

# Is “Good Social Work” Anti- Oppressive Practice?: The Mainstreaming of Critical Discourse

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### Abstract

Anti-oppressive social work practice (AOP) has been advanced as a key progressive methodology for some decades. Standing in critical social work, it is founded on clear assumptions and includes several key strategies for implementation. At the same time, however, two factors, namely the alignment of the discourse of good (dominant) social work with social justice, and AOP theorists themselves not consistently distinguishing differences, have led to a blurring of what constitutes good social work versus AOP. In this article we rely on a critical perspective to remind of these essential distinctions. We also establish that this failure to clearly distinguish the essence of AOP has allowed for the disciplining of AOP, thus rendering it largely without any force. We encourage social work educators, students, and practitioners to reclaim the progressive, critical edge of AOP to become effective agents of social change.

*Keywords:* Anti-oppressive practice; critical social work; good social work; dominant social work

Anti-oppressive practice (AOP) is increasingly informing disciplines such as education and psychology (Peters & Luke, 2023). In social work, this perspective has been discussed as a social work methodology (Dalrymple & Burke, 2019; Dominelli, 1996) for almost three decades (Dumbrill & Yee, 2019). However, it remains frequently misunderstood or misrepresented (Personal communication, Gary Dumbrill 22 January 2024; Dalrymple & Burke, 2019), perhaps in part because of the mainstreaming of AOP. In this article, we aim to revisit the construction of AOP and query whether in its current iterations it challenges dominant notions of social work or has been disciplined to reinforce the status quo (Foucault, 1977).

To do so, we briefly explore critical social work as the conceptual context for AOP (Dalrymple & Burke, 2019; Larson, 2008). Next, we present various articulations of AOP as a foundation for discussing the extent to which AOP has been coopted by the mainstream and is now assumed to describe dominant good social work. While we review the extant literature, we explore not only the differences between mainstream practice and AOP, but how AOP has become obfuscated by the ambiguous use of fundamental concepts and is losing its critical edge. Finally, we consider the disciplining of AOP more closely.

Our conceptual lens is a critical one, informed by the Foucauldian notion of the disciplining of disruptive thought and discourses (Taylor, 2013; Willey-Sthapit et al., 2022), and the idea that the various psy-disciplines inherently represent and recreate dominant patterns of thinking and behaviour (Foucault, 1977). Power is exercised and dominant discourses legitimated through mechanisms of governance such as integrating divergent thinking into mainstream paradigms through obfuscation, reframing concepts, and reinterpreting language (Rabinow, 1984). This renders unfavourable discourses largely invisible. We consider how discourses interact (Willey-Sthapit et al., 2022) and affect the AOP discourse.

### **Critical and Radical Social Work**

AOP, as a progressive paradigm, was established against a backdrop of critical and radical social work. Central features of critical social work, include, first, an analysis centered on power and the flows of power (Allan et al., 2020). This includes revealing structural, systemic exercises of power and understanding how oppression, discrimination, and disempowerment function in particular contexts, including those of colonization (Gray et al., 2008; Mullaly & West, 2018).

Additionally, critical social work adopts a post-modern lens, validating individual unique experiences and eschewing universal and all-encompassing notions of truth (Allan et al., 2020). Adopting a post-modern perspective further facilitates the recognition and integration of alternative ways of knowing, doing and being into social work (Dalrymple & Burke, 2019) and honours diversity and inclusion. As such, critical social work pays specific attention to the contextual and the local, relying on local knowledges and recognizing the power dynamics that shape the definition of social issues and relevant responses (Schmid et al., 2021).

There is a clear tension between this post-modernist stance and ideas of structural power. However, critical social work does not aim to minimize or relativize state and systemic power, but rather lifts out individual experience of such power and acts in response to injustice and abuses of power. To unpack the distribution of power in the social work encounter, social workers need to reflexively identify their social location, understand its meaning for the social

work interaction and the ways in which they might be complicit in reinforcing social control, and act to facilitate equitable relationships between the worker and those using services (D’Cruz et al., 2007). Below we demonstrate the intersections of this critical tradition and AOP.

## **Anti-oppressive Practice in the Critical Tradition**

### **Anti-oppressive Practice Assumptions**

Despite AOP being dynamic with its theory evolving (Baines, 2011), and coming to include, for example, green social work, mad studies, Indigenous theory, and intersectionality (Baines & Clark, 2022), certain central assumptions hold. Anti-oppressive practice as a transformative approach echoes critical social work principles (Baines, 2011), drawing particularly on notions of social transformation and intentionality (Dalrymple & Burke, 2019; Mullaly & West, 2018). Additionally, AOP recognizes social work as political, thus seeking and promoting social justice (Baines, 2011; Dalrymple & Burke, 2019; Dumbrill & Yee, 2019) and recognizing structures of oppression (Mullaly & West, 2018). Further, Foucauldian notions of power and the impact on individuals, groups, and societies (Larson, 2008; Mullaly & West, 2018) are foregrounded, the personal and political being interconnected. Power is understood first as operating through structural oppressive practices and the sustained misuse of power on the micro through to macro levels (Tadam, 2021). Second, power is exercised through social relations (Baines, 2011) including personal prejudice; systems and culture; mechanisms of inequity; historical processes such as colonialism and associated oppressive ideologies and practices; contemporary ideologies, for example, neoliberalism; political power; global relations like that between the global North and South; and whiteness, racism, sexism, heterosexism, cissexism, ableism and sanism (Dumbrill & Yee, 2019; Mullaly & West, 2018; Tadam, 2021). People may experience multiple oppressions (Baines, 2011). Like critical social work, AOP further assumes that such power dynamics are reflected in the social work relationship, especially if paradigms of practice are adopted based on the individualization of service user problems (O’Brien & Willison, 2022) and notions of gratitude rather than rights (Mullaly & West, 2018). Power is visible also in the unique positioning of social workers who frequently are invested with significant authority (Dalrymple & Burke, 2019). These relationships of power are tracked through analyzing discourses and the language used within these, as well as through understanding ideology and its role in governance (Mullaly & West, 2018). Additionally, AOP embraces the ideas of diversity, inclusion, and equity as aspects of social justice and pursues the goals of social transformation rather than social reform (Mullaly & West, 2018; Tadam, 2021).

Another key component of critical AOP is that of reflexivity. Critical (social) analysis lies at the heart of reflexivity (Baines, 2011; Dumbrill & Yee, 2019; Finn, 2020) and involves an unlearning of privilege and domination (Peters & Luke, 2023). Accordingly, anti-oppressive (AO) practitioners are required to recognize the intersectional operationalization of privilege as well as disadvantage; to consider not only where they have power, but also where and how they may be rendered powerless; to name ideological, institutional, interpersonal, and internalised oppressions; and to identify where “[o]ppression can silence, but ... can also be the vehicle for rebellion and emancipation” (Tadam, 2021, p.5). Additionally, practitioners should interrogate their engagement in a social work encounter for where they may have reinforced power relations (Dalrymple & Burke, 2019; Larson, 2008). As such, reflexivity is appreciating social work complicity both in individual encounters in direct social work practice, but also collectively in the perpetuation of oppression and colonization (Baines et al., 2022; Ioakimidis & Whyllie,

2023). Baines (2011) concludes that reflexivity alone is insufficient but requires of practitioners to “understand, critique and improve how they use ... privilege to challenge oppression in everyday life” (p. 28) and thus resist the impacts of colonization, poverty, and globalisation, “locally and internationally” (p. 31). Reflexivity must therefore be paired with action, resulting in praxis (Mullaly & West, 2018). We discuss such action further when considering how AOP is actually done.

These principles of being driven by the understanding of social justice as social transformation, focusing on structural forms of power, recognizing oppression, practising reflexivity, and engaging in praxis theorize AOP. They also simultaneously direct practice.

### **Anti-oppressive Practice Strategies**

Dumbrill and Yee (2019) argue that doing AOP is the social worker’s “dream” (p. 230) because it aims at rooting out social injustice. However, they and others (e.g., Baines, 2011) assert that there is no prescription of how to practice in an anti-oppressive manner - even as the literature highlights various practice steps of this social work methodology.

An initial aspect of doing AOP is embracing not only individuals but also groups and communities as service users. Engagement is an integrated effort on the micro, meso, and macro levels (Dumbrill & Yee, 2019). In addition, Wehbi and Parada (2017) call for organizations and institutions to move away from hierarchical structures that reinforce oppressive relations with service users.

Second, to avoid perpetuating inequality and stand alongside the experience of the service user (Tendam, 2021), the social worker must actively build egalitarian relationships with service users by minimizing “power imbalances” and promoting “equity and empowerment” (Larson, 2008, p. 42). Such “just working relationships” (Larson, 2008, p. 47), “demystify” systems (p. 47); and facilitate power sharing, collaboration and space for questions, feedback, and relevant practitioner self-disclosure. The social worker engages service users fully in all levels of care and associated decision-making through promoting participation and building partnerships not only in the immediate encounter, but also by creating space for service users to deliver services and be engaged in organisational decision making and policy development (Baines, 2011; Larson, 2008). Service user participation should thus extend from the micro through to meso and macro levels (Larson, 2008). Such involvement unsettles the notion that social workers know best and legitimizes service user knowledges and experience (Dumbrill & Yee, 2019; Healy, 2022).

Further strategies include the importance of practitioners listening and paying attention to service users in their unique context, including appreciating their specific and collective history (Finn, 2020; Mullaly & West, 2018). Increasingly, this is also framed as using a trauma-informed lens (O’Brien & Willison, 2022). In community work, it means collaborating with and being guided by the community (Wehbi, 2011). Another strategy is vigilantly using language that is empowering and counters dominant and oppressive discourses (Larson, 2008; Mullaly & West, 2018). Further, the AO practitioner should support the service user in revealing and affirming structural barriers and disadvantage around their individual and communal realities, recognizing patterns of discrimination and structural harm, and thus raising their critical consciousness (Dumbrill & Yee, 2019; Healy, 2022; Larson, 2008). AOP furthermore involves recognition of

individual and collective ways in which such injustice has been resisted (Baines, 2011; Mullaly & West, 2018; Peters & Luke, 2023). Such deconstruction, conscientization and the development of counter-stories typically resist essentialism, preface and foreground structural harm and injustice as part of the service user's narrative, build on service user strengths, agency, and personal power, and seek out alternative, holistic responses (Brown & Macdonald, 2020; Larson, 2008).

Yet another means of practicing in an anti-oppressive manner is promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion (Tendam, 2021), or as pointed out by Mullaly and West (2018), attending to "politics of difference" (p. 2). The social worker would move beyond tokenism (Tendam, 2021) to integrating the "culture, spirituality and strengths of service user contexts" (Larson, 2008, p. 50), and in Indigenous communities identifying "red intersectionality" (Clarke, 2022, p. 43), and thus, facilitating culturally safe and relevant approaches (Mullaly & West, 2018; Peters & Luke, 2023). Moreover, promoting diversity includes intentionally appreciating the richness and heterodox experience associated with economic, cultural, age, sexual and other identities, but also unpacking the assumptions about social identities (Baines, 2011; Dalrymple & Burke, 2019). Intersectionality is used as a lens for understanding the complexity of identity (Baines et al., 2022; Mullaly & West, 2018; Tendam, 2021) and is melded with concepts of the structural to identify and act on social divisions and to recognize the nuance and contradictions in the flows of power (Dalrymple & Burke, 2019).

Advancing resistance and advocacy to negate or minimize the influence of oppression and supporting empowerment and liberation are seen as an integral part of AOP (Mullaly & West, 2018; Peters & Luke, 2023; Tendam, 2021). Practitioners can, as social justice allies, challenge the practice behaviours that operationalize and reinforce "ideologies of superiority and inferiority" (Tendam, 2021, p. 5). For instance, managerialism, misuse of technology and racism and their impacts both on the social worker corps as well as service users should be resisted by emphasizing social work discretion and scope for decision-making, being alert to the profession's core values, supporting colleagues, friends and others impacted by oppression, and facilitating the redistribution of resources (Baines, 2011; Peters & Luke, 2023; Tendam, 2021). In supporting service users, social workers might reinforce and activate cultural, institutional, and personal facets of power to work against political, social, and economic oppressions at the structural level (Dalrymple & Burke, 2019). Social workers can initiate organizational change by leading on organisational and policy levels, pushing back against biases, prejudice, and oppression, and engaging in multi-agency and interprofessional practice (Barnoff, 2011; Dumbrill & Yee, 2019; Mullaly & West, 2018; Tendam, 2021). Social workers also need to adapt their practice to changing social conditions (Dalrymple & Burke, 2019) through understanding how individuals, groups and communities experience and construct local social conditions (Schmid et al., 2021). Another core AOP strategy linked to advocacy is facilitating solidarity between service users (Baines, 2011; Dumbrill & Yee, 2019; Mullaly & West, 2018). This requires actively developing connections and relationships between individuals, groups and communities facing similar challenges, and as stated by Wehbi (2011), linking the challenges the community are experiencing to other local or international struggles around issues such as homelessness, environmental challenges, intimate partner violence or poverty. Finally, AO theorists promote the principle of minimal intervention to limit the "oppressive and disempowering" nature of social work interventions (Healy, 2022, p. 235). This includes least

intrusive interventions, specifically early intervention, availability of preventative services and outreach to prevent the escalation of risk or harm to service users.

AOP is thus founded on core principles. It is also based on clear practice guidelines. As such AOP forms a distinct critical discourse.

## **Critique**

AOP has been criticized for, *inter alia*, its theoretical inadequacies and its lack of consideration of key constituencies. For example, despite practitioners being encouraged to employ the voices and lived experiences of marginalized individuals (Baines, 2011) and thereby recognize and validate service user knowledges and experience (see Dumbrill & Yee, 2019; Wehbi & Parada, 2017), the engagement of service users in theorizing AOP seems to continue being a gap. Also, even as Van Breda and Sekudu (2019) imply that decolonial practice and a recognition of local ways are part of critical and anti-oppressive practice and several AOP texts incorporate i/Indigenous knowledges (e.g., Baines, 2011; Baines, 2022; Dumbrill & Yee, 2019; Wehbi & Parada, 2017), AOP may have developed alongside rather than in conjunction with emergent articulations of Indigenous social work practice (Baines, 2011). Indeed, Wehbi (2011) recommends active global South to North knowledge sharing. Therefore, the intentional integration of AOP and service user and i/Indigenous knowledges needs strengthening.

Dalrymple and Burke (2019) explain that although the methodology has been seen as wanting because of its attachment to structural explanations of social conditions and ignoring the role of individual psychological factors, this criticism ignores the textured tension inherent in AOP between structural views and post-modern perspectives. Dumbrill and Yee (2019) also clarify that an understanding of the influence on structural issues on the functioning on service users does not preclude a response to immediate need.

Another significant criticism is that despite AOPs complex analysis of power and its link with social transformative justice, it is morally simplistic, idealistic, and politically naïve (Dalrymple & Burke, 2019). Also, Larson (2008) notes that anti-oppressive perspectives remain “distant and incongruent with the dominant discourse and practice models used by helping professionals” (p. 39), and that there is a “lack of fit” (p. 39) between what is taught to social work students and the prevailing practice contexts. Instead of interrogating the integrity of AOP as theory and methodology, these criticisms seem to be located in the lack of readiness of practitioners to fully engage in socially just practice, especially in restrictive, neoliberally informed work environments where it is hard to move social work systems towards less oppressive functioning and where there is a significant risk to jobs (Dumbrill & Yee, 2019; Pease, 2023).

Additionally, though Tedam (2021) does ask social workers to consider where they have been disempowered, AOP does not typically explore the experiences of social workers or students as part of oppressive systems. It thus makes invisible the relationship of the social worker to the employer and holds social workers rather than systems accountable.

Finally, even as AOP theorists insist on AOP’s social justice foundation as well as the need for social change on micro, meso- and macro levels (Dalrymple & Burke, 2019), they also seem to suggest several compromises when enacting AOP in neoliberal environments that are

characterized by resource constraints, expectations of immediate solutions, managerialist surveillance, the limited possibility of system changes, the dominance of social control agendas (Baines, 2011; Dalrymple & Burke, 2019), and dominant “modernist, positivistic, paternalistic” paradigms (Larson, 2008, p. 52). For example, Fenton (2019), while advancing relationship building, critical thinking and courage in practice, intentionally offers a watered-down prescription of how to practice radically. Similarly, Ross (2011) argues for a “broad tent” (p. 251) approach to activism that facilitates collaborative efforts across many actors for a more sustainable result. Dumbrill and Yee (2019) suggest social workers use “common sense” (p. 289) and should focus less on “revolution” than on “pragmatics” (p. 243). (In fairness, their statement is really about practitioners resisting binaries, but the emphasis on pragmatism is unfortunate).

Additionally, Tedom (2021), who cites the importance of an awareness of “isms” and power differentials in settings like child welfare and mental health and recommends community organizing, campaigning and disrupting organizational assumptions on an interpersonal level, avoids offering further practical strategies to effectively redistribute power or help the service user constellation enact their potential power and suggests that awareness or reflection is mostly sufficient and an end goal in and of itself. In sum, AOP theorists seem to promote ideas of moral courage by developing relationships and activating community (Peters & Luke, 2023), but simultaneously restrict what this might mean.

While AOP has gaps as a theoretical construct, it does appear that the main critique centres on its practicality in the everyday context. Even as this critique comes from those promoting AOP, Wehbi and Parada (2017) for example, reframing such discourse as supportive critiques that could strengthen AOP, these views suggest that AOP can only be applied meaningfully if its critical edge is blunted- and it is mainstreamed.

### **Mainstreaming of AOP and “Good Social Work”**

AOP and what it should represent has been challenged for several years (e.g., Larson, 2008). Indeed, Wehbi and Parada (2017) aimed to reposition AOP through a critical social work lens in response to AOP co-option in the neoliberal context. They also demonstrated that AOP was developed in response to elements missing in mainstream/whitestream social work. But, despite AOP being rooted in a critical tradition, it seems also to have found its place in mainstream “good social work”. Good social work, which seems to be used as a phrase akin to that of ‘best practice’, is identified as a social justice and human rights informed orientation that facilitates inclusion, emphasises autonomy, self-determination and strengths through individualized practice, and is evidence based (Schmid & Morgenshtern, 2024). Table 1 below contrasts AOP and mainstream good social work as two different epistemologies.

Table 1.

*“Good Social Work” Practice vs. Anti-Oppressive Practice*

<b>“Good Social Work” Practice</b>	<b>Anti-Oppressive Practice</b>
Dominant, traditional, conventional, Euro-Western, Anglophone	Alternative, emancipatory, progressive, local, i/Indigenous
Politically neutral	Politicized
Standardized and universalized	Contextual

Individualized, psychological, centered on autonomy and self-determination Person-in-Environment	Collective, communal, cultural; promoting solidarity Broad economic-socio-political context: Structural and systemic Transformation
Adaptation and reform Strength-based and resilience Client centered Expert knowledge Consultation and cooperation Inclusion = input	Agency and resistance to systemic injustice Service user driven Lived and local i/Indigenous experience Collaboration and partnership Inclusion = full participation on micro, meso and macro levels
Evidence based/evidence informed Reflection and awareness Social justice = promotion of individual rights and self-determination Microlevel advocacy Individual self-care Language needs to be less oppressive	Range of knowledges inform practice Reflexivity, praxis, and power analysis Social justice = promotion of individual, social and collective rights Micro, meso and macro level advocacy Collective care, organizational responsibility Language = thinking and practice shifts

We thus argue that “good social work”, even in claiming strength based, person-in-environment and person-centered practice, lacks the analysis of power and action aligned with critical and structural theories. Indeed, it is a strand within dominant practice and differs distinctly from alternative social work and AOP. In distinguishing dominant and alternative social work practice, Thompson and Stepney (2018), for example, refer to traditional and emancipatory streams, and Mullaly and West (2018) to conventional and progressive perspectives. With professional social work emerging in the global North, Anglophone expressions of social work have dominated and become viewed as universal (Morgenshtern et al., 2023); and Western conceptions have eclipsed local and i/Indigenous helping practices (see Gray et al., 2008; van Breda & Sekudu, 2019). The infusion of neoliberal ideas globally has reinforced standardization and a broad universalisation of social work. Indeed, the spread of professional social work through colonization and professional imperialism, (Schmid & Morgenstern, 2019), has entrenched these views as immutable. Even the International Federation of Social Work, which encourages adaptation to local contexts and has attempted to represent both the global North and South in its reviewed social work ethics (Sewpaul & Henrickson, 2019) and promotion of Ubuntu and Buen Vivre as essential social work approaches, has advanced international standards. Dominant social work is thus shaped by Anglophone, Eurocentric views, which in turn construct good social work.

We next make the case that the AOP discourse has become subsumed into that of mainstream good social work - primarily through the cooption of language and dilution of the critical nature of AOP. AOP theorists themselves have culpability in this. In this vein, Doel and Shardlow (2005) introduce the idea of AOP as corresponding to “the fundamentals of good social work practice: the pursuit of equality and justice” (p. 214). This sort of comparison has led to confusion about what is different and unique about AOP and how it resists dominant assumptions. Similarly, Baines (2011) and Baines et al., (2022) assert that “good mainstream social work practice” cannot easily be differentiated from AOP because respect, consultation, advocacy, and policy critique are used by practitioners in both approaches (p. 19). Further,

Baines (2011) blurs the lines between good social work and AOP by talking about “high quality practice” (p. 27), phrasing which echoes the construction of ‘best practice’. However, we argue that how these facets of practice are applied differs in mainstream practice as compared to AOP especially around notions of individualization, social justice and advocacy, reflexivity and selfcare, and inclusion.

## **Individualization**

A significant area of conceptual obfuscation derives from the construction of the service user. Dominant social work conceptualizes an individual client whose issues are predominantly psychological and centres practice on individualized responses (Schmid & Morgenstern, 2024) - even when speaking of families, groups, and communities. In AOP, the collective, communal and notions of solidarity should come to the fore (Wehbi, 2011). However, even as each of the following AOP texts identifies oppressions experienced by a range of groups, in offering direction to the AO practitioner, the individual is prioritized. Hence, Baines, who promotes societal transformation and solidarity with exploited groups, frames AOP as primarily facilitating individual empowerment (Baines, 2011; Baines et al., 2022); Dumbrill and Yee (2019) recommend that practitioners do “good casework” (p. 289); Tedam (2011) identifies reflection as the key component of change; and O’Brien and Willison (2022) - even as they offer illustrations of building solidarity and community, and extend a call to action to shift policies - direct their transformative, emancipatory, and collaborative approach of “radical listening”, curiosity, “reframing, revisioning, and re-storytelling” (p. 49) to supporting the strengths and resilience of individual service users. Similarly, Brown and Macdonald (2020) suggest that political and social justice work can be done with marginalized communities through counter-storying which includes using deconstruction, attending to context and institutional and historical oppression, resisting neo-liberalization, and avoiding pathologizing. Badwall (2021) argues that while Brown and Macdonald’s work contributes to the AOP “canon” (p. 150), its focus is on clinical direct practice with individuals, and potentially essentializes communities (and we would add, centres individuals in particular communities rather than working with such communities as a whole). Conceptualizations of AOP that limit social work to the relationships with individuals are reductive of AOP, potentially constructing it as equivalent to and mimicking “good social work” and excluding other service user systems and additional forms of anti-oppressive practice. In doing so, the exhortation to “move mountains” (Dumbrill & Yee, 2019, p. 290) is diminished. The difference between good social work and AOP becomes opaque.

Moreover, in seeing maladaptation as individual failure and using limited cultural competency frameworks, mainstream social work uses a deficit-based lens, stigmatizes, and blames clients, and effectively depoliticizes the social problems faced by individuals and presents social work as politically neutral (Baines, 2011). In contrast, AOP considers the broader economic-socio-political context of individual lives and the influence of systemic challenges and social structures on individual, family, and community functioning; reframes the service user/s’ experience as one of privileges, oppressions, or discriminations; aims to emancipate service user/s to act on this environment; and intends to remove such barriers typically through collective action. Writing that assumes that contextual social work in AOP is the same as person-in-environment is thus mis-describing AOP (Mullally & West, 2018).

Further confusion arises from notions of strengths-based practice. In good social work practice, a strengths-based orientation, - enabling clients to see their value and to use such

strengths to act on the issues affecting them (Saleebey, 1996) -, is articulated as the norm. Good social work recognizes the worth of shifting from a problem-saturated orientation to one that is affirming and hopeful. Working in a strengths-based manner in dominant social work typically means the social worker as expert identifying, naming, and reflecting to the service user their strengths (Kam, 2021) and supporting them in negotiating immediate service barriers. In keeping with an individualized focus, good social work tends to keep the identification of strengths within the confines of the individual sphere and tends to focus on the psychological. A strengths-based approach thus remains comfortably nested within a broader deficit and risk orientation. While the AO practitioner also lifts out service user strengths (Larson, 2008), the affirmation of strengths, coping strategies and resources/capabilities and building the social work response around these occurs regarding the individual, family and community as service user; and considers environmental strengths and resources also. In AOP, the identification of strengths is an intentional enhancement of the competencies and economic, social, and human resource base the service user already has, while ensuring access to resources to address gaps. It is also activating solidarities and the capacity to challenge and resist broad social and systemic injustices. Hence, a critical approach does not only consider what service users are doing well and what they know about their own situation but positions them as experts on their own lives and having the capacities to resist structural oppression, especially when acting in solidarity.

Another area where good social work and AOP potentially are confused pertains to the relationship of the service user with their context. Good social work is the practitioner placing the individual within their environment and attempting, through adaptation, to strengthen clients' ties with systems and support their ability to elicit resources from this environment. This person-in-environment approach acknowledges the importance of inclusion and diversity; and cultural competence is encouraged. Larson (2008) motivates for an "embracing of the culture and strengths of diverse populations" (p. 50) as part of AOP, though Tadam, (2021), for example, in discussing diversity and resisting othering, focuses on adapting dominant tools rather substituting these with i/Indigenous approaches, and subscribes to dominant notions of difference and facilitating inclusion thus supporting unidirectional expertise. Rather AOP draws on cultural humility and promotes two-way engagement that centres the knowledge and experience of the service user while also drawing on the service provider's expertise and resources (Gottlieb, 2020; Healy, 2022).

Additionally, the confusion between good social work and AOP becomes compounded because along with the social justice turn, mainstream social work has adopted ideas of partnership and collaboration (Weinstein et al., 2003), expressed as client self-determination and autonomy and being client centered. Mostly, however, the social worker retains the expert role and associated authority and seeks input rather than facilitating service user decision-making as to the care they receive - even if practitioners are perhaps listening more closely. Such duplicity of the profession has been highlighted in work with families where partnership is espoused but where families have no meaningful decision-making power (Schmid & Pennell, 2023). In contrast, progressive social workers agree that service users should have a voice in shaping the services they receive and, importantly, should also drive such processes. This shifts the relational dynamic from consultation and cooperation to critical collaboration and partnership where the worker's expertise complements that of the service user's knowledge/s and actively promotes agency (rather than responsibility) in achieving the service user's agenda and attends to the power dynamic between service providers and service users. Healy (2022) accordingly

emphasizes that in AOP, partnership goes beyond a task focus to respecting service users' knowledges, facilitating their agency on interpersonal and institutional levels and creating decision making opportunities. Such agency may be expressed collectively as in Ubuntu (Schmid & Pennell, 2023) or Buen Vivre. These approaches, representing African and South American indigenous worldviews respectively, centre such values as collective decision making and the communal, prioritize the intersection and interwovenness of individual and group well-being, and emphasize the eco-spiritual interconnectedness of all life (Schmid & Pennell, 2023).

A further confusing facet is the advancement of evidence-based practice. The evidence-based discourse of good social work leans towards quantitative assessment, assumes positivist measurement of all phenomena, and tends to reduce or exclude service user perspectives in determining social work responses thus occluding critical aspects of evaluation and program planning. Even so, evidence-based practice has still been identified as integral to AOP (O'Brien & Willison, 2022; Peters & Luke, 2023). This inclusion again seems to dull AOP's critical emphasis. Bates (2011) maintains that AOP can include evidence-informed practice if there is reflexivity, structural analysis, social justice goals, ethical practice, and the consideration of context and multiple ways of knowing. It seems that Bates is offering a different understanding of the nature and use of evidence, thus not discounting research and scholarship but repositioning it to consider several epistemologies, reflections of knowledge and knowledge sources to align with AO principles.

These above distinctions are important. This is because each approach has different outcomes for the social work encounter.

## **Social Justice and Advocacy**

The individualization of mainstream social work discourse extends into the construction of social justice which is now reflected in various ethical codes (see the Canadian Association of Social Workers [CASW], 2024); and is constructed as attending to the rights of the individual and promoting their self-determination. The interplay of these rights with social and collective rights is often not only occluded but effectively undermined in dominant practice and thus redirects the social worker's role away from systemic change and recognizing rights in context (Elkchirid et al., 2020). This becomes confusing for the practitioner who will have learnt that social justice is similarly "at the root of AOP" (Larson, 2008, p.51). A related area where good social work and AOP are collapsed into one another is advocacy. In dominant social work, the dynamics of power are kept invisible so that advocacy is typically microlevel and restricted to speaking up for clients and supporting them in accessing resources rather than shifting systems and structures. Baines et al. (2022) claim that in AOP the intent is to politicize the work as well as the issues service users face, whereas mainstream practice individualizes blame; and Baines and Sauer (2022) further clarify that critical consciousness-raising, facilitating solidarity and linking with allies, social movements and unions differentiates AOP advocacy from the advocacy taken on in "good social work".

## **Inclusion**

A facet where further distinctions between AOP and good social work need to be drawn pertains to notions of inclusion. Commensurate with an individualized focus, inclusion in good social work is achieved by strategies such as people first language, openness to diversity,

compassion and kindness. While these would also be aspects of inclusion in AOP, the latter extends to actively addressing the material conditions that create and sustain exclusion (Healy, 2022). Hence, the AOP practitioner concretely addresses discrimination and oppressions emerging, for example, out of gender and (dis)ability discrimination and anti-Black, anti-Asian and anti-Indigenous racisms, as well as Islamophobia and antisemitism.

## **Reflexivity and Self Care**

Good social work and AOP might appear similar too where the difference between reflection and reflexivity is not highlighted. Reflection is encouraged in mainstream practice, social workers being expected to regularly consider, through such processes as supervision and peer supervision, where they might improve their practice. This might include taking into account issues of trust between the social worker and service user and an awareness of the impact of power differentials. This process though differs from the reflexivity required in AOP (Shaikh et al., 2022) where there is an intentional and deliberate analysis of power that should consistently be tied into action. As such the social worker exercises moral courage (Peters & Luke, 2023) and goes beyond recognizing that oppression exists, to reflecting this back to the service user and additionally to standing in solidarity with service users to resist such oppression and to advocate on micro-, meso- and macro-levels for change.

Self-care is promoted in good social work, advancing the idea that social workers should maintain professional boundaries and undertake various activities to revitalize themselves physically and emotionally to take on the responsibility of caring for people in resource-poor and bureaucratic environments. Mullaly and West (2018) recommend the AO practitioner engage in self-care; Peters and Luke (2023) contextualize vigilant and compassionate self-care as resistance. Profitt (2011) adopts a more critical stance in arguing that individualized notions of care place the responsibility for wellness on the social worker. She advocates instead for developing a critical, collective notion of care that recognizes the intersection of the personal and the political, the influence of inequity, the collective impact of poor care of social workers and the responsibility of employers/ organizations. Such care includes peer support as well as mentorship by more experienced workers of novices to resist induction into dominant perspectives. It also places the responsibility for creating “preventative and sustainable...actions that address the causes of workplace stressors” (Tusasiirwe & Brito, 2022, p. 54) on the shoulders of the employer, potentially including the provision of livable wages, meaningful benefits, psycho-social supports, varied job descriptions, achievable goals and regular, supportive supervision.

## **Dilution**

The critical substance of AOP has been diluted by the failure of theorizing the service user as more than the individual in AOP, and in not distinguishing how social justice, collaboration with service users, reflection and self-care are situated differently in dominant and AOP discourse. Moreover, where AOP theorists have tried to support students and practitioners in creating spaces of resistance in dominant practice contexts, they have advanced *primarily* good social work - extending respect, understanding service user perspectives, expanding places for self-determination, and mitigating punitive environments. Such adaptation therefore erodes the critical edge of AOP and allows it to be subsumed within the discourse of good social work. It also has negative outcomes for social workers and service users. For example, despite arguing

for a more restrained version of AOP in neoliberal contexts, Baines (2011) also admits that in environments where there is significant disparity and the experience of racism and sexism is acute, it becomes extremely difficult for service users to trust the social work encounter and to employ it as a place to express anger or engage in meaningful critical consciousness raising. Further dilution of AOP occurs when AOP theorists communicate that social workers are doing AOP if they engage in only one or two aspects of this methodology (Collins & Willkie, 2010). AOP requires engagement around all the principles articulated earlier for it to have meaning and to bring about change.

Hence, while there seem to be elements of clear theorization of AOP, there are other areas where the boundary between good social work and AOP has not been explicitly designated; and where AOP language has been coopted/appropriated into mainstream discourse. AOP theorists may themselves have contributed to this lack of distinction, perhaps because of induction into dominant social work ideas. AOP theorists, while stressing the critical principles of AOP, dilute its methods to fit in within neoliberal context, this way further strengthening a reformist rather than radical character of social work. The ambiguity of what constitutes AOP and good social work has facilitated the disciplining of AOP.

### **The Disciplining of Anti-Oppressive Practice**

The mainstreaming of AOP and its reframing to conform to dominant concepts – even if this is “good” social work- undermines AOP practice, and effectively, in the Foucauldian frame, disciplines AOP. The disciplinary apparatus of power acts in several ways. It objectifies the “productive subject” (Foucault, 1982, p. 777), creates binaries and difference to divide, and facilitates the creation of the governed subject. Technologies of power operate through the imposition of dominant beliefs and discourses on the subject as well as the internalization of dominant views (Foucault, 1982), divorcing subjects from their agency, fostering self-regulation and self-discipline and creating essentialized—fixed and singular subjectivity (Skinner, 2013). Subjectivities become a vehicle for governing conduct, while dominant narratives supersede and silence other perspectives, rendering the latter invisible and irrelevant (Rossiter, 2005).

The disciplining of AOP is reflected, first, in the critical social worker becoming the good social worker because of pressures arising from the contradictions and associated moral distress of practice. For example, Rossiter (2001) noted becoming

exhausted and beleaguered...by a lifetime of being positioned as a "professional helper" by a state that organizes the people's problems as individual pathologies that are best administered by professionals who are trained not to notice the state...that uses the terms and definitions of professionals to hide its oppressive foundations (p.1)

Rossiter (2005) also labelled “the asymmetry” between practitioner expectations and “the possibilities of practice”, and the “crushing ambivalence” and “painful” constructed subjectivities that emerged in increasingly technocratic, overwhelming and under-resourced practice settings (p. 3). Rossiter (2011) later recommended that social justice-oriented practitioners engage in “unsettled practice” (p. 980). This echoes the sentiments of critical theorists reflected earlier who struggled to conceptualize praxis in environments that actively limit or even prevent socially just responses; and who instead employed notions of pragmatism

to rationalize practitioners' conformity to subjectivities and engagement that mimic good social work.

Practitioners are additionally disciplined through believing that in adopting one or two strategies of AOP they are working in a socially just manner. This permits practitioners to ease their conscience and opt not to actively resist injustice, allowing them to be "lazy radicals" (Fenton, 2019). However, functioning as a social change agent in an anti-oppressive manner involves examining and reconstituting every area of practice and implementing all the principles simultaneously. Unless engaging in all these initiatives as a package, or integrating advocacy on the micro-, meso- and macro-levels, practitioners are not doing AOP.

Additionally, as we have shown, many concepts have been co-opted from AOP and reinterpreted through a dominant social work lens, inherently shifting the social work discourse away from critical discussion. This allows dominant social work - especially in its construction of good social work- to present as benevolent and aligned with social justice and human rights goals and thus as legitimate (Chapman & Withers, 2019). Moreover, the mainstreaming of the AOP discourse both by AOP theorists themselves and by the reframing and reconstructing of AOP principles in mainstream discourse has effectively marginalized AOP, leaving dominant notions of social work uninterrupted. Neoliberal perspectives continue unchallenged on a macro scale, even if there is minor resistance and microlevel advocacy, and social work complicity in governance and social control is sustained.

### **AOP and Critical Social Work Practice**

There is an "innocence" (Rossiter, 2001) in believing that one is practicing within the parameters of AOP when one is in effect promoting good social work. Social workers will be inducted to, at best, practice good social work (for example, trying to institute preventive, proactive, holistic, and collaborative responses [Baines, 2011]), but cannot be anti-oppressive practitioners in settings where neoliberal conditions determine the practice context or fields such as those of child welfare, corrections, and mental health where they will primarily be agents of social control. Indeed, as exemplified by several instances gathered by Yu and Mandell (2015), dominant social work constructs resistance to coercive and oppressive power typically as extra-legal or illegal. Engaging in AOP will almost inevitably require that social work be conducted in spaces outside of such contexts, the abolitionist anti-carceral movement being an example of such opportunity.

That anti-oppressive practice may be limited to non-traditional social work spaces does not mean that practitioners in traditional environments cannot engage in reflexion or in acts of advocacy (Rossiter, 2001; 2005). Indeed, social workers should find and/or create spaces of resistance through developing critical consciousness and analyzing power relationships through critical discourse and enquiry because of "the possibility of keeping social work on the side of common decency: spiritually, politically and practically" (Rossiter, 2001, p. 12). They should remain aware though that they are not anti-oppressive practitioners.

The distinction between what constitutes good social work and AOP is essential towards the reflexive identification of the normalization of AOP. We hope that social workers can become aware of the ways in which their subjectivities have been impacted as well as understand the limits of their practice settings and see how these facilitate the advancement of a dominant

agenda. Moreover, we are cognisant that all flows of power -especially helping initiatives- replicate and reinforce existing power structures (Healy, 2022), AOP requiring ongoing critical consciousness, reflexion, and advocacy. The critical anti-oppressive practitioner thus needs to find alternative practice contexts that fully embrace and can support and provide solidarity around AOP. Although we are advancing radical social work, we are not, therefore, promoting an ideal(istic) or heroic version (Rossiter, 2005) of social work practice. As a profession that upholds the advancement of social justice as a core value, social work students must be trained to become social change agents on micro but also meso- and macro levels. Practitioners should be equipped to resist oppressions (Foucault, 1977) and to stand alongside individuals, families, groups, and communities in advocating for social transformation. In honouring resistance to structural and systemic injustice and promoting individual, communal, collective, and social justice, educators should continue teaching from an AOP lens. Noting the exacerbation of social inequities and the extreme violence internationally, social workers cannot become complicit in perpetuating injustice. Social work must be radical to maintain its social justice character (Pease, 2023).

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