Anti-oppressive Community Work Practice and the Decolonization Debate: A Contribution from the Global South

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Abstract

This chapter serves to contribute to an enlargement of contemporary, anti-oppressive social work theories and notions of community work practice. It is motivated by apparent gaps in existing discourses concerning the experiences, perspectives, knowledges, and practices of colonized peoples. The central concept by which the chapter seeks to meet its objective is that of (de)coloniality. This concept denotes forms of oppression that are particular to the regions of the Global South and, it is suggested, require to be recognized as such. The chapter's arguments are constructed around a case study, which narrates a community work intervention, conducted over a number of years by social work students at a selected South African university. To contextualize this, the chapter takes a historical perspective and provides a situated account. Following an opening discussion of anti-oppressive theories and how these might benefit from decolonial scholarship, the contextual challenges for South African social work are examined with particular consideration of how these have arisen from the country's history of colonialism and current reality of coloniality. The case study is presented thereafter using the anti-oppressive language favored by the students involved. Further reflections are presented using a decolonial frame. The chapter concludes that anti-oppressive theorizing and community work practices have an important role to play in locations of the Global South, such as South Africa. However, for social workers to respond meaningfully to the continued workings of coloniality in such contexts, a central professional binary – that of social worker/service user – may need to be unsettled.

Introduction

There will never be justice in South Africa while our children are still experiencing what we went through in the past. (Anonymous, cited in Majola 2017, p. 22)

Anti-oppressive practice (AOP) forms part of the tradition of critical social work (Healy 2014). According to Baines (2011), it is an umbrella approach that has been influenced by various theories in the feminist, Marxist, postmodern, poststructuralist, anti-colonial, and anti-racist traditions. Its point of departure is a twofold understanding of oppression: on the one hand, the term is seen as referring to situations where powerful persons or groups exert "a tyrannical influence over others," while on the other hand, it denotes structural forms of injustices that arise "from (often) unintentionally oppressive assumptions and interactions" as a "result of institutional and social customs, economic practices and rules" (Clifford and Burke 2009, p. 18; brackets in original). As a result, oppression operates by forming interconnected patterns and processes that are continuously (re-)created on the intra- and interpersonal, group, community, organizational, and structural levels,

within, between, and across societies. For this reason, AOP draws on methods from all levels of social work, including working with individuals, groups, communities, and structural social work (see, e.g., Dominelli 2002). Within this context, anti-oppressive community work may be considered a discernible form of practice; however, to have sustained, anti-oppressive effects, it must be integrated with other interventions.

Young (1990, p. 48), whose ideas can be traced in a large number of anti-oppressive writings, asserted that, “all oppressed people suffer some inhibition of their ability to develop and exercise their capabilities and express their needs, thoughts and feelings.” Following “ordinary political usage,” Young (1990, p. 48) considered oppression to be “a condition of groups.” Thus, AOP generally and anti-oppressive community work practice more specifically speak to the experiences of people living on societies’ margins, where recognition of their experience and perspective, political voice, and access to resources are curtailed (see Fraser 2008). That being said, Baines (2011, p. 19) rightly acknowledged that “a notable gap in AOP is the question of the role of indigenous knowledges and practices.” This chapter seeks to assist in closing this gap by bringing together anti-oppressive and decolonial literature. The key concept through which this is achieved is that of (de)coloniality.

This concept can contribute to an enlargement of AOP on two levels – epistemology and everyday practices. On the epistemological level, this chapter’s starting point is that to date, anti-oppressive theories have critiqued mainstream social work practice mainly from the perspective of the Global North, thereby “reproducing within its domains of thought and practice a coloniality of power/knowledge” (Grosfoguel 2007, p. 212). Anti-oppressive literature is concerned with how oppression operates, among others along the lines of race, class and gender, and with how this can be disrupted (Dominelli 2002). It thus articulates a powerful critique of contemporary societies in the Global North. Yet a scanning of the available literature suggests that contributions from the margins, for example, by Black African scholars, are limited and, thus, that a Euro-centered locus of enunciation continues to dominate. Under such conditions, anti-oppressive theorizing will be unable to articulate, let alone devise, means of responding to what Mignolo (2009, p. 3) has termed the “colonial wound.”

A decolonial approach seeks to critique social injustices in ways that take into consideration a “colonial matrix of power” (Quijano, cited in Mignolo 2007, p. 156). According to Grosfoguel (2011), this matrix represents a global system of asymmetric power relations that distorts, among other things, who is speaking (body politics of knowledge) and from where (geopolitics of knowledge). Body politics has to do with the issue of race and racial ordering of the world, while geopolitics speaks of the need to abandon the universalist conception of knowledge and the need for marginalized and colonized people to speak for themselves. This chapter aims to disrupt this kind of patterning: its locus of enunciation is a country in the Global South, with one of its authors identifies as Black African, while the other identifies as nomadic (Braidotti 2013). Moreover, the chapter engages the field of anti-oppressive social work in a way that lends a voice to a group that is profoundly marginalized in the profession’s global discourse: Black South African social work students and unemployed social work graduates. To this end, this chapter relies considerably on “gray” literature, such as unpublished student works, online publications, and discussions. However, this merely underscores the need for an anti-oppressive theorizing that consciously addresses the prevailing body politics and geopolitics in its field.

On the level of everyday practice, a decolonial approach can enrich anti-oppressive social work by acknowledging that there may be forms of oppression which are distinct to the Global South and which require equally distinct responses. In this context, the term coloniality has come “to have broad application in reference to social relations, structures, and processes which reproduce colonial modes of domination and exploitation in the present” (Tilley 2016, p. 68). A central aim of anti-oppressive practice is to help service users and service user communities understand the conditions that oppress them, as well as the processes by which this occurs. This serves as a prerequisite for people to gather the will and the energy to resist these conditions, to actively work toward developing alternatives, and to demand more equitable societies (Mullaly 2010). But what if the social workers themselves are oppressed? What if they experience forms of oppression that are historically grown and can be made sense of only once the social, economic, political, and cultural continuities are uncovered that bind, for example, South Africa’s post-apartheid era to its colonial and apartheid past? Writers on the topic of anti-oppressive social work have stressed the importance of adopting a historical perspective (see, e.g., Clifford and Burke 2009). Invoking the concept of coloniality is useful in understanding historical conditions and how to respond to them in ways that are specific to the Global South. Coloniality helps in understanding how the postcolonial context of both social workers and service users is marked by “damnation”: poverty, civil wars, death, and inferiority, among other things (Maldonado-Torres 2007, p. 247; see also Fanon 1961).

It is hoped that by introducing the concept of (de)coloniality into anti-oppressive discourse, this chapter will contribute to an enlargement of existing anti-oppressive theorizing and practices. To this end, the first section explores the historical and contextual conditions of South African social work, using both anti-oppressive and decolonial lenses. In the process, it finds a blurring of boundaries between those who are meant to render and those who are meant to receive social work services while demonstrating how both the dynamics and effects of this blurring can be made intelligible only in historical terms. Against this background, the second section presents a case study of a community work intervention, conducted by a group of social work students and intended both to express their solidarity with one another and to search for a shared understanding of their experiences of oppression – including the prospects of graduate unemployment and fears of remaining caught in intergenerational cycles of poverty – in ways that offer direction of how to resist. The case study is presented using the anti-oppressive language employed by the students themselves. A reflection on this case study follows, which is guided by an explicitly decolonial framework. The chapter concludes that anti-oppressive community work has a definite role to play in South Africa and, most likely, in other locations of the Global South as well. However, for social workers to respond meaningfully to the continued workings of coloniality in their own and their service users' lives, a central professional binary – that of social worker/service user – needs to be unsettled. This is what this chapter seeks to achieve.

Coloniality's Challenge to Anti-oppressive Social Work: The Case of South Africa

In their discussion of anti-oppressive ethics, Clifford and Burke (2009, pp. 31–35) encourage social workers, among other things, to seek to understand “the specific social histories of individuals and groups involved,” to analyze “different kinds of power,” and to evaluate “the range and impact of social systems and relationships.” Guided by these tenets, this section serves to trace some of the contemporary afflictions of South African social work. Focusing on inequality, unemployment, and poverty, it considers how these afflictions emerged historically under conditions of colonialism, were deepened under apartheid, and have continued into the present within a welfare context that reflects the current neoliberal ordering of the world. It is posited that the thread that binds together past and present afflictions, experienced by both members of the profession and its service user communities, is South Africa's history of conquest and coercion and the kinds of welfare system and power relations to which this history has given rise.

Contextualizing Anti-oppressive Community Work Historically

The area that makes up present-day South Africa was inhabited from about 500 BC by the San and Khoikhoi and from about 500 AD also by Bantu-speaking peoples. European explorers arrived in Southern Africa at the turn of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The first permanent European settlement was founded in 1652 in the vicinity of today's Cape Town, which was then expanded eastward over the following 120 years. Slaves captured in other parts of the Global South were imported from 1658 onward; after the abolition of slavery, this was followed by the importation of indentured laborers. Meanwhile, Portuguese slavers operated from today's Maputo in Mozambique, with the first recorded export of Southern African captives dated 1709. As a result of the twin pressures emanating from both the east and west of Southern Africa, the region experienced several decades of large-scale violence, disruptions of livelihoods, and refugee movements that are commonly referred to as the Mfecane, or "the Scattering" (Reader 1998).

In 1814, following alternating periods of British and Dutch colonial rule, the region was formally entered into the British Empire as the Cape Colony. When Britain abolished slavery in 1834, several thousand farmers and slave owners left for Southern Africa's interior and eastern regions where they fought several wars with the resident population and displaced entire peoples in the process. Between 1839 and 1854, these settlers founded three independent republics, all of which were annexed by Britain. In 1910, these territories were formally united into the Union of South Africa and integrated into the British Commonwealth. The Union was granted full sovereignty in 1931. Following the 1948 election victory of the National Party, South Africa began to institutionalize the doctrine of apartheid, an increasingly expansive and elaborate system of race-based discrimination, exclusion, and exploitation. In 1961, a referendum held among South Africa's white citizens led to the country becoming an independent republic (Giliomee 2003; Reader 1998).

South Africa's history has been shaped by the discovery of diamonds in 1867 and gold in 1885, in that its economy became dominated by the extraction of its mineral resources (Reader 1998). Within a period of less than 40 years, the exploitation of the country's mineral wealth became a well-coordinated economy, concentrated in the hands of a small, politically powerful elite, and funded by foreign capital (Mbeki 2009). This created a huge demand for labor and was one of the key drivers of the successive expansion of colonial boundaries in the nineteenth century, the

dispossession of Southern Africa's indigenous people, and their forceful relocation to small, often unproductive "locations": if indigenous people could be rendered indigent, they would need to sell their labor to survive (Reader 1998). By 1936, just under 400,000 men between the ages of 15 and 50 were working in the country's mines. By 1986, South Africa's gold mines alone employed well over 450,000 workers. In this regard, Reader (1998, pp. 512–513, highlights in original) observed that:

The influence of the mines' employment regime on African society ... has been pernicious – and profound ... It was never employment in the sense of a [mutually beneficial] relationship ... but always the exploitation of ... [a] resource ... Farms, factories, government agencies and even employers of domestic labour perpetuated the system, in South Africa and throughout the continent.

By 1992, the South African economy experienced profound contractions, the background to which was a severe accumulation crisis that had beset South Africa's mining and energy sector since the 1970s. Crush and Williams (2010, p. 9) described these contractions as the cumulative result of "declining ore reserves, rising cost and a stagnant gold price," which caused the South African mining industry to enter "a long period of restructuring and downsizing." These structural changes were a major contributor to the overall rise in South Africa's unemployment rate from 20% in 1970 to 36% in 1995 (Terreblanche 2012), a level at which it has since remained.

Parallel to this accumulation crisis, South Africa was faced with a growing global mobilization against apartheid, which led to sharp increases in net capital flight and convinced "the corporate sector ... that the apartheid regime could not survive and ought to be abolished" (Terreblanche 2012, p. 12). To this end, negotiations began in earnest in 1986 and involved the African National Congress (ANC) and South African business leaders first and the South African state and foreign pressure groups later. These negotiations were central in determining the future of South Africa's economic developments. Terreblanche (2012, pp. 64–65) described the process by which South Africa would be integrated into an increasingly dominant neoliberal ordering of the world as follows:

The strongest foreign pressure on the ANC, in all probability, came from American pressure groups ... The attitude was overwhelmingly that ... every country in the world ... [should adapt] as quickly as possible and as completely as possible to the American model of anti-statism, deregulation, privatisation, fiscal austerity, market fundamentalism and free trade ... The role of [these] pressure groups ... included ... [making] exaggerated promises ... [and exerting] subtle threats that the US had the ability (and the inclination) to disrupt the South African economy if the ANC should be recalcitrant.

The negotiations culminated in South Africa's first democratic election in 1994, which signified the beginning of what has since been referred to as South Africa's post-apartheid era. In 1996, South Africa

adopted a constitution that guaranteed socioeconomic rights alongside political and civil rights. This was seen as a tool to address the severe material, racial, and class inequalities that were South Africa's colonial and apartheid legacy, but at the same time, it was increasingly counteracted by the ANC government's adoption of a series of market-oriented economic policies in line with the negotiated settlement. While its first socioeconomic policy, the Reconstruction and Development Programme, placed the responsibilities of redistribution on the state precisely to achieve a universal and inclusive citizenship, it was swiftly abandoned in favor of the market-friendly Growth, Employment and Redistribution policy (Bond 2014). This policy created a neoliberal state which radically reshaped the terrain of citizenship in the country. A string of economic policies followed, with the latest being the National Development Plan, introduced in 2011. The summative effect of these policies, coupled with apartheid legacies of structural inequality and economic marginalization, was the continuation – and continuous re-creation – of severe and intricate socioeconomic hardships for the majority of citizens, who continued to be “systematically excluded from participation in the global economy” (Terreblanche 2012, p. 73).

Thus, South Africa entered the post-apartheid period with an economic history which over 350 years had been founded upon unfree Black labor – generated through conquest and coercion. This incomplete liberation points to what Ndlovu-Gatsheni (2011) called the “myth of decolonization.” Citing Grosfoguel, he argued that, “one of the most powerful myths of the twentieth century was the belief that the end of direct colonial administrations amounted to the decolonisation of the world. This myth led to another myth of a ‘postcolonial’ world” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2011, p. 74). Instead, the intricate workings of colonial power “did not evaporate with the juridical-political decolonization ... We continue to live under the same ‘colonial power matrix’” (Grosfoguel, cited in Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2011, p. 74). In short, South Africa's liberation, taking place as it did under an increasingly dominant, neoliberal ordering of the world, replicated in many ways what was happening in other regions of the Global South: the country's entry into its post-apartheid era simply meant having moved from a period of “global colonialism” into the current period of “global coloniality” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 2011, p. 74).

Inequality, Unemployment, and Poverty as Structural Forms of Violence

With the end of apartheid, South Africa's then Department of Social Welfare (1997, p. 2) set itself the task of working toward a “humane, peaceful, just, and caring society, which will uphold welfare rights, facilitate the meeting of basic human needs, release people's creative energies, help them achieve their aspirations ... and [full participation] in all spheres of social, economic and political

life.” While expressing the hopes and exuberance of its time, this commitment was formulated against the backdrop of a society that, by 1994, had become one of the most unequal in the world, where “most households experience[d] outright poverty or vulnerability to being poor” (May and Wilkins 1998, p. 1). In addition, inequality was skewed along gender and racial lines, across rural-urban divides, disproportionately affecting the elderly and people with differential abilities (May and Wilkins 1998). In short, the situation revealed an intersectionality (Pease 2010) of deprivation and disadvantage, which completely permeated South African society. In the context of post-apartheid South Africa’s overarching neoliberal economic policy framework, it is perhaps unsurprising that, over 20 years later, these statistics changed little. According to a report released by Statistics South Africa (2017), in 2015 unemployment stood at 36%, exactly where it had been at the end of apartheid. A total of 55.5% of South Africans were considered to be poor, with 45.4% of those assessed to be extremely poor, living on R441 (roughly 30 US dollars) or less per person per month. The Gini coefficient, an internationally accepted measure of inequality, had risen from 0.58 at the end of apartheid (May and Wilkins 1998) to 0.68 in 2016, with South Africa retaining its position as one the world’s most unequal societies. Importantly, Statistics South Africa (2017, p. 1) reported that, “the most vulnerable to poverty in our society” continued to include “females, Black Africans [and] people living in rural areas.”

In 1998, when South Africa was at the beginning stages of trying to address the socioeconomic legacies of colonial and apartheid rule, May and Wilkins (1998, p. 3) described the experience of poverty as a situation of “Continuous ill health, arduous and often hazardous work for virtually no income, no power to influence change, and high levels of anxiety and stress. The absence of power is almost a defining characteristic of the poor ... Poverty [often] involves ... public and domestic violence.” May and Norton (1997, p. 102) pointed out further that, “the emotional stress produced by the struggle, uncertainty and extreme living conditions can be linked to the resignation that little will change.” These descriptions and qualifications will be familiar to readers of anti-oppressive theory. For example, Young (1990) listed exploitation, marginalization, cultural imperialism, powerlessness, and violence as the “five faces of oppression.” These “faces” are connected in dynamic ways: because “social structures exist ... not as states, but as processes,” they work to place people in particular positions, affect individuals’ consciousness, and cause them to “act on the basis of their knowledge of pre-existing structures” (Young 2007, p. 169). At the same time, the dynamic interrelationship between the different faces of oppression renders them open to change. This is because, to the extent to which people become conscious about these dynamics and how they, as individuals, groups, and communities, are woven into them, they can also choose to critically reflect

on their expectations, priorities, values, and habits, as well as the consequences of their actions, and, as a result, choose to change and work together toward attaining a more just society. Thus, anti-oppression always remains on the horizon of the imagined, both as an ideal and source of hope and in the form of concrete objectives toward which people may strive and toward which social work can be oriented. The section below exemplifies how this can translate into action.

It became increasingly apparent that South Africa's welfare sector was unable to address the country's inequities and the large-scale suffering to which it gave rise. Social work struggled to deliver the services it was mandated to provide: in spite of a drastically expanding service user base but owing considerably to South Africa's neoliberal policy framework, there was a decrease in the funding of social development from 11% of the annual welfare budget in 1994 to 3% in 2005 (Earle 2008), thereafter stabilizing at around 5% (UNICEF South Africa 2017), with the balance directed to social security-related expenses. This led to substantive challenges in the ability of social workers to provide much-needed service (see, e.g., Dlamini and Sewpaul 2015; Lombard et al. 2012; Raniga and Kasiram 2010); however, the profession itself was required, if for nothing else, for statutory reasons. For example, Minister Dlamini (2013a, p. 1) suggested that over 66,000 social workers would be needed to fully implement South Africa's Children's Act No. 38 of 2005, yet at the time of the Act's promulgation, there were just over 11,000 registered practitioners (Earle 2008).

It was against this background that in 2009, the Department of Social Development launched its Recruitment and Retention Strategy (Dlamini and Sewpaul 2015). This strategy included a comprehensive bursary scheme for social work students, the majority of whom aimed to recruit "from the deep rural areas of our country" (Dlamini 2013b, p. 2). Not only did this intervention help to increase the number of registered social workers considerably, it also contributed to a noticeable change in the profession's demographic profile. In 2005, 50% of all registered social workers were categorized as Black African (Earle 2008). Contemporary statistics are hard to come by, but Schenck's (2009) and Hölscher's (2018) reports on studies conducted with social work students at two different South African universities may be taken as reflecting broader sociodemographic trends. Hölscher (2018) reported that in the space of 10 years, the number of social work students had more than doubled, with the percentage of students categorized as Black African having increased to 99%. Noting similar trends in terms of overall numbers, Schenck (2009) reported that as many as 43% of students in the cohorts under study had experienced extreme poverty, with 29% describing the neighborhoods where they lived as:

Poor, low-income areas with high unemployment, where the people ... mostly [depended] on state grants. Housing [was] overcrowded and insufficient, with pollution, littering and high volumes of traffic; people [were] unmotivated and passive ... [Students lived] in shacks, RDP houses and rented rooms. (Schenck 2009, p. 8; brackets added)

In addition, most of the students had experienced “multiple traumatic incidents. These incidents included witnessing murders, hijackings and domestic violence” (Schenck 2009, p. 9), leading to students describing their trauma with reference to feelings such as “numbness, detachment, alienation, debilitation, hopelessness, powerlessness ... and feelings of being ‘broken up inside’” (Schenck 2009, p. 10). All of this suggests that at the point of writing this chapter, South Africa’s social workers are increasingly originating from poor Black African, often rural, households, among whom the legacy of South Africa’s colonial and apartheid past is often intensely present.

The post-apartheid years also revealed other nodes of oppression in the profession, one of which has been selected for discussion in this chapter. This is the node that is most obviously connected with the global economic crisis of 2007. In the wake of this crisis, it was not the number of practitioners that swelled but the number of unemployed social workers. In the words of then Social Development Minister Dlamini, “like many other countries, South Africa was affected by the economic downturn, which resulted in budget cuts” (cited in Cronje 2015, p. 3). Again, accurate figures are not readily accessible; however, it appears that both the Department of Social Development’s capacity to fund nongovernment organizations and its own ability to fill vacant posts were diminishing. For example, in 2015, the Province of KwaZulu-Natal’s Department of Social Development announced its intent to ration its funding of nongovernment organizations (Ngobese 2015). And in January 2016, it was reported that close to 2,500 of the over 9,000 beneficiaries of the Department of Social Development bursary scheme were in fact unemployed yet contractually tied to work for the Department of Social Development upon completion of their degrees (Cronje 2015). The Department’s inability to absorb these graduates or to provide the NGO sector with the necessary funding to do so led to moves to “re-cost” (Department of Social Development 2016) and subsequently halt the bursary program (DispatchLive 2016). This decision was taken as the percentage of unfilled departmental social work posts was approaching 48% (Congress of South African Trade Unions 2017).

Sporadic protests against social work unemployment were not sustained, generally failed to attract widespread media attention and, on those occasions when they did, failed to generate a

sympathetic public discourse. One example is an online opinion piece published by a social work graduate in which he accused the Department of Social Development of reneging on its responsibilities toward both previous and current bursary recipients (Nala 2014). In the open responses section, a number of readers replied that instead of relying on the government, the affected graduates should instead seek to emulate people “who made it ... without a degree but lots of hard work” (Nala 2014, p. 3). A social work graduate replied:

We did not just rush off to get degrees. We come from poverty-stricken homes where some of us are the first to even obtain degrees. Some of us will be breadwinners in our families ... All we wish for is that the Department of Social Development find means of employing us, not just so we have jobs [but] so that we can serve these poverty-stricken communities who need assistance. (Nala 2014, p. 3)

Thus, after more than 350 years of colonial and apartheid rule, the social work profession had become accessible to Black African students from predominantly poor and rural backgrounds but ironically was now itself afflicted by the very problems to which it was intended to respond: inequality, unemployment, and poverty. Yet there appeared to be limited public concern. Anti-oppressive theorists refer to such a complex interweaving of disadvantage and indifference as structural violence. Violence may be considered structural when it “spans generations ... dominate[s] everyday living” and therefore is “deeply ingrained” (Bulhan 1985, cited in Mullaly 2010, p. 152). For this reason, it tends to be “tolerated, accepted, or found unsurprising” by those who do not suffer its consequences (Mullaly 2010, p. 55) while at the same time affecting particular groups disproportionately, causing widespread afflictions among them. Distorting the ways in which resources are allocated, the political voice and levels of recognition enjoyed by those affected, and the extent to which their claims for justice are considered legitimate within the broader public (Fraser 2008), structural violence is felt in all aspects of the affected people’s lives, thereby constituting “a total environment” (Mullaly 2010, p. 151).

In sum then, this section has argued that since the end of apartheid, South Africa became integrated into the global neoliberal order, which included exposure to the kinds of economic crises to which this order is prone. Within this context, the sociodemographic profile of South African social work changed to the extent that it now appears to resemble that of its service user base, who are mostly Black Africans, originating from the country’s poor urban township and rural areas. As a result of these two developments, the afflictions experienced by the majority of the profession’s service users were increasingly experienced by social work students and graduates as well. While the post-apartheid years revealed a number of other nodes of oppression affecting the profession, this section highlighted the complex of structural violence, to which the colonized people of South Africa

and their descendants have been exposed to for generations. This serves as but one example of the ways in which coloniality is at work in the social work realm. The chapter's second section explores the implications of these arguments for anti-oppressive social work practice, focusing on the field of community work.

Anti-oppression, Decolonization, and Community Work Practice

With the apparent blurring of boundaries between social workers and their service users, who then should be the beneficiaries of intervention? Who should be the ones to intervene? Against the backdrop of a decolonial reading of the challenges described in the preceding section, what should be the role of anti-oppressive community work practice? And what would be its limitations in the Global South? This section is structured around a case study of the community work practices conducted by social work students at a selected South African university. The purpose is to explore the extent to which anti-oppressive community work can converge fruitfully with the requirements of a decolonial agenda and suggest ways in which, from a Global South perspective, current anti-oppressive theorizing may need to be enlarged.

Anti-oppressive Community Work in Action: A Case Study

Writers on anti-oppressive theory and practice have pointed out that to conceptualize and intervene in the person-structure interface where the perspectives, perceptions, experiences, and interactions of individuals, groups, and communities are entangled with broader societal discourses and practices, anti-oppressive practice draws on all of social work's methods in order for different levels of engagement to inform one another. For example, Mullaly (2010) suggested that such practice should involve activities in which the victims of unemployment, poverty, interpersonal violence, and so on are "consoled or partially compensated to make their situation a little more palatable" (p. 223). In so doing, practitioners should assist their service users in developing their awareness of the links that exist "between personal problems and their structural causes, between therapeutic insights and conscious deeds" (Mullaly 2010, p. 223). This is to enable people to challenge the perceptions they might have of themselves and one another "as inferior beings" and to translate their individual and shared frustrations about "being denied basic individual rights" into "the collective action needed to attain these rights" (Mullaly 2010, p. 223). Dominelli (2002) notes that to engage successfully in such collective action, communities need to (re)develop a shared commitment to each other's welfare, which can be done irrespective of whether such communities

are “based on identities, interests or geographic location” (p. 128). Anti-oppressive social workers should aid such processes of (re)commitment by focusing their attention on “[assisting] in the process of mobilising people; [collecting] evidence that indicates the need for mutual systems of caring; and [helping] to mount the arguments for reciprocated, solidarity-based welfare provisions” (Dominelli 2002, p. 128).

All writers on anti-oppressive theory and practice cited thus far have drawn a clear line between the roles of social workers and service users, implicitly attributing positions of relative privilege to the former and oppression to the latter. Yet considering the cited explications of what anti-oppressive social work is about, one of the most suitable examples of anti-oppressive community work practice that could be identified for inclusion in this chapter involved neither. Instead, it comprised a community of social work students at one South African university, who over a number of years engaged in sustained practices of mutual support, political actions, and participatory, introspective research. For over a decade, they organized themselves by means of an association meant to serve and represent the interests of social work students at large. The association’s leadership was made up of two elected representatives from each year of study. According to one of its past leaders, “we ... used the ... association ... in expressing our political views and advocating for student social workers at the university campus and other agencies, which were relevant to our context” (Mdamba 2017). As such, social work students represented one another on the university-wide students representative council, to student housing, the university’s academic leadership at various levels of governance, and to the Department of Social Development (DSD). Issues taken up over the years included access to on-campus resources, access to the Department of Social Development’s bursary scheme, and, increasingly, the growing challenge of graduate unemployment.

Due to the fluid nature of student communities, student leaders attended to the task of (re-)creating their community as part of their responsibilities. Social events were organized, class WhatsApp groups ensured ease of communication, and a Facebook page including past graduates contributed to building a sense of continuity and cohesion over time. Given the widespread poverty experienced among the social work student body, members also sought to assist one another through monetary collections and distribution of food hampers and sanitary pads. Beneficiaries of this support were self-selected, and assistance was provided on the basis of trust. Administration and distribution were done by volunteers, and the scheme enjoyed great levels of support among both students and staff. In one instance, students prevented the financial exclusion of a peer by collecting money for her re-

registration and, thereafter, advocating for her inclusion in DSD's scholarship program. Yet, the student's evaluation of the intervention was mixed. On the one hand, she acknowledged that it preserved her chance of being a future professional and explained how she had learnt from this experience that "we've overcome; that means we are strong" (Ngcobo 2015, p. 23). On the other hand, she acknowledged that, "many other students who were not able to get such assistance but had a similar problem, did not come back" (Ngcobo 2015, p. 20).

The student association's response to the growing crisis of social work graduate unemployment involved mass action. At the turn of 2015/2016, one regional and one national rally were organized in collaboration with other student and professional organizations. However, attempts to repeat these efforts proved disappointing. In spite of having the support of their lecturers who cancelled classes on the day, only a fraction of students attended a protest march organized for March 2016. Students discussed this in the days that followed, but given how much was at stake, the reasons given for their nonparticipation were unconvincing to the organizers, and several student leaders expressed a sense of demoralization. This disappointment gave rise to members of the class of 2016 deciding to explore this lack of political engagement and to consider how this apathy in the face of a growing professional and personal crisis might be explained.

To this end, eight students – both leaders and members of the class – joined a National Research Foundation-funded project, which focused, among other things, on "students' experiences" of "participatory parity" in South African higher education (Bozalek 2014, p. 6). However, giving the study's original design a more distinctly participatory action research orientation, the students adjusted the study's original focus to seeking a "better understanding of [final year] social work ... students' lack of political action in the face of unemployment" (Khoza 2016, p. 5). They intended to achieve this by reflecting specifically on the links between identity and oppression in their lives (Khoza 2016). Students retained the larger study's participatory learning and action methods as a basis for their data collection, conducting three focus group sessions during which they produced artwork comprising rivers of life, community maps, and a photovoice activity. These activities gave rise to in-depth discussions around possible connections between their personal life stories and recent choices around how to respond to the real possibility of having to return, as unemployed graduates, to the vicious cycles of poverty from which they had sought to escape. Students analyzed their data jointly and then produced individual research reports. Detailed descriptions of the study's

methodology are available in Bozalek (2014) and Hölscher (2018). Content from two of the eight research reports was included in this chapter.

Against the background of their self-identification as Black Africans from low socioeconomic, rural and urban, backgrounds (Khoza 2016), participants suggested that there was an immediate and direct link between what they described as internalized oppression (following Mullaly 2010) and as a tendency toward acceptance and accommodation of what they regarded as the deeply unjust conditions of their lives (following Dominelli 2002). On the one hand, they observed how they had made continuous connections between their family histories, their current socioeconomic positioning, and an apparent lack of confidence in their ability to effect change in their own and their community's lives. Quotes selected by study participants for inclusion in their research reports included the following:

I feel ... that sometimes, because I am black, whatever I say will not really make a difference (Mdamba 2016, p. 33)

My mother ... is not working [and] even now, [she] is sick [and] earning a grant. So she cannot give me any money ... So I was like, shy, or have a low self-esteem of coming to university while I know my background. (Khoza 2016, p. 37)

On the other hand, students categorized their respective political choices according to Dominelli's (2002) typification of oppressed people's responses to the structural processes of injustices in their lives: acceptance, accommodation, and resistance. Mdamba (2016, p. 39) considered the following statement to be an example of a participant's acceptance of her perceived lack of political agency:

I feel like, sometimes, why be active when I know it won't help?

A case of accommodation, in Mdamba's (2016, p. 41) view, was this contribution:

What really turn[s] my spirit down not to participate [in political action] is that I have [government] funding ... so I believe that ... next year ... I ... have hope that I will find a job.

Mdamba (2016) noted that only one of the eight participants expressed a preference for resistance to the injustice they faced but linked this back to that particular participant's gender and somewhat elevated class position which had enabled him to develop a stronger sense of self-worth and confidence in himself as an agent of change than was the case with the other participants.

Based on their analysis, students made a range of recommendations toward further research, education, and practice, considering what anti-oppressive responses to their afflictions might look

like. Khoza's (2016) propositions speak particularly well to the concerns of this chapter and are therefore included here at length.

Social workers ... should consciously seek to understand the ... context in which they operate if they wish to make an impact on oppression...

Student social workers should challenge the structural sources of ... inequality ... discrimination and exclusion ... by using ... anti-oppressive theories. We need solidarity to eradicate the objectionable system that is oppressing us as students and beyond...

Political action enables ... student social workers ... to express ... [their] resistance to domination, and the possibility of participating in [the] collective ... pursuit of claims for welfare. Therefore political action should be motivated ... I have hope that initiation of vibrant political action can bring much change in the country and open the eyes of the government officials who are currently failing to do their responsibilities ...

As there is a relationship between education and practice, this calls for emancipatory education so that graduates can become engaged citizens who challenge oppression and injustices ... Black students define themselves according to pigment, that makes them have a low self-esteem and [feel] inferior. The social work level four students must decolonise their minds so that they can bring [a] revolution in the face of unemployment. (pp. 34–35)

Discussion: Decolonizing Anti-oppressive Social Work

In line with Young's (1990, 2007) understanding of the dynamic person-structure interface, Clifford and Burke (2009, p. 20) contend that, "the conditioning of life chances by 'external' structures such as lack of employment ... unequal distribution of wealth and income; stereotyping in the media, and many other factors, will ... affect [individual] life chances and shape their lives." They also note that "individuals also have ... [an] ability ... to actively engage with powerful social systems, rather than passively accept or collude with them" (ibid.). The students' community work interventions point to both promises and limitations that lie within students of social work being critically conscious of themselves and of their histories and of how these link with their life circumstances, in ways that inform their practices. The previous section showed how practices are not neutral but driven by knowledge and theoretical frameworks, often from the Global North (even where this may not be self-evident), with reference to the entanglements of South Africa's post-apartheid welfare system within a global regime of neoliberalism. Structural forms of violence in the South African welfare

sector constitute a set of historically shaped structures and practices, which have insidious effects on social work. These included, but were not limited to, the threat of graduate unemployment, a condition that is apt to lock large numbers of social work graduates back into vicious cycles of poverty and deprivation which they had, by means of furthering their education, sought to escape.

The community work intervention involved social work students employing a range of anti-oppressive concepts and community work practices, developed in response to these circumstances and conditions, structures, and practices. Practices entailed amelioration of individual hardship and suffering through acts of solidarity and mutual support, advocacy, social action, and consciousness raising through self-directed participatory action research and participatory learning and action activities. Among these, social action initiatives were the least sustained, which suggests that despite the anti-oppressive education they had received, most students remained depoliticized, with even that minority who had tried to organize student activism eventually becoming demoralized as well. Thus, a concept with particular appeal to the students was that of internalized oppression, as this enabled them to link personal histories with subsequent preferences for acceptance and accommodation of the structural forms of violence operating in their lives, rather than developing the courage to resist.

Against this background, the conclusion reached by Khoza (2016, p. 35) regarding the need for social work students to “decolonise their minds so that they can bring [a] revolution in the face of unemployment” is significant. Not only does this quote express a profound anger and the kind of energy that oppression can generate in the oppressed, it also demonstrates how this anti-oppressive community work intervention was able to direct the thinking of its participants toward better understanding and developing the will to tackle some of the remnants of colonialism in their lives. Yet the participatory action research that facilitated this analysis was conducted only at the end of these students’ education and did not therefore feed back into other students’ lives. All of this suggests that anti-oppressive concepts and practices are indeed meaningful and applicable in contexts of the Global South, such as South Africa. At the same time, given the intricacy and depth of the structural violence experienced, anti-oppressive interventions in the classroom cannot be expected to succeed in the short term, when they are taught as once-off courses in the hope that they would then somehow germinate into capacities for anti-oppressive practice. Anti-oppressive theories and practices need to become an integral part of a decolonial pedagogy in social work. Indeed, the idea of decolonizing social work education is generating a growing body of scholarship in

South Africa (Qalinge and van Breda 2018); however, the challenges of translating this emerging scholarship into pedagogical practices have been noted as well (see, e.g., Hölscher 2018; Hölscher et al. 2020, forthcoming).

The key gap in anti-oppressive theorizing that the students' reflections and practices and the anti-oppressive/decolonial analysis of the South African welfare context pointed to is this: in South Africa's post-apartheid context, access to education and to professions such as social work has broadened. As a result, the lines between social workers and the communities from which they originated, and which they are meant to serve, have become blurred. This exposed those marked by "damnation" (Fanon 1961; Maldonado-Torres 2007) to structural forms of violence in ways that are different from those previously described. However, it has also enabled broader access to a wider range of power in relation to these forms of violence – even if that power is localized within particular regions of the Global South. Beyond the violence of poverty and unemployment, and beyond the students' acts of solidarity, advocacy, conscientisation, and resistance discussed above, this points to an entanglement of the profession in evolving forms and dynamics of power and violence in ways that may well be particular to the Global South. While a full exploration of this entanglement exceeded the scope of this chapter, it is an important one to note as it points to the need for more considered research in the future.

As stated in the introduction, decolonial thinking challenges the hegemony of Eurocentric perspectives and promotes dialogue with other ways of thinking outside the dominant paradigms rooted in the Global North. A decolonization of anti-oppressive theory and practice requires seriously considering the insights and experiences of the people located in the marginalized zones of the globe. Over centuries, the lines between the colonizers and the colonized have divided the world into two zones – the "zone of being" and the "zone of nonbeing" (Fanon 1961 cited in Gordon 2005, p. 3). Grosfoguel (2011) reminds us that these zones are not specific geographical places but rather positionalities in relation to power which occur at global, national, and local scales and between various racialized groups. To speak from the zone of nonbeing is to look at the world from angles and points of view that are critical of hegemonic perspectives and practices.

Social work students in South Africa, through their experiences of living with poverty, inequality, and structural violence, speak from a unique positionality. Their practices imply that there would be no

anti-oppressive practice unless it starts with “us”: students, scholars, and practitioners of social work. Through their interventions, the students were able to introduce new ideas into scholarly conversations on AOP. Prominent among these is the idea that a central professional binary – that of social worker/service user – holds limited value for the kinds of the realities that can emerge in countries of the Global South. Returning to Grosfoguel’s (2011) notions of the global geopolitics and body politics of knowledge, this suggests that anti-oppressive theorizing and practices contain within them possibilities for the articulation of pluriversal knowledges, that is, knowledges that are “constructed and positioned from ‘other’ histories and subjectivities” (Walsh 2007, p. 226). It remains to be seen to what extent, and in what ways, they are also able to be unsettled by them.

Conclusion

This chapter focused on three main issues. Firstly, it provided a critical discussion of anti-oppressive theory and stated how this literature may benefit from decolonial scholarship. Secondly, the context and challenges for anti-oppressive community practice in South Africa were examined, with particular consideration of how these have arisen from the country’s history of colonialism and current reality of coloniality. Thirdly, anti-oppressive community work practices were examined through a case study involving social work students from a selected South African university. These three issues have implications for the decolonization of anti-oppressive community work practice, which are that, at least in the Global South, anti-oppressive work theorizing and practice need to be located within decolonial thinking. A decolonial anti-oppression framework should start from the premise that multiple oppressions exist within and across societies, which are rooted in coloniality, especially in the Global South. AOP must be informed by this recognition. This chapter presented one of the ways in which this might be done. The extent to which the approach presented may fruitfully inform theorizing and practices in the Global North will hopefully form the subject of further debates. AOP has shown that it has the capacity to evolve in ways that can respond appropriately to differential realities. Both scholars and practitioners of anti-oppressive social work must continue their journey of broadening their understandings of what these realities entail.

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