

**CRITICAL SELF-GAZING: EDUCATION
FOR ANTI-OPPRESSIVE PRACTICE**

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FOR ANTI-OPPRESSIVE PRACTICE**

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Abstract

For the past decade, many Schools of Social Work across Canada have incorporated the anti-oppressive perspective in their course curriculum, despite the many contentions within the profession. Drawing upon my experience as a student of colour in a School of Social Work, this study adopted a qualitative research approach (Mason, 2002) in exploring the experiences of four white students and four students of colour at the McMaster University School of Social Work as they learn about anti-oppressive perspective, in particular, the impact of students' racial identities in their learning. Their reflections shed light on what can be done to support students' learning.

The students in this study described the process of learning anti-oppressive perspective as "eye-opening". They expressed that critical reflectivity on their implicated role in the complex network of systemic power relations as indispensable to their learning, but also very challenging and unsettling. The process is full of ambiguities and contradictions, especially when situated in a society filled with contesting ideologies where oppressive practices are often masked with egalitarian values. Students referred to processes that nourish or hamper the development of critical reflectivity. In turn, this elucidated the importance of an education that will illuminate complexities and ambiguities so as to equip students to face the challenges of their future and to work creatively to eliminate oppression.

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Finally, to those who consciously or unconsciously excluded me. Without their participation, I would not have been able to see the social workings of oppressive ideologies and practices, both in others and in myself. We are all implicated; therefore we are all accountable to work towards social change.

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Introduction

Have you ever felt invisible in a classroom of less than ten people where people all around you are talking to one another while you are the only one in the room that has nothing to say after you say hello? You are the only one in the room that does not seem to fit in. For the first semester in the School of Social Work at McMaster University, that was my experience. The fact is everyone was so nice and polite; it never occurred to me that anyone in the room purposefully excluded me from their conversation. No one was nasty or anything close to that but somehow I could not find my place, I didn't fit in. It was troubling for me because for the past 30+ years of my life, I often took pride in my excellent social skills. I had been a full-time student, a part-time student and a mature student in the past, and I had never experienced anything quite like that in my life. I could not make sense of what was happening. Was it me? Had I lost all sense of social skills after moving to Canada? Why couldn't I fit in? I longed to fit in so badly, I hated being in a room with people mingling and chatting with one another, yet I didn't seem to find my place of existence in that space. I figured it must be me! If everyone else fit in, and I couldn't, then there must be something wrong with me.

Attending class full time and having to face the same scenario again and again was just too intense; many times, I came home from school feeling really depressed. I could not figure out what was wrong. Though I was learning about oppression and anti-oppressive practice in class, and had been told that being a person of colour, being a woman, I am being oppressed in society, I never felt that. I was unable to relate my everyday experiences of isolation to oppression. Because of the subtle and

seemingly trivial nature of my experience, it was very difficult to see what was wrong. I was unable to identify it, thus unable to name it.

I was unable to name it until I talked to my friend, who is also an immigrant and a woman of colour, and she shared two incidences with me. One was the experience of being spat on by a white male, and the other was being treated courteously by her white co-workers but never being invited to social gatherings. For her, the second incident was more hurtful, she felt invisible and silenced. She could not point her fingers on the act: it was so trivial and mundane, but constant. The impact was very strong, stronger than being spat on. The invisibility and unconscious nature of such acts make it hard for those on the outside to understand. In turn, it makes it hard for those suffering from them to voice out their experiences without being trivialized or denied. If those experiencing the impact of these acts choose to talk about it, often times they will be written-off as being “over-sensitive” or being accused of falsely accusing (Narayan, 1988; Essed, 1990; Henry & Tator, 2000). I found comfort in my friend’s sharing. It was a relief to be able to make sense of what is happening in my life, instead of naming myself or being named as “oversensitive” or merely just having difficulties in adjustment.

After my friend’s sharing and after reading Essed’s “everyday racism”, I came to understand how our everyday personal interactions are socially and historically organized, everything that happened in the past and present made more sense to me. Without such knowledge, I would still be struggling with my sense of inadequacy and frustration at not fitting in. I would still be at a loss and continue to blame myself for my failures to cope. Though I have never experienced blatant racism in Canada, there were many incidences I encountered that proved to be racist. For example, before

coming to Canada, my husband's coworker asked him if I married him for his money? What money? Why would someone think that? Would he ask the same question if my husband married someone that's white, that's not from the South? There is this belief that people from the South (Third world) will marry people from the North (First world) for a better life, people in the North are more civilized and superior, and those from the South need to be saved by those from the North (Razack, 1998; Mackey, 2002). But I never considered myself from the Third World. I am from a metropolis. What if I am from the Third world, doesn't it make sense that people marry for love? Is that too hard to believe? Or am I just too naive? After arriving in Canada, I've encountered numerous such incidences. Now I understand why the sales girl at the shoe store would talk to my husband instead of me, even though I am the one who is trying on the shoes; or people would introduce Chinese friends to me and assume that we will be good friends, even though I am from Hong Kong and speak Cantonese, while the other is from Taiwan and speaks Mandarin. These are very trivial occurrences and they just appeared to be people's ignorance at the time, or they are so mundane that they go unnoticed most of the time. There was just this sense of discomfort but I was not able to connect these incidences to the bigger picture---the stereotypes and assumptions behind these everyday practices. Now I come to see them as being socially organized. They are a manifestation of Ethnocentrism, a belief in a "we-they" way of thinking (Essed, 1990).

As I look back, I realized how I have internalized my own subordination (Mullaly, 2002). Born and raised in a British colony, I was brought up to believe that white people are more superior and civilized; they are polite and never litter---the typical British gentlemen (this carries sexist and racist tones). We were taught to be

more like our colonizers, and learn to hate to be Chinese because China is so underdeveloped and primitive. Up until I was 20, I refused to visit China. The irony is how is it possible that a country with a history of almost 4000 years can be considered as uncivilized and barbaric, and portrayed as the “truth”. I remembered how my mom used to trick me into eating chicken intestines when I was a little girl. She would tell me if I want to write better English, I should eat chicken intestines. The shape of the chicken intestines resembled the English writing. I believed her and I ate it, not because I liked it or was hungry, but because I wanted to write good English. Why would a young Chinese girl want to write good English? Why would her mother use such an excuse (from a working class family, I was taught at a young age not to waste any food)? Funny as this example may seem, it demonstrated the pervasiveness of the ideology of white supremacy. Knowing English, you are seen as more superior, being white is more valued. I used to love swimming in the beach and outdoors, I had a really brown tan in the summer. I remembered one time one of my elders told me I look so ugly with such dark tan, she said “一白遮三醜” (one whiteness covers three flaws) which means that as long as you are whiter, you are better looking. From then on, I never swam outdoors again. I tried to keep as white as possible. Such is the tool of the colonizers to rule the colonized, “power, most of the time, must be effected by those who are ‘being’ controlled” (Foote & Frank, 1999, p. 161). Like prisoners in the Panopticon, I learnt to watch myself, I kept the colour of my skin as light as possible, I spoke English, and I ate western food. I was “disciplined to see the world through the eyes of the privilege” (Dei, Karumanchery & Karumanchery-Luik, 2004, p. 7).

Not only did I internalize my own oppression, I was also racist. I had been ingrained with the ideologies of the privileged. There are a lot of foreign domestic

workers in Hong Kong. They are mainly from the Philippines. “We” call “them” Filipino maids. One time when I talked to my husband, then boyfriend, and I mentioned about the “Filipino maids”, he accused me of being racist. I denied it and could not understand how could I be racist when I was so nice to them. I respected them and always treated them courteously. Little did I know that having the power to use this language that stereotypes them as maids, I have defined, exploited and reduced them to the identity of a maid. Even though I had no intention of oppressing them, my behavior, socially and historically constructed, perpetuated “our” domination over “them”. My identity was/is tainted with the ideology of white supremacy. Now I realized acting white does not grant me the ticket to membership and acceptance. My skin colour will always be the marker of my difference. But I’ve come to understand that I don’t need to act white (though there is still a part of the learnt colonial mind in me and that’s something I need to be conscious of at all times), and being different does not necessarily have to mean being subordinate.

I went to great lengths to share my story because personal experience is a manifestation of how unequal social relations are structured. It is also through interpersonal interactions that unequal power relations are maintained and perpetuated. My experience is just a small window into the insidious and complex nature of how oppression operates in society. My experience in the School of Social Work is significant because the university as a system is the epitome of the society. As Brecht said of the theatre, “the university too is a place in the world, and the world is in it” (Bannerji, 2000a, p. 114). Individuals are the agents of the script, they are also the actors who interpret and change the script. The McMaster School of Social Work, like most Schools of Social Work across Canada, recognizes the importance of addressing

issues of oppression and injustice. The McMaster School of Social Work had incorporated an anti-oppressive framework as the foundation in the BSW and MSW curriculum. The School has explicitly adopted an anti-oppressive philosophy as follows:

As social workers, we operate in a society characterized by power imbalances that affect us all. These power imbalances are based on age, class, ethnicity, gender, geographic location, health, physical ability, race, sexual preference and income. We see personal troubles as inextricably linked to oppressive structures. We believe that social workers must be actively involved in the understanding and transformation of injustices in social institutions and in the struggles of people to maximize control over their own lives.

But what does it mean when the School holds an anti-oppressive philosophy and teaches about anti-oppression in the classroom in the hope of teaching students to eradicate oppression, yet as a “yellow” body in a pre-dominantly white institution, my felt experience was the opposite. I felt isolated, excluded, and silenced. I refused to see myself as both the oppressed and the oppressor; it was difficult to see my role in maintaining oppression. As I observed other students in my graduate courses and undergraduate courses, it was equally difficult for them to implicate themselves in being accountable in perpetuating oppression, though each one of them had the good will and commitment to eradicate injustices. This prompted me to want to find out more about the experiences of students at the McMaster School of Social Work as they learn about anti-oppressive perspective. I wanted to find out what the process is like for both students of colour and white students, how their racial identities impact their learning of anti-oppressive perspective, and what is done and what can be done to support the students’ learning and to equip them in dealing with issues of oppression/racism in their future work. These questions constituted the focus of this study. The next chapter will be a discussion of the literatures used to inform this study.

Chapter One

Literature Review

1.1 Looking through the lens of race

I chose to look at issues of oppression through the entry point of race, not because I am more interested in race or think that it is more important than other sites of oppression. But because it has been a very significant part of my experience after I moved to Canada and was what motivated me to conduct this study.

1.1.1 Racism in the Everyday

The concept of race is highly contested and ever-changing in the academic world. Recent scholars disavow the natural scientists' categorization of peoples hierarchically into different races based on their phenotypic/physical characteristics or genotype/genetic differences, and posit that there is only one race: the Homo sapiens. However, there is still a widespread common sense understanding of race as in diverse races with perceived differences of intelligence. The legacy of the biological determinism of race still manages to slip into our everyday understandings of the world (Dei et. al., 2004), but is camouflaged with a dominant discourse, in which the practice of racism is portrayed as isolated overt acts of violence and as a thing of the past. Often times, racist practices can happen even without the presence of the word race. "Discourse", is a term Foucault used to "refer to the ways language, text and other forms of communication are used as vehicles of social processes" (1980, cited in Henry & Tator, 2000, p. 291). The dominant discourse is a "public transcript" which reinforces and legitimizes the position of the dominant group; and grants them the power to define and structure the experiences of "reality" and the "reality" of the

subordinate group and their relationship with them (Hare-Mustin, 1994; Bell, 2003). I was mystified by the “public transcript” about racism. While I felt different because of my identity as a Chinese woman and an immigrant in Canada, I was unable to name my experience of alienation. It was normalized as a natural process of adjustment in a new country. Without an understanding of the historical development of the concept of race and the changing forms in which racism manifests itself, I was kept in this puzzlement and torn between the dominant ideology that denies the existence of racism and being true to my felt but unspeakable pain.

The process of unfolding my puzzlement started with the reading of Essed’s (1990) “Everyday Racism”. The verbal accounts of the women of colour interviewed by Essed in the Netherlands provided a counter narrative to the dominant discourse of cultural tolerance in the Netherlands which suggests the increasing equal treatment of racially and ethnically diverse groups and the non-existence of racism. The Black women’s everyday lived experiences (such as a Black doctor being mistaken as a cleaner in a hospital consultation room, a Black student’s sense of exclusion in the school system, a Black customer’s sense of being surveillanced and followed when entering a store) tell a different story. These experiences were very mundane and trivial, almost invisible except to those who suffer from them, but they are systemic, recurrent, and familiar practices that demonstrate how power operates in everyday situations. They are a manifestation of the idea of “ethnocentrism” (Essed, 1990, p. 8), the belief that one’s ethnic group is “better” than other ethnic groups; the values, norms and beliefs of one’s group are taken as the “good” norms and one’s culture is more superior and dominant than the others. It is this belief in the power and privilege

of the dominant group that defined the others as inferior and subordinate, and sustained the unequal relations of domination and subordination.

I immediately related my experiences of isolation to the practices of everyday racism; they are trivial but significant. Essed (1990) argues that racism is more than ideology; it is a process that is reinforced by recurring routine everyday practices in social structures. The racist “practices are not just ‘acts’ but also include complex relations of acts and (attributed) attitudes” (Essed, 1991, p. 3). The concept of everyday racism connects structural forces of racism with routine situations in everyday life, and links the ideological dimensions of racism with daily routines (Essed, 1991, p. 2). It is through these everyday, mundane, routine social processes that the system of structural racial inequalities is activated, re-created and perpetuated. The individuals are significant as actors in the power structure, but the focus is on how mundane everyday racial practices perpetuate unequal social structures.

1.1.2 Racism in State Practices

Much like the Netherlands, Canada takes pride in being a tolerant state. Unlike the Netherlands, Britain or the United States, Canada has an official policy on multiculturalism since 1971, adopted by former Prime Minister Trudeau, with the hidden agenda to keep white Canada intact by creating a mosaic of diverse cultures. The discourse of multiculturalism and the portrayal of Canada as a “cultural mosaic” is a strategy in which to contain, control, normalize, stereotype, idealize, marginalize and reify difference or those deemed “others” (Mackey, 2002, p. 6). The idea of tolerance is inherently problematic as it implies the presence of unequal power relations. And multiculturalism implicitly subsumes the idea of a core Anglo-Canadian culture, that is unmarked yet dominant. Those “other” cultures are marked

and tolerated only under the premise that the dominant culture is still the more superior one. They are the norm in which the “other” is being measured and defined. The dominant discourse takes whiteness as the “universal marker of being civilized” (Giroux, 1994, cited in Castagna & Dei, 2000, p. 30), it is so obvious that it is unspoken and unnamed. Thus, the superiority of the white race is maintained and remains invisible.

Moreover, multiculturalism frames racism as a cultural issue and does not problematize the unequal power relations and equity issues. This is the new face put on the old colonial discourse. Instead of the biological determinism of race as a self-righteous racial ideology to legitimize the “rule and divide” of non-Europeans by the European colonizers during colonization (Castagna & Dei, 2000, p. 21; Reynolds & Lieberman, cited in Dei, 1996), it is replaced by a more covert and sophisticated modern-version of ideological “othering”, with an emphasis on culture and ethnicity. Though the colonial era died, its legacy survives. People of colour continue to be denoted by their cultural practices and skin colour, and defined as the “other”, as fixed and knowable, in which their unequal treatment is justified (Essed, 1990; Dei et. al., 2004). As Foucault proclaimed, “visibility is a trap” (Foucault, cited in Dei, et. al., 2004, p.90). Razack (1998) termed this new racism the “culturalization of racism” (p. 60). It is this new cultural form of racism that is more difficult to detect and eliminate. So, the theoretical conception of race per se is not the problem, but the social practice of racism is and it is getting more and more evasive (Dei, 1996). As a social construction, race retains social currency because of its usefulness in sustaining the unequal power and privilege in society (Henry, Tator, Mattis & Rees, 1995).

Furthermore, the strong belief of a democratic liberal Canada where everyone is granted equal opportunity to succeed and is rewarded based on the individual's merit obscures the presence of racist practices. "Democratic racism" (Henry et. al., 1995, p. 13) is the presence of two conflicting and opposing sets of values in our society: one that commits to the democratic principles of justice, equality and fairness but co-exist with the racial attitudes and behaviors that discriminate and mistreat those deemed "others" (Henry et. al., 1995; Henry & Tator, 2000). The presence of these democratic ideals masks the racist ideas and perpetuates the power of the privilege and the exploitation of the oppressed. That is why one can be racist without knowing it. They hold strong beliefs in liberalism and avoid acting in a racist manner, however they will avoid contact with the minority groups. This is what Kovel (1970) refers to as "aversive racism", the aversive racists hold racist prejudice but avoid acting in discriminatory ways and see themselves as non-racist (cited in Henry, et. al., 1995).

It is the elusive and ever-changing nature of race and racism that sustain its pervasiveness and longevity. Racist ideologies are so deeply ingrained and woven into the social fabric and our social consciousness that they frame our understanding of the world and our expectations and behaviors; and shape the way we experience the world (Dei, et. al., 2004). It becomes second nature to us and often becomes invisible to those that commit racist practices and those that suffer from them. That is why I was unaware and did not relate my sense of isolation to racist practices and could not name it as such.

In spite of the significance of race and racism in my life, I cannot transform society just by removing racism (Dei, 1996). Racism is just one way in which hegemonic ideologies and structural inequalities are sustained. All the axes of

oppression interlock and intersect like a tapestry, in which racism is a thread. By looking through the concept of race and changing manifestations of racism, I am challenging injustice by rejecting social relations of domination and oppression, and seeking to obliterate the tapestry of oppression. “Oppression results from domination and marginalization, and is both a process and an outcome” (Richie, cited in McDonald & Coleman, 1999, p. 20). Similar to racism, the other sites of oppression are maintained by the same mainstream discourse that obscures oppressive ideologies and pushes those deemed different to the margins, thus maintaining the power and privilege of those at the centre. Oppression is more than ideology. It is a process in which unequal social structures are preserved and it has material and psychological consequences for those that suffer from it.

1.2 Anti-Oppressive Perspective¹ in Social Work

Since its inception, the role and purpose of social work has been highly contested, the face of the profession has changed a lot over the years and it is still changing (Cree, 2002; Dominelli, 2002). Despite the profession’s mission to enhance people’s well-being and to promote a just society out of good intentions and altruistic guiding principles, from the start, the profession has been torn by its dependence on state funding and its role in social control. From the legacy of the “charity” organizations and “friendly visitors”, the early social workers mainly focused on helping people to cope or deal adequately with their existing predicaments and conform to societal expectations (Carniol, 2000; Dominelli, 2002; Wolfson, 2001). Individual deficiencies, not structural circumstances, were often seen as the cause of social problems. Most social workers adopted the therapeutic or maintenance

¹ Anti-oppressive perspective/practice framework is used interchangeably in this paper.

approach, and worked on changing the individual and their psychological functioning, providing them with the resources to better adjust to their lives. There were a few innovative “settlers” during the Settlement House movement who started to look at the social structures of society, and began to argue that social problems are caused by structural circumstances instead of individual deficiencies (CSWE, 2005). However, it was not until the 1950s and 60s, at the time of the feminist, civil rights, gay and lesbian, disability and other social movements, that more social workers began to question these reformist approaches and their inability to address issues of structural inequalities (Dominelli, 2002; Campbell, 2003). This is apparent with the emergence of radical, structural, feminist, anti-racist, critical and liberatory frameworks which aim at transforming the systemic and structural roots of injustice and oppression (Pease & Fook, 1999; Campbell, 2003). However, the counter analysis that stresses the importance of working only with individuals to reduce the severity of their situation is still prevalent. Throughout the history of social work, the debate initiated by Mary Richmond and Jane Addams has been continuous (Margolin, 1997).

While the debate within the profession is unfolding, social work is, of course, affected by the unfolding societal-political scene. Under neo-liberalism, unequal social relations are more crystallized and the social work profession is faced with multiple challenges. There are growing social problems, increasing economic disparity caused by economic globalization, decreasing welfare spending, increased privatization of social services, expanding global migration, and rising expressions of oppression (Campbell, 2003). While the dominant discourse of the notion of “deserving” and “undeserving” clients is revived, there is increasing awareness among service users about their rights (Dominelli, 2002a). They began to question the taken-

for-granted assumption of social workers as scientific experts and demanded to be involved. The profession became more aware of the problem of its claim on neutrality and the impact of the dominant ideologies in constructing the profession and the individual social worker's intervention. They were more cognizant of how their involvement in the service users' lives served to maintain the existing systemic and structural unequal distribution of power and privilege, and re-created more injustices.

As contention within the social work profession continues, the current focus is on anti-oppressive perspective in social work education and practice. This is not a new practice model. It is part of the profession's ongoing old-new controversy (Dominelli, 2002). Anti-oppressive perspective is a synthesis and a refinement of a range of emancipatory approaches to social work (Dominelli, 2002; Dumbrill, 2003). With the approval of the Canadian Association of Schools of Social Work, the new accreditation standards in 1999 mandated the inclusion of the analysis of injustice and oppression in the social work curriculum (Carniol, 2000). At present, the Canadian Association of Schools of Social Work states:

The curriculum shall ensure that students achieve...an understanding and analysis of oppressions...analysis and practice skills pertaining to the origins and manifestations of social injustice in Canada, and the multiple and intersecting bases of oppression, domination and exploitation...and the competency in interventions with clients of diverse ethnic, cultural and racial backgrounds (CASSW, 2004).

More and more Schools of Social Work across Canada are incorporating the anti-oppressive framework in their curriculum, and it is gradually being taken up in the field.

Anti-oppressive perspective addresses social divisions and structural injustices, and provides a framework to analyze and eradicate oppression and discrimination (Dominelli, 2002; Campbell, 2003). Society is seen as characterized by hierarchical

social relations and unequal societal structures, on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender, class, sexual orientation, ability, age and religion (Mullaly, 2002; Dominelli, 2002a). Those different from the dominant group are pushed to the margin and defined as “inferior”. These social relations are constructed as natural and immutable (Dominelli, 2002a). The nature of oppression is pervasive, complex, subtle, multiple and interlocking, and carries material consequences for those at the margin. Anti-oppressive perspective aims to provide more sensitive and appropriate services to meet people’s needs regardless of their social status and is concerned with reducing the detrimental effects of structural inequalities, and in particular, eradicating those forms of oppressive practices that are reproduced in and through social work practice (Dominelli, 2002; Dominelli, 2002a). The clients’ ways of knowing and their involvement are seen as crucial.

The anti-oppressive perspective presents much practical and analytical potential to address structural and personal issues. However, there are worries that, with time, the idea will be sucked into the mainstream and lose its revolutionary potential. Moreover, the practice of anti-oppressive perspective requires educators, students and practitioners to be highly critical and reflexive. This is not always easy. The teaching, learning, and practice of anti-oppressive practice is still a work in progress, and the debate within the profession continues.

1.3 Current debates and challenges in the Anti-oppressive perspective discourse

Although the anti-oppressive framework has gained currency in social work education, the teaching, learning, and practice of anti-oppressive perspective is not without contentions. There is occasional backlash from supporters of the traditional reformist models that prefer working on a micro-level. Their lack of attachment to

anti-oppressive perspective may stem from their latent fear in the loss of taken-for-granted privileges awarded to them through an inegalitarian society (Dominelli, 2002). It may also be their lack of an understanding of the linkage of micro social work to structural changes that lead to social transformation. On the other hand, those that support structural change such as radical, feminist and anti-racist social workers, are worried that issues of race, gender, and class are submerged under the umbrella term “oppression”, where one can avoid discussions on specific axes of oppression. It is often easier and more distanced to talk about oppression than to admit one is racist or sexist; for example, often times during discussion on issues of race and racism, other sites of oppression are introduced to either ease or divert the discussion (Dei, 1996; Razack & Jeffery, 2002; Tester, 2003). Moreover, clumping everything under the umbrella of oppression leads to the question of hierarchies of oppression: are all sites of oppression the same, if not, which is more dominant and pervasive? Some worry that this may damage the potential for collective efforts to fight oppression.

There are also criticisms from service users. They felt that they were barely involved in the discussions and development of anti-oppressive practice, that it seemed more of an academic endeavour where service users are being appropriated rather than emancipated. There is more to be gained by the academic and supporters of the approach rather than those they work to liberate (Dominelli, 2002; Wilson & Beresford, 2000). Moreover, how can service users be empowered or emancipated when they are not involved in the process of liberation? In addition, some worry that while there is the talk on practicing from an anti-oppressive perspective, the material aspect of oppression is given less focus and, instead, the discursive dimension is taking centre stage (Tester, 2003).

Challenging inequalities and transforming social relations are an integral part of anti-oppressive practice (Dominelli, 2002, p. 9). This requires the anti-oppressive practitioner to be very aware of the dynamics and their implicated participation in the oppression. Despite the focus on social structures in anti-oppressive practice, the process of accounting for one's own responsibility in maintaining unequal power relations not only is very challenging, it can also lead to individuals being pathologized which defeats the philosophy of anti-oppression. The labels "oppressor" and "oppressed" can be very demeaning, disempowering and paralyzing; however, the process of enabling the practitioners to become aware of how oppression works and is reproduced in and through daily interactions is essential (Dominelli, 2002a, p. 13). Critical reflectivity is crucial in the practice of anti-oppressive perspective but is not easy to teach or to learn. It is a continuous challenge to educators, students and practitioners.

Anti-oppressive practice as a unifying concept has its merits and many possibilities, notwithstanding all the challenges. The fight against oppression cannot be neutral. It is highly political, though some within the profession still argue that social work is apolitical and objective. While, Dominelli (2002a) conceptualizes oppression as a continuum that runs from oppression to anti-oppression to non-oppression, I see the sequence is more from oppression to non-oppression to anti-oppression. This conceptualization is similar to Dei's (1996) conceptualization of racism that runs from racist to non-racist to anti-racist. Despite our wish to see a world that is non-oppressive, situated in a society with a history of oppressive practices and ideologies, the way to achieve the absence of oppression in society is through engaging in anti-oppressive work. There is no room for inaction, because to be non-

oppressive is to be a by-stander. However, that does not mean that anti-oppressive practice is the only way to practice social work. Like any other theory, it has limitations. It is impossible to find a grand theory that can satisfactorily expound a world that is full of complexity and contradictions, and multiple “realities”. While anti-oppressive perspective has come to the fore, the question is how can we utilize this knowledge to understand the changing and evasive nature of oppression and eradicate injustices. There is still much to be explored and learned in the teaching and learning of anti-oppressive framework and its implications for practice.

Chapter Two

Methodology

A qualitative research approach (Mason, 2002) was adopted in this study in order to explore social work students' experiences in the McMaster School of Social Work as they learn about anti-oppressive perspectives, in particular, the learning and teaching about race as an axis of oppression. In addition to interviewing students from the undergraduate program, I also incorporated my own experiences as a graduate student in the School of Social Work. Feminist epistemology recognizes the personal biography of the researcher as valuable data. Weaving together the stories of the researcher and the researched not only enriches the research, it also explicitly locates the researcher in the research, granting access to readers about how the researcher comes to understand what she/he does (Cotterill & Letherby, 1995). As C. Wright Mills (1959) concludes, "The social scientist is not some autonomous being standing outside society. No-one is outside society, the question is where he stands within it" (cited in Cotterill & Letherby, 1995, p. 71). Research is neither neutral nor objective, it is situated within the socio-political historical context, therefore must be interpreted and understood within such context.

2.1 Sample

The participants in this study were recruited from among the students completing the BSW program at the McMaster School of Social Work. Students at a senior level were chosen to be potential participants because of their comparatively longer experience in social work education and in the field. Both white students and students of colour were included in this study because I was particularly interested in

exploring how differences in students' racial identities affected their learning of anti-oppressive perspective in a historically predominantly white society, and in considering how their learning process can be best supported.

In early May 2005, an e-mail was sent through the McMaster School of Social Work to students then in the program, inviting their participation in the research (See Appendix 1). The first four white students and the first four students of colour that came forward made up the study sample of eight. The students self-identified themselves as white or of colour. There were six full-time students and two part-time students; five of the eight students had just graduated. Seven students were female and one student was male. Of the eight students, six had had brief encounters with me. Care had been taken to ensure that they didn't feel obligated or coerced to participate as the e-mail had been distributed by the School administration, not by me. That said, they did acknowledge that, while already interested in the topic of anti-oppressive perspective, seeing the familiarity of the researcher's name also gave them a sense of comfort and motivated their participation. The students' interest in the topic may also suggest that they were particularly actively engaged with it and hence not "typical" of the larger student body. While this may have been true, the focus of this study was not on finding whether students supported anti-oppressive perspective or not, but rather, on exploring how the students' racial identities affected their learning.

The McMaster School of Social Work is a medium size institution with an undergraduate student body of approximately 200 students and a faculty complement of 12. At the time when the interviews took place, all faculty members in the school were white, with the exception of one black associate professor. The composition of the student body was also mostly white, with approximately a quarter of the students

being of colour. Most students are female. Since the School does not keep a record of the racial profile of the students, this is only approximate information. At McMaster and in other Schools of Social Work, there is an increasing trend to diversify the racial composition of the student and faculty body, but at the time of the study, it continued to “look” predominantly white. The McMaster School of Social Work is also typical of the other Schools in Canada in its incorporation of an anti-oppressive perspective in the course curriculum, this being an accreditation standard of the Canadian Association of Schools of Social Work. The findings from the interviews with the students can therefore be fairly confidently considered transferable to other Schools of Social Work. While a small study, it has conceptual value and can provide insight to the future teaching and learning of the anti-oppressive perspective.

2.2 Interviewing

Interviews were conducted over the period from May 2005 to June 2005. The participants were invited to select a site most convenient and comfortable for them in order to safeguard their confidentiality. The interviews lasted between one hour and two hours and a half. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the students using an interview guide (see Appendix 2). Before the interviews, the purpose of the study was explained to the participants, and they were asked to sign a consent form (see Appendix 3) after all the questions were clarified. The participants were first asked when they were introduced to the concepts of oppression, racism and whiteness, and to share their understandings and reactions to these concepts. The interviews then explored the following areas: their understanding of their racial identities in relation to domination and subordination, the relations of their racial identities with their learning, the learning atmosphere and the relations between the students and faculty; the

supports available (both inside and outside classes) to facilitate their learning; and ideas they had to better support the learning process. The interviews were conducted in a conversational manner, with the questions flowing according to their emphases. Thus, while the questions were not asked in a rigid order, they were covered in all the interviews. In the later interviews, recurring themes and issues that emerged from the earlier interviews were integrated into the existing interview for further exploration. With participants' consent, the interviews were audio taped and transcribed verbatim. After each interview, I recorded field notes of the process of the interviews and of my own reactions and thoughts. The transcripts, field notes and my own experience formed the basis for the analysis.

2.3 Locating myself in the research

In feminist research and critical social science research methodology, “the researcher is seen as an active presence in the research process and the construction of findings” (Neysmith, 1995, p. 106) and there is substantive focus on balancing the unequal power relations between the powerful researcher and the powerless research participant in the interview process and the data analysis process. As a graduate student conducting research with undergraduate students in the same School of Social Work, I had the advantage of sharing a common student role in the same school, especially when I have previous brief encounters with six of the eight participants. There was a natural sense of comfort between the interviewer and participants, which motivated their participation in the study and it provided a basic rapport from the beginning of the interviewing process. However, since we hold “multiple identifications” in society (Essed, 1994, cited in Twine, 2000, p. 15), besides our common identity as students, there were other similarities and differences based on

other characteristics such as race, gender, class, and sexuality. The interview process was situated in the larger social context, which influenced the nature and structure of the research relationship (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003).

I was an “insider” and an “outsider” in this research: this puts me in what Patricia Hill Collins (1991) refers to as “the outsider within” positioning of research, it feels like “inside-out”/ “outside-in” research (cited in Smith, 1999, p. 5). As a student of colour, I hold “epistemic privilege” to the first hand experiences of racism and am more sensitive to the subtle forms of racist experiences (Narayan, 1988, p. 35). This provided me with advantages and disadvantages in interviewing students of colour. The benefit of being an “insider” was that I could make very quick connections to their experiences. The downside was that students of colour and I may take-for-granted that I understand their experiences of the issues. Thus, during the interview process with students of colour, I consciously clarified their answers and tried to ask the same question in a different way, to make sure that I captured accurately what was said. Holding one common characteristic, in this case being an “insider” racially, does not automatically grant me immediate access or understanding of their experiences. I might not share similarities with their class status, gender, and sexuality, and even if we are all students of colour, the difference in our skin colour and our ethnic background will make a difference in how we experience the world. For the most part, the interviews with the students of colour were very enjoyable; the similarities in our racial identity and our experiences of racism enabled us to create a sense of connectedness.

In the interviews with the white students, I was in an “outsider” position, due to our racial disparity. I have no life experience of their struggles, though I had read

about some of their experiences in literatures (Harris, 1997; Miller, Hyde & Ruth, 2004; Wong, 2004). In addition, I was also at a structurally less powerful position during the interview process. I found that there were times when I avoided asking certain questions for fear of offending the students, arguably a reflection of my structurally organized inequality. For the most part, I was able to ask what I wanted to ask, but I often come out of these interviews feeling puzzled and de-energized. The interviews were social encounters in which structured relations of inequality and difference were played out and, therefore, offered significant clues to how unequal relations are ordinarily maintained in everyday life. These observations and feelings are integrated into the findings and discussion that follow.

2.4 Data analysis and writing

Data analysis is a dynamic, creative and reflexive process, which involves reading and re-reading of the data (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). Following Mason (2002), I carried out four readings of the transcripts and field notes. The first read was a literal reading (Mason, 2002, p. 149), all the transcripts and field notes were read in their entirety to get a general view of each student's experiences. The second reading was a line-by-line analysis: Themes and keywords that related to the research questions were coded on the margin. After coding the data, the bits of data under the same keywords or themes were retrieved and assembled into categories or files under the same themes. The third read was an interpretive and reflexive reading of the data, which focused on my reactions to the data and what the data meant and what can be inferred from them (Mason, 2002, p. 149). New conceptual themes emerged as the data interacted between themselves and me. In the

fourth read, the data were coded under the new conceptual themes, and the bits of data retrieved and assembled into files under these conceptual themes.

The process of data analysis is what Coffey & Atkinson describe as the process “in which the details of the interview and our own emergent concerns interact” (1996, p. 44) and “interpretation involves the transcendence of ‘factual’ data and cautious analysis of what is to be made of them” (p. 46). Data are neither neutral nor factual, they are a co-creation between the interviewer and the participants. By the same token, data analysis is not a neutral process, data can never be understood by a pure literal read (Mason, 2002). Data are culturally, socially and historically embedded, thus, when retrieving bits of data from the data set, care must be taken not to lift the data out of their context. They must be understood within the context of what and how they were said, and situated in the larger cultural, social and historical context (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998; Mason, 2002; Mauthner & Doucet, 2003). Analysis involved “asking oneself questions about the data” (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 49), constantly comparing the categories and making linkages between the data, related concepts and my interpretation of it (Kirby & McKenna, 1989).

During the process of writing, I identified the eight participants from one to eight, with either a C or a W in front of the number to signify with “student of colour” or “white” student respectively. After each quotation in the findings section, there will be a reference to the participant and the page number of the transcript. I have reservations about this way of identifying them, as it feels cold and impersonal. However, I have used it because it seemed the simplest and clearest way of informing readers of the race of the participants. For the sake of safeguarding the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants, I have referred to all the participants as female

(since there is only one male participant). The writing up of the study was a process of writing and re-writing that gradually generated and refined the ideas. Some of my struggles en route (with what I should include and how I should include it) are incorporated in the findings section.

Smith (1999) believes that conducting indigenous research is a humble and humbling activity. My experience tells me that doing any type of research, as long as you are serious about the research, and hope the research will contribute to the elimination of oppression and power imbalances in society, is a humble and humbling activity.

Chapter Three

Findings

All of the students who participated in this study had a general understanding of the occurrences of injustice in society; and all the students of colour and two white students had heard of the terms oppression and racism before coming into the McMaster School of Social Work. Students of colour were more familiar with the term racism early on in their life “for obvious reasons”, as stated by the students themselves. Though the other two students had not heard of the term oppression, they were aware of the unfairness in society of, for example, being a woman, but they did not name it as oppression, it merely “sucks to be a girl” (W3 :1). The students were not familiar with anti-oppressive perspective/practice and they had never heard of the term whiteness before coming to the School of Social Work. It was only during their education in the School that they were introduced to the terms whiteness and white privilege.

Much like the participating students, I had never heard of the terms whiteness or anti-oppressive perspective prior to entering the McMaster School of Social Work. This is not surprising given that I received my social work education in Hong Kong, a former British colony. Though there was the blurry existence of the terms racism and oppression at the back of my head, I never related myself to these concepts, either as the assailant or the victim. I had always thought that racist or oppressive acts were very blatant violent acts committed by fanatic individuals, they were mean and acts of ignorance and they had nothing to do with me personally. Such is the mentality of the privileged (in one way or the other, we all look at the world through the eyes of the

privileged since that is the dominant ideology in society). Before coming into the school, the students and my understanding of oppression was mostly on an individual level, without linkages to unequal social structures.

I was first introduced to the concepts of oppression, anti-oppression and whiteness in the first semester of the Masters program. Though the term anti-oppressive practice was not mentioned in every class, there was always a discussion of how power operates in social relations and social processes, particularly how as social workers and/or social researchers, we are invested with power over our clients and research participants. As for the students, they recalled they were introduced to these concepts during their first year in the School of Social Work. Three out of the eight students had taken a specific course on anti-oppressive policy and practice which was a new course, introduced in the academic year 2002, where the concepts of oppression and anti-oppressive practice were introduced to them and were the main focus of the course. The other five students heard it in other courses they took in the School of Social Work. The students that took the specific course on anti-oppressive policy and practice and one other student felt that the focus on oppression and anti-oppression was an important part of their social work education. They felt that in every social work class, “we’ve talked about it” (W3: 1) and “it has been a part of it” (W1: 1); whereas the other four students felt that anti-oppressive perspective though significant, was not mentioned in every class they attended.

Despite the difference in their experiences of the focus of anti-oppressive perspective in their learning process, the students all agreed that it broadened and deepened their understanding of oppression. The process helped to clarify the concepts and dimensions of power and oppression, and how power operates in society

and how different sites of oppression intersect and interlock in people's lives. It provided them with a perspective to understand and to become more aware of the myriads of disadvantages that people face. They all enjoyed their education, and they described it as an experience that "opened their mind" (C4: 2) and "opened their eyes" (W3: 22). My experience was also one that was "eye-opening" and empowering. Like the students, I was more able to see beyond the individual level and relate to how social structures impact my life and the lives of the oppressed, and the importance of how I understand my structural location in relation to the perpetuation or transformation of oppression.

In spite of these great benefits, the learning of anti-oppressive perspective was not free from struggles and tensions. From the interviews with the students and from my own experience, the most important part and also the most challenging part of our learning was the interrogation of our social location and our implicated role in the process of maintaining relations of domination and oppression. For most of the students, it was the first time they began to question how their social identities are socially constructed and organized by the dominant ideologies and how that affects their relationship with others. By connecting their biographies to wider social structures, they started to realize the systemic disadvantages and privileges associated with those locations. They began to acknowledge how they are implicated in perpetuating the unequal power relations and social injustices in society and to account for their responsibility to change such practices. Students described this process of self-reflection as painful, unsettling and confusing. This coincides with the existing literature and with the observation of educators teaching anti-oppressive practice (Harris, 1997; Razack, 1999; Coleman, Collings & McDonald, 1999;

Dominelli, 2002a; Infinito, 2003; Miller et. al., 2004; Wong, 2004). However, not much is known from the students' perspective. In the sections that follow, I will first present how students described their experiences of identifying their social location: how they moved from innocence to the realization of their multiple implicated roles in the relations of domination and oppression. Their accounts are followed by an analysis of the circumstances that nourished or hampered the development of critical consciousness or critical reflection (Fook, 1999; Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005). My own experiences are interwoven throughout this chapter.

3.1 Critical self-gazing

The process of learning anti-oppressive perspective requires the students to examine and reflect on their social locations and the values, assumptions and ideas that derive from them, and on how they are implicated in their role as the oppressor or the oppressed. This process of self-interrogation is extremely important. It is through this process of "working on oneself" or "personal work" (McIntosh, 1989; Miller et. al., 2004) that the students come to realize how they are situated in society; not only to recognize the occurrence of oppression, but also to examine and question the consequences and the effects of their behavior and how that perpetuates the existing inequalities in society, and to truly move towards transforming society and creating social change. This process of raising critical awareness and consciousness is what Freire (2000) referred to as "conscientisation". Though awareness does not automatically lead to action for change, Freire (2000) insisted that true reflection would lead to action. Critical praxis is a continual process of reflection-action-reflection. Fook (1999) asserted that critical reflection enables one to recognize how one's personal history, values, assumptions and interpretations influence the situation,

and thus able to locate a concrete site for change. Many writers have written about this process and gave it different names: Pitner & Sakamoto (2005) referred to it as critical consciousness and posited that this continued process of self-reflection would lead to action to address social injustice; Dalrymple and Burke use the words “critical self-analysis”; Dominelli refers to it as “reflexivity”; and other writings on anti-oppressive practice use the phrase “critical self-reflection” (Pitner & Sakamoto, 2005). In anti-racist work, this process is referred to as “critical self-gaze” (Razack, 1998; Dei et. al, 2004).

The process of critical self-reflection is not easy. When the students were initially confronted with the role as the oppressor or the oppressed, both white students and students of colour resisted. They found the process confusing and unsettling. For students of colour, it was uncomfortable to accept one’s role as the disadvantaged. Though learning the conceptualization of structural oppression enabled students of colour to make sense of their experiences, they resisted being reduced to the role as the oppressed: “first it’s really sad, because you are like, ok now I am a victim, too” (C6: 3). This is especially confusing when one experiences other advantaged locations in life. C7 never felt oppressed, and disliked being forced to admit that she may be,

I wasn’t familiar with the term oppression and the way the system works. All right, but because I am from more or less a privileged background...I didn’t have to struggle for anything in my life...I don’t see myself as being oppressed because I have everything...I wouldn’t like somebody to say it to me, oh you are subordinate when you feel that you are not. (C7: 3-4)

This alludes to the complexity of social identity: it is fluid and contextual. Our social identity intersects with the different social structures that create who we are and this also inter-links with our life experiences and the context we live in. For example,

I was racially privileged in Hong Kong as compared to the Filipinos, Pakistani and even Chinese from China. Due to the change of context, I became a racial minority in Canada compared to Caucasians. However, I can be privileged as regards to my religious belief, my age and my sexual orientation in the Canadian context.

For white students, it was extremely challenging to examine their role as the oppressor or the privileged. Initially, some students were resistant and uncomfortable with the idea of white privilege. W1 felt very angry,

I think one of the initial emotional reactions to is certainly when it was the focus of that one course...you feel really angry that you are the focus of this...I think one does not want to think that they are oppressive especially if you have come from the perspective of kind of work against it...you take it very personally at first...you don't want to think that you are oppressive in your actions...you sort of want to examine your life and say well no...I don't do any of those things, therefore I'm not oppressive. (W1: 1-2)

Another student had similar initial reactions when confronted with admitting to her unearned privilege,

It was like one of those you know...that's not me kind of attitudes from the beginning. Well you know I am not racist, I am, you know, I am all encompassing and I am a great person. (W8: 2)

As students go through the program, they begin to realize their innocence and realize how they have contributed to the continuation of oppression in society.

And I think from my perspective, I worked through that and was able to then look at the broader picture and sort of say...acknowledge that oppression occurs...it occurs and sometimes it occurs in my name, you know, because of the fact that I am a member of the dominant culture, without my consent it occurs, but that I, but that I do participate in it...because I benefit from it...and also I think I participate in it because it's so much a part of our society that things occur, oppressions occur and it's accepted so we don't question it...yeah, I think the other thing is taking personal responsibility for something that you might not necessarily be personally doing, you know, it's accepting that you're benefiting, that you're participating but...you don't have the motive to be oppressive, but that's what's happening. (W1:2)

Critical self-reflection enabled white students to become more aware of their structural positions of power and privilege as compared to others of the “othered” ethnicities. By accepting the taken for granted privileges, students came to realize that they were condoning the oppression that exists in society. They unwittingly

participated in maintaining the unequal social structures. For students of colour, self-reflection enabled them to recognize how they might have internalized their own oppression and how they can also oppress others as well.

Learning as someone who has been oppressed and who experiences those kinds of things, how I might have oppressed someone else, that stood out the most...everybody wants to feel like no it's not me, it's them. And I am going to challenge them and when you see it yourself is when you really start to like...wow oh my god, I am one of them. I am one of the ones I am fighting against, and that's not what I am supposed to be...seeing how something that I've done might have impacted somebody was important to me...it was getting to see my own action outside of myself, getting to watch it is when it became important...otherwise, you are just out in space, you don't really know what's going on. (C6: 18-19)

There were similarities between the experiences of white students and students of colour in the initial stage: they were all more or less reluctant to see how their behavior contributed to the perpetuation of oppressive practices, as shown by their initial reaction: “that’s not me” (W8: 2) and “no, it’s not me” responses (C6: 18). But they felt that the process of self-awareness and self-reflection was very important in helping them to identify their social location and how they are responsible for perpetuating the relations of domination and subordination. They also came to the realization of the un-determined nature of their identity. Since each individual holds “multiple identities”, therefore one’s identity cannot be reduced to either the oppressor or the oppressed. In addition, critical reflectivity enabled students to become more aware of the pervasiveness of oppression, and how all the sites of oppression interlock and intersect with one another and how it can affect everybody in society and how it can keep people down.

Students identified another crucial aspect of self-awareness: to continue to keep one’s assumptions and behaviors in check. Anti-oppression is not something that you can learn and it’s done and over with, it is a continuous process of learning. They realized that having the analysis could be very empowering but dangerous,

Now you are making assumptions that you know you might not necessarily have made had you not had, you know, that kind of knowledge...you are putting what you've learnt onto people without letting them explain their own story...you know, be very careful how you start speaking about people and the assumptions that you start to make once you know these things, cause you can do more damage than good. (C6: 17)

Another student described the experience of being a facilitator in a tutorial for the anti-oppressive policy and practice course and how important it was for her to be aware of her position of power in that situation,

I understand the position of power I have in that classroom, hm I can easily say to people you are wrong...I have all these white students sitting around the table and they are saying like well I am not racist, how dare you say I am racist and I am tired of like saying that I have privilege, it's hard for me to say well you do, you know...I have to navigate this dialogue and facilitate not say, you know...it's not right for me to kind of push my beliefs or my values about AOP onto them, that to me would be hypocritical as well. (W8: 12-13)

These students felt that having an analysis about oppression does not automatically make them the expert and grant them the right to teach and define others' experiences. Doing so would be presumptuous. They felt that there was a difference between telling someone they are being oppressed and introducing someone to the structural analysis and conceptualization of oppression. And it is extremely important to introduce the structural analysis of oppression without imposing, and at the same time create a dialogue that will lead to discussions of these issues in a respectful way.

In addition, the students emphasized the importance of being vigilant with their behaviors and recognizing how they may disempower people instead of empowering them, despite their good intentions. A student shared an incidence with her friend, who has a lot of visible scars. One day they were walking on the street, a male passer-by continued to stare at her friend long after he passed by them, this student was so angry that she shouted at the man to stop him from staring. After the incident, the student reflected on the action she took on behalf of her friend,

I just thought it was the wrong thing to do, because I don't think that it had helped my friend, and I don't think that it helped the man I said it to...it was just my...feelings coming out...I don't want to take that power away from them to do it themselves...I tried to be very aware of...how I treat them. (W2: 12-13)

The man stopped staring, but her actions embarrassed her friend. As the colloquial saying goes “the road to hell is paved with good intentions”. The Chinese version is: 好心做壞事 (good heart commit bad behavior). Having good will and good intentions is not enough; it is important to see the impacts of one's behavior on others. Sometimes, the effects of such unconscious acts cause more pain and damage despite their good intentions (Narayan, 1988; Anthias & Yuval-Davis, 1993).

In different ways, the students noted the importance of self-reflection and self-awareness. It is extremely significant because their intention is to cause change and alleviate oppression, not perpetuate oppression; but it is very easy to fall back to the trap of being an unwitting participant. The students also realized that there would be times when they may say things or do things that are inappropriate or oppressive, and thought it important to call themselves on it, and to learn from it. They saw it as a constant learning process. Seidel (1996) describes the process of reflective learning which “involves the learner in looking backward, looking inward, looking outward and looking forward” (cited in Dempsey, Halton & Murphy, 2001, p. 633). This is the process the students described in which they have to constantly work on themselves, look at their behavior, look at the impact of their beliefs and behaviors on others and then look at what they can do to change how they act.

During the process of conducting this study, my awareness of critical reflectivity as a continuous and indispensable process was heightened. During the process of the interviews, I noticed how my racial identity and the racial identity of the students affected the course of the interviews. There were certain points during the

interviewing process that demonstrated how unequal power relations operate, how my role as the researcher was not value-free and power-neutral, nor was that of the participants. When writing up the analysis, I was struggling with what I should include and how I should include the material. Should I include that I felt colour-less when interviewing some white students? Should I include my disappointments and frustrations after the interviews? On the one hand, I understand the importance of including information that will illuminate the racialized nature of society and how it is embedded in the interviewing process. In qualitative research, it is essential and legitimate to include the researcher's experience and reactions in the research process as valuable data (Mason, 2002). On the other hand, I did not wish to include any data that would alienate the participants, especially when I knew that they participated in this research out of good will and their enthusiasm for my work.

Fear of offending the participants had blocked me from unmasking the complexities of oppression and tensions and contradictions when learning anti-oppressive perspective. My initial draft was written in a very neat and tidy fashion. It was smooth but distant and masked and I felt uncomfortable with it. By not including the tensions and contradictions, everything looked nice, I avoided conflict (but not the conflict within myself) and I did not have to risk offending the participants. However, nothing is to be learnt from such an analysis. More importantly, I would have kept the unequal social relations and the oppressive practices intact. So, the question was how do I include these data so that it reveals the underlying unequal power relations and is understood as such, and does it in a way that does not perpetuate or contribute to the domination or subordination of a certain group of people. I decided to take the risk; it was necessary and unavoidable if I was to keep my integrity and the trustworthiness of

this study. I decided to include some of the moments in the interviewing process and my interactions with the students, because they are manifestation of bigger social structures. It is through problematizing the inter-personal relations that the underlying unequal social structures and imbalanced power relations that we are situated in will be revealed.

The process of implicating oneself is not easy and full of struggles, sometimes it is very easy to unconsciously fall back into being an unwitting participant. Gathered from the students' interviews and from my experiences, there were insights about what nourishes or hampers the development of critical reflectivity and these are explored next.

3.2 Processes that support ongoing critical self-gazing

As mentioned in the previous section, the development of critical reflectivity is an on-going process. It is not about who gets it, who doesn't get it; it is a process of constant self-reflection within the changing socio-political context. As oppressive processes and practices are fluid and evolving, so too must be our strategies to combat them. From the interviews and my own experience, there are processes and forces that cultivate or stifle one's ability to continue to critically self-reflect. These elements are very closely inter-linked, however one may or may not lead to the other, and one or more elements may exist at the same time.

3.2.1 Persisting exposure to anti-oppressive philosophy

In her discussion about learning diversity, Comerford (2005) observes, "exposure occurs when one comes into contact with and learns from, individuals whose social, cultural and/or demographic characteristics differ from their own in socially salient ways" (p. 119). Exposure is the necessary condition for learning about

difference and diversity. Exposure is also a necessary condition for learning anti-oppressive practice. It is a starting point. Though hearing about oppression and how power operates in society may not necessarily lead to greater understanding of how oppression and domination work, the chances are it will lead to more opportunities to come to understand it, and eventually to questions about one's implication in social relations of domination and subordination. W1 compared her experience of learning anti-oppressive practice to that of the dripping of the water,

It's like...hm...almost like...that dripping of the water, you know that torture that people experience and it's you know constant, it's consistent and you just want to say stop it already, I get the message. (W1: 2)

This student described that she was asked to examine her privileged position constantly throughout the whole program. Painful as “torture” may sound, to my relief, she later reflected that having these concepts discussed in a portion of every class was helpful for her.

Yeah, the dripping was good, for me the dripping is very good. Hm...and yeah, I just...I think that it could easily get lost in all the other things that are happening hm...but with this being sort of the philosophy of the school and at least a portion of every class that's taught, hm...it really does help to continue and create that sense that it is a journey. (W1: 6)

This student alluded to the taken-for-granted nature of the “blank cheque” that is given to the white body, it is such a normal and standard part of life that it is quite invisible and almost always forgotten (McIntosh, 1989). That is why constant reminders are important. The other students shared the same view that anti-oppressive perspective is the foundation of social work ideology and should be the underlying theme in every course.

I think that people need to be aware of it all the time, like you take it for one class and then you forget about it...so I think that it should be...they should focus on it in every class. (W2: 1)

Since the school has a philosophy of understanding social relations through power imbalances and oppressive structures, students expected the School of Social Work to incorporate the anti-oppressive philosophy as the core in the curriculum, and not just as an add-on course. Students felt that it is important to broaden the type of courses on the different sites of oppression. As this students states:

I strongly believe that 40-50% of the students that leave that year, that 2BB3 class, the AOP class just don't get it, don't understand the concept of whiteness or race, or certain issues, because it's like you are taking 12 different issues and you are trying to put it in 3 months, you know, I just don't think... (W8: 6)

Opening more courses on the different sites of oppression will be beneficial to broaden and deepen students' understanding of the different sites of oppression. And as the core ideology in social work, it should also be emphasized outside of classrooms as well. On the other hand, if the school has only one class on anti-oppressive perspective, it would be mere tokenism and it would jeopardize the students' learning. The essence of anti-oppressive philosophy will easily be lost, such is the nature of how privilege and dominant ideology works.

As for my experience in the school, the introduction of the concepts of oppression and whiteness provided me with the opportunity to learn and make sense of my own experiences of oppression, and gave me a language to name my experiences. I find it important that the anti-oppressive perspective is incorporated in the course curriculum in order to facilitate the cultivation of a deeper understanding of the perspective and to enable students to let the materials sink in, then consider how they are implicated in the work for social justice and the perpetuation or eradication of oppression. However, unlike the privileged and the white students (and realizing that I am making a homogenizing statement here), as a racialized body confronted with everyday racist practices, I do not rely on the course curriculum to remind me of the

effects of racism as I am living with the effects of racism. Knowing that I'm exposed to racist practices everyday, I have no other alternative but to reflect on my behaviors, remind myself of my privileges and to address social injustices. Whether I choose to address them or not, they will affect me or are affecting me every day. The same is true for other disadvantaged groups; faced with the effects of their marginalized location, they do not have the luxury of ignoring issues of injustices. It is possible that their oppression is internalized and they choose to live with it, but they cannot help being affected by it. In sum, though exposure does not necessarily lead to increased knowledge of oppression or increased critical reflectivity, it is a necessary condition for them to exist and develop.

3.2.2 Learning through synthesizing emotion and cognition

Emotion is a huge part of the learning of anti-oppressive perspective. In the interrogation of their social locations, both students of colour and white students experienced myriads of emotional responses. Students of colour often experienced sadness and/or shock, whereas, white students felt angry, ashamed, guilty and/or uncomfortable. Though against the conventional learning that stresses the value and importance of rationality, and the biased and unscientific nature of emotions, many writers have emphasized the critical role of emotions in the learning process (Comerford, 2005; Miller et. al. 2004; Wong, 2004; Harris, 1997). Feminist scholars placed particular emphasis on the role of emotions in inquiry, and emotions act as a source of insights in the learning, social transformation process (Comerford, 2005, p. 121)

The synthesis of the affective and cognitive dimensions of learning is essential for the learning of anti-oppressive perspective. However, it is not easy to work with or

to understand one's emotions. Getting stuck with one's emotions can stifle one's learning and ability to act. In classes, I have seen many white classmates when interrogating their white privileges experience a variety of emotional responses. Those that confront it for the first time express resistance to the idea of unearned white privilege and often deny by saying, "I am not oppressive. I am not racist". Others that are familiar with these ideas may feel immobilized by a sense of guilt. However, these emotional responses are the immediate responses; they are cues telling the individual that there is a discrepancy or conflict between their embedded socialization and their new learning (Comerford, 2005). It is up to the individual to work through these emotions or to ignore them. As shown from the interviews, the students noted that emotions can sometimes hamper their learning and can also enrich their learning once they worked to understand them. W1 expressed anger initially when she, as the member of the dominant race, was the focus of class discussion:

I think to a certain extent, anger makes you stop. It's not a very productive emotion. Hm...so moving away from that emotion and to ...ok... so learning more about it and learning how to fight against it or work against it. (W1: 2)

By looking at her emotions and questioning why she felt this way, this student was able to understand the reason for her anger and look for ways to act on eradicating social injustices. However, the process is not one that is done and over with, it is a constant process of self-reflection. One does not only deal with one emotion, one may face multiple emotions at one time or at different times. The same student faced the discomfort of having white privilege and struggled in between accepting and denying this privilege,

I mean I quite honestly I always, I want to believe in my heart that racism doesn't exist. Which is, I mean it's a foolish thing to think but that's what I want to believe in my heart...so I mean, for me, that's something that I've had to...hm...I really have to sort of ...look...question or...come to terms. I think come to terms with the racism that

exist in our society...coming to terms with how I benefit from both oppression and racism that exists. (W1: 15)

The process of unmasking one's privilege is full of tensions and complexities. On the one hand, white students understood intellectually how their social location is structured to their advantage, yet emotionally, they resisted the idea of unearned privilege.

Students of colour, on the other hand, had to deal with the initial sadness of realizing their internalized oppression. This is how C6 described this process,

I think the process was hm like first the shock of it being upset that you know you realize that you are also now a person who has, it has been affected but then that real sense of empowerment from having that knowledge, knowledge is power, so you know, you are able to, so when somebody challenges you or somebody comes at you, you can fight right back, you don't feel like you have to you know back down. (C6: 4)

Similar to the experience of C6, I felt very sad at first when confronted with my victim role and the confusion of accepting and resisting such role. I resisted being the oppressed because I don't feel like a victim, however I could not deny what was happening in my life, my sense of isolation and exclusion in the school is organized by wider social structures. My sense of discomfort and confusion urged me to search for answers, and to search for ways to resist being victimized. The knowledge about everyday racism explained how my experiences are socially organized. Despite the fact that I still have to live with racism and internalized racism everyday, the difference is: I don't take it personally. I have learned how to detect it; I can name it, making the invisible visible and thus, talk about it. C6 shared the same view,

When you experience oppression, you experience racism is on a personal level, and sometimes the emotions that goes along with personal experiences can cloud things...having the ability to step back, to understand, to rationalize the behavior, doesn't necessarily mean that behavior is rational, but to be able to understand it in a rational way, you can hold yourself calm and make a powerful statement than to just attack somebody. (C6: 15)

Learning about oppression has enabled us to be more in control of our situations. But talking about it is not always easy and, like the other students of colour, I am often faced with people's reluctance to accept the existence of racism and risk having my experiences and views being dismissed. Despite personal agency, we are still living within the constraints of structural and systemic inequalities. At times, I feel tired and wish that I could live like before without knowledge of racism and oppression, then I wouldn't need to struggle. Again, that's just the initial emotional response I had in face of difficulties. Once I calm down and thought about it, I realized that I was affected even when I was ignorant of how oppression and racism work: I felt unhappy, I took it on myself for my inadequacy to adjust. At least, now I am empowered to handle the situation.

Throughout the process of doing this research, I paid extra attention to my emotions. At times, I felt disappointed and de-energized after interviewing a white student. It was important for me to acknowledge my feelings, but it was also important for me to step back and understand how our interviews were structured by our racial differences and how that had put me in a position of less power despite our apparently equal status. By ignoring our racial differences and treating me as an equal, my skin colour became invisible and an important part of my identity was missing. The "colour-less" interviews with some white students had de-energized me. Though I doubt it was a conscious decision on their parts, it mirrors the dominant discourse of colour-blindness. Racially privileged individuals tend to avoid seeing colour: they don't see colour, they just see people (Henry et. al., 1995; Henry & Tator, 2000). But the discourse of colour-blindness is a double-edged knife and it confused me. On the one hand, I felt flattered that I was seen as an equal; on the other hand, I felt I was not

totally present. Do I need to be seen as the same to be treated equally? I longed to be treated equally, however I cannot deny my ethnicity, my race and how that has affected my life. By synthesizing my emotional responses with the intellectual conceptions about oppression, the effects of structural domination became more transparent. I was able to look at the data and the interviewing process in a new light. I was able to understand that my disappointment was due to my expectation and hopeful anticipation of students' engagement and of our alliance. The question is not that they don't see me as Chinese, but they don't see how this "yellow-skin" identity is situated in this pre-dominantly white Canadian society and what that means individually and structurally.

Though dominant ideologies often devalue the significance of emotions and consider them as irrational, emotion is a very important element in learning anti-oppressive perspective. How we handle our emotions, how we synthesize our intellectual and affective learning will have an impact in our development of critical reflectivity. As shown in the interviews with the students, working with and learning from our emotions is a continuous process of learning. Learning to work with our emotions mean paying attention to our feelings, thoughts and behaviors, and learning to listen to what they are telling us. Emotion is an insight, it can motivate us but it can also stifle us. Therefore we cannot ignore it or get too caught up with it. Besides being a source of insight, emotions also act as a bridge to empathic connection in learning about the experiences of those deemed "others" (Comerford, 2005).

3.2.3 Caring to understand

As mentioned in the previous section, exposure to the ideas and the structural analysis of oppression and power, and the lives of the oppressed does not necessarily

lead to a deeper understanding. Exposure is merely information. Without an empathetic understanding, there will be no engagement: “an active interaction with others with differing constellations of social identity and the ability to hold multiple perspectives” (Comerford, 2005, p. 119). It will just be something that you learn and know intellectually, but will not lead to any action to transform the situation.

Students shared that they learnt best in small groups and by hearing “stories”. Since the exercise of interrogating one’s privileges and accounting for one’s responsibilities in maintaining oppression is a very intense activity, small groups provide the environment where it is more possible to build a more trustful relationship and a safer atmosphere, and students can be a little bit more relaxed and comfortable in sharing their thoughts and experiences.

There has to be a way that you can figure out how to effectively hm teach these subjects, because they are so sensitive, but they are so important, and if you can’t get a good discussion going on, you can build a level of safety where people feel comfortable even to say the things that may be they shouldn’t be necessarily be saying, but that’s what’s needed in order to start breaking things down. (C6: 7)

Sometimes hearing others’ stories may be just a form of exposure, but sometimes it may lead to further engagement. This white student shared the impact her friend, a person of colour, had on her.

I am pretty much open and non-resistant to learning it. Hm...some of it is really hard to hear, like my friend from XXX for example hm...I was almost in tears because I never knew that she was treated this way in her...like she grew up with people throwing rocks at her...when we went for a walk, hm...I can just see that...I am more aware. I am very much more aware hm...which is a good thing. Yeah, I was almost and it was hard for me. I felt really guilty being part of the white race because although I am not like that, it was very sad to see the way, just the way people treated her. (W2: 7)

Because this white student cared for her friend, she is able to empathize with her friend’s experience of everyday racism. She was able to see how structural inequalities had affected her friend and how she was implicated in them. She shared another experience where she witnessed the occurrence of a racist act when she was

with her friend, they walked around her friend's neighbourhood and a car drove very close to the sidewalk and almost run over her friend. To some, this may appear to be an accident or the act of a crazy driver, but this student was able to respect and trust her friend's assessment that it was race-related. She believed that as a person of colour, her friend lived with racism everyday and had developed the expertise to detect racist acts. Moreover, it is not the intention or interest of people of colour to see "more" racism than is actually there (Essed, 1990).

I mean we can't for sure know whether it is race related, and yeah she thinks that it was and I tend to believe her. I mean, she would know like...I believe her, I mean she knows her own experience. (W2: 9)

Because this student cared for her friend, she was able to listen and be a witness of the racist act. "Witness is not an abstract gesture, but an action", it is a confrontation with the dominant ideology (Freire, 2000, p. 177). Instead of dismissing her friend's experience, her trust and support validated her friend's experience, and further pointed out the complexities of identifying subtle forms of racism.

Another white student also emphasized the importance of listening.

I think AOP, as long as you listen more, I really do listen, and I've talked to person of colour, I can identify with may be feelings of oppressions or discrimination, I cannot identify with their experiences and what they've gone through, however I can sit there and I can listen and really listen and not ever say oh yeah, right. (W8: 6)

This student noted it is only through truly listening that one can try to get a glimpse of another's experience. To truly listen without judgment is a sign of respect, it is also an indispensable element in working across differences where those involved can dialogue and clarify their differences.

From my own experience, there were occasions when I was left to fend for myself in a room full of white people where everyone had their mouths shut, and there were times when I felt being supported just because I felt I was being heard. Listening

is not just an act of being there without engagement; one may not necessarily have to make a comment or talk, but being there engagingly without judgment makes a big difference. I remember an experience from one of my classes. I did a presentation about everyday racism and I was the only student of colour in that class. Fortunately it was a very small class and we had a very devoted professor. There was trust in the class and everyone was very supportive and I felt safe to talk. Even so, after the presentation, there was a long silence. Oftentimes, discussion of race and racism will end up in silence. It is such a sensitive issue that students sometimes feel immobilized or anxious that they may say something offensive. I was not able to get feedback from everyone in the class; I wasn't sure what the silence meant at first. Towards the end of the course, one of my classmates thanked me for my presentation. He felt that my presentation was very unsettling but inspiring. His silence had meant he needed time to think and reflect on the new information, his silence meant engagement. Without this conversation with my classmate, I would not have known what his silence meant. His sharing was a huge encouragement. I can't help but wonder if this was a larger class, would I have been brave enough to present the same topic in the same way? If I didn't have this dialogue with this classmate, would I have mistaken his silence?

To be engaged also includes having the responsibility to educate oneself and not wait to be educated. A white student noted that,

It's up to me to find out...not up to me for that person to educate me...I wouldn't allow them to educate me. I would educate myself. I think that's one of the biggest problems that I've heard is that you know oh I would just ask the person blah blah blah...but I wouldn't. (W8: 13-14)

This is what Narayan referred to as “methodological humility” and “methodological caution” (1988, p. 38). Though hearing stories of the oppressed is an effective and deeper way to understand the lives of the oppressed. However, and

likely out of good intention to want to learn more, the oppressed are often asked by the privileged to share their stories. This turns them into “spokespeople” for their group, and puts them on the spot, defenseless. It over burdens them, besides it is not their responsibility to teach.

For students of colour or oppressed groups, it is not that they are unwilling to share their stories or their experiences. On the contrary, some feel that it is their responsibility to share,

Well, I guess but I think in some ways it's my responsibility to share, like because if I don't share it, they don't know, you know. And may be it's their fault they don't know, but then it's partiality my fault if I am not even going to try to help them know something that they didn't know before. (C4: 15)

But they choose to do so strategically, this is because in the past, when they did share their experiences, they were often dismissed or written off as being “over-sensitive”, “trivial”, or “subjective”, whereas the other parties were excused by their innocence.

Some of the reasons why I don't say it, it's because then I have to deal with the excuses that people try to create...so instead of saying ok let's actually think about what we are saying or whatever, and then it becomes the whole like...oh I apologize if I offended you, it's not about offending me, let's discuss what we are saying. And they try to veer it away. (C4: 9)

There is a risk and maybe a consequence to be borne when students of colour choose to share their experiences, sometimes emotional and sometimes material. This student of colour chose to speak up when she judged it might make a difference in people's thinking and behaviors. For her, it was not so much about wanting to be understood, but about having the equal footing to share their experiences and views and to discuss the difference in perspectives. Difference does not necessarily lead to discrimination, it is having the power to define that difference that keep people apart, that turns a dialogue into a monologue. C4 feels that,

Yeah, it's not even you know I think, for me it's not even necessarily that you understand, it's that you care about to understand, do you know what I mean, so I mean someone, I can never...I know I can't ever understand some people or what they are thinking or how they are feeling, you know...but it's about being willing to try or respecting the fact that they think that way or you know those kinds of things. (C4: 15)

Understanding oppression is, then, not just a cognitive exercise; rather it is having the heart to care for others. That is, when you care enough, this care and concern carries with it this responsibility to seek out and acquire the knowledge of other people's experiences and truly listen (Narayan, 1988). It also carries with it the sensitivity to choose the right time, right place, and right attitude to ask about the others' experiences.

It is possible to bridge this gap, but those that are in the positions of power and privilege are often unaware of it: that is the very nature of privilege. Exposure or engagement is therefore needed to trigger an impulse to find out more. My husband always knew that he lives in a racist society and does not buy into the whole discourse of colour-blindness. However, before he experienced seeing me coming home from school crying almost every day, he had no idea what it is like to live a life that is infused with racism. Though he has never experienced racism in his life, luckily for me, he loved and cared for me enough to feel that pain and to see with his own eyes what it is like. From then on, when opportunities arise, he will share with his friends or co-workers his views on racism and oppression. As for me, because I have experienced the effects of everyday racism, I cannot allow myself to be oppressive towards others. Before my own exposure to an anti-oppressive analysis, I used to disagree with same sex marriage because of my Christian faith, I didn't disagree with same sex couples being together, as a matter of fact, I treated them very nicely and respectfully. I did not see that by disagreeing with granting them the right to marriage

I was being oppressive. I did not make the link to structural inequalities. Now, for me to disagree with same sex marriage is hypocritical.

Because of their experiences of racism, students of colour are more sensitive to other sites of oppression and more readily empathize with those that are marginalized. This is not to say that all people of colour can empathize with the marginalized, or that white people cannot have this sensitivity. More correctly, those that have experienced and understood the effects of oppression are more likely to empathize with those that are marginalized and to understand the interlocking and intersecting nature of oppression.

I think because I was already coming from a mindset of understanding oppression occurs, that it is just really fascinating for me to find just the different, just the different ways that it occurs and how that can affect us all. (C4: 2)

Understanding that oppression is not a fixed entity, but is fluid and interlocking, that each site of oppression is intimately linked with other sites and that they depend on each other to maintain their power and influence, urges one to be involved with all sites of oppression. One cannot undo one's marginality without simultaneously undoing all the systems of oppression (Razack, 1998). As C4 & C6 observed,

If I see injustice, well, it's not really, it doesn't affect me, then you know, it made me think about that differently, like the fact that it may not affect me but in the end it does affect me because it's all under the same type of umbrella of what is it that we are dealing with within the society. (C4: 13-14)

I don't want to use the word like obligation, but I feel that if I don't, I feel I am doing a disservice to myself and to society in general, if I feel something's not right and I just sit there and don't say anything, I feel like I am perpetuating the problem and letting it continue by not speaking up. (C6: 5)

Their words echo Carmichael's (1950) idea of "if you're not part of the solution you're part of the problem" and "inaction is action" (Coleman et. al., 1999, p.300; Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005). By choosing not to act against oppression, one is complicit.

To return to the words of C4, “caring to understand” entails that one care to engage in their learning and also care enough to realize that oppression affects us all. As Quartey (1994) says, “the similarities of oppression are all around us; if you’re not being oppressed in one aspect of your humanity then you’ll be oppressed for another” (cited in McDonald & Coleman, 1999, p.19). We are all in one way or the other privileged or disadvantaged, we are all caught up in this web of oppression and even if there is a small portion of people that are 100 percent privileged, oppression also affects them simply because it keeps our society from being just and human, and keeps them from being more humanitarian (Friere, 2000). On the contrary, if one does not care enough, they will more likely stay distant and disengaged. However, to be engaged takes up a lot of energy, and is draining:

The difficulty is integrating it into my daily life. It’s hard, it is hard, like I don’t, you know I don’t have friends that has gone through this program you know...sometimes I just wish I didn’t even know it...yeah, it’s hard to just turn it off. (W8: 16-17)

The struggle is: it is impossible to be 100 percent anti-oppressive all the time. There will be times when we need to distance ourselves either to gather our thoughts or to work with our emotions. It is also very important to have allies, so that we can support each other in this fight and not disengage ourselves forever (Bishop, 2002; Kivel, 2002).

3.2.4 Struggling against dominant ideologies in a dichotomized society

Situated in a western society that is highly individualistic, dichotomized and full of contradictory ideologies (Henry et. al., 1995; Dei, 1996), we are socialized into believing that everyone is granted equal opportunities and rights, and structural inequalities are non existent. There is a dualistic framework that clearly frames those that belong to the “in-group” and those that don’t; those that are “us”, and those that

are “them”; those that are considered “good”, and those that are “bad”. This dualistic thinking is pervasive in our society and is deeply embedded through our socialization. Therefore, it is very confusing to learn otherwise when students come to the school of social work.

Hm...yeah, just, it's just confusing because when you are taught something on a daily basis, it's ingrain, it's deeply ingrained in you when you taught something and then, you learn otherwise, your whole, your equilibrium is off because your whole, what should I believe, what shouldn't I believe, you're shuck up, you know, you're jolted, which is a good thing, it's a good thing. (W2: 11)

Students felt confused at first to learn that society is structured in a way that advantage some groups and disadvantage others; this goes against the dominant ideologies and the way they were brought up. It is especially difficult for those in advantaged positions to learn that they achieved what they have because they have been treated with favour, not because they have worked hard. It is discomfoting and disheartening, particularly when the ideologies of liberalism and meritocracy are still very pervasive outside the School of Social Work in the media, in the people close to them for example their families and friends and even in other departments within the university. It is inevitable that students still carry with them this individualistic and dualistic thinking as they learn, sometimes consciously and sometimes unconsciously:

I don't just see a colour, or I don't just see a nationality and make an assumption about them, I want to hear their story right away. (W3: 8)

The thing that I learnt most about anti-oppressive practice is all individuals...I mean what would help you may not help her, and it's all individuals. (W2: 13)

At first glance, what the students said are very true. They pointed out the complexities and the problems of essentializing/homogenizing a person's experience; however, they were also lauding the merits of individualism. To say that one does not see colour and a nationality is to deny the saliency of racism and structural inequalities. While half agreeing with what the students are saying, it is problematic to reduce a

person to just their race or nationality, since each individual holds more than one identity and every one is unique. Yet, it is equally problematic to neglect the structural inequalities that people confront in their lives. One of the students also pointed out the struggle of just acknowledging her privilege and not the areas where she may also be disadvantaged.

It's scary. It's very scary, 'cause you don't realize that until you know it, until... you've educated about it. And it's so discouraging to see other people who can't do anything, you see hm...it's also though...I don't want to put myself up there either because there's a lot of assumptions, oh she's a white female, she can do anything like I may have my own internal struggles, there may be a disability, or there may be something that may not be totally visible...that ah it's still struggling, it's still a little bit scary too, to know that because of something that I was born into until that I didn't even know that I even have any privilege that is giving me a lot more opportunities than someone who may be new to the country and may be of a different race. (W3: 6)

The dichotomized nature of how our society is structured guides us to fall into the binary stance of “either/or” or “yes...but” perspective, but social relations are not so simple and clear cut, instead, it is complex and contextual.

The binary framing of oppression and anti-oppression with the implication of simply associating oppression with “bad” and anti-oppression as “good” carries the same effect and is problematic (Wong, 2004). That is why when students initially interrogate their social location, they had a difficult time implicating themselves, and even throughout their learning, they still struggle with this binary division.

I think it's just always with my struggle with denial inside, you know like oh I am not like this...and I constantly think that you know, I am just this well-rounded individual...and it's like I am not. (W8: 16)

Now, I feel comfortable admitting that I am racist...but I don't agree with just because you are white that you have privilege that somehow that's the only thing that matters in this society, that to me is saying that race that's putting a hierarchy on it...when you are telling me that well if you are white in this society, this is what it means for you, it's just, for me you're just diminishing my experiences. (W8: 21)

The reality just cannot be divided into the oppressor or the oppressed, nor can it be divided into good or bad. Oppression and privilege are fluid, social relations are a continuum, and one can be both an oppressor and an oppressed, depending on the

historical, socio-political context. No one site of oppression is more important than the other, however, it is possible that one site may be more salient than another depending on the individual's biography.

For students of colour, it is to address their internalized oppression, since they grew up almost in the same environment and were taught the same ideologies.

Even though I've always you know thought about what I thought about...about things I fight against, all these kind of things, but there's still things in my head that I think I internalized...so being able to look at those things honestly and try to realize and think it through, what does this mean. (C4: 13-14)

Another student of colour shared the experience of having to watch herself when entering stores. She learned to put her hands where they were visible to make sure she would not be mistaken as having the intention to steal, even as she knew it was unfair to not have the privilege to forget about her race. But it had become such a daily routine that it has been taken-for-granted: "well, it's just something that's a part of my life now" (C5: 3). In addition, it is to her advantage to avoid the unnecessary misunderstandings. The struggle for students of colour is to sort out the internalized oppressive practices.

Brought up in a British colony, I believed in the superiority of being white. And I am still struggling with the belief that having white skin is prettier. Cognitively, I understand that having white skin is not better, but I still have to work with my inner belief, the belief that is ingrained in my head since a teenager that white is beautiful. Up to this day, I still do not swim outdoors. When writing up this research, I also noticed myself trying to avoid dichotomizing the concepts or write in a way that sets us in a binary system. I must admit that it is still a struggle.

3.2.5 Recognizing everyday politics of oppression and resistance

Though dominant discourse portrays racism and oppression as mean and overt acts, the students who participated in this study pointed out that it is important to pay attention to their trivial, covert, mundane, everyday manifestations.

I think the scary part about oppression and racism is...they are so subtle, like you can miss it...you may be somebody is having a hard time because of their demeanor...when really it could be something totally different...there is things that are you know you can obviously you can look at and be like, ok, that is outright you know oppressive or outright racist or prejudice, but there are a lot of things inside that aren't you know. (C6: 2)

It is also through these everyday incidences that students become aware of the effects of oppression and how social structures affect the everyday life of the individual. This white student, whose friend grew up having neighbourhood kids throwing rocks at her, expressed the intensity of everyday racist acts.

Yeah, it's like I was blind you know, like I was hm... it's like I had blinders on growing up because I...until I met my friends, hm...I had no idea, I really had no idea that...this is what happened to her, to this extreme on a daily basis. (W2: 8)

This same student also noticed that most of the time oppressive acts may not be violent or out of a bad intention, she mentioned an occasion where she went out with an Asian female friend, and she noticed a lot of white men crowd and say inappropriate things to her friend. Though it may be out of appreciation for the beauty of this Asian woman, but it made her very uncomfortable. This student felt that it is the dominant stereotypes that portrayed Asian women as “sex” objects that put this woman in such a situation.

Another example, a student of colour, C6, recalled an incident when she worked at a restaurant and four men asked, “what is she?” C6 explained how the system, the ideology of white supremacy accorded these white males the right to ask her that question and to speak to her in such manner (similar to the example above, the

gender axis of oppression also plays a role here). Everyday incidences of oppression are a manifestation of how unequal social structures affect every minute aspect of the lives of the oppressed, as Bannerji (2000) aptly puts the “political is personal” (p. 88). Therefore, for the oppressed, what happens on the political level is poignantly felt and enacted on the personal level.

In addition, it is through these apparently minor incidences that students begin to realize their implication in relations of domination and oppression. As W8 clearly states,

I think that it's admitting to yourself...because of little subtleties that I've noticed within myself...I mean I am not out marching with the KKK or I am out throwing...people don't see that racism means that you can discriminate and not mean to do it...I never thought I would be homophobic...there are like little things. (W8: 3-4)

It is the invisibility of these subtle, trivial, everyday practices that make it very difficult for the oppressed to name what is happening in their life though often painfully felt. And it is also because of the invisibility and subtleties of these everyday practices that make it so difficult for the privileged to locate their benefits and their unwitting participation.

There were moments when I realized that I had been oppressive only after the fact. I remembered visiting a friend in another town whom I've known for almost twenty years. I never clued in that he is gay. While I was visiting him, I saw a short gay couple wearing the same bright orange-coloured shirt and they were the same height, walking hand in hand. I thought it looked funny and made a silly comment in front of my gay friend. It was only afterwards that I realize how stupid I was and how ignorant, no wonder he had to move all the way to Canada to hide his sexual orientation. Though the silly comment I made was not out of bad intentions, I am sure it confirmed my friend's decision to stay closeted. So, the ability to make the invisible

visible is a very important part of the learning of anti-oppressive perspective. It is also the ability to locate these subtleties that nourishes the students' critical reflectivity and motivates them to act to transform society. They are sites for resisting oppressive practices, now I am more aware of my assumptions, how I act, and the impact of my actions and words. However, the dualistic division of theory and practice in social work often confuses students, leaving them to think that they have only an analysis but no tools to eradicate and fight oppression.

I think the school has it on such a high level that you really don't have a chance to see it in practice. I mean there's a disconnect and so you kind of in a sense left out on your own devices to figure out how you are going to use what you learnt in order to challenge what you come across...there's a disconnect between hm theory and practice in our school. And it really needs to be more integrated. (C6: 7)

While, this student felt there was a disconnection between theory and practice, and felt helpless at times at not knowing how to eradicate oppression, I was puzzled with her words. Elsewhere in the interview, she had shown the knowledge and skills to identify oppressive practices and the ability to assess when and how to intervene when confronted with oppressive acts.

But I think it comes with the you have to learn how to how to really work with people, you know what I mean, you have to know how to maneuver certain situations, you got to know what tone to use, you got to know when's appropriate to get more upset, when to lay back, when to let silence work. (C6: 5)

Learning the analytical framework and knowledge about how the interlocking sites of oppression and power operates in society, together with her learning on interpersonal interventions gave this student the skills and language to act, so what she had learnt was incorporated into her behaviors. As Camilleri (1999) presumes "all actions are theory driven" (p. 25). Theories provide us with a framework and perspective in understanding the world and ourselves and our relationship with it. It informs our actions.

Depending who you are speaking to, you might put it in very simplistic terms...you're able to now look at a situation and have something that you can identify with so it builds a connection that you might not have had before had you not gotten the knowledge and the language and the understanding of how those things interplay...the empowerment personally...I feel personally I am more empowered to deal with it than may be somebody that who might not have had the information... You have the ability to now really speak up and make a difference. (C6: 15)

It is intriguing, therefore, that this student still felt theory and practice were separate and that she lacked the skills to act, even when she articulated her competency very clearly.

Other students also found the dualistic division of micro and macro social work problematic. C4 sees that micro and macro social work are intimately linked, we are all situated in this historical socio-political context, and it is quite impossible to separate us from the systems.

I think when a client comes in, and they say...I am depressed because my husband left me for example, right, and so now, you know I can't pay the rent...all these things like that, and you say ok fine, we'll try to find you a shelter, perhaps find you this...and I think that this is very important to do, but then the problem is that there is so many other clients out there that's having those same issues, so even...even if thinking, that's my issue, even think about, not even necessarily think that they think they will do something, but thinking that it is important to recognize that why is it that you know he's left, and now there's all these issues, why is it that we are supposed to be living in a society with a social safety net that isn't catching anybody. (C4: 7)

So what this student is saying is that it is important to care for the client's immediate material need, but it must be linked to the larger societal constructs. When we practice we must pay attention to our clients' social location and how the social structures affect their present predicament. We may be engaged with individual counseling or community work or policy planning. However, no matter what level of work we are involved in, it is necessary to understand the linkages. They are not separate entities, one affects the other, which also means that change in one area will lead to change in another, that is how systems work.

No doubt, to eradicate oppression is a huge task and it would be naïve to believe that it can or will be done overnight. As mentioned earlier having the ability to locate how oppression operates in the everyday lives of the oppressed will open sites to eradicate oppression, it is through the same channels that perpetuate the relations of domination and oppression that we fight against it. So, it may appear that we might not be out there changing the world, but we are changing the world by changing the everyday social relations and conditions that are most real and most painfully felt by the oppressed. Just as this student had said, she wanted to “make a difference, shake things up a little bit” (C6: 21), so every little thing mattered and the accumulation of every little thing will make a big difference.

I felt this deeply, going back to the experience of my initial non-existence in the School of Social Work. What changed my life at that point was having a very attentive professor listening to my struggles, I wouldn't say she did anything “big”, though it meant big to me. By listening, she validated my pains and gave me strength to move on, the same is true for the people we serve. Quoting Freire (2000), it is not up to the oppressor's to free the oppressed, the oppressed have to liberate themselves, and this is the only way that oppression will not regenerate and maintain its currency. Critical self-gazing “is a necessity of liberatory praxis” (Dei et. al., 2004, p. 7), by doing this personal work, we locate the site of our complicity as oppressors and oppressed, thus act to resist it and free ourselves from it. Change must start within the individual self, this personal work is a vital component of political change (Dei, 1996).

Chapter Four

Discussion

The experiences of the students being interviewed in this study echoed the emphasis in the existing literature on the importance of students' implication of self in the learning of anti-oppressive perspective (Harris, 1997; Razack, 1999; Dominelli, 2002a; Infinito, 2003; Miller et. al., 2004; Wong, 2004). Students in this study identified critical reflectivity as crucial to their learning, but found the process of challenging their implication in systemic relations of domination and oppression to be contentious and uncomfortable. The students felt that this was a very unsettling but indispensable part of their learning. In the interviews, students alluded to the processes that nourished or hampered the development of critical reflectivity; their comments offer insight and direction for enhancing the teaching and learning of anti-oppressive perspective.

4.1 Teaching and learning to illuminate complexity and ambiguity

4.1.1 Breaking-down binaries: oppressor-oppressed / individual-structural

Students felt that anti-oppressive philosophy should be the foundation of social work and should be the underlying ideology in each course. Instead of just having one or two courses on anti-oppressive perspective, they proposed that anti-oppressive perspective should be infused into each course (such as the practice theories and interviewing skills) because continued exposure is necessary to deepen and integrate their learning of the anti-oppressive lens into other aspects taught in social work. Moreover, they also suggested the introduction of more courses covering diverse sites of oppression. They felt this would avoid the division among the students into two

distinct groups: the “oppressed” and the “oppressor” and would also be a good way to open up lines of communication. While, agreeing with the students’ wish to see more attention to anti-oppressive perspectives in the curriculum, teaching and learning solutions may be more complex.

Dominant ideology often constructs social relations in a binary fashion of “us” versus “them”, “self” versus “other”, “good” versus “bad”. As students initially examine their social location, they often fall into this dualistic thinking. This not only creates a very tense atmosphere in the classroom that is damaging to the learning and the social transformation process; it also simplifies and masks the complexities of the interlocking, intersecting, elusive and ever-changing nature of oppressions.

Going back to social work education, what are the implications for the teaching and learning of anti-oppressive perspective? How can such complex and fluid analysis of oppression be taught and understood? If it is taught in a simple manner, it runs the risk of simplifying the issue and falling into the dominant dualistic thinking of dividing us into “oppressed” and “oppressor”. If taught in a complex manner by looking at all the sites of oppression, it may become too overwhelming for students especially at the initial stage of their learning. Or it may turn out to be only an intellectual endeavour with students understanding the complexity of oppression from a distance (we will talk about this in the next section), and without implicating themselves. If all are implicated and all are affected by oppression, it becomes normalized and legitimized.

The naming of oppression therefore is important, but it is crucial students don’t get fixed in an oppressor or oppressed role. Each site of oppression deserves special attention and should not just be clumped under the umbrella term “oppression”

and viewed as if the same. Each site has its valence depending on the individual and the context. So, even though there is no hierarchy among the different sites of oppression, a specific aspect of oppression can be more salient in an individual's life than the other aspects. I am suggesting a "yes...and..." approach. Yes, we need to look at each site of oppression, such as racism, sexism, classism, etc. and name it as it is, and we also need to look at the interlocking and intersecting nature of how these sites of oppression operate. Yes, we need to look at our privileged positions and examine how they perpetuate the existing relations of domination and oppression, and we also need to look at our oppressed positions and how we are implicated from that location. Yes, we need to look at our personal accountability and how we are situated structurally. No matter which location we are in, the key is what did and are we doing to perpetuate oppression, and what can we do differently to change it. A "yes...and..." approach, also includes the respect that yes, one can practice from the entry point of race, and another can practice from another entry point and still be working towards the same goal: to strive to transform our society to a more just and human world. In order to eliminate oppression, we must work on all the systems of oppression (Dei, 1996; Razack, 1998; Dei. et. al., 2004).

In addition to what the students have suggested (integrating anti-oppressive perspective into the course curriculum and adding more courses on different sites of oppression), I am proposing another course compulsory for all final year social work students on anti-oppressive practice. A follow up course can facilitate the connection and integration of what the students have learnt throughout their journey and how they can continue their journey after they leave the school, bearing in mind that this is a continuous process.

4.1.2 Incorporating intellectual and affective learning

Many writers and the students interviewed here noted the importance of emotions in the learning of anti-oppressive perspective. Emotions are a cue and an insight. They can lead to engagement or withdrawal depending on how one handles and understands their emotion. When interrogating one's implication, it is inevitable for students to feel uncomfortable as they come into contact with new information that unsettle their old beliefs and conceptions about themselves and the world (Wong, 2004) and "they take it very personally". It is this discomfort that propels students to question what they think they know and begin to feel the need for change. Without this emotional piece, there will be no empathetic understanding of what it is like to be oppressed, there will be no engagement, and the learning of anti-oppressive perspective will be intellectualized and less likely to lead to profound social change (Coleman et. al., 1999). Students can look at the issues at hand from a distance, everything they say and write makes every sense academically, yet there is a sense of objectification and lack of involvement. Objectification is a barrier to learning anti-oppressive perspective; it allots the person the knowledge or information and the power to define the other as the object, thus once again re-generating the unequal power relations. However, emotions can also be an obstacle to learning; anger, shame, guilt, and sadness, can immobilize students. Knowing both intellectual and affective aspects of learning are indispensable, how can they be synthesized?

Wong (2004) proposed the importance of preparing students for this uncomfortable and unsettling journey by cultivating an openness to the feeling of discomfort before they are introduced to the concepts of systemic oppression and start critically examining their social locations. An openness to discomfort is a way to

acknowledge the feelings felt by students in a non-judgmental manner as they interrogate their social location. In this way, students not only examine and challenge their participation in systemic domination and oppression, they are also in touch with their emotions. It is a personal process but they can make sense of it without feeling attacked, defensive or a need to withdraw. This is what Claxton (1996) called “disinhibition, which enables learners to avoid or overcome tendencies to defend or withdraw unnecessarily” (cited in Dempsey et. al., 2001, p. 634). They come to understand how their experiences are also socially organized and constructed. Moreover, setting the groundwork to look at emotions in a non-judgmental manner, will also facilitate the students’ sharing of how they feel and what they are experiencing in their learning, thus enriching the learning experience and developing a dialogical learning process. It is crucial to bear in mind that dialogue is not about an argument of who is right or wrong, it is a matter of sharing what everyone is going through and the differences in perspectives and making sense of different experiences in relation to larger social structures. It may sound simplistic, in reality it is more easily said than done, however, I have faith that it is possible when those involved care enough to understand themselves and the others’ experiences, and they care enough to make the world they live in a better place.

As discussed above, it is the elusive, disguised, ever-changing but personal nature of oppression that makes it so difficult to comprehend, therefore effective teaching of anti-oppressive perspective must facilitate students to embrace this complexity and ambiguity.

4.3 Reframing professionalism and working within contradictions and ambiguity

Students raised an important issue regarding the teaching at the university: they felt that what they learn is at a “high level” and is very theoretical; it lacks practical implications in everyday social work. There is a disconnection between theory and practice. This is a very realistic concern raised by students, since they are expected to be experts, the “know-it-all” practitioners that possess professional knowledge once they graduate. So, does the knowledge taught in the school of social work lack practical value? Does anti-oppressive perspective lack practice implications in everyday social work? Or is it just one of those common criticisms that suggest theories are the prerogative of the academics in the ivory tower? It is legitimate for students to raise this question, and it is also a concern that the school needs to revisit now and again. The society is changing all the time, so does the problems faced by the population we serve. Therefore it is important for the School of Social Work to evaluate the curriculum and make sure the education students receive will prepare them to face the changing challenges in the field and to provide the best services for the service users.

While the anti-oppressive perspective is not a practice theory, it is a perspective that analyzes the systemic and structural inequalities that are present in society and how unequal power relations operate. Even though anti-oppressive perspective does not directly point to what should be done to eradicate oppression, it provides a lens in which students can assess how service users and their predicament are situated in society, and lead to actions to improve their situation. Since each individual is unique and people are interactive, it is quite impossible to teach students tools similar to those of a mechanic in fixing a car. Social work practitioners do not

fix problems, or fix the people that have the problems (though this may be what dominant discourse portrays). We endeavour to facilitate the empowerment of the people we work with so that they can handle their situation better or to improve their situation. From the interviews with the students, it emerged that they are more aware of their taken-for-granted assumptions and beliefs and they are able to incorporate the structural analysis of oppression in their everyday social work practice. The theories they learnt informed their actions. Then, why do students still feel what they learn lacks practice value?

The students' lack of confidence in their knowledge and skills to practice from an anti-oppressive perspective suggests that there is a lack of connection and integration between the perspective and the practice theories in social work, and in micro and macro social work. The anti-oppressive perspective is grounded in the everyday lived experiences of the oppressed. The essence of anti-oppressive perspective is that structural inequalities are perpetuated through the inter-personal level, so it affect the lives of the oppressed on a very personal and individual level. And it is through these everyday practices that one can resist and alter the relations of domination and oppression. Thus, interventions on the everyday lived experiences of the oppressed will trigger changes and disrupt the bondage on the structural and systemic level, and vice versa. So, in the teaching of anti-oppressive perspective, it is important to make explicit the connections and integration between the individual and the structural level.

Furthermore, the dominant discourse of professionalism is inherently contradictory to the anti-oppressive philosophy, which values the voices of clients and multiple ways of knowing. In contrast, the route to professionalism is to make claims

to expert knowledge, anti-oppressive practice challenges this “expert” knowledge (Dominelli, 2002; Dominelli, 2002a; Campbell, 2003). This professional discourse portrays social workers as “know it all” experts that can fix all social problems and injustices. It restricts students from having reasonable doubts or a “thoughtful not knowing”. This is especially true when there are decreasing welfare funding which adds a very heavy workload on workers, and the proliferation of technical tools further suffocates practice that requires practitioners to reflect critically. It appears that social work practitioners are becoming more and more similar to mechanics. Fook (2000) observed that new social work students are becoming more detached from the service user and seek “correct” solutions rather than seeing their involvement as crucial in the evaluation of their work in practice (Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005). However, it is impossible to have “correct” interventions when working with people, each individual and his/her situation is unique.

Instead of educating social work practitioners to become similar to factory workers in assembly line production, it is important for Schools of Social Work to adopt an education that facilitates students’ integration of feelings, thinking, actions and critical reflectivity, so that they can deal critically and creatively with multiple “realities”, and discover how to participate to transform society. Good education is to liberate and transform society, it is the practice of freedom (Freire, 2000; hooks, 1994), and “it links us with life, and returns to people what it takes from people so that social change can come about” (Bannerji, 2000a, p. 115). Therefore, to prepare social work students to face the challenges of the world and the dominant discourse, it is ever more urgent to develop students’ critical reflectivity and an openness to contradictions, uncertainties and ambiguities.

4.4 Everyday world as site of knowledge building

I have chosen to look at my personal experience as a starting point in this research study for several reasons. First of all, the quest of knowledge is an inspiring but personal adventure. I wanted to choose an area that I am passionate about. Besides, this study would be meaningless if it means nothing to me and it would be very difficult to continue to pursue the work. So, I chose to find out more about my experiences. Secondly, personal experiences have tremendous value in knowledge building and in facilitating our learning and knowing. As Macedo puts, the process of rigorous participation in learning and knowing is only possible through the student's transformation of their lived experiences into knowledge and to use the already acquired knowledge as a process to unveil new knowledge (Freire, 2000). Personal experience is situated in the world we live in; since it is my lived experience, I know it intimately. Therefore including my personal experience can only enrich the learning and the knowledge building process, this counters the dominant ideology of research and the researcher as “scientific, neutral and objective”. Knowledge building is a social activity and all knowledges are situated (Haraway, 1988, cited in Mauthner & Doucet, 2003, p. 416).

Thirdly, I believe that my experience is not isolated; it provides an insight into understanding the experiences of the oppressed. Knowledge about the oppressed should be grounded in the lived experiences of the marginalized and oppressed people and should occupy centre stage in the knowledge building discourse (hooks, 1994). Moreover, my experience is a small window to which the “relations of ruling” that shape local experiences is revealed (Smith, 1996, cited in DeVault & McCoy, 2003). The “relation of ruling” is a phrase used by Smith to explicate phenomena that occur

in the everyday world, “ruling takes place when the interests of those who rule dominate the actions of those in local settings” (Campbell & Gregor, 2002, p. 36). Social relations and practices are “socially organized”, they are put together “systemically, but more or less mysteriously and outside a person’s knowledge, and for purposes that may not be theirs” (Campbell & Gregor, 2002, p. 18). Therefore the social relations of ruling are often invisible and activities of ruling often do not have anything to do with intent, good-intentioned work may be part of the oppressive relations of ruling (Campbell & Gregor, 2002). Similar to how oppression works, the dominant oppressive ideologies prevalent in society dominate the everyday social relations of the privileged and the oppressed by osmosis, it becomes such a part of their life that it becomes the norm and is legitimized. That is why those involved are often ignorant of their participation. Therefore, oppression is often misunderstood as acts of individual selfishness or meanness. My experience of isolation in the school is socially organized and at first I participated in maintaining this relations by blaming myself. My unawareness of the causes of my condition as relating to the extra-local forces and ideologies led me to accept my isolation and exclusion. It is through interrogating everyday social relations that I come to understand how my condition is socially organized and how I unwittingly participated in the relations of ruling and maintained my isolation, which then lead to actions to change. Therefore, the everyday world is a site in which to understand “how things happened” (Campbell & Gregor, 2002) and how things can be changed. Everyday experiences are a legitimate source of information for understanding how ruling takes place, thus invaluable for knowledge building.

Afterword

I started with the story of my personal experience, now I am referring back to the journey of my story. I walked into this project with race as the entry point and was a bit suspicious of AOP, conscious that AOP may water down the discussions about race and racism. Besides, what does AOP stand for, anyway? The process of conducting this research gave me the opportunity to listen to students' stories, and experience the significance of the interlocking and intersecting nature of oppression and domination. I already knew that an anti-racist approach does not just look at race, but also addresses other axes of oppression. But to listen to white students' stories with my own ears was important; it carved in my heart, not just in my mind, how salient it is to address the interlocking and intersecting nature of oppression. Someone may be privileged by white skin colour, but disadvantaged in other aspects of their identity; it is not right for me to disregard their pain and just look at their white privilege. Similarly, how would I like it if my experience of being a yellow body is minimized? I've been told that I am lucky to have the opportunity to study my Masters degree. Yes, I am privileged that way. I don't need to be told I am lucky, I know I am lucky, but that does not erase the fact that I am a person of colour living in a predominantly white society. It does not erase the pain I endured. Being of colour may be significant in my life, it may not be. The question is: who has the right to define for me? No matter how trivial the disadvantaged position may seem as compared to the privileges that that person holds, they all deserve attention. It is not up to us to define another person's experience whether they are privileged or

oppressed, after all we all hold multiple identities, but it is up to us to address structural inequalities, particularly in acknowledging our contribution to differential power relationships.

I came from doubting the anti-oppressive perspective to realizing its merits. However, it is important to make an effort to name the complete term instead of using the acronym, AOP. AOP has no meaning, whereas, anti-oppressive practice has. Furthermore, it is essential to name all the sites, because each site has its valence depending on each individual's life experience.

For me, the process of conducting this research had been another eye-opening experience. It illustrated the importance of open dialogue in learning anti-oppressive perspective and in working towards social change. Without a genuine open communication with these students, I would not have the chance to understand the experiences of those that are different from myself. Moreover, I am grateful that despite the racial disparity between my thesis supervisor and myself, we were able to have a fairly equal relationship where my voice was fully respected, and I felt free to explore and pursuit my intellectual puzzles. (Note, we don't live in a vacuum, we do live in a world that is marked by unequal power relations. It is impossible to have absolutely equal relations. The most we can do is acknowledge and minimize the power differentials.) This is very encouraging; it proves that it is possible to “work *together* across differences” (Narayan, 1988, p. 31, emphasis added). I am hopeful that it is possible to transform our world into a better future when each one of us are able to look honestly at ourselves, our apparent innocence and refuse to act as agents of oppressive practices.

Appendix 1

Letter of Information

The purpose of this research project is to learn more about the experiences of social work students at McMaster University as they learn about anti-oppressive perspectives, in particular, as they learn about racism and anti-racism. Social work education on anti-oppressive approach requires students to examine their social locations in society in relation to privilege and oppression; domination and subordination. This self-examination process is challenging and difficult. I am seeking to explore how both students of colour and mainstream (white) students experience social work education in these areas. Specifically, I would like to ask them how they see challenges and what they think the School has done and can do to support their learning, to facilitate their understanding of their racial identity and equip them in dealing with issues of racism in their future work.

I am seeking to interview both students of colour and mainstream (white) students. In participating in this study, you will be asked to meet with the interviewer for one session that may last between one to two hours. You may choose the meeting place that is most preferable to you. The interview session will be tape-recorded and transcribed.

Your participation in this research is voluntary and confidential. Every care will be taken to respect your privacy. No identifying information will be included in any of the written reports generated from this study, and all information you provide will be locked in a filing cabinet at my home to which only I have access. You may choose not to answer some of the questions. You may choose to withdraw from the study at any time without consequences. If you choose to withdraw, all information you have provided will be returned to you.

You will receive a written report of the findings of this research. This project has been reviewed and received ethics clearance by the McMaster Research Ethics Board. Should you have any concerns or questions in regards to your participation in this study, you may contact:

The McMaster Research Ethics Board Secretariat
c/o the Office of Research Ethics
Telephone: 905-525-9140 ext. 23142
E-mail: ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca

I will be conducting interviews at (dates). To participate, please contact Lisa Watt at wattlh@mcmaster.ca or by phone at 289-439-3327. In your response, please indicate whether you identify yourself as a student of colour or white student.

Thank you for your help.

Appendix 2

Interview Guide

Topics to be included in the semi-structured interview are listed below:

1. When and where were you first introduced to the ideas of anti-oppressive social work practice, particularly in issues of anti-racism, whiteness and oppression? (Probe for initial reaction and understanding of these ideas; and of the attention given to the particular social locations of students and instructors.)
2. Tell me about your experiences (journey) in learning about this analytical approach to social work as you go through your program in the School. (Probe for their intellectual and affective experiences, inside and outside classrooms, with students, with faculty members, with co-workers, with families and friends... etc.)
3. What kinds of gains, insights, challenges and tensions have you experienced in your learning (intellectual and affective)? Are there discrepancies between what you learn and what you experience? (Probe for any examples or critical incidents)
4. Who do you talk to about these challenges and tensions in your learning? Are there people who you feel you can't talk to and if so, why? Where can you talk about it? Where are the places you feel safe to talk about it? How did you talk about it? (Probe for examples.)
5. How do you think your racial identity impacts the way you learn anti-oppressive or anti-racist perspectives?
6. How was your learning helped/hindered, supported/unsupported intellectually and emotionally? (Probe for examples.)
7. What would ideal teaching and learning of anti-oppressive and anti-racist practice look like? What are your suggestions to reach that ideal teaching and learning state?

Appendix 3

**Project Title: Social Work Students' Experiences of Education for
Anti-Oppressive Practice**

Consent form

I agree to take part in this study. I have been fully informed about this study and I understand that its purpose is to understand the experiences of social work students in learning anti-oppressive perspectives, in particular, learning about racism and anti-racism.

I understand that Lisa Watt is the principle investigator of this study, and that her work in this study is being supervised by Jane Aronson (faculty member of the McMaster School of Social Work).

I am willing to take part in one interview that will last between one to two hours and will agree to have the interview audio-taped and transcribed. I understand I may choose not to answer any particular question and/or may choose to withdraw from participating in this study at any time without consequence. I understand if I choose to withdraw, any information I have provided, including audiotapes, transcripts or notes will be returned to me.

I understand I will not receive any direct benefits from taking part in this project, but my participation may help to improve the teaching and learning of anti-oppressive and anti-racism perspectives in social work education.

I understand that my anonymity and confidentiality is assured. Any information I have provided and that can be identified with me will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with my permission.

I understand if I have further concerns and questions regarding my rights as a research participant, I can contact the McMaster Research Ethics Board.

Name and signature of Participant

Date

Name and signature of Investigator

Date

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