionals and researchers who supervise pre-service social workers and was piloted at a field education setting in NYC. The goal of the present study is to explore pre-service social workers' perceptions of the curriculum, including how the series of four training programs influenced their work, strengths and weaknesses of the curriculum, and additional anti-oppression and anti-racism training needs. This study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How do pre-service social workers who receive training in anti-oppression and anti-racism during their fieldwork placement respond to these training programs?
2. How can we construct effective anti-oppression and anti-racism curriculum to better support social workers in the field?

The integration of the proposed pedagogical approach could have important implications for social services agencies who provide field education for students. This research hopes to contribute to crucial educational practice and effective training of social workers.

Study Setting

To address the above questions, two focus group interviews were conducted with nine pre-service social workers whose field placement was at a small research institute located in NYC during the 2017-2018 academic year. Moving forward, the setting will be referred as “the Institute.” This study defines pre-service social workers as current students in a master level social work program.

Intervention:

Anti-Oppression and Anti-Racism Curriculum

The anti-oppression and anti-racism curriculum consist of a series of four anti-oppression and anti-racism training programs which were developed and piloted at small research institute to provide pre-service social workers the opportunity to be exposed to and immersed in the experience of using critical lenses that are not typically available to them in academic settings but are paramount in social work. The four training programs, entitled *Examining Oppression, Privilege, and Anti-Oppressive Practice; Power, Privilege, and Race; Addressing White Supremacy in Group Practices;* and *Why Words Matter: Creating an Anti-Oppressive Vocabulary for Writing Practice*, were informed by anti-oppressive practice (AOP), critical race theory (CRT), and Black feminist standpoint (BFS) theory.

A number of salient principles in AOP, CRT, and BFS seek to foster awareness of historical and systemic racism and oppression with the goal of evoking critical reflection about the unequal social conditions of historically marginalized and oppressed people (Barnoff & Moffatt, 2007; hooks, 2014; Pulliam, 2017; Tenorio, 2011).

In alignment with AOP tenants, this curriculum was co-created and co-facilitated by three employees at the Institute: a Licensed Master Social Worker, a Mental Health curriculum/tool Counselor, and a Doctor of Sociology. Each of the four training programs in the series was conducted at the Institute, was two hours in duration, and included small group discussions and interactive activities. The interactive activities (i.e., Fishbowl, Privilege Walk, and Affinity Groups) were used to examine the nature of social power and the ways in which dominance is expressed and/or enacted in text and talk (Van Dijk, 1995) by helping to provide a visual representation of power and to help participants understand their socially constructed positioning. For example, the Fishbowl activity highlights the ways dominance is expressed in group settings, while the Privilege Walk and Affinity Group activities illustrate the nature of social power. The activities focus on relations of power, dominance, and inequality and the ways these are reproduced or resisted by social group members (Van Dijk, 1995).

Data Collection and Analysis: Study Procedure

In the fall of 2017, 20 pre-service social workers participated in up to four separate training programs as part of the anti-oppression and anti-racism curriculum. Nine participants who completed all four training sessions were invited to a recruitment meeting during which they were verbally informed about participation in the research study. Those interested in participating met with a group facilitator who described the study in further detail and secured informed consent. Participation consisted of answering eight open-ended questions during two focus groups related to the anti-oppression and anti-racism curriculum.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Inclusion criteria included individuals ≥ 18 years of age who were currently enrolled in a school of social work program in NYC. Additionally, participants had to be currently interning at the Institute and must have attended all four anti-oppression and anti-racism training programs. Of the 27 pre-service social workers, nine fit the eligibility criteria and consented to participate in the study.

Data Collection

Using a qualitative approach, the nine pre-service social workers participated in two focus group interviews during January 2018. The focus groups explored best practices and effective approaches to anti-oppression training for future social workers in their field placements. The goals of the focus groups were to examine: 1) how pre-service social workers respond to anti-oppression and anti-racism curriculum as a pedagogical approach to working with and among marginalized and racialized communities, and 2) how to construct effective anti-oppression and anti-racism curriculum that supports pre-service social workers in their field placements. The focus groups were co-facilitated by a Black male pre-doctoral fellow and a White female senior research scientist.

Measures: Focus group guide

The focus group guide was designed by the investigator and was based on open-ended questions related to the series of four training programs to assess whether pre-service social workers' thinking/ behavior changed since attending them. Questions included: "What were your first impressions?," "In what way is your life different because of your participation in this training?," "What do you feel were the strengths of this training?," "What do you feel were the weaknesses of this training?," "How can we improve this training?," "What would you add to this training?," "What would take away from this training?," "What additional training related to this topic do you recommend for future pre-service social worker?," and "Is there anything we should have talked about, but didn't?"

Data Analysis

Focus group content was audio recorded, transcribed verbatim and uploaded into Dedoose (2018) for data management and coding. Using analytic induction techniques (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), focus group transcripts were read and coded for themes and sub-themes, through which common themes and concepts, as well patterns in and frequency of discursive events were identified. This process allowed for a deeper understanding of participants' experiences, opinions, and knowledge of the anti-oppression and anti-racism curriculum. The data analysis is rooted in critical discourse analysis theory, which is commonly used in anti-oppression research in order to assess the relationship of views and narratives to broader, contextual power formations and social, cultural, and economic forms (Ball, 2012).

Study Findings

The mean age of the nine participants was 26.4 (SD=4.19) and all were female. Six (n=6, 66.6%) participants identified as White and three (n=3, 33.3%) identified as Black. Over half of participants identified as ethnically American (n=5, 55.5%), had attended public undergraduate institutions (n=5, 55.5%), and had attended a public undergraduate program (n=5, 55.5%). At the time the focus groups were conducted, eight of the nine participants (n=8, 88.8%) were currently enrolled in a public graduate school. For five (n=5, 55.5%) participants, this was their first experience with anti-oppressive coursework, defined as classes with keywords such as "anti-oppressive practice," "anti-oppressive," "race," "diversity," "marginalized communities," "discrimination," and/or "oppression" in the title or course description.

Results

Data were coded according to key themes that emerged:

1. Pre-service social workers' first impressions of the anti-oppression and anti-racism training programs.
2. What participants are doing differently as a result of the anti-oppression and anti-racism training programs.
3. Strengths of the anti-oppression and anti-racism training programs.
4. Weaknesses of the anti-oppression and anti-racism training programs.
5. How to improve the anti-oppression and anti-racism training programs.

6. Identified additional anti-oppression and anti-racism training needed.

Over 275 codes emerged from the coding. All names have been changed to undergraduate college or university to ensure confidentiality.

1. Pre-service social workers' first impressions of the anti-oppression and anti-racism training programs

At the first focus group, which covered the “Examining Oppression, Privilege, and Anti-Oppressive Practice” and “Power, Privilege, and Race” training programs, participants’ first impressions were dominated by a perceived shift in thinking and strong feelings related to the intensity of the training sessions and resulted in 32 codes. Participants appreciated how the discussions were “not sugar-coated” and allowed the group to deconstruct and redefine preconceived notions about particular topics, especially White supremacy, collaboratively. Emphasis was placed on the value of the anti-oppression and anti-racism curriculum: I liked that we were given a safe space to talk about these things... kind of a rough draft... especially since it’s something very important in the social work field... these trainings kind of showed us that it was okay to talk about these things. (St. John’s University, personal communication, January 22, 2018).

Participants acknowledged the lasting impact the series of training programs had on them. The focus groups offered insight into the growing awareness among the pre-service social workers of the general value of the curriculum. However, despite a generally positive view of the curriculum, some negative feelings emerged from the difficulty of processing emotionally-taxing material. This discomfort was ultimately necessary in order to challenge existing complacency with and incomprehension of oppression.

2. What participants are doing differently because of the anti-oppression and anti-racism curriculum

In conducting this research, 100 themes emerged around what participants would/will do differently in their practice. Themes ranged from retrospective processing, reflecting, working with clients, language, dealing with feelings, and both awareness of oppression and self-awareness. Trends suggest that participants were primarily concerned with topics of White supremacy, including how to increase their awareness of White supremacy, how to combat it in practice and intrapersonally, and how to recognize forms of White supremacy in everyday life as it pertains to characteristics (e.g., perfectionism) and structures (e.g., capitalism). One participant described their newfound awareness of white supremacy:

I think it [the training] made me very aware. It made me very aware of how it [White supremacy] has infiltrated our everyday lives in every aspect, whether it be watching TV or in class or in a training like this. (University of Maryland, personal communication, January 24, 2018).

Participants wished to continue the process of self-reflection, self-questioning, empathy, and understanding. This inside-out approach, beginning with self-awareness and interrogation and translating to a conceptualization of ingrained dynamics and oppressive behavior, provided the

foundation for furthering work with clients and in general practice. In relation to their personal practices, participants expressed that they would like to face conflict and work with humility, as well as to identify strengths in coworkers and express appreciation. In regard to working with clients, participants felt the trainings better equipped them to set goals and to explore privilege, racism, internalized helplessness, and perpetuations of White supremacy. There was an emphasis on retrospective processing, which is essential in social work practice. These findings suggest that pre-service social workers' engagement with and appreciation of the curriculum directly relate to their field placements and enhance understanding of oppression, privilege, and White supremacist culture.

3. Strengths of the anti-oppression and anti-racism curriculum

Fifty themes emerged around strengths of the series of training programs. Themes ranged from activities, atmosphere, discussion, and facilitation/group work. Participants identified strengths in almost all aspects of the curriculum, though none more than in the foundation of open, informative discussions prompted by interpersonal dialogue, provocative presentations, and group activities. Each of the four training programs prioritized open sharing of personal experiences and establishing an environment of non-judgment. The safe space allowed for clarification, vulnerability, and observance of positionality. One participant stated:

I felt like being such a large group was really helpful. I got a lot out of just hearing other people's experiences. That really informed like my work now. I think each other, how many of us there were... [there were] just different experiences that were helpful to me to hear about. (College of Santa Fe, personal communication, January 24, 2018).

A newfound awareness and mindfulness fostered by the activities and discussions were consistently reported. Such topics covered therein were intersectionality, latent biases, privilege, micro-aggressions, and power dynamics. The findings suggest the activities were generally perceived as helpful and eye-opening, serving as good ice-breakers, and opportunities for vulnerability, self-reflection, and addressing positionality.

4. Weaknesses of the anti-oppression and anti-racism curriculum

Forty themes emerged around weaknesses. Primary themes focused on time, presentation, facilitation, and activities. The weaknesses of the training programs were often reflective of participants' ambivalence toward the inherent emotionality and intensity. Some participants expressed wanting longer or additional training sessions and more time for debriefing/processing, while others thought the training programs were mentally exhausting and overly vulnerable. One participant shared:

I think more time would have been nice. I know we have limited time for everything and all of these trainings were so great and at the end of each one they always ask what the weakness was and I always had a difficult time answering that question other than that I wanted more information and more time to talk about these things. (University of Maryland, personal communication, January 22, 2018).

This suggests the tiring nature of such intensive work but the subsequent appreciation of the depth of knowledge achieved and inclination toward further learning. Many participants requested more time to process, suggested slowing down certain discussions, and indicated they would appreciate more time to elaborate on both personal experiences and the additional topics of class, wealth, and capitalism, gender, and sexuality. Other participants gave the opposite feedback on the length or volume of information in the training sessions, pointing to overly wordy presentation materials, complex definitions, over-explanation of concepts by facilitators, and certain tangential conversation patterns, presumably among other participants during the training sessions. Per the former request for additional training time, one way to lengthen the training programs would be to offer half-day or full-day sessions, instead of two-hour sessions, which would allow for ample time to discuss and process the content. Among logistical critiques were requests for food, short breaks, and the slight reformatting of certain portions of the presentations or activities.

5. Improvements to the anti-oppression and anti-racism training programs

Forty-five themes emerged around improvements, including discussions, logistics, and more time. The reported weaknesses were well-translated into proposed improvements to the training programs. Longer training sessions, perhaps in parts, were a common suggestion, along with further conversations about class/wealth and gender/sexuality. One participant stated they wanted additional sessions in the series of training programs added to the curriculum in order to encourage further critical consciousness:

I sort of wish these had been split up into more trainings that were harder and pushed us a little bit harder... I just don't remember leaving with really concrete memories of that day and that time and things that were different in a way that I did with some of the other ones. I sort of wish we could have split them into more categories, and maybe made them all more personal or just talked about them more or done another, like some other kind of activity in relation to it that would have solidified and forced us to explore the concepts a little more... (Dickinson College, personal communication, January 24, 2018).

Participants suggested more time to debrief, process, reflect, and explore uncomfortable dynamics within the group. Logistically, there were suggestions of eradicating certain aspects of activities (small group discussions in place of written activities, less time on the community agreement) and suggestions of adding multimedia components to the curriculum in general. The requests for more time to process carried particular weight in discussions of the interactive group activities. Another point raised was a lack of time to process, to pursue topics of particular interest, and most importantly, for discussion. For many pre-service social workers, then, opportunities for discussion are valued instances in which they have a voice and choice in the learning process. These findings suggest extended or additional discussions around race and oppression may have long-term impact for anti-oppressive practitioners.

6. Additional anti-oppression and anti-racism training needs

Ten themes emerged around additional training needs and suggestions for additional training topics in the future. Primary themes ranged from class consciousness, gender and

sexuality, power dynamics with clients, and speaking with young people about race. A major contributing factor to participants' interest in the trainings were the conversations around race, especially as they relate to intersectionality. One participant suggested:

So, like, the same way how we did this second training about power, privilege, and race... power, privilege, and gender... power, privilege, and women.... which is gender, too, but specifically like, like there's LGBT stuff and then there's women's stuff and they do come together, but doing them separately could be important, too. (New Paltz, personal communication, January 24, 2018).

Participants expressed interest in the following additional training topics: gender-based oppression/privilege, undoing racism, class consciousness, power dynamics (with clients), cultural humility. They also expressed interest in a repetition of the Fishbowl activity throughout each of the training programs in the series, as well as further work incorporating the curriculum topics into practice and supervision. These findings suggest diversity and continuity in anti-oppression and anti-racism training is fundamental.

Conclusion and Implications

The results of this study suggest that pre-service social workers who receive anti-oppression and anti-racism training during field placement respond well to the content and readily utilize presented concepts in their field work and broader life. Accordingly, they view the curriculum as an integral component in furthering education and competency, both academically and in the field. Effective anti-oppression and anti-racist training curriculum must be standard for not only pre-service social workers entering field placements but as consistent elements in academic curriculum and field supervision in order to better address the current deficiency of AOP education. Moreover, the curriculum may be enhanced by including topics of gender-based oppression/privilege, class consciousness, power dynamics (with clients), and cultural humility. It is crucial to create a space for pre-service social workers to think critically about race and oppression.

Limitations of the study fall into two categories: representation and breadth. Limitations in representation include a small sample size, a lack of male perspective, and a lack of diversity in terms of race, ethnicity, religion, and graduate school. Limitations in breadth include the somewhat overwhelming amount of content to cover over the course of two focus groups, and time constraints coupled with emotional intensity may have limited disclosure of true and honest opinions/experiences. Future research should incorporate faculty and field perspectives about anti-oppression and anti-racist training curriculum for pre-service social work students, as well as examine the impact of the curriculum on knowledge and attitudes about anti-oppression and anti-racist practices.

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