

## DISLOCATING AOP

**DISLOCATING AOP:  
AN ANALYSIS OF ANTI-OPPRESSIVE PRACTICE'S SUBJECT POSITIONS**

**BY**

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## Abstract

Anti-Oppressive Practice (AOP) has become one of the most influential approaches to contemporary social work practice. Despite its widespread significance it seems that there is confusion, and a lack of consensus, regarding what AOP actually is. This research, therefore, examines how social work educators understand AOP in order to determine what AOP looks like and whether it has since acquired a fixed and defined identity. Data gathered from eleven qualitative interviews with social work educators at three Canadian universities revealed that AOP is understood as having nine core tenets; and yet, AOP is also understood as being a highly fluid and ambiguous epistemology. The research also showed that AOP's fluidity and ambiguity are not weaknesses to be resolved, but rather are intentional and purposeful as they enable it to resist and dismantle dominance, and pursue social justice.

AOP's fluidity and ambiguity was theorized as mirroring the fluidity and ambiguity of human identities and identity categories—both resist being fixed and reified, as they are more than the sum total of these parts. In this regard, it is proposed that AOP can be understood as occupying multiple *subject positions*. Analysis of AOP's subject positions revealed that when AOP tends toward becoming fixed and fully known it becomes co-opted and compromised by structures of dominance and is used as a tool of oppression. In other words, when AOP is definitively located it ceases to be anti-oppressive. It seems, therefore, that we must constantly *dislocate* AOP through critical dialogue in order to ensure that it is a means of dismantling dominant structures of power and pursuing social justice.

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## I. Introduction

Dominant ideology in the West has seduced many into believing that we are unimpeded masters of our destiny, that hard work will give us all we can dream of, and that every individual has an equal opportunity to pursue those dreams. We are taught, and we often believe, that our societies are based on a meritocracy—that we have earned our “successes” and our “failures” based on our merits. This ideology affects how we view ourselves, how we view each other, and how we relate to one another. If, for example, we are unable to climb out of poverty or similar hardship, it must mean that we haven’t worked hard enough and are inferior. There are, however, alternative discourses to the dominant ideology that expose a different narrative. Critical theories, for example, cite structural causes for people’s seemingly personal struggles (as well as seemingly personal successes) highlighting that these phenomena often operate outside the individual and are beyond their immediate control (Mullaly, 2002; Lundy, 2004). Racism, sexism, classism, heterosexism, ableism, and ageism have been shown to produce and maintain social inequalities; and, they are shown to imbue every social interaction, and every social structure (Dominelli, 2002; Mullaly, 2002). Structures of oppression and privilege thus discredit any claims that we rise and fall, “have” and “have not” solely on the basis of our merits, while also eroding the dignity of many and assaulting our collective humanity. The belief that we live in a meritocracy has, therefore, been exposed as a myth: “The last half-century has seen an assault on race, gender, sexual orientation, and age-based barriers to equal opportunity, but the surface

upon which we compete for recognition is still a steep hill, not a level playing field” (Fuller, 2003, p. 9). Moreover, amplifying the impact and negating the structural nature of oppression, the emergence and ascendancy of neoliberalism has, through its retrenchment of the welfare state since the 1980’s, exacerbated social inequalities and left marginalized individuals and communities to fill the gaps (Baines, 2006; Lundy, 2004).

Social work has long recognized the connection between the personal difficulties that people endure and the social structures that are both platforms for their expression and barriers to their resolution. As such, social workers claim a professional commitment to transforming society in ways that eliminate discrimination and promote social justice (CASW, 2005). A range of emancipatory epistemologies and models has emerged over recent decades, which has not only shaped the espousal of such a commitment, but has also helped to inform the process of pursuing such goals. Anti-Oppressive Practice (AOP), in particular, is one such approach that has arguably become one of the most significant theoretical influences on contemporary social work education and practice. Social work courses in AOP, and/or under-pinned by AOP, have been developed in Canadian schools of social work as a means of providing students with an education that acknowledges and embodies AOP’s all-encompassing relevance. Wilson & Beresford (2000) explain the tremendous influence of AOP on social work:

‘Anti-oppressive practice’, or ‘AOP’ is central to any discussion of social work theory, policy and practice. Not only has it emerged as a crucial component of social work learning and practice, it is also presented as a *key approach* to and *theory* of social work.... AOP has become one of social work’s sacred cows....

Indeed, an outsider could be forgiven for thinking that anti-oppressive practice is synonymous with, or even comprises, contemporary social work (theory and practice) (p. 554, 565).

The influence of AOP on social work is not surprising. It is palatable to social work as it reflects the profession's values, ethics, and commitment to achieving social justice. And yet, although the profession (as a whole) embraces the intentions and aspirations of AOP (Wilson & Beresford, 2000), there are concerns regarding how effectively it has been translated into social work practice and education, and whether AOP is even a means capable of achieving its own articulated ends (Hart, Hall & Henwood, 2003). Also, even more worrisome, there is concern that AOP actually *contributes* to the oppression of marginalized groups (Wilson & Beresford, 2000), instead of eliminating it.

These are not isolated critiques of AOP, and they give us reason to explore whether they are related to what seems to be AOP's ambiguity and elusiveness. It appears that, despite AOP's influence and ubiquity within social work, there continues to be confusion, and a lack of consensus, regarding what AOP actually is:

It seems that the more currency that AOPs acquire domestically and internationally, the more confusion there is about what exactly AOP connotes.

Does it refer to a social worker's attempt to eliminate racism, sexism, and classism on behalf of service users? Does it refer to a social worker's attempt to eliminate *any isms* in working collaboratively with service users? Does it refer to an attempt to eliminate power differentials across the board? Or, does it create a hierarchy of oppression by viewing one form of oppression (e.g. Racism) as more

important than another (e.g. Ableism)? Clearly, there needs to be greater clarification on what AOPs entail. (Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005, p. 437)

It is plausible that, therefore, such ambiguity could affect how AOP is taught, learnt and applied in practice. In the same vein, we ought to clarify that AOP's ambiguity is not necessarily a matter that needs to be resolved. AOP is a relatively new approach, so it may be that it will eventually become more defined and settled as it develops over time; or, conversely, perhaps AOP is meant to remain indefinable, as this is inherent to its character. The purpose of this research, therefore, is to explore how social work educators in Canada understand AOP and to determine whether, from their perspectives, it is acquiring, or has already acquired, a fixed and discernable identity; or, if it's seemingly ambiguous character is a necessary and critical component of AOP. This research will also examine the implications of these understandings of AOP and how they are managed in the social work classroom. Overall, this research will, therefore, contribute to an ongoing discussion about what AOP actually is and the implications it will have on social work education and practice.

## II. Methodology

All research is value-laden and carries within it implicit views of the world, which have political implications (Absolon & Willett, 2005; Kirby & McKenna, 1989). As such, the researcher does not stand outside of the research, but rather plays a role in shaping what transpires, and what is silenced, whether consciously or not (Mauthner & Doucet, 1998). Absolon & Willett (2005) explain how Aboriginal research methodologies manage such subjectivity:

It is our opinion that one of the most fundamental principles of Aboriginal research methodology is the necessity for the researchers to locate himself or herself. Identifying, at the outset, the location from which the voice of the researcher emanates is an Aboriginal way of ensuring that those who study, write, and participate in knowledge creation are accountable for their own positionality (Owens, 2002; Said, 1994; Tierney, 2002).... When it comes to research by/about Aboriginal peoples, location is an essential part of the research process. (p. 97)

I also subscribe to the view that no research is neutral or wholly objective, and that the researcher has an impact on what emerges; therefore, I intend to make myself, the researcher, visible throughout this paper wherever relevant so that you, the reader, can decide for yourself how my involvement may have shaped this research in ways unconscious to even myself. In this section specifically, I intend to respectfully observe the knowledge shared above by Absolon & Willet by attempting to make transparent the epistemological lens through which I analyse the world around me, and will use to

analyze this research, as well as the values that I consciously use to inform that analysis.

Moreover, at this point the reader may be puzzled that I have somewhat unorthodoxly preceded the literature review with this discussion of the methodology. I have chosen to order my paper in this manner because it makes sense that the literature review (what I've chosen to include and exclude, and how I've organized the information to make my points) is as impacted by my epistemological lens as any other component of the research that follows.

Although I am intent on locating myself, I am hesitant to define my social location as though it were fixed and unambiguous because it is neither. I do not wish to itemize my location as this may reify it, as well as the power and privilege that come with it. That being written, I do have access to a great deal of privilege due to my social location, regardless of whether I explicitly delineate it in this paper; and, that privilege impacts on my lens as a researcher indicating that it ought to be named. Moreover, it is also important to make visible my *whiteness*—an often invisible, yet ever present position of structural advantage and race privilege (Yee & Dumbrill, 2003)—so that I cannot hide behind any guise of neutrality or objectivity in this research, or pretend that I put my dominance on a shelf during the research process. Therefore, I believe it is purposeful to name my social location, however, I prefer to articulate it instead as a *subject position* (a poststructuralist concept) in order to resist any further reification of my privilege. Heron (2005) explains this concept:

Individuals take up or identify with particular subject positions structured through relations of power and made available through different discourses.... The

constitution of individual subjectivity through discourses is part of a wider network of power relations in which persons are being positioned at any given point, and these discourses may contradict one another. Subjectivity is, thus, unavoidably multiple and contradictory. (p. 347).

So, what are my subject positions? What positions have been made available to me; and, what positions have constituted my particular subjectivity? I am a white, heterosexual, Canadian-born woman in my late 20's. I currently have no mental or physical difficulties. I was raised in a working-class family; but, due to my university education, I am transitioning into the middle-class and will likely have access to many of its privileges. Like most, I occupy positions of both dominance and marginalization; however, I do not wish to seek refuge from accountability, or make claims of my "innocence" (Rossiter, 2001) based on my experiences of oppression. Rather, I acknowledge that my subject positions have greatly ameliorated my experiences of oppression – my whiteness has mostly protected me from any significant or enduring harm that I would otherwise experience as a result of my gender and socio-economic status. Within most contexts, therefore, I occupy dominant subject positions, which grant me access to enormous amounts of unearned privilege and power.

My subject positions signify that I am implicated in harming and oppressing those who occupy marginalized subject positions regardless of any intention I have to do otherwise. Indeed, oppression has structural causes that are outside of my control; however, this does not mean that I can relinquish any ownership of its negative impact as I participate in the reproduction of those structures daily and reap the benefits of this set-

up. Unless I withdraw myself from society completely, which is virtually impossible, I believe that I must accept some responsibility for the way it is organized. My subject positions also mean that I largely do not have the “epistemic privilege”, or knowledge gained through the lived experience of oppression, that a marginalized person (or an insider) would have (Narayan, 1989). As such, there are limits to what I can know, either emotionally or intellectually, about what it means to be oppressed and the full impact of its assault. Related to this research, this entails that there will be limits to what I may be able to perceive about AOP in terms of its efficacy in improving the lives of social work clients and attaining social justice. I may also not perceive the reproduction of dominance and oppression expressed by the social work educators, because I too am steeped within, and benefit from, that dominance myself. In this regard, my subject positions leave my analysis vulnerable to preserving the dominance to which social work educators, social work, the university, and I have access; and so I welcome critiques that take me to task on this issue.

Having written about the limits to my understanding of oppression, I've also critically reflected on what I might be able to perceive about dominance. From birth I have been taught how to wear my whiteness—how to claim entitlements to privilege, and how to exclude those who don't look like me. I have knowledge of the lived experience of dominance, so to speak. I've witnessed how spaces are different when they are all white vs. when they aren't because I've been in both. I've witnessed how white people speak differently in these spaces and how verbal language, body language, and discourse is often edited to preserve whiteness. In this regard, I may be able to deconstruct how

dominance maintains itself in this research, and expose it as such, because I have been a part of these processes. Indeed, whiteness encompasses many dimensions of dominance and never operates the same in every space; however, the world has endeavoured to teach me over the course of my life how to preserve whiteness in a multitude of contexts. It is a way of being to which the world still coerces me to conform; and, if I am to make any claim of being anti-oppressive, it must also be one that I deconstruct and dismantle everyday.

In the interest of further transparency I also intend to account for my research agenda, as I understand it. Cam Willett explains why it is important for researchers to be explicit about their reasons for undertaking their particular research:

I believe that it is unethical to do research in which you have no stake whatsoever – no interest, no personal connection with, no reason other than your training as a scientist. You need to have some reason for doing it. When you explain your methodology, you need to be able to answer the question, ‘Why are you doing research?’... (Absolon & Willett, 2005, p. 104).

This research was initiated by the AOP working group at McMaster University’s School of Social Work. I originally joined the working group by invitation because of my involvement with the Committee for Anti-Racist Education, which was also based at the same school. I accepted the invitation knowing little about AOP, but wanting to know more, as I was eager for these kinds of critical discourses. My interest in critical discourses was first ignited during my BA in English Literature where I was exposed to stories of people who have experienced the world from the margins, and where I learned

to connect seemingly individual experiences of oppression and privilege to social structures. Through my subsequent social work education and involvement with the AOP working group I developed an interest in AOP because of its pursuit of social justice; because it subverts traditional hierachal ways of being in the world; and, because it is quite a provocative and stimulating theory in that it encourages learners to examine how they are implicated in structures of oppression. The research that we undertook as a team enabled me to appreciate what AOP can contribute to social work, but it also exposed me to areas requiring further analysis. Studying social work during a time when AOP is being newly infused into the curriculum enabled me to experience with my classmates the difficulties of trying to “get” AOP: What is AOP? Who gets it? Who doesn’t? What are we supposed to be getting? Are we supposed to ever get it? The complexities, ironies, paradoxes, and contradictions that permeated an AOP education caused a plurality of responses from students – frustration, impatience, stimulation, curiosity, and anger to name a few. In my opinion, many students persevered with AOP despite these difficulties, but many also seemed to “play the game” until they could graduate and abandon it altogether. These observations, and my own frustrations, motivated me to re-visit the research undertaken by the AOP working group to see if it could help me to understand and theorize AOP’s ambiguity. This is a more specific focus than was contained in the original research, and more details will be provided about this in the “Methods” section of this paper. Indeed, I have undertaken this research project in order to complete the thesis requirement for my MSW; however, I chose this particular

topic because it examines questions I've had about AOP, and because AOP has long been an interest of mine generally, even before I had the language to label it as such.

Beyond what I personally stand to gain from this research, I envision that it will assist social work educators, students, and practitioners in taking steps closer to social justice for their clients and for marginalized people as a whole. In this regard, the immediate beneficiaries will be social work educators, students and practitioners; however, and more importantly, the research is meant to be a contribution to producing more just and equitable ends for groups who experience indignity, violence, and oppression as they are intended to be the ultimate beneficiaries of an improved social work education. This research is meant, therefore, to be a catalyst and a tool (no matter how small) to pursue this vision.

This research is informed by a variety of critical theories and/or emancipatory methodologies such as AOP, Feminist Theory, Anti-racist Theory, Indigenous theory, and the work of Paulo Freire. Indeed, they are divergent in some ways, but all offer similar lenses and insight into this research as they share an emancipatory objective at their core (Kovach, 2005). Kovach (2005) explains that, “The epistemological assumptions of these varied [emancipatory] methodologies contend that those who live their lives in marginal places of society experience silencing and injustice (p. 21)”. Echoing this sentiment, Mullaly (2002) indicates that critical theories are concerned with, “moving from a society characterized by exploitation, inequality, and oppression to one that is emancipatory and free from domination” (p. 16). This research is also informed by Postmodern and Poststructuralist thinking, such as that embodied within Queer

Theory, and the work of Michel Foucault in order to acknowledge my own subjectivity in the research, and also to help me make sense of the multiple ways of knowing that emerged within AOP in the research data.

Finally, it is important to explain the purpose for choosing social work educators as participants for this research. Because social work educators have both the privilege and the responsibility of teaching AOP to future social work practitioners, and because it is expected that they would have an enhanced understanding of AOP, their understandings of AOP are of particular interest. The impact that social work educators can have on the lives of service users and marginalized people in general is extraordinary; and, therefore, this research aims to hold educators accountable for the kinds of knowledge that are chosen to inform social work practice and to evaluate what that knowledge contributes to (and/or detracts from) the pursuit of social justice. By interviewing social work educators this research will be shifting its critical gaze from the margins to the centre, and, in part, deconstructing their dominance and that of the academy. The knowledge offered by the social work educators will be valued and dealt with respectfully, but will also be interrogated for its consistency with anti-oppressive practice principles and other critical perspectives. In this regard, this research will embody emancipatory ends as its ultimate purpose in that it is undertaken in the perceived interest of service users and marginalized populations as a whole. In sum, therefore, this discussion captures not only the methodology underpinning this research, but also the epistemological lens to which I, the researcher, manifestly subscribe.

### III. Literature Review

#### a) What is AOP?

Defining AOP is an elusive undertaking and contested terrain. There are, however, a number of themes that re-appear throughout the AOP literature. AOP begins with the acknowledgement of social inequalities and their deleterious impact on individuals and groups, and it necessarily seeks to dismantle the structures of dominance that underpin them (Preston-Shoot, 1995). Critical social theory has helped AOP to read the social world as being organized by social institutions and structures that legitimize and reproduce oppression based on race, gender, class, sexual orientation, ability, ethnicity and so on (Mullaly, 2002). In AOP various dimensions of oppression, such as racism, classism, and sexism, are seen as intersecting in ways that amplify or ameliorate the impact of each (Mullaly, 2002). Individual and collective experiences of oppression are understood as being caused by the structures of domination that permeate all areas of our social world. The link between the personal and the political (the classic feminist slogan) is not always visible and, therefore, most oppression operates invisibly, unintentionally, unconsciously, and without an identifiable culprit (Mullaly, 2002). AOP seeks to restructure social work relationships so that they foster empowerment, user control, equality, and citizenship while promoting egalitarian values and a person-centred philosophy (Dominelli, 1996; Preston-Shoot, 1995). Others, such as Mullaly (2002) have offered guiding principles to assist the anti-oppressive social worker in linking the personal to the political, and in achieving social transformation: having realistic

expectations, undertaking critical self-reflection, utilizing support and study groups, and constructively using the anger one has about our oppressive social world (pp. 204-211).

These discussions of AOP, while helpful in providing a foundational understanding of AOP and enabling further dialogue, use broad strokes to articulate its identity, which is not atypical in the AOP literature. Perhaps unsurprisingly, practitioners and theorists decry its phantom character. Despite what the literature tells us about AOP there continues to be confusion, and a lack of consensus, regarding what AOP actually is (Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005; Williams, 1999; Wilson & Beresford, 2000); and, “no practitioner or academic has come up with a full and definitive model” of AOP (Lynn, 1999, p. 948). More specifically, the contradictions and the gaps between what AOP claims to be and what it actually does seem to be related to its intangible character.

Williams (1999) writes,

Anti-oppressive practice implies a political role for social work. It confers on it an emancipatory interest, a standpoint which for many has powerful moral appeal. Yet the idea of change is problematic, the parameters and remit of political activity within social work contested, the authority of the mandate often unclear, and the assumption of consensus as to aims and means contentious. In short, the anti-oppressive practice rationale must be more firmly grounded and its ambitions made more explicit. (p. 223)

Mullaly (2002) also articulates AOP’s malleable character and hints at the implications:

An examination of the current literature on the subject, along with a look at the curricula of social services educational programs and just listening to practitioners

talk about the subject, could lead one to conclude that everyone believes he or she is writing about or teaching or practising anti-oppressive social work. I am not suggesting that there should be only one theory of oppression or one anti-oppressive approach to practice, but at present anti-oppressive practice seems to be whatever one wants it to be ... (p. 3)

It is not surprising that most social workers would regard themselves and their practice as anti-oppressive as it has become, as discussed earlier, the most significant social work approach and value base for the profession as a whole. Moreover, as Dei (1999) explains, “Dominant group members are usually aware that any acknowledgement of complicity in racial subordination seriously comprises their positions of power and privilege” (p. 401). In order to retain our power and privilege, albeit to varying degrees, few social workers would admit to not being anti-oppressive; yet, can we all claim to be anti-oppressive? In my experiences as a social work student and practitioner I have been privy to discussions of AOP whereby many felt that it was simply good social work practice, meaning that it is an articulation of what the field has been about all along. This contention, in my view, puts too much emphasis on the manifest anti-oppressive intentions of social work and denies how the profession is implicated in reproducing structures of dominance—*social worker is against oppression, therefore, it is not oppressive, and must be anti-oppressive.* Conceivably, this logic may be a means of protecting the perceived efficacy of our professional (and personal) identity. It may also be indicative that the field is looking for ways to locate its “innocence” (Rossiter, 2001)—that space where we can convince ourselves that social work is shielded from its

oppressive social, political, and historical context. Indeed, social work in Canada has a history of being oppressive (the widespread placement of First Nations children in residential schools across Canada (Qwul’sih’yah’mah, 2005) is one such shameful and poignant example). AOP, therefore, is not and never has been inherently anti-oppressive. Rossiter (2001) articulates the impossibility of social work, or any social worker, being intrinsically anti-oppressive, or innocent given its historical context:

I think I've been on the lookout for a theory, a practice, that would make doing social work a fine thing to do by magically doing away with social work and myself as a history which is marked by oppressive relations and ideologies which conceal these relations.... I have to check myself for my inevitable flight towards innocence. As much as I'd like to have a practice of freedom that is pure and free from doubt – a technique – there is no such ahistorical, decontextualized space. We are always acting in and through a history in which the contradictions of history are lived out in our practices, and no person – even ones who do it perfectly can be extracted from history.... I need to maintain suspicion over my Americanness that always whispers in my ear that I can find a technique, a power that can allow me to ignore the history in which our trespasses are embedded.

(para 4, para 15)

It is worrisome that social workers view their practice as anti-oppressive by virtue of the fact that they are social workers because it's a fallacious logic that denies their participation in structures of dominance. Ironically, in this regard AOP could be used a tool to help social workers make such claims of their innocence. Wilson & Beresford

(2000), for example, assert that AOP is “generally offered as an unquestionable good ... [and] the possibility that such ‘anti-oppressive’ ideas and structures/theories could, in themselves, be oppressive or reproduce social injustice does not appear to be acknowledged (p. 558)”. Indeed, AOP is as situated as social work itself; and, therefore, should not be taken for granted as being anti-oppressive anymore than social work, despite any discourse that would seduce us into uncritical acceptance. It may be beneficial, therefore, to develop a clearer understanding of what constitutes AOP in order that we can better discriminate between AOP and social work at large, or even between AOP and oppressive practice. In the absence of such delineation AOP risks becoming everything, and then it becomes nothing at all. And, in this scenario, the status quo prevails and our professional intention to be anti-oppressive becomes mere rhetoric.

As this research delves into the process of acquiring a better understanding of what AOP is, it will also explore whether it ought to be defined, or whether it is even capable of being defined. In other words is AOP undefined, or is it indefinable? This difference amounts to more than mere word play. Is AOP undefined because it is incomplete, affected and tenuous? Or, is it indefinable because it is dynamic, strategic, and multi-faceted? More specifically, is AOP’s ambiguity a deliberate and purposeful component of AOP; or, is it simply immature and ambivalent about its own identity? In the end, we are still looking for a better understanding of AOP—even if that means understanding that it is not meant to be fully understood.

b) AOP as Purposefully or Problematically Ambiguous?

i. Theoretical Plurality – Complimentary or Contradictory?

AOP is its own approach to social work; however, it is influenced by a number of social theories, such as critical theories, postmodernism, and poststructuralism; and, even represents, to an extent, an amalgamation of these theories. Unavoidably, therefore, AOP embodies divergent and often contradictory thinking such as, to provide a generalized example, that which is contained in modernist and postmodernist thought. Modernism, which includes critical theory, posits that an objective reality exists to be discovered and it seeks out definitive answers to the questions we have about the world we inhabit (Johnson, 2000). Postmodernism, in relative opposition, or at least as a subsequent critique of modernism, rejects meta-narratives and instead asserts that there are no objective truths as all knowledge is constructed within a particular social, cultural, and historical context (Trainor, 2002).

AOP's embodiment of modernism is evident in its critical theoretical influences, namely the assertion that society is structured by social inequalities and oppression (Dominelli, 2002; Mullaly, 2002). Born out of this perspective are emancipatory aims for those who are oppressed according to their membership within identity categories based on race, sex, age, sexual orientation, ability and so on. Emancipatory epistemologies embodied in AOP rest on modernist thinking in that they assert a particular truth about our social worlds: that structural inequalities and institutional practices divide human beings into marginalized and dominant groups and then respectively oppress and privilege persons deemed members of those groups (Mullaly, 2002; Dominelli, 2002;

Hugman, 2003). AOP examines how racism, sexism, heterosexism, and so on impact people according to their social location, and in so doing also divides people into oppressed and oppressor groups. AOP uses the concept “social location” to denote a person’s position in society with respect to various identity categories (Heron, 2005).

McPhail (2004) explains how those categories have been used in social work:

In social work theory, practice, and education, people are generally classified by their membership in groups.... These group statuses are frequently divided into binary categorizations such as male/female, white/people of color, heterosexuals/homosexuals, wealthy/poor, and abled/disabled, with the former groups defined as having power and the latter groups defined as being powerless.... Group identity is viewed as both the source of oppression and the potential site of liberation. These group identities are then used as categories of analysis for theorizing, conducting research, and planning political action, as well as informing social work practice, policy, and education.... (pp. 4-5)

Such identity politics have resulted in many gains for marginalized groups, and humanity as a whole, most notably by enabling people to organize around a shared identity to resist their oppression and make demands for social change (Gamson, 1996). AOP’s analysis of our social locations helps to make the workings of oppression and privilege visible; however, their uncritical use has caused social work students to reify social locations that are otherwise highly fluid and ambiguous (Heron, 2005; Williams, 1999). Some charge social work with failing to challenge dichotomized and fixed identity categories, thus

perpetuating their reification and resulting essentialism (Williams, 1999; McPhail, 2004; Harlow & Hearn, 1996).

Without denying the gains of identity politics, some theorists, therefore, question whether such modernist approaches are capable of achieving equality, liberation, and social justice in the end (McPhail, 2004; Namaste, 1996; Gamson, 1996). Even more worrisome, the use of identity categories, even if done with the purpose of attaining rights for marginalized groups, may paradoxically re-inscribe existing binaries thus reproducing the basis upon which groups are already oppressed. Using Queer Theory to explain this point, Stein & Plummer (1996) explain that, “existing gay strategies, and minority group strategies in general, have tended to rely on conceptual dualisms that reinforce the notion of a minority as *other* [italics added] and create binary oppositions which leave the centre intact” (p. 134). In the same vein, essentialist and totalizing identity categories, fixed definitions of oppression, and prescribed ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ ways of addressing oppression are thought to have prevented AOP from attaining its goals (Dominelli, 2002; Butler, Elliot & Stoppard, 2003; Hart, Hall & Henwood, 2003).

There are also many ways that AOP embodies a postmodern discourse. For example, AOP validates multiple ways of knowing, such as the knowledge gained through the lived experience of oppression, or “epistemic privilege”, and strives to work with others across differences to access such knowledge (Narayan, 1989; Campbell & Ungar, 2003). AOP aims to dissolve hierarchies and undo the traditional approach to social work whereby the practitioner is regarded as the “expert” and the service user is there to learn from the expert (Dominelli, 2002); and, this is influenced by postmodernist

thought (Walker, 2001). Applegate (2000) claims that social work's strength is that it responds to unpredictable and ambiguous situations and that in this regard it has always been postmodernist.

While these are laudable principles, others argue that they have not really materialized in social work practice or education. Wilson & Beresford (2000) explain that AOP "experts", such as academics, have appropriated service users' knowledge and have always retained control over what constitutes AOP. Also, social work educators may recognize the value in reducing power dynamics between themselves and students in order to allow diverse knowledge to emerge; however, as will be explained later, they struggle to implement this principle in the classroom (Butler, Elliot & Stoppard, 2003; Maidment & Cooper, 2002). Similarly, it is ironic that while AOP honours multiple truths, it is increasingly becoming *the* truth in schools of social work (Wilson & Beresford, 2000).

The difficulties of bridging the gap between postmodernist thinking and practice aside, its inclusion in social work and in AOP does not qualify as an unquestioned improvement on modernist thinking. Trainor (2002), for example, asserts that the anti-truth sentiments of postmodernism have had "disastrous social consequences" on professional practice because it undermines the critical and political assertions that social work makes about the social order. There are also concerns that a postmodernist analysis is not a politically useful means of achieving social justice, at least not in the current socio-political context. For example, if we regard all collective identities as spurious, in that they are recognized as socially constructed and, therefore, non-existent, we will have

eroded the foundation upon which collective organizing for social change has been made possible. Some theorists argue that such a move would be politically dangerous and harmful to those who deal with the impact (violence, social exclusion) of so-called non-existent identity categories (Atherton & Bolland, 2002; Gamson, 1996). Postmodern thinking may, therefore, undermine social action and even social work's code of ethics, as it “endorses nothing, leaving no end worth striving for” (Atherton & Bolland, 2002, pp. 428-429). Moreover, Hugman (2003) argues that social work ought to abandon postmodernist relativism and continue to assert its own truth in the interest of marginalized people because if it doesn't, neoliberalism, which has emerged as “the implicit but none the less triumphant meta-narrative of our time” (p. 1037), will maintain and strengthen its ascendancy.

This discussion captures the competing logics of modernist and postmodernist thinking as they pertain to social work issues. Indeed, I have polarized these epistemologies and extracted their extreme arguments in some cases in order to make their contradictory natures clear. Various theories that we would consider modernist or postmodernist may be less “pure” than these descriptions; nonetheless, we can see how AOP incorporates both, albeit somewhat diluted at times. Incorporating contradictory epistemologies has made AOP paradoxical in some respects. For example, AOP simultaneously legitimizes and de-legitimizes identity categories as explained earlier. Commenting on Queer Theory, but equally applicable to AOP, Gamson (1996) explains this double-bind: “[We must] recognize that undermining identities is politically damaging in the current time and place, and that promoting them furthers the major

cultural support for continued damage” (p. 411). Some theorists believe that the paradoxical arguments contained within AOP are weaknesses that need to be resolved. Williams (1999), for example, charges AOP with ambivalently vacillating between relativism and pragmatism. Others, however, believe that theoretical plurality, even when containing antagonistic discourses, may be an opportunity to identify and retain the pieces most conducive to realizing AOP goals. Walker (2001), for example, argues that social work ought to draw the most useful aspects of modernist and postmodernist discourses in the quest to eliminate discrimination, and that one need not triumph over the other. In this regard, it provides an anti-oppressive practitioner with more tools to meet service users’ needs. Service users are, after all, often grappling with unpredictable and ambiguous difficulties and so multiple discourses can assist in examining social problems in their ambiguous context (Applegate, 2000; Campbell & Ungar, 2003; Hugman, 2003).

As illustrated above, and asserted in the literature, AOP is both a modernist and a postmodernist project (Mullaly, 2002). AOP is also shown to be contradictory and paradoxical by virtue of this theoretical multiplicity. The seemingly antagonistic logics contained within AOP need not be inherently problematic; however, some theorists caution that too often such contradictions and paradoxes engender a stopping point in our analysis (Gamson, 1996). AOP’s theoretical multiplicity, even if contradictory and paradoxical at times, suggests it may be a cause of its perceived ambiguity; and, that its ambiguity may be purposeful in that it provides a space for the contributions that diverse knowledge can make to social work’s pursuit of social justice. Nevertheless, such

ambiguity may be a source of confusion and defeat for AOP learners, and may cause them to abandon their analysis altogether. It seems, therefore, that what is of concern is not necessarily that AOP is contradictory and paradoxical, but rather how social work educators communicate and manage these issues in the classroom.

ii. *Anti-Oppressive Practice?*

Social work struggles to apply AOP at the micro level (Lloyd, 1998; Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005; Butler, Elliott, & Stoppard, 2003; Campbell, 2002; Campbell & Ungar, 2003; Williams, 1999; Wilson & Beresford, 2000). AOP's discourse on structural inequalities, and the goal of eliminating such inequalities, albeit laudable, has not transferred easily into social work practice or education. Some argue that application in practice must be an essential component of AOP; otherwise, it will merely be a discourse on "good intentions" (Lynn, 1999). As noted earlier, however, there is no definitive model of AOP that would assist practitioners in applying its structural analysis at the individual level (Lynn, 1999). AOP is also criticized for being too abstract and ideologically driven and not prescriptive enough for practice with people whose lives are impacted daily by oppression (Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005). This discussion of AOP's applicability is not limited to social work practice, but also includes a critique of its use in social work education. AOP seeks to critically analyze how power resulting from complex social identities affects the client-worker relationship (Heron, 2005); yet this analysis has not been sufficiently applied to other traditionally hierarchical social work relationships, such as the student-educator relationship. One social work educator writes,

I have no right to expect others to achieve competence to practise anti-oppressively if I am unprepared to do likewise. Anti-oppressive practice is not something which can be taught, practised, and assessed ‘out there’.... [We must] recognize that what we require of students, and encourage with service users, we must require of ourselves: otherwise, the contradictions...will demotivate and disillusion. (Preston-Shoot, 1995, pp. 11, 27)

Social work educators practice in the classroom; students are their de facto clients (Campbell, 2002). Social work educators acknowledge the need to model the principles of AOP in the classroom and in their student-educator relations (Huff, McNown & Jonson, 1998); but have not yet achieved this (Butler, Elliot & Stoppard, 2003; Maidment & Cooper, 2002). Stainton & Swift (1996) highlight this concern and delineate what is needed in an AOP pedagogy:

Serious questions need to be asked about the extent to which our current teaching methods and formats reinforce and model oppressive rather than emancipatory practices. Pedagogical issues requiring consideration will include determining optimal class size, ensuring safety of both students and instructors, dealing with sensitive and often personal matters, development of suitable evaluation procedures, and determining the mix of reading, writing, discussion, and experience needed to facilitate an emancipatory learning experience. (p. 86, quoted in Campbell, 2002, p. 28)

It appears that applying AOP is no easy task; however, if the expectation is that students will work anti-oppressively with clients upon graduation, educators’ practice in the

classroom should also model the same power-sharing relationship (Campbell, 2002).

Structural barriers, as well as students' ideological and attitudinal barriers, thwart an AOP educational process (Allen, Floyd-Thomas & Gillman, 2000); yet, this provides no more of an excuse for educators than it does for practitioners who have failed to practice anti-oppressively to meet the needs of their clients. Despite awareness of the rhetoric, there continues to be a gap between the content of AOP and the process of teaching it (Campbell, 2002; Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005). This has the paternal spirit of "*do as I say, but not as I do*", which leaves students to fill in the gaps when they begin their practice. Inadequate methods of teaching AOP, therefore, can undermine its proclaimed commitment to co-participatory and power-sharing practice relations.

Applying AOP at the micro-level, whether this is in practice or in education, is indeed impeded by its socio-politico-economic context, which is fraught with various hierarchical and hegemonic structural barriers: First, social work is a profession that has, to a certain degree, a social control function and the dominant power that that function implies (Pease, 2002; Pollack, 2004; Wilson & Beresford, 2000), which is largely antithetical to AOP. Second, the social services sector has eroded professional autonomy and focuses heavily on standardization, output and fiscal efficiency (Lloyd, 1998; Baines, 2006), which thwart attempts to build power-sharing relationships with clients. Third, a hierarchical university setting impedes the possibility of developing power-sharing relationships between social work educators and students. Similar to the client-worker relationship, the student-educator relationship is mediated by the hierarchical power structure in the university and in society (Campbell, 2002; Wilson & Beresford, 2000).

Fourth, existing dominant ideologies and mainstream cultural values socially exclude (Hopton, 1997) and are, therefore, antithetical to AOP. And, fifth, a neoliberal agenda at the national level has retrenched the welfare state (DeMaria, 1993; Baines, 2006) and promotes values that are antithetical to the application of AOP in all contexts. Indeed, such barriers call into question whether a micro-level application of AOP is achievable in the current context (Preston-Shoot, 1995), or the degree of achievement at a minimum. And yet, can we expect anything less of AOP as it claims to attend to the connection between individual difficulties and our social structures?

We can also speculate that AOP's elusive character does not lend itself to micro application, assuming that that is an agreed upon goal of AOP—after all, surely one must *know* a theory to some degree in order to competently use it. Sakamoto & Pitner (2005) pointedly ask, “How can we approach practice, teaching and research from an AOP perspective if we do not have a consensus on the concept” (p. 438)? This research, therefore, will also explore whether there is a connection between AOP's ambiguity and the difficulties of applying it in practice.

### iii. Oppressive Practice?

Ironically, these critiques force social work to critically examine not only whether AOP is, or can be, anti-oppressive (Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005), but also whether it may actually be oppressive. The process of practicing anti-oppressively and teaching AOP is not, as explained above, detached from a hierarchical university setting or its socio-politic-economic context. This has caused some to assert not only that the methods of

teaching AOP are insufficient for imparting such knowledge, but also that they demonstrate a model for reproducing oppressive relationships and structures (Campbell, 2002; Stainton & Swift, 1996). Pointedly, if social work educators are not modeling anti-oppressive practices and relationships for students, they're modeling oppressive ones. Wilson & Beresford (2000) also hold AOP accountable, in terms of how it is currently utilized in practice, for re-oppressing clients. They argue that AOP has appropriated services users' knowledge; has used and reinforced negative constructions of, and existing oppressive knowledge about, service users; has legitimized a controlling social work practice; and has masked social work's own professional power (pp. 569-70). In the same vein, because ownership of AOP has remained primarily within the academy its discourse is generated and disseminated within that environment making it potentially inaccessible to those outside the academy. In this regard, AOP is shielded by linguistic barriers that have the impact of excluding marginalized people, or indeed anyone outside the academy, from a discussion of its value. For these reasons, Wilson & Beresford have cited "the illusion of anti-oppressive practice" (2000, p. 558).

This research will, therefore, also necessarily examine whether AOP's ambiguity is related to critiques that it is implicated in legitimizing and reproducing oppression.

#### IV. Research Questions

The literature review shows that there is a discourse on AOP within social work that seemingly conveys an understanding of AOP; and yet, there also continues to be confusion over what it is, thus highlighting AOP's perceived ambiguity. In response, this research will explore the following central question: How do social work educators understand AOP? The literature review also shows that AOP may be intentionally and purposefully ambiguous highlighting that it is not necessarily a characteristic that needs to be resolved. Conversely, there is reason to examine whether AOP's ambiguity is related to its negative critiques; and, if so, it may indicate that social work ought to define AOP in order to resolve such problems. In response, this research will, therefore, explore other more specific questions: Do social work educators' understandings of AOP indicate that it has settled into an approach that is fixed and knowable; and, if so, what is known? Or, do their understandings of AOP indicate that it remains ambiguous and elusive; and, if so, is it intentionally ambiguous, or is its ambiguity identified as a weakness to be resolved? Also, if AOP is shown to be ambiguous, what is the source of, and purpose for, its ambiguity? Finally, what are the implications of social work educators' understandings of AOP, and how are they managed in the social work classroom?

## V. Methods

McMaster University's School of Social Work organized an AOP Working Group in January 2003 whose task was to undertake research that would inform the school's ongoing development of an AOP education; and, more specifically, to inform the development of a core course in AOP for incoming social work students. As explained previously, I joined the working group from its inception as a BSW student due to my general interest in anti-racism and anti-oppression. The working group, composed almost equally of social work faculty and students, began meeting regularly to design this research project. We decided that we would interview both social work educators and students, who have taught and studied AOP respectively, from three different universities in Canada about AOP. The data collected from that research project, and from those interviews, compose the data that will be used for this paper; however, I will be examining only the interviews that were conducted with the social work educators.

Participants were recruited by contacting directors of social work programs and inquiring whether their school would like to take part in this research (See Appendix 1 for Information Letter to Directors). When schools agreed, the director informed social work faculty about the project with an information letter (See Appendix 2 for Information Letter to Faculty) and recruited participants for the study. Nine interviews in total were conducted with twelve social work educators. One of those interviews was not properly recorded and thus we had to exclude it from the research. Out of the eight remaining interviews, one was conducted with four participants in a group interview. Therefore, in

sum, this research uses data gathered from eleven participants in total (seven single interviews, and one group interview with four participants), all of which were recruited from three schools of social work in Canada. Demographic information was also collected from participants using a demographics form (See Appendix 3 for Demographics Form): seven of the participants identified themselves as white females; two identified themselves as women of colour; and two identified themselves as white males.

In-depth, active, and conversational interviews were conducted with participants to ensure that participants' views were not restricted, and to allow for knowledge to be co-constructed between participants and researchers. The interview guide was composed of five open-ended questions that were designed to explore participants' understandings of AOP, and how they teach it in the social work classroom (See Appendix 4 for the Interview Guide). We also included a question to elicit critical reflection on participants' social location and its impact on their understandings of AOP and their pedagogy. Two faculty members of the AOP working group conducted interviews with the participants. There are "insider/outsider" dynamics in this design, and I am hoping that this research will benefit from the advantages of each.

Undertaking faculty-to-faculty interviews held the potential for the following "insider advantages" (LaSala, 2003): the faculty researchers were better able to recruit participants based on their membership in a shared academic community; there was a possible shared sense of trust, creating a safe space for dialogue, between faculty whose manifest agendas and commitments to social change are known; and, there was a shared

professional discourse and understanding of experiences common to their profession.

This is not to suggest that all faculty members occupy the same subject positions; indeed, faculty occupy diverse subject positions in terms of their race, sexual orientation, gender, ethnicity and so on. Therefore, insider-to-insider does not wholly capture the relationship between the researcher and the participants; but, because their status as educators is the essential criteria for engaging in the interviews, this subject position is significant. This research is, therefore, designed with the awareness that there are structures of power impacting on one's ability to freely discuss political issues in the public domain without consequences, whether real or perceived, and it attempts to circumvent such real barriers through insider-to-insider interviews.

Without dismissing the advantages of faculty-to-faculty interviews, there are also potential disadvantages resulting from this dynamic that need to be acknowledged. According to LaSala (2003) insiders may fail to notice what is unique to their group; may take for granted a shared understanding, and not explore or probe further as necessary; and, may edit their true thinking for fear of gossip or “loss of face” within their community. I argue that this is a significant concern with regard to this research, as challenging AOP is a politicized activity as it can be seen as “taking the side of the oppressor” (Wilson & Beresford, 2000, p. 558). Moreover, there is the potential for “experiential interdependence” existing between the researcher and participants due to their shared experience of privilege as academics (Boushel, 2000). Boushel, (2000) explains this dynamic and its potential negative impact:

Researchers' experiential affinity with advantaged groups has received little explicit attention, despite its considerable implications. Yet, if the 'experiential affinity' between the researcher and the researched is one of shared powerlessness, both are more likely to maintain their relatively advantaged position when this is overlooked or unexplored.... The term 'experiential interdependence' is used here to help conceptualize this potentially oppressive interconnectedness. (p. 77)

The working group had not acknowledged the potential for experiential interdependence in the original research design, but this now seems like a significant concern (not hinging on any one faculty interviewer, but rather as a systemic issue impacting on all such interviews). It may be advantageous, therefore, to have a student, such as myself, analyze the faculty interviews to provide an outsider perspective (albeit to some degree) and help to guard against the reproduction of their dominance. Moreover, de-briefing with my research supervisor, who was also one of the faculty interviewers, about my interpretations of the data may help to layer and retain both the insider and outsider advantages that we both provide.

Because AOP cites the need to work with marginalized groups, and to value their knowledge of oppression, the AOP working group was conscious that service users were not included in designing or implementing the research. This issue was discussed among committee members from the inception of the committee; however, ultimately we were not able to identify ways of including services users in the project in ways that honoured their knowledge without being exploitative. We did not actively resolve to exclude, however, that was the result. It is admittedly ironic that a research project on AOP that

has failed to actively include those who are meant to be the ultimate beneficiaries of AOP; and, unfortunately, this is not unusual: “While AOP is offered as an emancipatory approach to social work … recipients of social work have been minimally involved in discussions and initiatives associated with the development of AOP” (Wilson & Beresford, 2000, p. 554). Despite this limitation in the research design, this research is, however, as explained earlier, undertaken in the perceived interest of service users and marginalized populations as a whole as it aims to hold social work educators accountable for the kinds of knowledge that are chosen to inform social work practice and to evaluate what that knowledge contributes to (and/or detracts from) the pursuit of social justice.

The data were analyzed using a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). All of the interviews were read through once without coding any of the data in order that I could sensitize myself to the kind and range of ideas put forward by the participants. I then read the interviews a second time, and openly coded each one for emerging concepts. I went through the interviews a third time and again coded the data for the same concepts, but also allowed for new ones to emerge during this reading. During the third reading I also made notes regarding potential emerging categories. Categories are “higher order concepts” that are more abstract and explanatory in nature (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 113). The emergence of these categories helped me to begin generating theory from the data. Up until this point, I had been coding the data by making hand-written notes in the margins of printed copies of the interviews. From this point forward I then began analyzing the data using N-Vivo qualitative software. I read through the interviews a fourth time using N-Vivo, which enabled me to code the data

into concepts, and the concepts under categories that had emerged; and, to constantly compare across categories for refinement. During this reading, central categories took shape, which enabled me to theorize the data further. As I began explaining the findings and the theory in text, I was also constantly re-reading the data contained within each category to ensure that they were appropriately coded. The results of this analysis are presented in the “Findings” section.

Of note, there are also three practical issues that need to be raised in this section. First, data provided in this paper, in some cases, needed to be edited for readability. In most cases this was accomplished with square brackets and ellipses according to an APA format. In a few cases more substantial grammatical changes were required and were made without the use of brackets and ellipses, as their frequency was overly intrusive at times. The meaning of the content as I understood it was not altered in any way, however. Second, there are a few pieces of data that are used more than once in the findings section. This was intentional because in some cases the same piece of data supported more than one concept or category. Third, in the findings section an assigned number will identify participants in order to protect their anonymity. “SP” and their number will identify participants interviewed in single participant interviews: SP1 through SP7. “GP” and their number will identify participants who were interviewed in a group: GP1 through GP4.

## VI. Findings

When asked what AOP means to them, participants readily listed off a few core themes or tenets in an effort to capture its essence. Most participants mentioned two or three tenets explicitly and other tenets were inferred from stories and information they shared. In this section I will outline the nine tenets that emerged, however, it is important to know that this list is more than the sum of its parts. Participants critically reflected on AOP in their interviews and revealed that these tenets also contain a requisite fluidity and ambiguity that affects our understanding of AOP as a whole. This fluidity and ambiguity emerged as a central category, in conjunction with power, and these will be outlined following a discussion of the emergent tenets. A summary of AOP’s nine tenets is provided in Table 1 on page 53, which can be referred to throughout this discussion.

### a) Understanding AOP’s Tenets

#### i. An Anti-Oppressive Worldview

AOP—Anti-Oppressive *Practice*—the term suggests that the focus is on practice. The participants, however, all described AOP as something much bigger, and the term they used most often was “worldview”. SP5 stated this explicitly:

SP5: “First of all, I would kind of see [AOP] as relating to a whole worldview ... I remember one of my students saying that we shouldn’t be talking about anti-oppressive practice—we should be talking about anti-oppressive living”.

Other participants also supported this assertion, describing AOP as an epistemology:

GP3: “[It’s] a philosophy, a philosophy on the way of being in the world.”

SP1: “It’s something I think people carry in their soul. It’s how you see the world. It’s on an epistemological base. So it’s how you see knowledge and knowledge-creation. It’s how you see your interactions with people. Relationships between the knower and the known.”

These understandings of AOP indicate that it cannot be contained within social work practice, or even within the profession as a whole, as it is a grand commentary on the nature of our social world—what we know about the social world, how we interpret or know that world, and how we behave within it. If we agree that AOP is a worldview as is the contention of the participants, its application then has no boundaries, as participant SP1 makes clear:

SP1: “Anti-oppressive practice isn’t a theory or something that you put on when you go to work. It’s how you are with your kids. It’s how you are with your neighbour. It’s how you live your life.”

It would seem, therefore, that AOP is somewhat of a misnomer. The participants’ suggest that a focus on practice is limiting, and that it is better described as an anti-oppressive worldview or epistemology. If AOP constitutes a worldview, what is that worldview? What does a person who practices from an AOP perspective believe about the social world?

## ii. A Theory of Oppression and Privilege

Participants indicated that AOP theorists view the world as one that is structured to oppress some and privilege others. Participants explained AOP by theorizing about oppression and the ways that social work is implicated:

SP2: “What I teach to students is I try to teach is that there’s no absence of oppression.... I think that there are different degrees of freedom, [which none of our institutions] are outside of or innocent from.”

SP7: “[I emphasize] being able to analyze and understand how oppression is operating in given situations that are happening within one's work. Including, obviously, relations with the client.... [but also] the ways in which the agencies as organizations help to reproduce relations of domination, help to reproduce oppression in people's lives, [which] is something the clients pick up on much more than the workers in the agency probably pick up on. So, I think if we don't attend to how this operates within our agency and practice as a whole, then the agency itself [perpetuates] systemic racism, or systemic oppression, and has a free reign. And the clients feel that.”

SP3: “[AOP is about] the interlocking nature ... of oppression, and looking holistically at oppression and the connectedness of all these structures is really so central, and perhaps that is where it differs from, and I know this is debatable, anti-sexism, and anti-racism—it's oneness.”

GP4: “Saying that [dominant groups are] exploiting this interdependence and interconnectivity to their advantage is oppression. And such oppression denies our common humanity and personhood, but denies the common humanity and personhood of others. This is one group's personhood and humanity above others, and this destroys the essence of what it means to be human.”

Consistent with the literature review, the participants theorize about the structural and intersectional nature of oppression, its complexity, the impact it has on social work practice, and on humanity as a whole.

Participants made it clear that AOP also scrutinizes privilege in order that it not recede into a comfortable place of invisibility and preservation. GP4 explains the importance of de-centering and de-constructing the power of privileged groups as their privilege is inextricably linked to the maintenance of oppression:

GP4: “So it's about [students] understanding oppression, but understanding the privilege that thrives it and dismantle that I guess.”

GP4: “There's 'oppressive', so if we started with oppressive, so that AOP is about what is oppressive. And I was thinking, I don't know, for me, AOP, I think [we need to] look at the flip side of it. So, what is oppression is also the flip side to

privilege. So racism exists because there is race privilege too. There is a flip side, so AOP looks at the flip side as well as just looking at the oppression.”

This analysis shifts the critical gaze from the margins to the centre and speaks to the importance of holding those who benefit from the status quo accountable for the oppression that others receive as a result.

Participants expressed that theorizing about oppression and privilege (who is oppressed, how oppression is constructed and maintained) is foundational to understanding AOP; however, participants also highlighted the complexities and politics of this discourse, revealing that it is dynamic and fluid, and not one that is taught or learnt with any ease:

SP1: “Somehow people are expected to pick an identity of who they are in their self-location: ‘I am an Aboriginal person. I am a woman. I am queer.’ You have to pick one. It’s hard if you’re an Aboriginal lesbian with a disability, you know? How do you put all that together? How do you situate yourself in multiple spots? And what does that mean for how you make alliances with people? So it’s much more complex than I think students and faculty sometimes play into. I worry that we play into a hierarchy of choosing an identity. For me anti-oppressive practice is realizing the complexity of that and resisting some of that identity politics that I see sometimes gets construed as being anti-oppressive practice.”

SP6: “What I think students really come away [with], they must come away very confused about what oppression is. Will they be able to tell the difference between somebody who is really seriously being oppressed by somebody [or someone who is] having a bad day, or in a bad relationship, or, when the power balance is truly unequal? We know that in any relationship there’s unequal power balances, but does every unequal power balance equal an oppressed person and an oppressor? When you have oppressed people, you have oppressors, and who are they, you know? Who are we dealing with here?”

The above participants explain how the fluidity of power affects and complicates what we know about oppression. Participants theorized about the nature of oppression and

privilege in an effort to explain their understanding of AOP, but also revealed the contextualized and politicized nature of this understanding.

iii. A Critical Stance

Participants explained that AOP retains no guise of neutrality, and that it demands that we adopt a critical stance, which is informed by various critical discourses:

GP4: “‘Anti’ means it’s against [oppression], it’s not just trying to stay neutral. It’s trying to undue it.”

GP1: “It asserts a stance, just by virtue of [the word ‘anti’].... It demands action. The stance demands action. Silence is to collude.”

SP4: “Well to me AOP means um, a particular stance that we take in our work and practice. And when I say our work and practice, I mean our direct practice with individuals, I mean our practice as researchers, and I certainly mean in my particular practice, which is working with students. So it’s the kind of awareness that I have about my place in all of this.”

SP1: “Values come out in the discussion. When you pick up issues of racism or homophobia, you are touching on values. So, it is connected. I just don’t want to have it labelled that way as a value because I think it’s a political stance as well and it might lose some of its political ‘oomph’ if it’s relegated to values.”

SP2: “AOP—what I’d like it to be is a multiplicity of discourses, of critical discourses; and, a multiplicity of critical discourses, critically looking at its own critical discourses.”

According to the participants, AOP, therefore, does not merely describe the nature of oppression and privilege; it is unapologetically critical and intolerant of the structures that grant undeserved privileges upon some while causing harm and violence toward others.

Participants also explained that action must be born out of that critical stance, which is a theme that emerged in its own right and will be explained next.

iv. Praxis

Participants consistently asserted the importance of taking action to dismantle oppression:

GP4: “There isn’t this neutral position, you can’t stand still, and because there is power you can’t do away with power, we have to use that power in very deliberate ways to undo this structure.”

Participants explained that if we’re critical of the structures of dominance without intervening to dismantle them, we’re supporting them and allowing the status quo to thrive. Participants emphasised that AOP demands the need for action, and more specifically the need for praxis:

GP2: “We see in this the possibility to redress, and the redress is actually part of the making it up. Striving to reconnect humanity. Action. It absolutely has to be action. It has to come out of a stance, but it is an active stance. The task is to remake humanity.”

SP1: “Don’t just be mad. How are you going to make the change?” So, I like that part. That part’s good because if they do figure that out, then they can make change and that is helpful to us. That is helpful to us. If they just rail and protest, that doesn’t do much.”

GP2: “Praxis has to be in the forefront.”

GP1: “Praxis! Personal praxis in a sense, yeah.”

“Praxis” is a cyclical process of action-reflection-action. Freire (1970) asserted that praxis was the process through which oppressed groups could gain a critical awareness of their oppressive reality, and that it was the only way to transform that reality.

Participants saw praxis as an essential component of AOP. The absence of action in response to awareness of oppression maintains the existing social order, which is more reflective of *oppressive* practice and is, therefore, antithetical to AOP.

v. Working Together Across Differences

When discussing what AOP looks like, participants cited the need to work together across differences, in a *power-with* relationship, in education, practice, and generally:

SP4: “So I think the curriculum needs to involve opportunities for the students to develop relationships with each other, relationships with the instructor that are different than those that have been historically in place.”

SP7: “And I'm kind of saying, ‘It's okay to struggle...the thing is to struggle.’ Not to feel bad that you have to struggle, but to keep struggling. Because I think you know, it's an interesting question because I think there is a need to collapse that power differential...between the students and the teachers on these issues and to position oneself as amongst those who are struggling to learn.”

SP4: “My hope is that students will find a way to disrupt and destroy entrenched ways of interacting with people.”

Participants explain that AOP directs social workers to work *with* service users and marginalized groups, in a *power-with* relationship, to resolve personal and collective difficulties as well as to transform the oppressive structures that underpin them. Building this type of a relationship with people who have less structural power de-legitimizes the ideology that *we know better*, and it fosters social inclusion and empowerment.

Participants also explain that developing this kind of a relationship across differences in societal power is essential, yet quite an onerous undertaking:

SP6: “That's a very tricky thing to navigate. You know I've certainly heard of people's experiences where they try to get down on the ground with the students, and the students chastise them: ‘I'm here to learn from you. Why am I paying all this money if you don't know anymore than I do’ kind of thing. How do you position yourself in the classroom to be a learner, but not a peer? I have met professors who have tried to be peers and it does not work.”

SP1: “I’m reminded of the old saying, ‘Nice is no excuse for a bad personality’. If we were all the same, we could all be very nice and respectful of one another and we’d carry on and we would get along fine and we would have lovely curriculum and we’d admit students who looked like us and everybody would be happy. That would be nice. But that’s no excuse, right? It’s a lot harder to do the other. But I think it contributes to a better sense of what Anti-Oppressive Practice really means. If we really do mean to help students learn to work across difference, then we have to figure out how to do that too. And how can we figure that out if we’re all the same?”

This shows that participants regard AOP as being anti-oppressive in both content and process, but also explain that there are many structural and ideological barriers that thwart the development of a power-sharing relationship. This puts the AOP educator and/or practitioner in a position where they must swim upstream against the dominant *power-over* ideology:

Traditional professional framings of worker-client interactions tend to assume that the client is passive and dependent – a person who must be helped by the professional using his or her knowledge, skills and goodwill. The presumption that the person asking for assistance is ‘defective’ in some way percolates this configuration of the person and sets the context for *power over* dynamics to be reproduced rather than egalitarian ones. As a result, dominant discourses become reinforced rather than undermined. (Dominelli, 2002, p. 98)

Dismantling traditional hierarchical relationships and rebuilding egalitarian ones in social work practice is difficult as the dominant ideology supports the notion of the professional or teacher having power over the service user or student. Indeed, the barriers are pervasive, but no less pervasive than the ones students will face when attempting to apply AOP as practitioners. It is, therefore, helpful for students to have this struggle modeled

for them in their education. If students are expected to struggle with this in practice despite barriers, social work educators should embrace the same challenge.

The importance of working together across differences is also supported by critical theorists. Paulo Freire (1970), in particular, poignantly asserts that social transformation cannot be achieved in lieu of a commitment to co-participatory relations:

Because of [oppressors'] background they believe that they must be the executors of the transformation. They talk about the people, but they do not trust them; and trusting the people is the indispensable precondition for revolutionary change. A real humanist can be identified more by his trust in the people, which engages him in their struggle, than by a thousand actions in their favour without that trust....

[The oppressed] cannot enter the struggle as objects in order later to become human beings. (pp. 60, 68)

Participants seemed to feel no less passionate about the significance of this tenet.

vi. Epistemic Privilege

As noted in the previous tenet, social work traditionally holds a position of power over service users and marginalized groups. Participants explained that this is maintained, in part, through the social construction of practitioners as “experts” about the lives of marginalized people:

SP1: “The anti-oppressive practice perspective in how we come together is basic respect, which I don’t necessarily see in more tradition social work approaches where the social worker is the expert.”

SP7 uses sarcasm to convey this sentiment:

SP7: “What do *we* think of *them*? And what are *we* going to do about it. What do *we* think *they* should be doing differently? Do *we* have a plan for *them*? Because *we* know better.” [Italics added to convey participant’s sarcasm]

This illustrates that a hierarchy of knowledge is created through the construction of social work expertise, whereby the practitioner’s knowledge is privileged and, consequently, less powerful groups’ knowledge is devalued, which reproduces their marginalized subject position. Participants also explained that we all lose in this scenario, as essential knowledge about the lived experience of oppression is not shared, and we are left with an incomplete understanding of oppression:

SP3: “So what does anti-oppressive practice mean to me? It means deconstructing oppression wherever it occurs as it occurs. It always requires me to look at the agency of the people, the voice of the people, the insights of the people that we speak of, even as marginalized groups. So I don’t go and assume that I know how they’re being oppressed. I really have to look at what they’re saying about how they’re being oppressed.”

SP5: “I think when people who have been on the margins are brought into the centre, and when their voice is kind of honoured and elevated, often during some kinds of experiential exercises or activities that we have in class...those are the things that seem to be most significant for students.”

SP5: “You know, how can you ask questions in a way that kind of opens it up for people to really be the experts rather than asking questions that sets you the worker up as the expert? And I think that there’s some really not so difficult kinds of semantic and linguistic ways of thinking about how you speak to people that result in a very, very different kind of conversation.”

Participants view AOP as an epistemology that directs us to work together across differences of structural power so that we can learn what those who have the experience of being oppressed know about oppression. This contention is informed, in part, by the work of Uma Narayan (1989) who asserted that members of oppressed groups have a more intimate and immediate understanding of how oppression operates and its impact on

people's lives; and that, therefore, any understanding of oppression is inadequate unless it accounts for this "insider" knowledge.

vii. Co-Construction of Knowledge

Participants explained that knowledge is not fixed, universal, or objective; rather, multiple kinds of knowledge are constructed and reconstructed as we interact with one another and with our social worlds. AOP endorses this postmodernist view of knowledge, and as such it requires that practitioners also engage in dialogue and the co-construction of knowledge with others:

SP1: "[AOP] is about people coming together, you and I, and creating a meaning in the space between us. That you bring your lived experience, your location, and I bring mine, and together we create the space where we are creating our own meaning, constructed in this moment, in this time. It might be different if it was another person sitting across this table. It might be different if it was another day. But what anti-oppressive practice means is that we bring whatever is going in our worlds at this time to this moment and construct meaning for ourselves. "

SP3: "I think one [component of AOP] would be that kind of post-modern idea about multiple truths, multiple realities. I mean I think that's a very important part of it the idea that knowledge is constructed. That it's not to be discovered—that it's actually constructed according to the kind of the context."

SP1: "There isn't one voice in anti-oppressive practice; ... there are different and competing and complementary [voices]..."

Participants also explained the difficulty in merging both clients' experiential knowledge with social work's academic knowledge in order to co-construct knowledge that is born out of, and values, both:

SP3: "One of my concerns is about AOP language and how students might hear, or maybe how I talk about it, is when we talk about the client being the expert ... Somehow that gets heard as the social worker is just kind of along to be there as a, 'Yes you're the expert' as opposed to recognizing the, and again it's part of the

reflexivity, the power in being a social worker, but also recognizing that there is some different knowledge and different skills that we bring to the encounters...”

Despite the difficulties in co-constructing knowledge, which is in part affected by power relations that shape what emerges and what is silenced, participants explained how it could influence social work education and practice:

SP4: “I think it's important to create a community of learners rather than teachers and students; to co-construct our learning journeys certainly to honour the wisdom that students bring as well and to adopt a stance as an instructor as a listener and learner as well as offer perspectives and ways of thinking about things.”

SP1: “So the effect of that sort of thinking, about the nature of our work as practitioners, influences us in practices. So when students are talking about the practice of social work and what anti-oppressive practice means, it's not about a social worker thinking in their head ‘What do I have to do next to make you do what I want you do?’ It's creating the meaning between us, right? So that's another piece of it.”

This tenet builds on the tenet of epistemic privilege. If we recognize the value of “insider” knowledge, as well as diverse knowledge in general, we understand the need to co-construct new knowledge in order to utilize what we each have to contribute to the pursuit of social justice. Indeed, this view of knowledge is influenced by postmodernism and poststructuralism in that AOP does not dictate an objective knowledge base that is true across space and time. Instead, we create knowledge with each other and within a context, and that context also creates us as subjects and shapes the knowledge that emerges (Namaste, 1996). The imperative to co-construct knowledge is also informed by the work of Paulo Freire, who used the teacher-student relationship as a literal example to explain this process: “Education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student

contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students” (1970, p. 72).

With AOP, therefore, we approach practice (and the world around us) with minds open to learning and constructing meaning with one another in each space. This epistemology becomes contradictory, however, in that it does not allow us to co-construct knowledge that validates the oppression of others. AOP is, therefore, not completely malleable, nor is it nihilistic (as a postmodern influence might imply) as it also approaches knowledge construction with a commitment to social justice and equality.

### viii. Critical Reflexivity

Participants cited the need to be critically reflective about one’s social location as central to AOP because it helps practitioners to appreciate how their own location shapes their practice:

SP1: “Self-location I think is a really key part of anti-oppressive practice, it is in and of itself anti-oppressive practice.”

SP7: “What matters are the skills I have, the knowledge I have, and it’s not about me really, right? I’m going to take on this role, and then if I bring the right skills to the role or the position, then I can do the job. But, it’s the ‘me’ who is doing the job [that students are] not prepared to think about. And we really emphasize a reflective practice as an approach.”

SP7: “It’s the incessant, incessant ways in which whiteness materializes in people’s practice. Dominance materializes, and it’s just incessant.”

Participant SP3 articulated the need for social workers to be reflective about the multiplicity and fluidity of their social locations:

SP3: “The problem is that, for me any kind of categorizing becomes a dominant space. Even the reactive resistant form of categorizing becomes a dominant space

as soon as it gets frozen. So ‘difference’ is where I look, right? We’re talking about difference. And difference is different all the time as it moves and evolves. And we’re different every minute and every second of the day. So, how is difference being spelled out in the specifics of a particular time?”

Participant SP7 also echoed this sentiment and indicated a preference for the term “subject position” in order to highlight and appreciate its fluidity:

SP7: “I try to get [students] to think about their realities, which is why I kind of think of ‘subject position’ - their world views and where they are positioned at this nexus of interlocking oppressions in any given moment, how that shapes their experiences of the situation they’re in. That it’s not like, ‘I’m a social worker, here are my skills and you are my client’. But [rather], ‘I’m a human being doing social work and all this stuff is shaping me, and it’s shaping how I see the person I’m working with or the community I’m working with. And it is also shaping how the person or the community is seeing me’. Bodies are being read and assumptions are being made.”

Participants also asserted that social institutions, such as the school of social work and social work as a profession, should examine how they are located (or their subject positions) in order to critically reflect on the role they play in reproducing dominance:

SP1: “I think has been useful to maintain a dialogue around anti-oppressive practice and what it means to be continually self-reflective as a school.”

GP4: “How has social work helped in the past and in the present too, to maintain oppressed] because our privilege is that we can define how this comes together. We even have privilege to say, ‘this is anti-oppressive practice’.”

Participant SP7 explained how students generally minimize the need for critical reflexivity, and also that a professional identity may be a particular barrier to acknowledging one’s oppressive subject positions:

SP7: “I think development work per se has seen itself as outside of those kinds of power relations. People who do that work think of themselves as not being racist by virtue of the fact that they [do development work]”.

SP7: “The people who see themselves doing social change [mistakenly] think they are outside of these kinds of power relations...”

SP7: “To realize that you're in a position of dominance is a much harder realization to come to, especially for people who do social work.... We of all people don't want to be doing anything nasty to anybody else.”

The social work literature also highlights the importance of critical reflexivity.

Reflexive knowledge is the knowledge that we have about ourselves—our self-awareness (Mullaly, 2002). Engaging in critical reflexivity entails developing our self-awareness such that we are not only observing the world, but also recognizing that our observations are connected to our subject positions, which implicates us in the production of society and of its structures (Kondrat, 1999). Identity categories, such as race, sexual orientation, gender and so on are often presented as, ”a shorthand that reduces fluid and complex positionings into a fixed position that can be named”, and this re-inscribes dominance and marginalization (Heron, 2005, p. 344).

Practitioners are encouraged, therefore, to become more critically aware of how their subject positions are produced by, and reproduce, structures of dominance:

I want students to think about how [issues related to power and oppression play out] in the ‘helping relationship’: how the complexities of their and their clients’ identities may interact, how domination may be reinscribed at the moment of helping, and how their participation as social workers in such relationships inevitably works to shape their identities. Self-reflection is crucial to examining these dynamics. (Heron, 2005, p. 341-42)

Engaging in critical reflexivity is an emotional process for social workers because, particularly for students who occupy positions of dominance, it can threaten their “innocent” identity (Heron, 2005; Rossiter, 2001). Learning that we are racist, for example, and are unavoidably implicated in the reproduction of structural disadvantage by virtue of our subject position is met with resistance and denial as it can tarnish a spotless, “do-gooder” self-image. Critically reflecting on our subject positions as practitioners, and as a profession, helps us to be aware of how we perpetuate structures of dominance, and it challenges any claims of innocence that we may make. Such awareness encourages us to dismantle not only oppression in society, but also the oppressor that lives within us and within our profession.

#### ix. Commitment to Social Justice

What is the ultimate goal of AOP? If it is critical of the current social order, and actively deconstructs that social order, what it is that we are meant to reconstruct? What is the vision? Participants seemed to view AOP as a means of ultimately transforming the social order into one that is more “just”, and that this is really the purpose of social work as a whole:

SP1: “And yet I do think [AOP] is something about how one sees the world, how one picks up notions of social justice.”

GP2: “Ensure that if people are going to be doing social work that they engage in that struggle for justice. Because if they're not engaged in that struggle, by default they are engaged in the struggle that perpetuates oppression.”

SP6: “A focus on social justice, which for me, social work has always been about. There are in the Code of Ethics one of the, the tenth item on there, which I always

show students, is about making change to make the world better for your clients. It's right there in the Code of Ethics."

Participants view social justice as paramount; and, it appears to be a non-negotiable goal of AOP. Participants also seemed to discuss this tenet of AOP as somewhat self-evident, as though the vision of social justice were fixed and known. SP6 did, however, explain that identifying what social justice might look like is a political enterprise even when attempted within the profession:

SP6: "I mean I think that even people who are supposedly mainstream, clinical and all those things we think are conventional and conservative, have a very different notion of what social justice is all about."

SP3 and GP2 also began to delineate the vision of social justice:

SP3: "We all want to be autonomous. We all want to be free, although we have different notions of what we mean by freedom. And what I see anti-oppressive notions of freedom to be is they're associational. They're always about community. They're not individualistic as liberal notions of freedom.... We want to participate in society. We want to be free to participate. But we want to free to participate based on our difference and not in spite of our difference."

GP2: "We see in this the possibility to redress, and the redress is actually part of the making it up. Striving to reconnect humanity. Action. It absolutely has to be action. It has to come out of a stance, but it is an active stance. The task is to remake humanity."

These visions of social justice go beyond equating it with the distribution of material resources. It also includes social and civic opportunities and rights, which allow us to participate more fully as human beings in society. And yet, the vision of social justice is not a foregone conclusion, or a singular truth for all. As one participant put it,

SP3: "The vision is no longer a meta-narrative."

Indeed, it must evolve from the co-construction of knowledge through dialogue across differences in order that we may collectively determine, in an ongoing manner, what exactly constitutes “justice”.

Table 1 – Nine Tenets of Anti-Oppressive Practice

Tenet	Description
An Anti-Oppressive Worldview	How we interpret the world and how we know what we know. An epistemology.
A Theory of Oppression and Privilege	The social world is structured to oppress and privilege. Oppression is structural and intersectional.
A Critical Stance	There is no neutrality. We must be critical of oppression and privilege.
Working Together Across Differences	Working with others across differences in a power-with relationship. Fosters empowerment and social inclusion.
Epistemic Privilege	Centralizing the voice of marginalized people. Knowledge of the lived experience of oppression is valued.
Co-Construction of Knowledge	Knowledge is multiple and diverse. We must construct knowledge with others across difference.
Critical Reflexivity	Critically reflecting on our subject positions, how we reproduce dominance, and its impact on social work practice.
Praxis	<i>A cyclical process of action-reflection-action, which is undertaken to transform an oppressive social order.</i>
A Commitment to Social Justice	The end goal, the vision, of AOP.

### b) AOP's Fluidity and Ambiguity

The list of AOP's tenets outlined in this paper gives the impression that it is a fixed and knowable epistemology. Indeed, presenting such an uncomplicated framework of AOP would fill a gap that many would like to see filled. Participant GP4 stated:

GP4: "I don't think anyone has done it yet, come up with a nice clean definition."

This illustrates that capturing a definition of AOP is regarded as desirable and worth seeking. Admittedly, it would be neat and tidy to package AOP in this manner, but something much less convenient emerged from the data. AOP was shown to be more than the sum total of its tenets; AOP is also understood to be a highly fluid epistemology, and intentionally ambiguous or elusive as a result. Participants' explanations of AOP reveal that it is constantly shifting and changing, often taking shape in contradictory and paradoxical ways; and, that this fluidity has contributed to AOP being intentionally indefinable. Admittedly, even this statement is paradoxical in that we are defining AOP as indefinable; but such a paradox is not atypical of AOP as a whole. Participants discussed AOP's intentional fluidity:

GP2: "It's dynamic. It's a changing thing. It's very hard. That's why I like a kind of critical, open stance."

SP6: "It's a worldview instead of a thing that's fixed."

SP2: "AOP isn't an 'it'. I mean it really isn't an 'it'. I think it is lazy talk to say 'it'. And I think it is lazy thinking to say 'it' because I think if you're trying to get away from reifying thinking, then you can't really say 'it'."

GP3: "It's a stance of being open to a change in knowledge base, and a personal transforming with that knowledge base..."

SP5: "If you're teaching anti-oppressive practice and you show people or you kind of give them some kinds of guidelines or some way of doing things, well that is just kind of creating a kind of mechanized way [of doing things] ... which would kind of be totally opposed to what we're trying to do."

SP5: "I find that so much of anti-oppressive thinking and postmodern thinking in general is about having two possibly contradictory things and maintaining them both."

Participants explained that AOP is intentionally ambiguous or elusive, and that they accept and even embrace AOP's ambiguity, despite any collective reflex to "get it":

SP2: "AOP is a Red Herring, as far as I'm concerned. It's not actually what I want to get at. I don't want to get at try to fix conceptually or otherwise what AOP means. I think the enterprise of social work and the enterprise of disciplines need to stop doing that, trying to get at and fixing what the conceptual meanings actually are, so we can [instead] engage in making meaning."

SP3: "A meta-narrative around race didn't work for me. It made me feel that I was myself being oppressive in that. So ... if you're not going to go for meta-narratives than you have to go for the specifics of oppression as it exists, within our social-historical place."

GP2: "Maybe then, in a way, the least important thing is worrying too much about what the most important thing is. In other words, trying to get it right, trying to get it perfect, uh maybe that is the least important..."

SP3: "We don't want to categorize. So then we don't want AOP to be yet another category. So its fluidity is maintained because it's always responding. It's always in conversation. So that's the one thing I learned. Instead of saying, 'What is AOP?' I always start with, 'What is Liberalism? What is Marxism?' You know, and so that when it comes to AOP, they're already conversing."

SP2: "I want to 'queer' progressive Social Work. I want to queer AOP. I want to queer feminism. I want to queer anti-racism, right? ... I want to traverse what those normativities are and how we make those normativities—both within AOP already and within what we consider progressive work. I'm not interested in conservative, mainstream work, you know? I think in part I want to look at pushing the boundaries."

SP2 uses the term “queer” as it is used by Queer Theorists: “Queer is an ongoing and necessarily unfixed site of engagement and contestation” (Berry & Jagose, 1996, p. 11, cited in Sullivan, 2003, p. 43); “Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant” (Halperin, 1995, p. 62, quoted in Sullivan, 2003, p. 43). In this regard, SP2 would prefer that AOP, like Queer Theory, remain intentionally elusive in order that it may challenge dominance. Generally, participants seem to be saying that AOP’s ambiguity is intentional and that its ambiguity hinges upon its fluidity, not necessarily exclusively, but there is a relationship between the two nevertheless. It makes sense, therefore, that defining a shifting and changing AOP is an impossible task—like pinning Jell-O to the wall.

c) Struggling with AOP’s Fluidity and Ambiguity

SP4 explained that students struggle with AOP; and, that social work educators have their own struggles with AOP, and also struggle with managing students’ struggles:

SP4: “I think so much of AOP has been constructed as work that students do in their head. And, when they get mixed up or they read something or are really listening and are trying to make intellectual sense of something, it bugs them. It hurts them. It confuses them. It annoys them. And then they’re told, ‘Well it’s supposed to be like that. It’s supposed to unsettle you. It’s supposed to be disrupting all of this stuff’ and all of the other rhetorical buzzwords that accompany this course. You know, I’m trying really hard not to be jaundiced about all of this! It would bear an accurate review … that we just bury them with incredibly dense, dense topics. And sometimes it’s a pretty darn, big pie to swallow for a 3rd year student.... So the students have to work so hard to wrap their minds around it, and there’s no space or time for their hearts. So they either act out, or they just suck it up, go away and just hold [their] noses and get out of here with the least amount of effort and pain to [themselves] as possible.”

SP4: “[The struggles with AOP have] fractured interpersonal relationships. There have been struggles, and there have been hurt feelings. It’s been kind of hard to

be transparent. There have been ... criticisms. And I've been part and party of all of that, and that gets into the atmosphere and the students know it. And in many ways ... [we're] still a place with pretty bad vibes around all of this. So it's hard. And when you try and talk about it you get kind of the response that, 'Well, yes, it's supposed to be [difficult]', and it's not really helpful. It's like someone telling you that diarrhea is a fact of life."

SP4: "So I think what happens is that they have this tremendous conflict and dissonance.... And when students get into the critical world of practice, my fear is, and I have no empirical evidence to support this at all ... but my fear is that most of them just say, 'Oh bugger it', and they'll go with the flow. And the flow is that practice is going to be practiced the way it's historically been practiced, which just reinforces old power relationships and they do what they need to do to survive in practice... And in fact they say, 'Oh yeah, that AOP stuff. You know I did what I had to do to get out of the course. But really the skills I acquired, I acquired on the job.'"

SP4: "And I think that's probably the single greatest flaw in where we are as a school in the development of [AOP] ... So far what we've done is create the disequilibrium. And unless we're able to help the students find a way to get a new balance between these things, we're sending them out unbalanced. And so they have almost no choice except to retreat to the place that they were because at least the world stood still there. And I think it's only the incredibly brave and healthy students who are able to go out unbalanced and either live with that disequilibrium, live with the inherent contradictions or find a way to find the kind of new balance that we're hoping for."

According to SP4, both students and educators appear to struggle to "make intellectual sense" of AOP. The paradoxes, the contradictions, and the overall fluidity and ambiguity of AOP leave students unsure of what AOP is and of how it can inform their practice. It seems that it's not that struggling and discomfort are harmful or even unconstructive; but rather, it is how they have been managed in social work education that has had deleterious impacts. SP4 explained above that students are told quite matter-of-factly that AOP is meant to be ambiguous and that they are supposed to struggle with it; and, that dialogue on these issues stops there. The cause and purpose of such ambiguity is not

theorized, which leaves students confused, disillusioned, and unbalanced. Significantly, this participant conjectures that students manage this state by abandoning AOP altogether in order to resolve their cognitive dissonance and regain some semblance of balance.

Other participants echoed this sentiment when they explained that they need to better handle the difficulties that students have with understanding AOP, and that naming the issue and engaging students in dialogue on the issue is a start:

GP1: “We have to model [AOP] in some fashion. So I would agree that some element of the struggle [is] not having all of the answers [and being] transparent with that.”

GP3: “[Addressing the struggle] is important. I struggle the most with … not knowing how to address … the struggle and not doing it right. Attempting to do it and dropping the ball.”

SP7: “A few students have said that it really helped to have me say that I don't know, that I know I'm getting it wrong sometimes, that I'm struggling because they thought that they have to know.”

GP3: “[It's a] contradiction. We're saying we're mindful of power and we dialogue about power and privilege, and yet when we're practitioners or teachers we're in positions of power or perceived power. I think this work is always paradoxical. I find it useful to label that, talk about that, and dialogue about that with students. Constantly we say one thing and we do another thing, or we try to mediate and we have angst over those positions, and whenever we forget that we are in those positions we really are false, we're not being genuine, we're not being reflexive if we pretend that we're not in an institution that replicates other structures.”

GP2: “We agree that we try [to struggle with] students. We don't have the answers, but to constantly say we don't have the answers … will just piss them off.... So, again [it has to take place in] dialogue.”

It appears that social work educators acknowledge that everyone struggles with understanding AOP. Struggling is unavoidable and necessary, but it is also necessary to explore, *why* it is important otherwise students and practitioners may become

unmotivated and disengaged. It seems that social work educators could do a better job of engaging in an open and honest dialogue with students about the purpose of AOP's fluidity and ambiguity, in order that students may better understand the purpose of their struggles.

d) The Purpose of AOP's Fluidity and Ambiguity

Exploring the purpose for AOP's ambiguity may be a starting point in engaging in a dialogue about why we struggle to understand AOP and why those struggles are important. In this section, using participants' discussions of AOP, I propose three potential purposes for AOP's fluidity and ambiguity:

i. To Engender Epistemological Development, Dialogue, and Critical Thinking

Participants seemed to embrace AOP's fluidity and ambiguity because, quite simply, it keeps the field learning:

SP1: “[Dialoguing on AOP] kind of keeps us all learning. So being a learning organization and thinking of ourselves as a place that, ‘we don’t get it’—anti-oppressive practice. None of us really get it. We’re all figuring it out. And to have that conversation all the time helps.”

SP3: “We don’t want to categorize. So then we don’t want AOP to be yet another category. So its fluidity is maintained because it’s always responding. It’s always in conversation. So that’s the one thing I learned. Instead of saying, “What is AOP?” I always start with, ‘What is Liberalism? What is Marxism?’ You know, and so that when it comes to AOP, they’re already conversing.”

GP2: “We can come up with a definition [of AOP], but we need to come up with a discussion.”

Never fully knowing AOP encourages dialogue with others in an effort to always learn more, which constantly evolves AOP into a more responsive and effective epistemology.

Indeed, this embodies an AOP process as AOP's fluidity and ambiguity creates opportunities for learners to co-construct new knowledge. Participants explain that AOP's fluidity and ambiguity can be very frustrating for students and practitioners who want to "get it". Participants also discussed the purpose of this discomfort:

SP6: "There aren't really any right answers. I don't know, we say that we understand this business of truth being fluid, but I think that most of us have a tendency to want to stop in our favourite place, and make that be the truth and it is very hard to conquer that. It's not helpful for students, but we still struggle to avoid that."

SP7: "I think the knowing becomes problematic. I mean we need to, one needs to try to know, but it is such a trap to think that you do know, and to go back to that place of innocence again where you're not educated because you know. 'I know so I could never be racist', and I just think that we more or less, sometimes more, sometimes less, always reproduce dominance. Both sides. Not just in terms of race, but the whole you know multiplicity or, I work from a concept of interlocking oppressions. So, how oppression happens all the time and people happen into the same patterns. And when it works for you, it is a comfortable place and you don't have to keep struggling with that place of comfort. One person's comfort is another person's discomfort. So I think the knowing contributes to, well, it can be seductive because it can contribute to you feeling that, 'Okay now it's okay to be comfortable because I know'."

These participants assert that thinking we know AOP makes us comfortable because we would have reified it into something that can serve our needs. The discomfort that is born out of its fluidity and ambiguity, in contrast, is purposeful in that it encourages constant critical thinking on the efficacy of the knowledge base and its ability to attain social justice. Embracing that we can never fully know AOP makes us critical of what we claim to know, which allows AOP to be responsive within a context of dominance that seeks to appropriate it. Reifying AOP is, therefore, antithetical to its character, as it

would stagnate and become *a truth* for the sake of convenience and comfort for those who benefit from the status quo.

### ii. To Gain from Diverse, Paradoxical, Contradictory Knowledge

Participants explained that AOP is an amalgamation of diverse theories:

SP1: “Anti-oppressive practice is a group, a range of theoretical perspectives that come from, usually critical social theory, postmodern theory, anti-racist, queer theory bases that inform our daily interactions, our practice. So different things come from some of those theoretical places that I would describe as anti-oppressive practice.”

SP3: “I found what was really important was to talk about AOP as a conversation with other theories. And never really to almost speak without reference to that because otherwise it gets marginalized. So this is why in the AOP course, when we talk about liberal theory we look at ourselves because we're so steeped in it. And then I show [students] how you can be progressive and critical and liberal. And then I can show how AOP is not outside of liberalism totally. It doesn't reject it. You can't reject autonomy. That's ridiculous... You don't want a society of slaves. So it complicates liberalism and is complicated in turn by it. And the same with Marxism and the same with feminism and the same with postmodernism.”

Participants explained the contradictory and even paradoxical nature of AOP that results from its theoretical multiplicity. Participants highlight the difficulties associated with such plurality, but also the necessity in maintaining competing discourses:

SP6: “And I think it's a real difficult line to walk, the line between having some values that students, I mean we just cannot have social workers moving out of here who are racists, blatant racists, they can't be free to choose that one. But on the whole, when we tell students, here's what you have to think, here's what you have to value and so on, can be pretty problematic. It can easily narrow itself to something that is too prescriptive and that prevents students from doing that work of what they think. I think it's hard. It's one of them most difficult things in teaching social work.”

SP3: “[It's an] intellectual struggle, [and] this is why I don't agree with postmodernism completely because for it to be entirely fluid would mean that any

claim of difference or any claim of being constructed is equal to any other, which I disagree with.”

SP5: “I find that so much of anti-oppressive thinking and postmodern thinking in general is about having two possibly contradictory things and maintaining them both.”

SP2: “AOP—what I'd like it to be is a multiplicity of discourses, of critical discourses, and a multiplicity of critical discourses, critically looking at its own critical discourses.”

AOP’s theoretical multiplicity contributes to its fluidity and ambiguity. Paradoxical and contradictory logics make AOP very difficult to define; yet, this need not be inherently problematic. Walker (2001) highlights how seemingly antagonistic discourses can compliment one another, and that they offer multiple resources and skills (instead of universal ones) from which social work can choose to intervene appropriately:

An integrated and disparate model of social work practice drawing upon the most utilitarian aspects of modernist and postmodernist thinking to illuminate the search for understanding the experience of the client/user of personal social services, thus preserves the importance of explanatory power, but also sees the domain of social understanding as pluralistic where a range of explanations can co-exist, and be part of a larger chain of enquiry that challenges discrimination in all its manifestations (McLennan, 1996). It offers a both/and position avoiding either/or sterility. (p. 37)

AOP’s fluidity and ambiguity may, therefore, enable it to give discursive space to the contributions of even contradictory knowledge without discrediting AOP as a whole. In

this regard, AOP's fluidity and ambiguity produces multiple ways of intervening in multiple contexts to dismantle structures of dominance.

### iii. To Challenge Dominance and Maintain Authenticity

Participants explained earlier that AOP ultimately pursues social justice, and that it does so by challenging and dismantling structures of dominance that maintain oppression and privilege. Participants also asserted that dominance, or power, is fluid; and that its fluidity enables it to respond to any threats or resistance in order to maintain itself. AOP and dominance are, therefore, each seeking to dismantle the other while protecting itself. Building on these arguments participants go on to theorize that AOP must, much like dominance, also become fluid in order to accomplish its goals. The first quote was made by the interviewer in conversation with SP2 on this issue:

Interviewer: "When I first started thinking about AOP when I was here, we were talking, it made lots of sense. And then it's become more popular in other places and eventually someone's got a textbook on like, how to teach AOP and this research isn't about that. But I had a fear, or a thought somewhere in my mind at that point in time that somehow this is going to get compromised by the processes we're going through. And then it'll have to be reinvented in a different way because it would have lost what it had." SP2: "Yeah. Absolutely."

SP2: "So I think unless you see AOP or ... curriculum as not just a text, but an inter-textual space of actually embodiment, then I think it can get compromised.... Dominance is always shifting and transforming itself. I mean this is the interesting paradox of AOP. I find [that] when you talk about fluidity, when you talk about multiplicity, I mean part my response is, "Oh great! You know, White people just get to openly talk about how multiple they are. Or other dominant spaces can talk about how multiple they are." You know, I think dominance has to transform itself in order to work, you know? In order to keep its networks of hegemony ... going all the time."

SP2 "Queer Theory, just like any other theory, any marginalized theory, has the risk of being assimilated and fixating itself when it's primary premise is that it

detests fixation.... And um, and I think that's the very living space of AOP, you know? That's an exciting piece in some ways, as much as it is painful and disheartening."

In the last quote, SP2 again draws parallels between the fluidity and ambiguity of Queer Theory and that of AOP. Queer theorists are explicit about its requisite ambiguity and assert that this is, in part, to resist cooptation. Turner (2000) explains that,

[Queer theorists] celebrate the unformed, inchoate, provisional character of the field, and they look with suspicion on the possibility that, after a tumultuous, boisterous, and unfocused adolescence, queer theory will settle into the adulthood of traditional disciplinarity, with a clearly defined field of inquiry, a journal or two, and a few doctoral programs at the more advanced universities. Queer theory begins with a suspicion: that the predominant modes of intellectual and political activity in western culture during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century do not serve the needs of queers and that perhaps they cannot be made to do so. Queer theory is oppositional. (Turner, 2000, p. 9-10)

Perhaps, as SP2's statement implies, AOP has this in common with Queer Theory. It seems, however, that Queer Theory is perhaps more conscious and proud of its fluid and ambiguous identity and the purpose it serves.

Participants also explained that AOP is not simply resisting and challenging formal structures of dominance, such as those existing in a university or in an agency. It is also resisting and challenging the more insidious forms of dominance that reside within us, individually and collectively, as we engage with AOP, as well as the dominance that becomes embodied within AOP as a result:

SP2: "I think it gets constantly compromised, because we're never outside of our own disciplines, our own histories, our own selves in that sense."

SP7: "The people who see themselves doing social change [mistakenly] think they are outside of these kinds of power relations."

SP2: "I've shifted away from AOP ... primarily because I find that I'm having a hard time actually talking. It becomes a tool of rhetoric and I'm finding that ... not unlike other discourses, like when you say feminist or when you say anti-racist, [there's] certain structures of discourse and it ends up being that we're all speaking the language ... and it's actually become quite rhetorical in a number of ways."

SP7: "Although I firmly believe that one needs to get to the point of understanding interlocking oppressions, I think you have to look at race on its own, and I think that if you start weaving in all these other things ... it gets diluted, and it offers the students a way of not really engaging, particularly the white students ... they can come out with we're all oppressors, we're all guilty, we're all oppressed."

SP3: "So white men have said, 'We are being constructed as the oppressor and that's a construction.' And maybe it is because most things are constructions. 'I don't think there's anything real about anything'. So I responded to that by saying, 'Anti-oppressive practice addresses liberatory claims, not claims of entitlement', and that the specifics tell us what is dominant space and what is marginalized space.... So here is how construction is getting mainstreamed. Here is whose interest it is serving."

SP7 uses satire to imitate those students who erroneously believe they can act

independently of dominance:

SP7: "No, I understand because I have a black supervisor and she told me how it is, and I know what you're talking about. I have to show that I'm not one of those people that would make you feel uncomfortable in a white space."

Participants explain that multiple forms of dominance seek to compromise AOP— dominance coming from all directions, internally and externally. It seems, based on what participants have shared, that AOP has already been compromised to a degree as it has been used as a tool to separate oneself from structures of dominance and project one's

own innocence. It has also been compromised in that it has been reduced to rhetoric, whereby one can project an anti-oppressive image that is verified merely through the mastery of its discourse. A few participants feel AOP is having difficulty maintaining its fluidity and they feel more strongly about the extent to which it has become compromised by structures of dominance:

SP3: “Yeah, [AOP] is horribly marginalized because no one's taken it seriously. No one's uncomfortable anymore or challenged by it.”

SP7: “And I feel that sometimes AOP gets reified into something really concrete—knowledge or skills that you can acquire, and then you *know*. I don't know what I'd call it for myself. I guess I'd call it relations of domination … I think the knowing becomes problematic. I mean we need to, one needs to try to know, but it is such a trap to think that you do know, and to go back to that place of innocence again where you're not educated because you know. I know so I could never be racist … I just think that we more or less um sometimes more, sometimes less, always reproduce dominance. ”

And yet, engaging in this critical dialogue constitutes an act of resistance against such compromise indicating that the struggle is not over. It appears that AOP’s fluidity and ambiguity are purposeful in they allow it to resist becoming neutralized and assimilated into structures of dominance as this would inherently compromise its goal of dismantling those very structures:

SP3: “The problem is that, for me, any kind of categorizing becomes a dominant space. Even the reactive resistant form of categorizing becomes dominant space as soon as it gets frozen.”

Said another way, when AOP becomes fixed, and no longer resists being fixed, it will cease to be AOP. In this regard, AOP’s fluidity and ambiguity helps it to maintain a level of authenticity, meaning that it enables it to remain committed, in content and form, to challenging and dismantling oppression and pursing social justice.

### e) An Analysis of Power

As the participants spoke about AOP it became clear that they were always talking about power, either explicitly or implicitly. One participant stated,

GP2: “If we’re going to talk about anti-oppressive practice, power has to be in there.”

Here the participant identifies the importance of power, and does so quite pointedly, yet I think this statement sorely underestimates its influence. Power initially emerged as a tenet of AOP, but analysis of the data revealed that it was much more salient. Dominant power and AOP were shown to have an antagonistic relationship with one another in that each is perpetually attempting to dismantle and resist the other. Each of the tenets of AOP are affected by dominant power in that, like AOP as a whole, each are perpetually fluid and ambiguous in order to challenge dominance and resist cooptation. Similarly, the tenets of AOP are also affected by dominant power when they become compromised by that power. Power has been discussed throughout the “Findings” section of the paper, as it emerged as omnipresent and was impossible to confine to a singular section. Nevertheless, a few examples of participants’ comments will explain its significance further.

SP4 asserted that social work’s own legitimized dominance has compromised the application of AOP, namely the commitment to work together across difference, value epistemic privilege, and co-construct knowledge:

SP4: “[I critically reflect on] my place as the ‘inquirer’ into the ‘inquired into’ as a researcher, and as a practitioner, [and on] my place as someone who historically

has had the power to ask the questions. And then reflecting on all of that and trying to unpack it and to look at social work and say, ‘How did it come to be like this and how has social work been constructed? And who has the power and why? And how does practice from the place of those who have historically had the power in the field of social work need to examine the place of self and self location and the ability to even acknowledge let alone see across difference?’”

Other participants articulated how dominant power affects our understanding of the other components of AOP, namely taking a critical stance, engaging in praxis and critical reflexivity. Here social workers are encouraged to recognize and engage with dominant power and the multiple ways that it seeks to maintain oppression and privilege and compromise the components of AOP. This includes critically reflecting on their own power; utilizing that power to challenge oppression; and confronting the external exercise of power that obstructs social justice:

GP4: “Theoretically, going back to the bigger philosophical arguments too, if we’re arguing that, you’re right, there’s always power, would a position that if we want to do away with that power and let things happen be an anarchist position, that the natural order of things eventually would be to right itself, I’m not sure I take that position. There isn’t this neutral position, you can’t stand still, and because there is power you can’t do away with power, we have to use that power in very deliberate ways to undo this structure.”

SP1: “[I hope students] see themselves as having some agency, some ability to make a difference in the world and the ability to see how they can use their social location and privileges or whatever, to see things and to intervene more appropriately.”

GP2: “You have to engage power, speak to power, which makes AOP scary … people are scared, there’s a power.”

GP2: “There’s power in agencies, there’s power in government, blah, blah, blah, there’s power in our professional, but its not all about us having power, its about people having power over social work.”

Some participants' descriptions of power, when viewed in isolation, seemed to conceptualize it as being reified and unidirectional. For example, that certain people have power and use power, and that others don't. And yet, analysis of the interviews as a whole, as shown in the previous section, revealed that participants felt power was fluid, operating from a multitude of sites in a multitude of ways. It also emerged that participants characterize dominant power and AOP as being in a reciprocal relationship, with each affecting the other. SP2 expresses this more pointedly in a discussion of subject positions:

SP2: "I teach that we're all implicated. In the very moment of talking about racism ... you're producing racism no matter who [you are], I don't care what colour you are. You know, you are. Someone starts talking about heterosexism and homophobia I end up producing heterosexism and homophobia. We're so locked into these things."

In this particular example, the participant seems to explain that, paradoxically, discussing dimensions of oppression (even if done with the purpose of deconstructing and destabilizing their hierarchical and binary logic) reproduces those categories, and the power that is attached to them, which then makes them available as tools to oppress. This example illustrates that AOP and power are not mutually exclusive; the two are not independently challenging one another. Changing the composition of one changes the composition of the other, regardless of whether the change was initiated of its own volition or forced by the other. For example, relations of power may determine what kinds of social action a social worker is able to take; and, conversely, proceeding with the critical stance that there is no neutrality, any action that is taken, or not taken, has an impact on the power relations that had shaped its expression in the first place. Thus, both

power and the expression of AOP are in constant flux simultaneously shifting themselves and the other as a consequence, and/or shifting the other and itself as a consequence.

This conceptualization of power is influenced by the thinking of postmodernism and poststructuralists such as Foucault, and is also supported by more contemporary Queer theorists. Foucault, in the History of Sexuality Volume 1 (1978), wrote the following about power:

The omnipresence of power: not because it has the privilege of consolidating everything under its invincible unity, but because it is produced from one moment to the next, at every point, or rather in every relation from one point to another.

Power is everywhere--not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere.... Power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society. (p. 93)

In the same text, Foucault also proposed that power was not external to social relationships as it is immanent in them; and, that resistance is never external to power as it is immanent in it (1978, p. 94-95).

Indeed, there are potential problems with this view of power in that it could be seen to undermine social action as Foucault's analysis makes it difficult to identify an agent of illegitimate power, which undermines attempts to dismantle that power. Despite this significant limitation, this view of power does, however, give us greater insight into the complexities of oppression and privilege. For example, it helps us to understand why we cannot dismantle racism by convincing the heads of our institutions or of the state that

it is wrong. The social structures that perpetuate racism are embedded within us all and within all our social interactions and relationships—we all produce and are produced by racism. Because of its significant limitations I don't support Foucault's analysis of power as a metanarrative, but rather as one that makes another theoretical contribution to our understanding of AOP. More specifically, as explained above, I propose that Foucault's analysis of power helps us to theorize the purpose of AOP's fluidity and ambiguity, namely that they enable it to resist and challenge an equally fluid and omniscient power.

## VII. Discussion

The findings reveal that AOP has nine core tenets that seemingly capture its identity. None of these are surprising as they are all typically represented in the AOP literature. These tenets imply that AOP is a fixed and knowable epistemology and that it has been able to resolve its ambiguity; and yet, something much less straightforward emerged from the data. AOP continues to remain fluid and ambiguous despite the identification of these nine tenets. This research has shown that AOP is intentionally fluid and ambiguous, and that these are intrinsic to its identity, and not aspects of AOP that can or should be resolved. In this regard, AOP resists being definitively fixed or located and instead is constantly *dislocating* itself. AOP is still constituted by its core tenets, however, the meanings of those tenets, like AOP as a whole, are contextualized and shaped by relations of power. This research has also shown that AOP's fluidity and ambiguity do not indicate that it is a weak or immature epistemology, but rather reveal its strength and sophistication, as these are a means of enabling it to challenge dominance and pursue social justice. It seems instead that when AOP tends toward becoming fixed and fully knowable, it becomes vulnerable to being compromised by structures of dominance, which impedes its ability to challenge and dismantle those structures. In this regard, when AOP stands still it becomes reified into a tool of oppression indicating that it is no longer AOP and has instead become something entirely different, a tool of oppression even. Similarly, when AOP is implicated in reproducing oppression, this

signifies that it is being contained and fixed by dominance indicating that we need to dislocate it through dialogue in order that it may become anti-oppressive again.

a) AOP's Subject Position

Because AOP can be identified by its nine core tenets it seems to have a social location of its own. And yet, while we can list those tenets we can see that they each resist reification, as does AOP as a whole. Indeed, this process echoes the futility of socially locating human beings. Harlow & Hearn (1996) explain that,

Theoretically the concept of identity has been problematised by poststructuralists (amongst others) who contest the existence of a fixed identity (Henriques et al., 1984). Instead the notion of subjectivity is preferred as this allows for a shifting changing subject who is constructed by a changing context. (p. 10)

This analysis of human identity categories sounds similar to what the data have been revealing about AOP. It seems that AOP is as resistant to having its tenets reified and essentialized in much the same way that human identity categories are resistant to being erroneously fixed. Additionally, it seems that definitively locating AOP is as impossible as locating human beings. For example, I have been categorized as a woman, but this category is very difficult to define as its meaning changes across different social, political, cultural, and historical contexts. Moreover, the power that I can access as a woman intersects with my other identity categories, and it also changes according to the power that others have in relation to me. As such, and as I explained in the outset of this paper, I support Heron's (2005) contention that we occupy subject positions as opposed

to a reified social location; and, therefore, in recognition of these parallels, what I am proposing is that AOP *also* occupies multiple “subject positions”. Let’s return to Heron’s (2005) explanation of this concept, which will help to highlight the parallels:

Individuals take up or identify with particular subject positions structured through relations of power and made available through different discourses.... The constitution of individual subjectivity through discourses is part of a wider network of power relations in which persons are being positioned at any given point, and these discourses may contradict one another. Subjectivity is, thus, unavoidably multiple and contradictory” (p. 347).

Academia has an urge to know and contain AOP and we may *attempt* to do so by developing a list of its tenets. This provides an understanding of its identity as much as knowing a human being via their race, class, age, ability and so on. Indeed, human identity categories are meaningful and have real social impacts; yet, humans and AOP are much more complex than the subjectivities made available to them. We cannot pretend to definitively understand AOP through an itemized list of its tenets anymore than you can pretend to know me through my social location, as both are fluid and ambiguous—we are both subjects, not objects, and we necessarily occupy multiple subject positions.

At first glance this argument suggests that AOP is vulnerable to becoming nihilistic, but I don’t believe this is the case. Acknowledging that AOP occupies multiple subject positions does not invalidate the categories of which it is composed anymore than my having subject positions invalidates that I am a woman or that I am white, and the real impact that those categories have in the social world. The purpose, rather, is to

acknowledge that the meaning of those categories is affected by the relations of power operating in multiple spaces in multiple ways; and, that they reciprocally alter the relations of power. For example, I often shape the meaning of my gender differently in different spaces as a way of resisting the relations of power that seek to define and oppress me. I rarely “perform” my gender similarly across multiple spaces because dominant male power is equally fluid and multiple. And yet, while I can shape my gender and the meaning it has in various contexts, there are boundaries to its fluidity: I cannot change that “woman” is the category made available to me, nor can I completely redefine how the category of “woman” is read by the world around me as I am defined in relation to other women (and men). Indeed, there are limits to the ways I can shape the meaning of my subject positions. Again, I think there are similar parallels here with AOP. While the tenets of AOP may be fluid and ambiguous their meaning is similarly not imbued with relativism. The core tenets are not nihilistic, as they too are understood within the range of meanings they carry in the social world and there are limits to how those meanings can be shaped. We may push those boundaries, but we cannot annihilate them. Moreover, the meaning of AOP as a whole may shift according to various contexts, but it cannot suddenly become anything and everything because it is grounded by its core tenets—these are the subject positions that are made available to it and which constitute its identity, albeit tenuous.

I assert that conceptualizing AOP as occupying subject positions can help us to appreciate, through comparison with human subject positions, that AOP is unavoidably and purposefully fluid and ambiguous. This analogy can potentially be a means of

engaging in a dialogue with AOP learners about this discourse as they can compare the rationale of AOP's multiple subjectivities with the rationale for their own. In this regard it may serve as an entry point for further dialogue and understanding.

It also is important to acknowledge that this understanding of AOP is one that has been constructed by those who predominantly occupy positions of dominance. The participants were somewhat diverse in their subject positions, but overall their status as university educators reveals that they are highly privileged individuals. Additionally, as I explained at the outset, I also occupy predominantly dominant subject positions and my analysis is undertaken from, and affected by, those subjectivities. Understandings of AOP will, as is the contention of this research, always be fluid and ambiguous; however, we must appreciate that as dialogue on this issue expands to include service users and other marginalized groups, this understanding of AOP will likely shift in unpredictable and exciting ways. Indeed, this is absolutely essential. As long as understandings of AOP are retained within the academy it will be shaped by dominant power, thus limiting its fluidity, and it will be less able to remain committed to its core tenets as a result. Unless service users and other marginalized groups are included in the dialogue AOP will tend toward becoming located and reified, and it will become compromised by dominance. In this regard, future research should explore ways of pursuing this dialogue beyond the walls of the academy so that it may truly become increasingly anti-oppressive in content and process.

b) A Framework of AOP

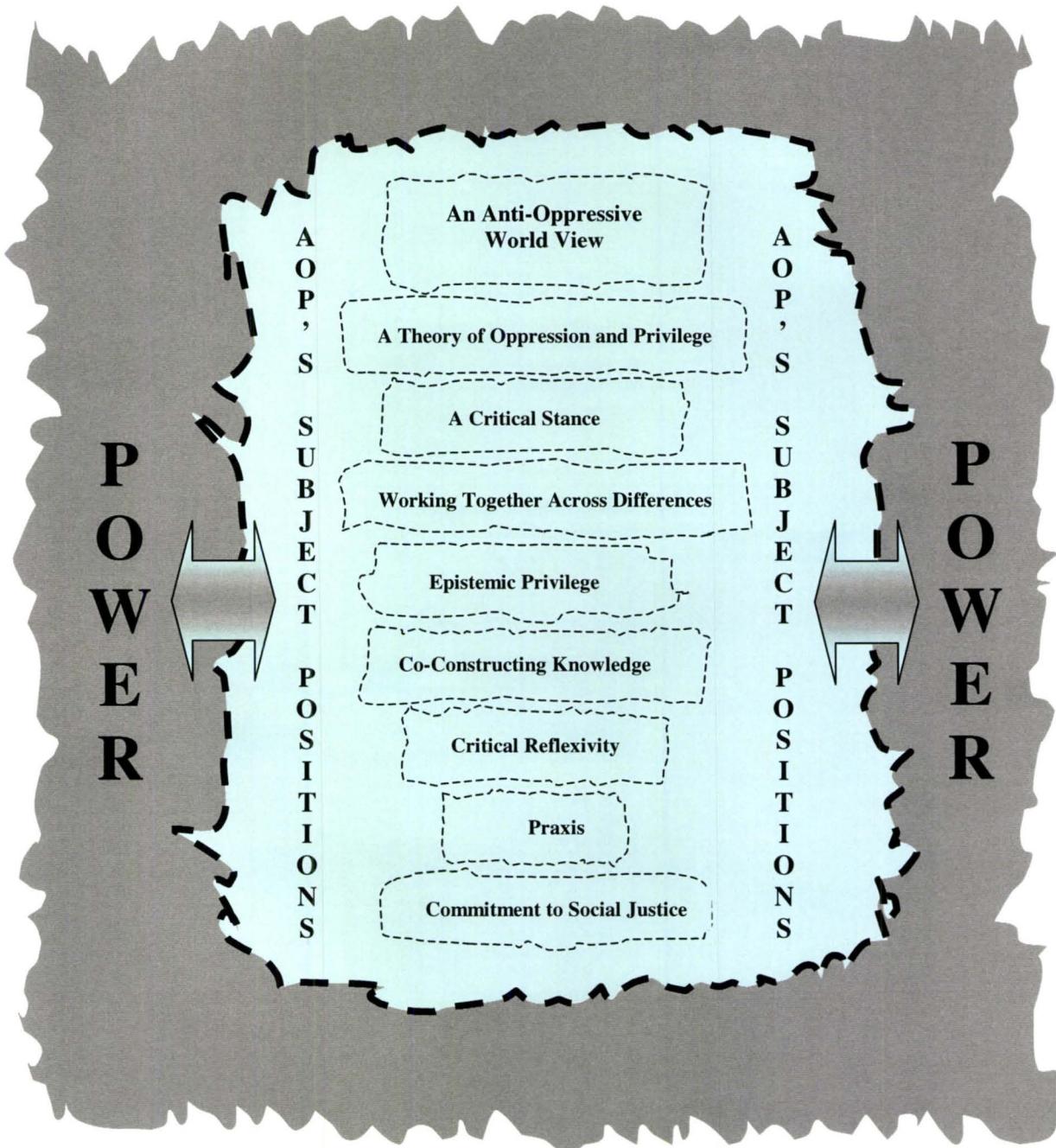
I have created a framework of AOP (Diagram 1 on page 78) that illustrates how it is understood by the participants in this research. At the centre of the diagram, the nine categories or tenets of AOP are listed. These tenets are each outlined by a random shape with permeable borders, which symbolizes their fluidity and ambiguity. The borders are permeable in order to indicate that each category affects the others—none are independent, and the expression of one cannot invalidate another. For example, the commitment to social justice affects what kind of knowledge will be co-constructed—we cannot, therefore, construct knowledge that validates oppression and privilege.

The nine tenets compose AOP as a whole, which is also outlined by a random shape to symbolize AOP's fluidity and ambiguity. The fluidity and ambiguity emerged as more than a mere tenet of AOP, but rather as a central category influencing each tenet and AOP as a whole. For reasons outlined earlier, I assert that AOP occupies subject positions, which illustrates and theorizes its fluidity and ambiguity, and I have labelled it as such on the diagram. The border containing AOP as a whole, or its subject positions, is also permeable in order to illustrate its reciprocal relationship with power.

Power is outlined with a random shape in order to demonstrate its fluidity and ambiguity. It has no defined border and it surrounds AOP on the diagram in order to signify its omnipresence. AOP and power are different colours, which implies that they are mutually exclusive; however, the arrows demonstrate otherwise. The arrows on the diagram are two-way arrows, which illustrates how power shapes and is shaped by AOP.

Diagram 1

A Framework of Anti-Oppressive Practice



Overall, while the diagram as a whole may appear static, the random shapes are meant to convey that it and all of the categories within it are in flux. Finally, while AOP is shown to be fluid and ambiguous, the core tenets prevent it from being nihilistic and ensuring that it pursues social justice, an end goal that takes shape through an anti- oppressive process.

c) Implications for Social Work Education and Practice

This research reveals that negative critiques of AOP are related to AOP's fluidity and ambiguity; however, not in the ways previously suspected. Social work students seem to be frustrated and defeated by the paradoxes and the contradictions that saturate AOP and have rendered it indefinable. And yet, AOP's ambiguity and fluidity are not inherently problematic; rather, it is the failure to dialogue and theorize about the purpose of AOP's elusive identity that has been deleterious. It appears that social work educators have responded to students frustrations by indicating that they're not supposed to fully "get" AOP, yet haven't really entered into a dialogue about why. I assert that social work students and practitioners would have much more confidence in AOP's efficacy, and in applying AOP in practice, if they were armed with an understanding of why it cannot and must not be fixed or fully known, and why they must struggle with it as a result. The strength of AOP is that it can challenge the fluidity of dominant power and resist being compromised by it; and, through knowing this, I propose that students can better appreciate why there can never be a set of instructions on how to universally apply AOP, and appreciate that it will always be applied differently in different contexts in order that it can respond to the relations of power operating within multiple contexts. Indeed, this is

a tall order for students, and for social work as a whole; yet, hopefully the core tenets of AOP will help us to ensure that AOP is grounded by the pursuit of social justice, a vision that is necessarily shaped through an anti-oppressive process. Students will struggle with AOP, and will continue to do so as practitioners; however, recognizing that such struggles are necessary and purposeful in dismantling dominance (internally and externally) will hopefully inspire and motivate dialogue and action in the pursuit of social justice. Butler, Elliott & Stopard (2003) explain the unavoidability and the purpose of struggling with such ambiguity:

Difficulties act as impetus for change: achievements are points to move on from and change is seen as organic and fluid. In the face of enduring racism in society, there can be no one definitive goal. This would create the illusion of ‘a right’ and ‘a wrong’ and would in itself reproduce hierarchical power relations.... We must be comfortable with ambiguity, uncertainty and remain open to challenge. (p. 278-9)

It is my hope that this research can be a tool to begin the process of theorizing about AOP’s fluidity and ambiguity. In the end, we’re not looking for answers that make the questions go away. Instead, we’re looking for ways to engender ongoing critical dialogue on AOP’s multiple subject positions.

## VIII. Conclusion

This research lets us know that we can never fully know AOP. Paradoxical? Yes. Problematic? No. Critical discourses, such as AOP, seek to challenge and dismantle dominance. Dominance is fluid and ambiguous; and, therefore, if AOP hopes to remain committed to its core tenets, and avoid being co-opted by dominance, it too must resist reification. AOP is not an object of study. It is a subject whose positions are unavoidably and necessarily fluid and ambiguous. It is a lived space because we engage with it and reconstitute it through critical reflection, dialogue and action, which helps to ensure that AOP is anti-oppressive in both content and process. In this regard, we should not seek to define or locate AOP; but rather, we ought to ensure that it remain permanently dislocated.

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Appendix 1 – Information Letter to Directors



School of Social Work  
Kenneth Taylor Hall 319  
1280 Main Street West  
Hamilton, Ontario,  
Canada, L8S 4M4

Dear <add director of school's name and title>:

We are undertaking research in an attempt to identify how to best teach anti-oppressive social work practice (AOP). The research is being undertaken through interviews or focus groups with faculty members who teach AOP and also by conducting focus groups with students who have taken an AOP course.

We seek your assistance and ask whether your school would participate in this research. The types of questions we would like to explore with your faculty members are:

- a) What does AOP mean to you?
- b) What is the most important thing you do in your teaching to help students learn AOP?
- c) What is the least important thing in your teaching to help students learn AOP?
- d) How does your own social location (race, class, gender etc.) impact the way you teach and engage with AOP?
- e) Do you have of how AOP learning might shape student's social work practice?

The types of questions we would like to ask students include:

- a) What does AOP mean to you?
- b) What is the most important thing in your education that helped you learn AOP?
- c) What is the least important thing in your education that helped you learn AOP?
- d) How does your own social location (race, class, gender etc.) impact the way you learn and engage with AOP?
- e) Give examples of how this AOP learning might shape your social work practice.

Interviews and focus groups will take place in September or October 2003 and are expected to last 1 to 1½ hours each. A McMaster faculty member would undertake the interviews with your faculty members. A McMaster student would undertake the focus groups with your students. Interviews and focus groups will be recorded and transcribed and analysis will take place using a grounded theory approach. The identity of students and faculty members participating will not be disclosed.

The outcomes of this research will help us develop and refine our own AOP course at McMaster University, School of Social Work. We also anticipate sharing with the field knowledge we gain about the best ways to teach AOP.

We hope, therefore, that you will consider participating. Please contact Gary Dumbrill at (905) 525-9140 ext. 23791, e-mail dumbrill@mcmaster.ca <editorial note: additional or alternate researcher contact names may be added> for further information. This project has received ethics clearance from the McMaster Research Ethics Board.

Yours truly,

Faculty Researchers

Gary C. Dumbrill  
Bill Lee  
Sally Palmer  
Sheila Sammon  
Tracy Swan

Student Researchers

Robert Cosby  
Cathy Ferreira  
Amanda Westwood  
Michelle Young

Appendix 2 – Information Letter to Faculty



School of Social Work  
Kenneth Taylor Hall 319  
1280 Main Street West  
Hamilton, Ontario,  
Canada, L8S 4M4

Dear Faculty Member/Instructor,

We are engaging in a research project designed to examine courses in anti-oppressive perspectives, policy and practice (AOP). We are trying to understand course content and process as well as understand whether the courses meet their objectives and the ways they help shape social work. The types of questions we are exploring with faculty members are:

- What does AOP mean to you?
- What is the most important thing you do in your teaching to help students learn AOP?
- What is the least important thing in your teaching to help students learn AOP?
- How does your own social location (race, class, gender etc.) impact the way you teach and engage with AOP?
- How do you think AOP learning might shape student's social work practice?

We are asking you and other social work instructors to participate in the research by taking part in an individual interview and/or perhaps a focus group that will last about 1 – 1½ hours. The interviews and/or focus group will be tape recorded and transcribed. Your individual remarks will be kept confidential, which means that we will not identify you in the final research report.

Your participation in this research is voluntary. You may choose not to answer some of the questions. You may withdraw from the study at any time without consequences.

We will be at your school <dates to be added>. To participate or find out more please contact Gary C. Dumbrill at (905) 525-9140 ext. 23791, e-mail dumbrill@mcmaster.ca <editorial note: additional or alternate researcher contact names may be added>

Thank you for your help.

Yours truly,

Faculty Researchers

Student Researchers

Gary C. Dumbrill  
Bill Lee  
Sally Palmer  
Sheila Sammon  
Tracy Swan

Robert Cosby  
Cathy Ferreira  
Amanda Westwood  
Michelle Young

### Appendix 3 – Demographics Form

School: \_\_\_\_\_ Faculty: \_\_\_\_\_ Program: \_\_\_\_\_

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

How would you identify your gender? \_\_\_\_\_

How would you describe your race? \_\_\_\_\_

Level of formal education (diplomas/degree/s) \_\_\_\_\_

Other education you consider relevant \_\_\_\_\_

Do you consider anti-oppressive education a main part of your teaching philosophy? YES NO

If yes, please explain/how so

---

Do you consider anti-oppressive education a main part of your research/writing? YES NO

If yes, please explain/how so?

---

What courses have you taught in the past that are related to anti-oppressive education? \_\_\_\_\_

Have you taken a course or received special training in anti-oppressive work? YES NO

If yes, please list/explain.

---

On a scale of 0-5 (1 being none, 5 being substantial) How much do you feel you know about anti-oppressive practice?

1      2      3      4      5

On a scale of 0-5 (1 being none, 5 being substantial) how much do you feel AOP course help students learn about anti-oppressive practice?

1      2      3      4      5

On a scale of 0-5 (1 being none, 5 being substantial), to what extent do you think students learn about racism in the AOP course?

1      2      3      4      5

Please use the reverse of this form to make any other comments you have

#### Appendix 4 – Interview Guide

- a) What does AOP mean to you?
- b) What is the most important thing in your teaching to help students learn AOP?
- c) What is the least important thing in your teaching to help students learn AOP?
- d) How does your own social location impact the way you teach and engage with AOP?
- e) Give examples of how this AOP learning might shape students' social work practice.

## Appendix 5 – Consent Form to Participate in Research



School of Social Work  
Kenneth Taylor Hall 319  
1280 Main Street West  
Hamilton, Ontario,  
Canada, L8S 4M4

### **CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH**

Project Title: Developing a Pedagogy for Teaching Anti-Oppressive Social Work Practice (AOP)

You are asked to take part in a research project conducted by the School of Social Work at McMaster University, Hamilton. If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact Gary Dumbrill at (905) 525-9140 extension 23791, e-mail: dumbrill@mcmaster.ca

### **PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

To identify effective ways to teach AOP

### **PROCEDURES**

The researcher will meet with individuals or groups of faculty members/instructors to discuss their experience and ideas about teaching AOP.

If you volunteer to take part in this study you will be asked to do the following things:

First, the researcher will privately ask you a few questions to gather demographic information about your teaching experience and background. Next you will be asked to take part in an individual interview or perhaps a focus group with other faculty members that will last about 1 – 1½ hours. The questions you will be asked in this interview or group include:

- a) What does AOP mean to you?
- b) What is the most important thing you do in your teaching to help students learn AOP?
- c) What is the least important thing in your teaching to help students learn AOP?
- d) How does your own social location (race, class, gender etc.) impact the way you teach and engage with AOP?
- e) Do you have of how AOP learning might shape student's social work practice?

You can choose not to answer any of these questions.

The interview or group meeting will be tape recorded so that the researcher does not miss anything said.

### **POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS**

None

### **POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO PARTICIPANTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY**

You will receive no direct benefits from taking part in this project, although you will have access to findings, which will hopefully help develop a better understanding of effective ways to teach AOP.

### **CONFIDENTIALITY**

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission. That means written reports will not contain information that identifies you without your permission.

Interview tapes will be kept in a locked filing cabinet at McMaster University. Transcripts will not contain identifying information—transcripts will be stored at McMaster University and may also be stored at the University of Victoria (Social Work faculty members at the University of Victoria may be assisting McMaster researchers with analysis). Tapes will be destroyed after 3 years and transcripts after 10 years.

### **PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL**

You can choose whether to be in this study or not. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer and still remain in the study.

### **RIGHTS OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS**

You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study. This study has been reviewed and received ethics clearance through the McMaster Research Ethics Board (MREB). If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, contact:

MREB Secretariat  
McMaster University  
1280 Main Street W., GH-306  
Hamilton, ON L8S 4L9

Telephone: 905 525 9140, ext. 23142  
E mail: srebsec@mcmaster.ca  
Fax: 905-540-8019

### **SIGNATURE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANT**

I understand the information provided above and my questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I agree to participate in this study. I have been given a copy of this form.

---

Name of Participant

---

Date

### **SIGNATURE OF INVESTIGATOR**

In my judgment, the participant is voluntarily and knowingly giving informed consent to participate in this research study.

---

Signature of Investigator or research assistant

---

Date