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Useful Concepts in Anti-oppression

Aim

- To introduce a number of concepts, understanding of which can help the development and maintenance of anti-oppressive practice.
- To discuss briefly each topic, under the headings Community and culture, Power and empowerment, Equality and anti-oppression, and Identity and relationships.

Community and culture

Under this heading we will present commentary on these topics: Diversity, Culture, Cultural competence, Multi-culturalism, Competent community, Inclusion and exclusion, Integration, Participation, and Community action.

Diversity

Diversity refers to the presence of a wide variety of identity characteristics amongst the people in a particular community: old and young, big and small, from a wide variety of ethnic groups, representing different religions, from all classes, disabled and non-disabled, with a wide range of lifestyles and political beliefs, of different sexual orientations, and in a range of parental and family roles. Diverse communities offer opportunities for a wide range of experiences and relationships amongst members, fostering

understanding and removing stereotypes and prejudice. Sometimes, however, they are seen as diluting the 'culture' of particular groups, and this may be viewed as undesirable by some community members.

The opposite of a diverse community is a closed community, where the community is built around one identity within a category, to the exclusion of other identities within that category: for example, older people only, disabled people only, rich people only, Jews only. Communities may be closed by choice, as with some communities for older people in America; or they may be forced on people, as with ghettos for Jews or institutions for disabled people.

Closed communities may preserve and strengthen a particular 'culture', but they reduce the experiences available to members, and they may be very vulnerable to misunderstanding, prejudice, oppression and even attack from those outside. Miller and Gwyne (1972) describe the effect of institutional care for disabled people as their 'social death'.

Culture

Culture refers to the traditions, beliefs, patterns of behaviour and creative productions of a particular identity group, particularly those that are considered important by that group. A concept of 'culture' can be developed for any identity group, not just those relating to ethnicity, nationality or religion. By researching beliefs, behaviours and creations of any group that are important to that group, we can gain a picture of what can be called the 'culture' of that group (for a light-hearted example see Fox, 2004). A good way to explore this is to find an organisation, self-help group or internet website that represents an identity group. The actions of the group, or the content of the website, will provide useful leads into the 'culture' of the group. This can be done for groups representing different ages, different life experiences (for example, ex-offenders or survivors of domestic violence), different disability or health status groups, different genders, different life conditions (for example poor, homeless, refugees, asylum seekers), different lifestyles (for example travellers, students), of different economic and social classes, people of different parental status (for example fathers, lone parents), different political ideologies, different ethnic groups, different religions, different sexual orientations or identities, different sizes (exceptionally large, tall or short).

Cultural competence

This refers to the ability of an individual or an organisation to acquire sufficient knowledge of the culture of diverse groups to increase tolerance, understanding and acceptance and to reduce stereotypes, misunderstandings

and prejudice (Pope-Davis et al., 2003). In a health and social care context, where the aim is not just to accept people but also to help and support them, such knowledge can have the additional function of ensuring that support is provided in a culturally sensitive and respectful way. For example, attention can be paid to provision of appropriate food, appropriate care of hair and skin, use of appropriate modes of greeting, arrangements for practice of religion, welcoming of traditional modes of dress, and so on (O'Hagan, 2001; Asamoah, 1996).

Multi-culturalism

At one level, multi-culturalism merely refers to the co-existence of different cultures in a particular community or society. However, an important additional element that is often striven for is equality of acceptance and respect. In many societies, though, there is a historically and traditionally dominant culture. Some members of that culture may feel that multi-culturalism risks dilution or even loss of important elements of that traditional culture. This in turn may lead to attempts to impose elements of the dominant culture on members of other groups, who may feel oppressed as a result and may become isolated from mainstream society.

In recent years the apparent effects of multi-culturalism in Britain have been heavily criticised. Even Trevor Phillips, at the time Chair of the Commission for Racial Equality, gave a speech in 2004 advocating dropping use of the term 'multi-culturalism' and replacing it with discourses about integration and a unified national culture. This view is argued in detail by West, who says: 'Far from promoting integration and inclusion, multi-culturalism has done nothing except encourage separatism and strife.' (2005: 45).

However, a more balanced view, emphasising the benefits of a multi-cultural approach within a framework of national values, is presented by Madood (2007).

Competent community

The concept of a competent community refers to one that is able to include and cater for all the needs of a wide variety of identity groups – ideally all identity groups (Iscoe, 1974). The concept was particularly developed in relation to avoiding the exclusion from local communities of disabled people, because of a failure of communities to establish the means of meeting their needs, for example for care, education, leisure, work or social life. The principle underlying the notion of the competent community is that education, health, social, economic and support services should be available locally so that the needs of all people can be met within the local area

(Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993). In the context of anti-oppressive prac-
tice, this principle can be extended to include the ability to provide all
these things for people of all identities – old and young, big and small,
from all ethnic groups and religions, of both genders and all sexual orien-
tations, of all economic and social classes, disabled and non-disabled, and
so on.

A related concept is that of 'social capital' (Field, 2002) in which the
strengthening of networks and relationships within communities is linked
to increased competence and achievement of that community.

Inclusion and exclusion

The essence of oppression is enforced exclusion from desirable opportuni-
ties and experiences. Correspondingly, the essence of anti-oppression is
inclusion. We have to include the proviso of enforcement in exclusion for
it to constitute oppression, since some people or groups may wish to
exclude themselves, with all the risks that that may entail. Voluntary
exclusion is not necessarily a good idea, but it does not constitute oppres-
sion. However, involuntary exclusion can happen in a variety of ways.
There need not be any explicit rules or pressures that exclude people,
though those may certainly operate, as can be seen in the history of the
Jews recounted in Chapter 1. There may be much more subtle influences
that keep people out of opportunities or certain social relationships or
economic settings. An example is the 'glass ceiling' experienced by women,
disabled people or working-class people in work settings, where overt
policy may purport to encourage equality in seeking promotion to senior
posts, but in practice there are limits to the progress that is actually made
by members of those groups (Cabinet Office Strategy Unit, 2003; Women
and Work Commission, 2007; for an international perspective
see Society for Human Resource Management, 2007). Another example
would be the relatively low representation of ethnic minorities in financial
institutions in the City, in parliament, in the police and in academia
(Tackey et al., 2001).

Genuine inclusion requires awareness and positive action by those with
the power to influence situations, and commitment to attitude change
amongst those with privileged status in relation to inclusion.

Integration

This refers to a situation where not only is there inclusion of different iden-
tity groups through policies of equal opportunities, but there are support-
ive contacts and good relationships between different groups in practice –
in housing, in work, in education, in health facilities, in leisure and social
settings.

Participation

This concept takes anti-oppression even further by expecting not just integration in the sense of physical presence, but actual participation in equal proportions and with equal effect. Thus we would expect people from ethnic minorities, disabled people, gay people, people of all classes, men and women, young and old, in numbers equal to their proportion in the community, to be using local facilities, to be voting in elections, to be achieving academic or professional qualifications, to be benefiting from education and health resources, to be using leisure facilities, and so on. If members of particular identity groups are not participating as we would expect, the reasons need to be explored and the situation remedied. This may require better information, active policies of inclusion and welcome and support, and avoidance of any subtle or not-so-subtle forces of exclusion.

Community action

Communities operate through networks of relationships, usually including many special interest groups of community members. These groups may facilitate interests and 'culture' through catering for particular identity groups. Other groups may be concerned with more general issues. Community groups may operate in ways that exacerbate social divisions, or they may greatly help anti-oppression by encouraging inclusion and participation. Each such network or group needs to ensure that it is not, intentionally or unintentionally, excluding people on irrelevant criteria. This does not mean that every group has to accept everyone. It is quite right that, for example, a women's group would not accept male members, or a Christian fellowship would not accept members who are not committed Christians. However, one would hope to see in each group an acceptable proportion of ethnic minority members, or gay members, or working class members, or disabled members, and so on. When community groups develop cultural competence, the way is open to the achievement of a competent community.

Power and empowerment

In this section we will cover the concepts of Power, Empowerment, Choice and freedom, 'Political correctness', and Advocacy.

Power

Power is a rather elusive concept. Often it is easier to see power when it is directed, or potentially directed, against you than it is when you possess it.

For example, as lecturers we do not, unless we wish to be particularly conscious of the issue, see ourselves as exerting power over our students. Rather we see ourselves as facilitators of learning and as imparting our knowledge in order to help them for their future. Students, however, often see lecturers as wielders of great power – power to determine what is learned, power of selection, power of assessment, power of discipline, power in giving references, and so on.

We all have power in some aspects of our lives (Haugaard, 2002). The first step in anti-oppression is to recognise the areas of power that we have, and commit ourselves to use it for the benefit of people and not to oppress them. Oppression is often the result of powerful people or social forces exerting power over the weak. Sometimes it is the majority exerting power over a minority, using the power of numbers. Sometimes minorities gain power over much larger majorities, as for example in the era of apartheid in South Africa.

Human beings love power, and any threats to their power may result in violent actions to retain it. Many genocides, including the Holocaust of the Jews in World War II, have resulted from a belief that a group constitutes a threat to those in power.

It cannot be suggested that we do not need power. Anti-oppression requires power to enforce positive anti-oppressive policies. Power is the engine that drives both oppression and anti-oppression (Adams, 2003; Thompson, 2006). However, in seeking anti-oppression, we are perhaps more likely to deliberately decide not to use our power, than if we think others deserve to be oppressed, or if we are unconscious of the issue.

Empowerment

Empowerment involves addressing the imbalance of power between groups in society. In order to achieve a true balance, it is necessary not only for a relatively powerless group to be given more influence, but for those in a position of power to give up some of that power. The latter goes against human nature and so is inherently unlikely to happen, though there are some mechanisms to encourage it that have been developed by those with higher ideals, for example democracy and the establishment of human and legal rights.

The usual route to empowerment is through disempowered groups, through their own actions, demanding and securing empowerment. Women have become more empowered through the suffragette movement and later the feminist movement. Disabled people have become more empowered through the disability rights movement. Black people have become more empowered through the struggle for civil rights and anti-discrimination legislation.

Even when weaker groups in society achieve a certain degree of empowerment, the extent is often still controlled by a more powerful social group,

and credit for the 'gift' of empowerment is claimed by those in power. As we saw in Chapter 1, the emancipation of Black slaves is historically claimed by white activists rather than being credited to the efforts of Black people themselves. Disability rights legislation, race relations legislation, and even equal opportunities legislation to give women more rights, were enacted by the gracious permission of non-disabled, mainly male, almost entirely white legislators, after long and painful protest by the recipients themselves.

Choice and freedom

A major consequence of others having power over you is a loss of choice and freedom. Correspondingly, a major element in anti-oppression is ensuring that people have choice and freedom. Personal autonomy is nowadays taken as the highest human value in much of Western philo-sophical ethics, with major implications for health and social care services (Brazier, 1991; Gillon, 1986).

However, a number of qualifying points can be made about choice and freedom. First, the way they are exercised is likely to be strongly influenced by past experience. If people's lives have been very restricted and their experience of choice very limited, the knowledge basis of their choices may be inadequate. In other words, their choices may not be in their best inter-ests. It is, of course, an arrogant assumption for one person to claim they know better than the person themselves what is in their interests. Nevertheless, it may be true – particularly in the case of children, vulnera-ble adults, or people who exhibit anti-social behaviour.

Second, loss of choice and freedom is not the only component of oppres-sion, and for some people remedying other components may have greater priority. Enforced exclusion, enforced denial of access to education, health or relationships, being de-skilled, or being treated in a demeaning and disrespectful way, are other components of oppression. Remedying them for particular individuals or groups in certain circumstances may justify some coercion to achieve 'best interests'.

'Political correctness'

The term 'political correctness' is now used almost always in a negative, mocking way to describe some event that the speaker considers bizarre or excessive as a remedy for an alleged wrong or injustice. (See for example Browne, 2006 and Philpot, 2000.) Indeed, in researching for this book, we could not find a single reference presenting political correctness in positive terms.

However, it is worth considering the origins of the term. The word 'polit-ical' refers to struggles to gain power and influence. 'Political correctness'

was originally an attempt to give greater power and influence to disadvan-taged or relatively powerless groups to determine their experiences. Thus, for example, the language used to refer to a group might have been solely determined by others, and might not convey respect for the group. Those who wish to avoid oppression of the group would do well to ask members of the group what language they would be happier with, and to adopt that language themselves. This principle, of asking the people them-selves what they prefer and acting on the reply, can be extended into many other areas, of rights, relationships, housing, work, education, health, social care, and so on. True 'political correctness' redresses the imbalance of power and influence between groups in society. A good example would be the design of environments to ensure accessibility for disabled people, especially as a result of involving disabled people themselves in that design.

As an example of an attempt to find a 'middle way' between the excesses of political correctness and a total rejection of it, here is the statement on language that has been included in student handbooks on social work courses at Reading University:

POLICY STATEMENT ON ANTI-DISCRIMINTORY LANGUAGE

It is expected that everyone concerned with the programme – tutors, practice teachers and students – will be engaged in a creative search for language that helps to reduce discrimination and oppression. Students will be expected to show evidence throughout their involvement in the programme that they are engaged in this search. At the very least, there will be avoidance of language that is clearly abusive, insensitive or well-known to be discriminatory and unacceptable.

Over and above this, there should be an active process of considering the appro-priateness of the language we use. As well as their dictionary meaning, words may have positive or negative image connotations inherent in their meaning or origin, or acquired through common or historical usage. Also, the people to whom a par-ticular word refers may have expressed dislike of it, or may have actively adopted it as a group for political purposes.

Decisions about the appropriateness or acceptability of words will depend on the relative importance given to communicating with others through the accepted meaning of the word, avoidance of the negative connotations or imagery associ-ated with the word, and following the wishes of the people to whom the word refers. Often, the wish to support the empowerment of people who have had little control over what happens to them in society, will lead to prominence being given to the expressed preferences of those people. However, this may sometimes hamper accurate communication, or the people themselves may not have expressed a view, may not have a consistent or agreed position, or may be unaware themselves of some of the connotations of words.

The words we use should not simply reflect personal opinion or preference. We should strive to be able to justify the words we use by arguments that reflect our thinking about the above considerations. Within this context, and with the

recognition that some words will always be unacceptable because of their widely recognised offensiveness, the requirement of the programme is for evidence of the process of thinking about the development of personal and institutional language, rather than adherence to a prescribed list of particular words considered 'acceptable' or 'correct'.

However, we should recognise that others are further ahead on the journey than we are, and their thoughts and conclusions are worthy of study and possibly emulation. The programme therefore undertakes to provide students, practice teachers and tutors with papers to aid discussion and decisions about language.

Advocacy

Advocacy is the representation of a need or an idea, either by a person or group on behalf of themselves, or by someone or an organisation on behalf of another person or group. Advocacy is allied to political action, since it usually involves seeking greater influence in decision-taking. However, it can involve other actions, such as helping people to integrate and participate in community life. Self-advocacy by disadvantaged groups, and advocacy on their behalf by others, can be vehicles through which injustices can become better recognised, people can become more involved, respected and included, and remedies found for oppression suffered.

There are many different kinds of advocacy, and any of them can be useful in particular circumstances. It is often best if different forms of advocacy can work together. Each form of advocacy has its strengths and limitations, as indicated in Table 2.1.

The role of human service professionals is likely to involve an element of advocacy on behalf of those they support (Coulshed and Orme, 2006; Payne, 1997; Bateman, 2000; Brandon and Brandon, 2001; Brandon, 1995; Gray and Jackson, 2002).

Equality and anti-oppression

This section covers the concepts of Equality, Social justice, Discrimination, Restoration, Privilege, Social devaluation, Oppression, and Rights.

Equality

It is remarkable that, despite the centrality of the notion of equality in anti-discrimination and anti-oppression, very few people believe in it or practise it. Human beings are naturally competitive, always striving to be unequal. Hierarchical structures abound, in society as a whole, in nearly all organisations, in local communities, and even in families.

Table 2.1 Advocacy

Type of advocacy	Example	Strengths	Limitations
Paid advocacy	Solicitor	Expertise, especially on legal rights; powerful representation.	Costly; often an unnecessarily 'heavy' response.
Advocacy as part of a professional role	Social worker; nurse	Influence within services; time allocated as part of job; experience and knowledge of needs.	Usually working with more than one person, so attention limited that can be given to individuals; bound by conditions of employment; possible conflict of interest, e.g. if a person needs help to complain about one's colleagues or employers.
Advocacy by an organisation on behalf of a group	Mencap; Royal National Institute for the Deaf; Age Concern	Expertise; power deriving from membership; influence on national policy.	Usually concerned with general rather than individual issues.
'Formal' problem – oriented advocacy	Ombudsman; Citizens Advice Bureau; local councillor; MP; patient advice (PALS)	Formal or legal basis; independence; authority by virtue of role.	Often oriented towards complaints or specific problems.
'Informal' single issue unpaid advocacy	Crisis or instrumental, outcome-oriented Citizen Advocacy	Flexible; informal; expression of citizenship and social capital; minimises conflict of interest since unpaid and voluntary.	Concerned with single issues rather than long-term needs.
'Informal' long – term unpaid advocacy	Relationship – based Citizen Advocacy partnerships; advocacy by family and friends	Same as informal single issue unpaid advocacy, plus: long-term; relationship-based; protective as well as empowering.	Great trust required that the relationship will pursue the person's best interests.
Self-advocacy by individuals on their own behalf	Creative arts; taking part in own reviews; expressing wishes; involvement in person-centred planning	Empowering; ensures relevance; participatory; enhances self- esteem.	Lacks power; depends on adequate support.
Self-advocacy by a group on behalf of its members	People First; National Pensioners Convention; British Council of Disabled People	Gives a voice to the otherwise unheard; expression of basic rights; supportive to members.	Likely to be concerned with general rather than individual issues; depends on financial and advisory support for success.
Advocacy by individuals on behalf of a group	Elected representatives; Partnership Board; Advisory panels	Contribution of relevant views; expression of democratic participation and rights.	Individuals may not be representative; views expressed may not be those of the group as a whole

Source: Williams, 2006

In economics, we may have a concept of 'equal pay for equal work', but what constitutes 'equal work' is riddled with assumptions about the worth of people that rest entirely on acceptance of inequality. John Cole, former BBC correspondent, pointed out in a recent radio broadcast that chief executives of companies can earn up to 120 times the salary of their employees. And the concept of 'equal pay' only applies within a particular society. While the average wage in Britain is around £25,000 a year, that in Bangladesh is around £400 a year, and that in some African countries even less. These gaps are getting larger, not smaller. If we believed in and sought economic equality in the world, then we would accept that, unless we use up the world's resources at an even greater rate than at present, North America, Europe and Japan would have to become much poorer, and China and India would have to curb their current growth, in order to allow Africa and South America to catch up. Without this, the slogan 'make poverty history' is tokenistic. Yet voluntarily becoming poorer is not on the agenda of any government, think tank, organisation or academic institution anywhere in the Western world (Barry, 2005).

Without equality of resources, it is difficult for people to achieve equality in other aspects of life. Nevertheless, some attempts to achieve equality in narrower fields outside the issue of global economics can be approached through the other concepts considered here (Thompson, 2003b). We devote the next chapters of this book to analysis of concepts of equality and their implications in health and social care.

Social justice

Justice in a legal context is concerned with 'just deserts' – what people deserve according to their observation of, or transgression against, agreed laws and constraints in society. Contained within this notion of justice is the idea of fairness, for example that the punishment should fit the crime, and that legal processes should be followed impartially (Rawls, 2005). The concept of 'social justice' extends this commitment to fairness into other aspects of social life – education, health care, social care, access to benefits, and so on (Hurley, 2005). Fairness means that no-one should be excluded from access to or benefiting from an available resource for reasons that are irrelevant to the purpose of that resource. At least debate and negotiation, and in many cases political action, has to take place to determine what is 'irrelevant' in particular circumstances. Skin colour, gender, disability, sexual orientation, age, social class, have all been considered relevant in all sorts of human endeavours and social structures, until political action – nearly always by groups representing people with the excluded characteristics – has determined that they are not (Pearce and Paxton, 2005; Wilkinson, 2005).

Discrimination

Negative stereotyped beliefs about people with certain characteristics in the categories just mentioned – skin colour, gender and so on – constitute prejudice. Where prejudice occurs in those with power to exclude, negative discrimination is likely to occur. Discrimination will be characterised by experiences of unfairness by individuals, by denial of opportunities, and by under-representation of people with particular characteristics. Anti-discrimination legislation establishes structures to allow individuals to have the fairness of their experiences, opportunities and representation judged against criteria of relevance, and for appropriate remedies to be available.

Discrimination can also arise through ignorance. For example, an organisation may be unaware of aids available to support disabled people, or how to provide information that will reach and be appropriate for ethnic minorities.

The MacPherson Report (1999) into the killing of Stephen Lawrence gave recognition to the phenomenon of 'institutional discrimination'. This is where a whole organisation operates in such a way as to discriminate against certain people or groups, because of inbuilt organisational structures and assumptions. This phenomenon can still exist, even where most or all of the individuals in the organisation are committed to anti-discrimination. In the case of Stephen Lawrence, the cause of blunders was not so much racism by individual officers as an assumption by the whole Metropolitan Police Force that Black people were more likely than white people to commit crime. This led to the initial arrest of Stephen's Black friend at the scene, while the gang of white killers got away. (See also Law et al., 2004.)

Institutional discrimination can be seen in many education, health and social care agencies, leading to less good treatment of disabled people and poor people, for example – even if this is completely unintended by any one individual in the whole agency.

Restoration

Within the legal concept of 'justice' there is the idea of 'restoration', whereby the balance of harm and benefit between offender and victim is addressed by making the offender compensate the victim in some way (Johnstone, 2003). This can be extended within the idea of 'social justice' to refer to a restoration of fairness where it is demonstrated that discrimination has taken place. As described elsewhere in this book, effective restoration requires positive policies and positive action to ensure that discrimination is eliminated and genuine fairness is accorded to all those whose characteristics are irrelevant to the task in hand. This may well

involve not just 'treating everyone the same', but identifying active ways of compensating for risks of discrimination faced by certain groups. Examples would be providing appropriate aids to performance for disabled people, or having active policies for recruitment of women or members of ethnic minority groups.

Privilege

A useful concept for understanding discrimination is that of 'privilege'. Rather than saying that certain social groups are at risk of discrimination, we can view the issue as one of particular identities carrying with them 'privilege'. This refers to the fact that certain groups are automatically accepted as worthy of inclusion, good treatment, respect and support. White, middle-class, male, heterosexual, British, mature but not old, Christian, home-owning people are likely to be such a privileged group in the UK. It can be argued that only when privileged people recognise their privilege and consciously work to curb its operation in situations of diversity, can discrimination be eliminated.

One of the first people to draw attention to this way of thinking was Peggy McIntosh in the USA. She wrote a seminal paper entitled 'White privilege and male privilege: a personal account of coming to see correspondences through work in Women's Studies' (McIntosh, 1988; see also Lipsitz, 2006). McIntosh compared her circumstances to those of African-American female colleagues in her building and line of work. She wrote an autobiographical list of unearned advantages that she experienced by virtue of having 'white' skin and Anglo-European facial features. Some examples from her list of 46 elements of unearned racial advantage include:

- I can if I wish arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time.
- I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely represented.
- I can be sure that my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race.
- I can swear, or dress in second-hand clothes, or not answer letters, without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty or the illiteracy of my race.
- I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.
- I can be pretty sure that if I ask to talk to the 'person in charge', I will be facing a person of my race.
- I can easily buy posters, post-cards, picture books, greeting cards, dolls, toys and children's magazines featuring people of my race.
- I am not made acutely aware that my shape, bearing or body odour will be taken as a reflection on my race.
- I can worry about racism without being seen as self-interested or self-seeking.
- If my day, week or year is going badly, I need not ask of each negative episode or situation whether it has racial overtones.

- I can be sure that if I need legal or medical help, my race will not work against me.
- I can arrange my activities so that I will never have to experience feelings of rejection owing to my race.

Social devaluation

Our identity, which we will discuss in Chapter 7, is defined not only by ourselves but by others. When our identity is defined negatively by those in power, oppressive experiences are highly likely to result. The social process involved has been called 'social devaluation'. It involves the casting of a person into negative social roles, for example of menace, object of ridicule, burden, sick, eternal child, subhuman creature (Wolfensberger, 1969, 1992, 1998; Race, 1999, 2003).

The idea is similar to that of 'stigma', described by Goffman in an influential book in the 1960s: *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoilt Identity* (Goffman, 1963). The concept of stigma is also discussed by Burke and Parker (2006), Mason et al. (2001) and Green (forthcoming).

The resulting social processes constituting devaluation, and the consequent oppressive experiences for the people who are devalued, are outlined in Table 2.2.

The oppressive experiences of people resulting from social devaluation have been called their 'wounds', a term originally coined by Jean Vanier (Wolfensberger, 1992; Williams, 2001). Vanier's solution to the problem of social devaluation and the consequent 'wounds' was to advocate for 'life-sharing' between privileged people and those at risk of devaluation, in a spirit of equality (Vanier, 1979). Wolfensberger (1998) has developed a framework for tackling devaluation which he calls 'social role valorisation'. It involves systematic, empirically-based measures to avoid the casting of people into negative social roles and to assist perceptions of them as being in socially valued roles, through avoidance and reversal of the devaluing social processes outlined in the Table 2.2. He especially applies this framework to the operation of human services (Race, 2003).

Oppression

At the beginning of Chapter 1 we gave our definitions of discrimination and oppression: the former involving inequality and unfairness, the latter adding the element of social evaluation as of low worth, leading to unwelcomeness, exclusion and even death. Here we will mention some other concepts and definitions of oppression and discrimination.

In a feminist context, Alison Jaggar defined oppression as 'Unjust, humanly imposed restrictions on people's freedom' (Jaggar, 1983: 5).

Table 2.2 Social devaluation

Social process	Experience of the person or group
Denial or restriction of opportunity or support or development or functioning	Impairment, loss of opportunity,experience and competence
Relegation to low status	Being looked down on, treated as second class
Systematic rejection by social agencies or from social networks	Rejection, being unwanted
'Symbolic marking', or surrounding people with negative, degrading and damaging imagery	Pervasive negative interpretation of one's nature and identity to others
Scapegoating as the cause of social problems	Constant risk of unjust accusation, punishment or ill-treatment
Distantiation, segregation valued social relationships and experiences	Enforced separation from valued people and
Assumption of a high degree of power over particular groups	Loss of control, loss of decision-making about one's own life
Physical discontinuity, moving people about without their control	Loss of history, belongingness, possessions, sense of physical continuity, relationships
Relationship discontinuity, treating relationships as unimportant	Frequent sudden disappearance of people in one's life without own control or knowledge, loss of relationships, fragility of relationships, betrayal
Lack of freely given relationships, discouragement or denial of the importance of natural relationships	Relationships are unnatural, artificial and very fragile; allegiance is to others, not oneself; people are discouraged from relating to oneself
Deindividualisation, regimentation, mass treatment	Being regimented, denial of choice, being regarded as a number or just one of a group rather than a unique individual
Poverty-making	Poverty, few possessions, insecure possessions, few resources, inability to improve one's social condition
Restriction of experience, denial of participation in social events or opportunities	Restricted or narrow experience, boredom, a wasted life, loss of knowledge and competence, few relationships
Cutting off from religious participation, treating spiritual life as unimportant	Spiritual needs unmet and spiritual life undeveloped
Life-wasting through low intensity, quality or relevance of service or support	One's time being wasted, lack of support, boredom,poverty of experience
Brutalisation and even death-making	High risk of assault, impairment, denial of life-saving treatment, or even being killed

Source: Williams, 2001

In a legal context, the Court of Appeal decided in 1987 that oppression should be defined by the Oxford Dictionary entry:

Exercise of authority or power in a burdensome, harsh or wrongful manner; unjust or cruel treatment of subjects, inferiors, etc.; the imposition of unreasonable or unjust burdens.

Marilyn Frye has given the definition:

> A systematic, invisible, group-specific and exploitative social structure, meant to keep one group in an inferior or submissive position. (Frye, 1998: 49)

Dalrymple and Burke (2006) emphasise powerlessness, suggesting that this can lead to negative self-image, negative experience, lack of opportunity, insecurity, stress, exclusion, rejection, being treated as inferior, and feelings of inadequacy, helplessness and dependence. They stress the role of the law in tackling discrimination and oppression. They also stress the need for oppression to be defined by those who experience it, echoing the need to study authentic first-hand accounts. Morris also talks of 'disabled people's struggle to take over ownership of the definition of oppression, of the translation of their subjective reality' (1992: 160).

Thompson describes discrimination as a process that results in oppression. He defines oppression as 'the hardship and injustice brought about by the dominance of one group by another; the negative and demeaning exercise of power' (2003a: 34) He suggests eight processes that make up discrimination: stereotyping, marginalisation, invisiblisation, infantilisation, welfarism, medicalisation, dehumanisation and trivialisation. We can see a similarity here with Wolfensberger's concept of social devaluation through being cast into negative social roles: for example, menace, eternal child, sick person, subhuman, object of ridicule (Wolfensberger, 1969, 1998).

To reiterate the distinction we use in this book: oppression goes rather further than discrimination in giving people bad experiences. Whereas the essence of discrimination is injustice or unfairness, the essence of oppression is being disliked and unwelcome, and you being made aware of that. One way of putting this is to say that oppression involves being cast into a negative social role, for example as a threat or a nuisance, an excessive consumer of resources, sick or non-human. If you are seen in this way, negative experiences are highly likely for you.

Exercise

See if you can find other definitions of discrimination and oppression. Have a go at writing your own definitions, based on the understanding you have gained of their meanings in practice.

Rights

One approach to avoidance of oppressive experiences is to establish civil or legal rights, through constitutions or the law. This strategy gives people

protection against harm, even if they are cast into a negative social role. Many groups at risk of oppression consider this is the best strategy: 'I don't care what people think about me, as long as I am protected from bad experiences.'

However, it can be argued that being valued is actually a greater safeguard. Rights can be taken away, but if others value you they may protect you and advocate for you even in the absence of rights. All rights were taken away from Jews in Nazi Germany, but a few survived because they were hidden or enabled to escape abroad by non-Jewish friends or benefactors. The moral task of seeing people as valuable and seeking and supporting valued social roles for them is an important strategy alongside the establishment of rights and protective legislation.

Identity and relationships

In this final section of this chapter we will cover a few topics that help to map out the task of seeing people as valuable and seeking valued social roles. Those topics are Identity, Deconstruction, Survivorhood versus victimhood, and Relationships.

Identity

As covered in Chapter 7, we need to be aware of how people define their own identity, how others see their identity, and the importance each attributes to different aspects of identity. Respecting and valuing identity, and developing the ability to convey that respect and valuing through knowledge of what particular identities entail, is an important part of being anti-oppressive (for example Owusu, 2000; Spencer, 2006).

Deconstruction

One source of difference between people themselves and others about identity, and a major source of stereotyping, is the fact that many concepts of identity are socially constructed rather than having a fixed identifiable basis in real experiences. The concept of being an 'older person', for example, is socially constructed. 'Older people' may not feel any different from younger people, may not be less fit or less able to work, or less able to do anything. Our physical sexual characteristics are biologically determined, but our gender identity is heavily influenced by conventional concepts of gender roles and gender behaviour (Elam, 1994). Disability is at least partly a social construction: if the world were designed for wheelchairs, we might all possess a wheelchair for convenience, and being a wheelchair user

would not necessarily be related to having an impairment and so would not immediately conjure up the identity of 'disabled person'. Ethnic identity can be defined by certain criteria, but supposed differences between ethnic groups may be merely assumptions with little basis in fact. The example was given in Chapter 1 of an early-20th-century encyclopaedia entry about African-American people.

Being clear about which beliefs about identity are socially constructed rather than real – the process of 'deconstruction' of conventional ideas about identity – helps us to avoid stereotypes and to appreciate and welcome diversity.

Survivorhood versus victimhood

Being regarded as a victim may entail being cast into a negative social role, as pathetic person who must be pitied and be an object of charity. This can in itself bring experiences of oppression. In general, people do not like being thought of as victims – it places them in an inferior position relative to others. Much better to foster is the concept of 'survivorhood'. We can then look for, respect and learn from the strategies that people themselves adopt to overcome oppression. We can work in equal partnership with them against oppression, rather than having a relationship based on power imbalance.

Relationships

The easiest context within which to pursue anti-oppression is the personal one – that is, in our personal relationships with people of different identities that we encounter. A strategy that can be used at any of the levels delineated by Thompson (Personal, Cultural and Structural – see Chapter 1) is outlined in Chapter 7. Even if we feel we cannot have great influence over cultural or structural forces, we can strive to be personally anti-oppressive towards those we meet. An anti-oppressive stance is not just a question of treating everyone the same. Just as institutional or organisational policies need to be pro-active and not just reactive, so our personal anti-oppressive practice needs to be active, thoughtful, knowledgeable and evaluated. We need to have an informed sense of the identity of the other person, what aspects of identity are important to them, and the need to avoid stereotyping. Within that, we can equip ourselves with at least some knowledge of culture, language, beliefs and likely experiences of the person that will help us to put them at ease, respect them, and adopt, if necessary, an advocacy or support role based on partnership and mutual learning.

The task of anti-oppression

If we wish to be anti-oppressive, the concepts, examples and frameworks so far discussed can help us to see the requirements. We need to:

- respect and welcome diversity
- rid ourselves, as far as possible, of stereotypes and prejudices through gaining accurate knowledge of people or groups that differ from us in some aspect of identity
- use any power and privilege we have to benefit people and not 'wound' them through social devaluation
- work for communality, sharing and equality
- be aware of negative aspects of the culture and structures of the society in which we live, and try to counteract them and change them
- recognise the pervasiveness and seriousness of oppression in the world, and commit ourselves to positive action to remedy and prevent it
- study first-hand accounts by those who experience oppression, to understand its reality, nature and prevalence, and to gain authentic knowledge for tackling it.

In later chapters we will outline various approaches to these tasks.

In the academic context of professional training, we also believe it is important to have a critical analysis of important concepts (Dominelli, 2002a, 2002b; Thompson, 2003a), and we begin this process with further analysis of the concepts of equality, diversity, equal opportunities and anti-discrimination in the following chapters, especially as they relate to organisational issues and practice.

Summary

- A wide variety of concepts are relevant to anti-oppressive practice.
- Understanding these concepts can help progress towards anti-oppression.
- Critical analysis of concepts is important.
- The concepts generate action tasks that can be adopted.