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TOYIN OKITIKPI & CATHY AYMER



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TOYIN OKITIKPI and CATHY AYMER

Key Concepts in Anti-discriminatory Social Work



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The difficulty lies not so much in developing new ideas
as in escaping from the old ones. (John Maynard Keynes)

contents

About the authors	xi
Acknowledgments	xii
Introduction	1
A call for change	1
About this book	3
Part One Underpinning Ideas and Concepts	7
1 The Nature of Discrimination	9
Introduction	9
Key concepts	12
Overt discrimination	12
Covert discrimination	14
Individual level discrimination	15
Organisation discrimination	17
Colour blind approach	18
Reasoning	20
Conclusion	21
2 Ideas Informing Anti-discriminatory Practice Models	23
Introduction	23
Ideas informing anti-discriminatory practice	25
Key concepts	26
Socio-structural understanding	27
Anti-discriminatory dilemma	32
The hierarchy of oppression	34
Conclusion	35
3 Models of Anti-discriminatory Practice	37
Introduction	37
The person-centred approach	40
Key concepts	42
Attitudinal and behavioural approaches	43

Structural considerations	45
A separate approach	47
Integrated services	48
Empowerment	49
Conclusion	50
4 The Political Dimension of Anti-discriminatory Practice	52
Introduction	52
The political nature of anti-discriminatory practice	55
The de-coupling of politics: Thatcherite ideology	58
Key concepts	60
The political act of challenging	61
Conclusion	62
5 Legislation and Policies	63
Introduction	63
Myth and reality: the difference between positive discrimination and affirmative action	65
Gender bias	67
The race question	68
Disability	70
When different discriminations collide	71
Human rights legislation	72
Sexual orientation	73
Religious belief	74
Commission for Equality and Human Rights	76
Equal opportunity policies	77
Conclusion	78
Part Two Implementation and Practice Considerations	81
6 Working with Diversity and Challenging the Status Quo	83
Introduction	83
The changing landscape	84
Beyond a binary world view	85
Not blaming the victim	87
The power dimension	88
Key concepts	89
Sexism	89
Disability	90

Racism	91
Class	92
Invisible groups	93
Religious tolerance	94
Making sense of the new realities	95
Conclusion	96
7 Key Skills, Knowledge and Anti-discriminatory Practice	97
Introduction	97
Rethinking anti-discriminatory practice	99
A proactive approach	100
Engaging with anti-discriminatory practice	101
Key concepts	102
Language use	102
The power of communication	104
Assessment	105
Introspective, reflexive and reflective practice	108
Conclusion	109
8 Integrating Anti-discriminatory Practice into Social Work Methods and Approaches	111
Introduction	111
Integrated approach	112
Key concepts	113
Crisis intervention	113
Task-centred approach	116
Cognitive-behavioural approach	119
Psychodynamic (psychoanalytical) approach	122
Conclusion	124
9 The Dynamic Nature of Anti-discriminatory Practice	126
Introduction	126
Unintended consequences of ADP	128
Key concepts	129
Children services	129
Adult services	132
Disability	134
Mental health	135
Community development	136
Conclusion	138

10	Towards a New Practice Dimension	140
	Introduction	140
	Meaning, identity and culture	142
	The domain of identity	143
	Identity as narrative	145
	Identity as psychological development	145
	Power	147
	Trust	149
	Problematising normality, universality	149
	The paradox of tolerance	153
	A modernist response in a different age	154
	Reenergising ADP	155
	Towards a new practice dimension	156
	Integration of the self	158
	Conclusion	159
	Bibliography	161
	Index	167

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Introduction

Treating people with kindness, tackling unfairness, and looking for ways to provide appropriate and non-discriminatory practice has a long history in social work (Forsythe 1995). Yet despite the lucidity of the notion, anti-discriminatory practice (ADP) is not necessarily a concept that can be easily integrated into day-to-day practice. Often cited as good practice and a good way of working with people, anti-discriminatory practice is generally presented, rightly, as an approach that is conducive to a positive outcome (Dominelli 2004; Payne 2005; Thompson 2005). Although we agree with the underlying assertions of Payne, Thompson, Dominelli and others, we nevertheless maintain that while it is not impossible for practitioners to adopt anti-discriminatory practice, their ability to embed the approach in their day-to-day practice would be less difficult if their organisation make the necessary changes that support anti-discriminatory practice. In our view, by creating a conducive environment for anti-discriminatory practice to thrive, the organisation would be helping practitioners' self-reflection and facilitating fundamental shift in their attitude and general outlook towards others. There is some evidence of tacit acceptance about the difficulty of implementing anti-discriminatory practice. For example, it is clear that approaches towards anti-discriminatory practice have changed over the years. In its earlier form, there were attempts to change people's beliefs and attitudes, but now there is a move away from individualising and focusing on self-awareness towards greater emphasis on developing legal framework, structures, systems and processes to curb practitioners' discriminatory practices.

A CALL FOR CHANGE

Anti-discriminatory practice was developed in response to social work practices that perpetuated discrimination, injustices and inequalities. The calls for an end to oppression and discrimination have a long history which gained some momentum in the 1960s. However, it was not until the 1970s and 1980s that the demands for equality were formulated into an approach that practitioners could attempt to integrate into their work. Anti-discriminatory practice challenged the negative assumptions that were endemic in society regarding race, social class, gender, age, disability and sexual orientation. During the 1970s and 1980s, there

were great concerns among social work practitioners, community groups and political activists (and many other concerned individuals), about the relatively high numbers of black children in the care system. There was also disquiet about the neglect and poor education attainment of both black children and white working-class children; concerns were expressed about society's negative attitudes towards migrants; there was anger about the police's poor response to domestic violence and their racism; the disproportionate numbers of young black men in mental institutions; the criminalisation of non-heterosexual relationships; and the inhuman and degrading provision for people with impairment/disability. In essence, the call for change and a different response to recipients of social welfare and social work services came from a diverse group of people and organisations.

This book does not make any bold claims or challenge the existing knowledge base of anti-discriminatory practice. Rather, it encourages a revisiting of the concept and an acknowledgement that the driving and fundamental principles of anti-discriminatory practice still holds as good today as when it was first developed. Although in this publication we suggest that anti-discriminatory practice roots were forged during the political hothouse of the 1960s and 1970s, we are in fact reminded by Forsythe (1995) that 'there was clearly a rich tradition of anti-discriminatory theory and practice in nineteenth-century social work, a vision of social inclusion and systematic challenge, within the contexts available, of structures which undermined this' (1995: 14).

He also highlighted, and it is worth quoting in full that:

There were therefore several traditions in respect of anti-discriminatory in early British social work. On the one hand were groups supporting blatant discriminatory, segregative practices on the basis of Malthusian and neo-Darwinian eugenic theory. On the other hand were the practice and vision of such pioneers as Elizabeth Fry, Samuel Barnett or Josephine Butler which revealed as much more universalist inclusive tradition and sustained, purposeful challenge to structures of discrimination. (Forsythe 1995: 15)

Forsythe further observed that:

A third group acted in the same way towards their particular group such as Barnardo and yet reinforced, say, the religious discrimination embedded in their social and intellectual context. Fourthly there were many who simply tried to avoid inflicting discrimination on their care group by simple sensitivity and kindness rather than systematic challenge of structures. (1995: 15)

The tradition of sensitivity, kindness, the avoidance of inflicting discrimination and trying to provide a universalist approach has a long history in social work. Of course, it is always the case that each generation is prone to believing that they had the idea first and that they are the ones at the forefront of 'innovative' practice. However, as Forsythe demonstrates, social work has always taken the idea of anti-discrimination practice seriously and has strived from its inception to ensure that the concept is not forgotten and is a core aspect of practice. Anti-discriminatory practice is part of the ethos contained in the health and social care field that supports practice that is grounded within an ethical framework and is guided by the duties, principles and responsibilities as set out in the professions' Code of Practice.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

This book is particularly aimed at practitioners, academics, students, lay readers and service users (since they are now involved in training practitioners and are contributing their knowledge in different areas of service provision). The aim of the book is not to upset people by being unnecessarily provocative. Anti-discriminatory practice, although a good practice, does have the ability to evoke fear, anxiety and mistrust. In some cases, just the mere mention of the concept generally provokes uncomfortable feelings and concerns about being unfairly labelled. Unfortunately, it is not uncommon for discussions and sessions on Anti-discriminatory practice to turn into acrimonious battle grounds with a polarisation of views and intolerant stance being taken by participants. As we know from our own experiences of running training courses, many practitioners have been bruised by their encounters with people who hold discriminatory views and who fail to see what the fuss was all about. Similarly, there are those who feel they are unable to take part in serious exchanges of views about anti-discriminatory practice because they are too afraid of being labelled racists, disabilist, sexists and/or homophobic. One of the overriding objectives of this publication is to encourage discussion to take place and a plea for tolerance and better understanding about differences. It asks for people to be honest and sensitive about the subject and also to acknowledge that this is indeed a difficult subject area to explore. It is important to admit from the outset that no one is perfect and that while a person may experience discrimination and be oppressed by others, they may also, at the same time, discriminate and be oppressive towards other people. In other

words, no one person or group has a monopoly on experiencing or perpetuating discrimination or oppression.

This book is divided into two parts. **Part one**, consisting of five chapters, focuses on discussing the concept and the different models of discrimination and the legal framework within which it operates. Chapter 1 explores the nature and the extent of discrimination. It discusses the fact that discrimination has physical, psychological and emotional manifestations. In essence, understanding the nature and impact of discrimination assists in placing anti-discrimination practice in context. Chapter 2 considers different concepts and socio-cultural ideas that underpin discussions about anti-discriminatory practice. It highlights some of the complex dynamics that anti-discriminatory practice has to work within. It also tries to make the point that although the approach is empowering, there is a growing danger of it becoming hijacked by intolerance, oppressive and discriminatory attitudes and beliefs. Chapter 3 demonstrates that there is a tension between approaches that are service-led and those which are service-user focused. It discusses how some organisations straddle between the different camps while others, for good reasons, adopt what is akin to a service-user bias. Chapter 4 explores the political dimension of anti-discriminatory practice. It argues that Anti-discriminatory practice was borne out of political struggles of the 1960s and 1980s. It suggests that while it is understandable that an association could be made between cultural and sexual politics and anti-discriminatory practice, it is just as important to retain the political edge of anti-discriminatory practice. Chapter 5 is interested in exploring the legislative framework that underpins the ideas and philosophy of anti-discriminatory practice. As well as providing an historical overview of how legislation has evolved in this area, it also illustrates the difference between what is actually sanctioned by law and what has developed, increasingly, as a matter of 'culture' within practice. **Part two**, which also consists of five chapters is more practice orientated. Chapter 6 concentrates on the reasons why practitioners would still need to work with anti-discriminatory practice. It argues that, despite the increasing reliance on litigation, the first port of call of discrimination is still the contact and interaction between people. In this context, it is the encounter between the practitioner and the service user that is of interest. It suggests that it is within this encounter that prejudices, unfairness and discriminatory values, attitudes and behaviours are played out. Chapter 7 examines the range of skills and knowledge utilised in anti-discriminatory practice and the application of these skills in practice. Chapter 8 attempts to

integrate anti-discriminatory practice with a (limited) number of methods and approaches utilised in social work. The aim is to discuss and consider the applicability of anti-discriminatory practice ideas in some of the different methods and approaches generally used in social work. Chapter 9 discusses the dynamic nature of anti-discriminatory practice. It focuses on some of the service areas such as: children and families; adult services; disability; mental health and community development, and suggests that there are continuous changes taking place in social work practice and, therefore, anti-discriminatory practice would need to adapt and cope with the changing socio-cultural landscape. Finally, Chapter 10 discusses some complex sets of ideas about identity, meaning, culture and trust. It explores the inherent tensions in anti-discriminatory practice and argues that for the concept to remain relevant it has to continuously argue its case and reassert its effectiveness. This chapter suggests a new practice dimension and asserts the importance of an integrated approach that recognises the complexities of people's lives and the realities of their experiences.

Although there is a logical order to the book, each chapter is self-contained and could therefore be read out of sequence. It is evident that throughout the publication reference is made, in discussion, about how a particular area may be approached. However, it is important to stress that this is not a practice guideline with endless case examples; rather it is a starting point for rediscovering and reengaging with anti-discriminatory practice. We hope it is of use to you.

