If Anti-Racism Is the Goal, Then Anti-Oppression Is How We Get There

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Abstract: Many schools of social work around the United States of America wrote anti-racism statements because of the recent murders of Black and Brown people. In this contribution, the authors describe a challenging and tense discussion of racism and anti-racism leading to a group process about oppression and anti-oppression in the social work profession. For some, the urgency to address racism led to tactics and strategies that got in the way of social workers engaging in anti-oppressive practices. While the structure of higher education often reinforces traditional hierarchies of power, the profession of social work calls us to promote our core values of social justice, integrity, and the importance of human relationships as we strive for an anti-oppressive future. Consequently, social work faculty may experience role conflict as we navigate these tensions. We believe it is important to harness and process such discomfort as we critically examine the power dynamics within our own department, and our own profession. This voluntary, ad hoc group, composed of a diverse group of faculty members, provides space for ongoing mutual aid, consciousness raising, appropriate discomfort, and accountability. If anti-racism is the goal, then anti-oppression is how we get there.

Keywords: Anti-oppression practice, oppression, higher education, White supremacy, restorative justice

Despite the history of police and other mostly White American citizens shooting and lynching Black individuals, some multi-ethnic segments of American society clamored loudly after watching Derek Chauvin kneel on George Floyd's neck for nine minutes and twenty-nine seconds. Derek Chauvin, however, was aided by Thomas Lane, another White man, as well as Tou Thao, a Hmong American, and J. Alexander Kueng, a mixed ethnicity Black Identified man. Essentially a multi-racial team of men - Black, Hmong, and White, aided in the murder of George Floyd, and its attempted cover up. The murder of George Floyd sparked anti-racism statements among some businesses, academic institutions, and professional groups as well as calls to recognize that "Black Lives Matter." While the murder of George Floyd certainly enacts racist beliefs about Black men, a larger system of oppressive beliefs about many populations have guided actions in the United States of America in which one group leveraged their power to massacre, imprison, restrain, or lessen the value of other populations. Examples in American history include the Trail of Tears, boarding schools for Native Americans, enfranchisement laws that were

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differentially applied to White women and women of color, the eugenics movement in America, military conscription during the Vietnam war, prohibition against gay and lesbian's marriage equality, "bathroom bills" targeting transgender men and women as well as sundown towns across the United States. Many populations have been subject to oppressive political actions and legally sanctioned discrimination (Ferber et al., 2009).

The aim of this paper is to draw upon our insights and experiences within our voluntary, Ad Hoc Anti-oppression Committee, in order to name and discuss the contradictions within social work and higher education regarding values and practices; in doing so, we apply a theoretical framework of social dominance and oppression, discuss structures that reinforce oppression within higher education as well as common emotional and intellectual responses to oppression, and make recommendations for meaningful action.

In this first section, we briefly explore concepts used to examine or explain oppression in American society including how and why some people adopt anti-oppressive language yet act in ways that subordinate groups. To that end, we draw on our experiences forming and participating in a voluntary, ad hoc anti-oppressive committee, as well as the tensions and missteps that did and did not fuel new understandings of social dominance, hierarchies, intersectionality, multiple social categorizations, socialization processes, and consequently oppression to further illustrate how oppression trickles down from structural systems to interpersonal interactions. While structural systems permit discriminatory interpersonal interactions, these systems also create modes of being described as privilege that shape how dominant groups judge their actions and the actions of subordinate groups. Added to the complication of conceptualizing oppression is the dynamic nature of oppression in that interactions are shaped by the social context and identities of social groups interacting in the social context. To elucidate oppression, we start by explaining social dominance theory and applying that to oppression and then the creation of hierarchies of oppression.

Social Dominance Theory

Social dominance is an arbitrary system in which one social group dominates other social groups (Pratto et al., 2006). Social domination occurs on the group-level while also permitting interpersonal dominance at the interpersonal level and cognitive aspects of dominance at the individual level. Thus, social dominance is a multi-level framework that includes several terms, such as privilege and discrimination, used to describe aspects of social domination. Social domination is explained through myths about the appropriateness of domination like, for example, that a management committee made up of all White people can write a letter about the murder of George Floyd without including the voices and perspectives of the Black or Indigenous people of color. This incident occurred in our department, sparking arguments about oppression laid against many marginalized identities in the department coupled with complicity with oppressive actions by people that identify as social justice advocates. During these arguments, questions arose about one's positionality in relation to social justice as well as people who are marginalized because of their identities and/or social locations. These arguments revealed that the social hierarchies

that stack different populations into more-oppressed or less-oppressed groups are not as uniform or linear (Amosa & Gorski, 2008; Clark, 2010; Marshall, 2009).

To broaden the identities and complexity that exist among social groups, some diversity scholars employ intersectionality to address multiple identities (Carbado, 2013; Crenshaw, 1989; Ghavami & Peplau, 2013). Intersectionality proposes that multiple group-level identities interconnect or converge and contribute to unique forms of oppression and represent multiple positions in a social hierarchy. While intersectionality is subject to critiques based on interpretation and application, the concept is widely used, and empirical evidence supports portions of the concept with different marginalized populations (Ghavami & Peplau, 2013). In contrast, social psychologists apply multiple social categorizations to group-level multiple identities to explain how cognitive, affective, and motivational factors influence group-level social interactions (Curtin et al., 2016; Riggio, 2013; Pratto et al., 2006). Additionally, multiple social categorizations include aspects of oppression that are not accounted for by intersectionality alone, such as colorism. Thus, even when people are committed to anti-oppressive work, they may still contribute to oppressive behaviors. Examining the multiple social categorizations of members of our group lends itself to understanding how the dominant and subordinate social groups dynamically interact to create hierarchies that maintain and reshape social hierarchies and social dominance (Remedios & Snyder, 2018).

As we are born into multiple social categories, we are then socialized into an inequitable social system, which is pervasive, consistent, circular, self-perpetuating, and invisible (Harro, 2013). Unless something occurs that disturbs the cycle, the cultural, social, and institutional socialization processes continue, making it difficult for individuals to reflect, question, and challenge what is the "norm" to them. This leads to the creation of a culture within an institution to perpetuate the White norm/White supremacy. In the instance of White management committee members writing a letter in response to George Floyd's death without inviting faculty of color to share their perspectives, multiple faculty members of color challenged the appropriateness of the situation. White tenured faculty is not a monolith, either, and their actions differed greatly. Many remained silent, both verbally and through non-action, while others exhibited behaviors that DiAngelo (2018) termed "White fragility." While some tenured and non-tenured White faculty engaged in activism, working for and with faculty of color to reflect everyone's voices.

Oppression

Oppression is "a set of policies, practices, traditions, norms, definitions, and explanations, which function to systematically exploit one group to the benefit of another group" (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, p. 84). Despite the clarity of Sensoy and DiAngelo's definition, oppression is a confusing concept because many times scholars, practitioners, and laypeople equate oppression with the systemic oppression laid against groups in society, namely racism, sexism, heterosexism, ableism, and other "isms." McDonald and Coleman (1999), in contrast to Sensoy and DiAngelo, include a more expansive conceptualization of power in their definition when they state, "Oppression is also discrimination systematically enforced through use of social/economic/political power, in

such a way that the status quo is maintained, and inequity is legitimized in domination" (p. 20). While racism, sexism, ableism, and heterosexism describe oppressive relations between dominant and subordinated social groups based on a social identity such as ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender identity, the overarching concept of oppression foregrounds examination of power relations, including subordinate and dominate, center/margin, and invisible and visible.

Oppression, thus, is backed by social power that dynamically creates ingroups and outgroups in social contexts. For example, faculty groups on some U.S. college campuses are divided into professor, associate professor, and assistant professor social groups. The system of higher education endows each of these social groups with a level of power based on their position within the social and educational hierarchy. Therefore, in faculty meetings the power relations between the faculty members operates "in the background" as professors, associate professors, and assistant professors interact. At times, power relations are made overt through tenure in that assistant professors – typically untenured – might be reminded of their place in the academic hierarchy and tenure process (Dews & Law, 1995). Faculty members in professor or associate professor social groups might espouse values associated with egalitarianism, particularly in professions such as social work, while relationships between professor groups enact social hierarchies prevalent in American society that rank people with different ethnic identities, sexual orientations, abilities, and gender identities among many other identities (Dessel et al., 2012; Di Palma, 2005; Harris & Nicolazzo, 2020; Wong & Jones, 2018). While professor social group and tenure status play roles in social hierarchies, other social groupings also come into to play and create additional groupings and subgroupings that add to complex social hierarchies within academic settings. Staff and adjunct faculty are often ignored and not invited when decisions are made for the department, as these additional social groups are often overlooked and under-appreciated.

Additionally, in the social work profession, the division between direct practice social workers - such as clinical, case management, or direct client care positions - and community practice social workers - such as community organizers and policy advocates - is an additional facet of social groups that can further group social workers in academic settings (Feldman et al., 2021; Liddel & Lass, 2019; Robinson et al., 2020). Thus, dominant social groups in an oppressive regime will differ based on social context and are more dynamic and complex than simple ranking of faculty from assistant to full professor. While this example has focused on our social work department that is located within academia, the ideas and assertions laid out in this section are transferable to other social contexts and social groupings, explaining how hierarchies of oppression are structured and maintained.

Hierarchies of Oppression

As unpacked in the previous section, oppression is a multi-faceted and interconnected social process. Hence to practice an anti-oppressive approach effectively, the multiple facets of social grouping across social contexts should be addressed. This will be a conceptual leap for some and for all, a non-linear and dynamic process.

The United States of America, for example, was established by 56 White, affluent males. Many of these men owned slaves, subjugated women, and disenfranchised poor people all while writing,

> We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. (National Archives, 1776/2022, para. 2)

The social structures that followed the establishment of U.S. society afforded subsequent White, wealthy men unearned privileges by virtue of their status in the U.S. Over time, voting was established for White men, slaves were freed, attempts to decimate Native Americans occurred, men of other ethnicities were permitted to vote, other forms of subjugation were established to maintain divisions between Black and White people, laws punishing the sexual assault of women, mostly White, were enacted and years later protected Black women, quota systems for immigration were enacted limiting non-Northwestern Europeans entrance to the United States, gay and lesbians advocated for equal civil rights, women advocated for equal rights as part of an equal rights movement, people with disabilities were afforded protections under the Individuals with Disabilities Act, and many other events by subjugated social groups have challenged the dominant status of social groups in American society. While cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied, White men have historically maintained a high social status in American Society (Kimmel & Ferber, 2017), other groups maintain a subordinate status. However, to this day, cisgender, heterosexual, able bodied, White men's status in American society is the pinnacle of the hierarchy of oppression.

As stated earlier, the dynamic and contextual nature of oppression inhibits the static ranking of subordinated groups because the context changes the ranking of subordinate groupings. The dynamic and contextual nature of the hierarchy of oppression, thus can create tactics and strategies used by both dominant and subordinate social groups during interpersonal interactions and social actions striving to be anti-oppressive. While tactics and strategies will be discussed later in this paper, features of the hierarchy of oppression will be discussed further in this section.

Privileged or dominant social groups within a hierarchy hold power and social status as well as the maximum access to necessary commodities. Subordinate groups, in contrast, must either conform to the rules and desires of those at the highest levels or resist conformity (McDonald & Coleman, 1999). In most academic departments, necessary commodities include tenure status, the ability to assert one's position without risk of retaliation that might results in job loss, priority selection of courses including dates and times, on campus and professional social capital, and differential access to sabbaticals and other workload resources. Subordinate social groups must decide whether to engage in a constant struggle with those in privileged or dominant groups status as well as others within subordinate groups (McDonald & Coleman, 1999; Pratto et al., 2006). Resistance and conformity have both positive and negative implications for subordinate social group members. For some subordinate group members, conformity is participating in their own

oppression in exchange for shadow privilege, a privilege that is extended to another because of their relationship with a privileged person. Conformity might ebb and flow in that digression in response to direct experiences of oppression might lessen conformity, while witnessing oppression towards other subordinate social group members might increase conformity. Conformity can also occur through status maneuvering which involves subordinated social groups creating similarities between those with privileged status to align themselves with dominant social groups (Oselin & Barber, 2019).

This might explain, to some extent, why non-White police officers do not intervene when Black citizens are brutalized by White police officers. Non-White police officers might be benefiting from shadow privileges due to their close relationships with White officers, or they might be finding being police officers or being male as their similarities. In the case of Derek Chauvin and three other officers who are responsible of George Floyd's death, Derek Chauvin is the oldest of the four, and likely the most senior officer amongst them. By challenging officer Chauvin, the rest might have feared retaliation or loss of privilege they have benefited.

Both shadow privilege and status maneuvering can create conflicts among subordinated social groups as those subordinate social group members resisting oppression conflict with subordinate social group members that conform with the oppression by dominant group members. When conflict disrupts subordinate social group relationships, as McDonald and Coleman (1999) point out, groups further up the social hierarchy benefit, especially as subordinate social group members fight amongst themselves rather than pull together to challenge the social hierarchy. Freire (1965/1973, 1968/2014) suggests that dominant groups stimulate conflict among subordinate groups as a way of maintaining an oppressor and oppressed relationship. Manipulating social groups, inciting conflict among subordinated social groups, and presenting a mirage of helpfulness and solidarity while simultaneously inhibiting oppressed groups from rising up – essentially reaching out with their hand to help them up while putting their foot on them to keep them down – redirects attention from social hierarchies towards other social groups and the struggle for limited resources. Therefore, it is crucial to address all forms of oppression in order to practice anti-racism. If we allow the culture where we remain silent when a marginalized group is targeted, other forms of oppression will persist.

Structures That Support Oppression

An example of a structure that supports oppression is silence particularly related to White supremacy. On its face, the term "White supremacy" sparks memories of enslavement, lynching, and violent control of Africans and African Americans. At one time, this was the primary mode of maintaining White supremacy but since the civil rights movement the strategies for maintaining White supremacy have changed. White supremacy during the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, has permitted many people in the United States of America to authoritatively rename COVID-19, the "China virus" and then viciously attack Asian Americans and Asians in response to perceived infringement on their rights (Jeung et al., 2021), and the hate crimes against many other social groups such as gay men and lesbians, transgender men and women, non-binary people, as well as

people with various abilities and disabilities. Thus, White supremacy has evolved to account for more than overt acts of murder of African Americans to include subversive acts of subjugation of perceived subordinate social groups (McCoy, 2020).

In the social work profession, prominent social work reference texts do not define White supremacy (Barker, 2014; Harris & White, 2013; Mizrahi & Davis, 2020; Rowe & Rapp-Paglicci, 2008; Thyer, 2008; Timms & Timms, 2016; White, 2008), which is a form of silence by a profession that espouses social justice values. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary (2011), however, defines White supremacy as "the belief that the White race is inherently superior to other races and that White people should have control over people of other races and the social, economic, and political systems that collectively enable White people to maintain power over people of other races" (p. 1429). White supremacy, however, is not limited to subjugating one color or ethnic group into slavery but includes a dynamic assimilation of groups into a "White" category, the establishment and domination of subordinate groups, and a reshaping of overt violence and enslavement of marginalized populations towards Whitewashing of the domination, as well as insidious infiltration into judicial, political, economic, cultural, cognitive, somatic, metaphysical spheres of society and human development (Gillborn, 2006; hooks, 2004; Kendi, 2019). White supremacy, therefore, is a multi-dimensional social construct that is embedded in overt and covert aspects of society in ways that emphasize power dynamics between dominant and dynamically situated subordinate social groups. White supremacy gives birth to and rears hierarchies of oppression. White supremacy is best understood as a system of power and control that uses systems of oppression such as capitalism, patriarchy, ethnocentrism, and heterosexism to dominate and exploit marginalized populations in the interest of maintaining privilege for Whites, and most particularly Whites who control most of the income and wealth in society.

Social groups can also support White supremacy through policies or plans that bolster Whiteness as superior, also known as strategies, as well as tactics or ways of enacting strategies that uphold Whiteness as superior over other groupings. Strategies can include rewriting memory or history or cultural appropriation as well as tactics like stimulating conflicts among subordinate groups and tone policing, meaning one focuses on the tone and not the content of what is being said (Biddle & Hufnagel, 2019; Curtin et al., 2016; Nuru & Arendt, 2019; Quinones, 2017), White tears (Hikido & Murray, 2016; Patton & Jordan, 2017; Phipps, 2021; Tate & Page, 2018), and status maneuvering (Oselin & Barber, 2019). Several scholars have written about many of the strategies and tactics used in oppressive contexts (Pewewardy, 2003; Smith et al., 2021).

Among our department and committee conversations, for example, some White faculty members subjugated subordinate groups through tone policing of Black Indigenous People of Color (BIPOC), interrupting women, and speaking for all members of the faculty when discussing oppression. Simultaneously, some BIPOC engaged in status maneuvering by steering conversations exclusively towards race and racism despite the multiple social categories among the people that are marginalized in social work, academia, and society. Thus, strategies and tactics operate within a power structure that emphasizes overt and covert mechanisms for a system of social control. Covert strategies are more insidious and have included the use of what Herman and Chomsky (1988) call the *manufacture of*

consent, which employs techniques of advertising and other methods of manipulation to normalize White supremacy, and its assumptions about BIPOC people. Tactics are employed to subordinate populations through interpersonal interactions such as those described above but also through media and educational institutions. These interpersonal tactics contrast with overtly violent structural intimidation and terrorism tactics that are typified by groups such as Ku Klux Klan and more recently by "alt right" groups such as the Proud Boys, Promise Keepers, and QAnon (Kendi, 2019). These interpersonal and structural tactics are important – individually and combined – facets of maintaining White supremacy, normalizing Whiteness, instilling conformity to Whiteness, promoting conflict within marginalized groups because of status maneuvering, and adhering to a dominant and subordinate social order. Moreover, reactions to these interpersonal and structural tactics produce further reactions among those with social identities matching dominant social groups or subordinated social groups.

During the spring of 2020, a faculty member analyzed the distribution of student advising among all full-time faculty in our department. As part of this analysis, they submitted their report that compared faculty demographics with participation in undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral student advising and reported that 100% of cisgender, heterosexual, White men were tenured. In contrast, 42% of White women and 20% people of color (including one female) were tenured. Additionally, 88% of men compared to 40% of women were tenured and no queer faculty were tenured. Highlighting the demographic differences among the tenured faculty does not reflect other differences that play a role in the social relationships among faculty members. Social work is a professional field consisting mostly of cisgender women with the aim of promoting justice, yet these statistics reflect a set of advantages based upon gender, race, and sexual orientation. Additionally, 71% of the White male tenured faculty refused to advise undergraduate students leaving advising to faculty comprised primarily of groups of faculty members that are marginalized because of their identities and social locations. Hence, like many structures in U.S. society, our social structure benefits cisgender heterosexual White men. When confronted with this data, many White male faculty members defended and denied these inequities and positioned themselves as victims to the resistance of faculty members that are marginalized because of their identities and social locations who spoke up during an anti-oppression committee meeting. To address the situation, many faculty members, both tenured and non-tenured, voted for all faculty to advise undergraduate students. Even those who voted against the matter participated in the training sessions. This is not indicative of their acceptance of the change in the department for an anti-oppressive approach. It is our hope, however, that through the process of training, advising, coaching and consultations, non-tenured and tenured faculty will share the common goal of an improved student education, and bring us closer to achieving the goal.

**Emotionality and Resistance: The Oppression Continuum**

Emotionality is an important facet of both tactics and strategies used by dominant and subordinate social groups. As discussed, White tears, tone policing, conformity, and resistance are emotional ways that both dominant and subordinate social groups contend with oppression. To explore and explain emotionality in the context of oppression, we

employ and adapt Carr's (2003) theory of empowerment through a feminist lens and then illustrate aspects our conceptualization by applying our experiences in the department and with each other. Carr (2003) draws on feminist thought on positionality, interpretation, identity building, and mobilization for change to examine the process of empowerment.

Our individual and communal responses to oppressive experiences range from intellectualization or emotional detachment to emotionalization or intense personal feelings. Should we respond emotionally as the oppressor, then we might exhibit a sentimental attachment to a worldview that protects our self-image, social status, and power (Ahmed, 2004; DiAngelo, 2018). Such emotionality shifts attention away from those who are oppressed towards the oppressors and allows oppressors to avoid accountability for the harm this social group causes. Should we respond emotionally as the oppressed, we may grieve for lost opportunities, the possibility of hope, and the imposed limitations on one's value and success in society (Gitterman & Knight, 2019).

We all participate in oppression, moving fluidly on a continuum from oppressor to oppressed. We contribute to oppression as individuals, as communities, and as the social work profession (Jones, 2020). Therefore, we need to be mindful of tactics used to oppress others, such as deny, attack, and reverse victim and offender (DARVO) in order to deflect the blame (Second City Works, 2020), but to take responsibility of our own words and actions. While we cannot escape from the oppression continuum, we can become aware of our positionality, reflect on our emotionalization, and support one another in effecting social transformation (Carr, 2003), thus, eliminating bystanders and creating amplifiers.

Figure 1. *Oppression Continuum*
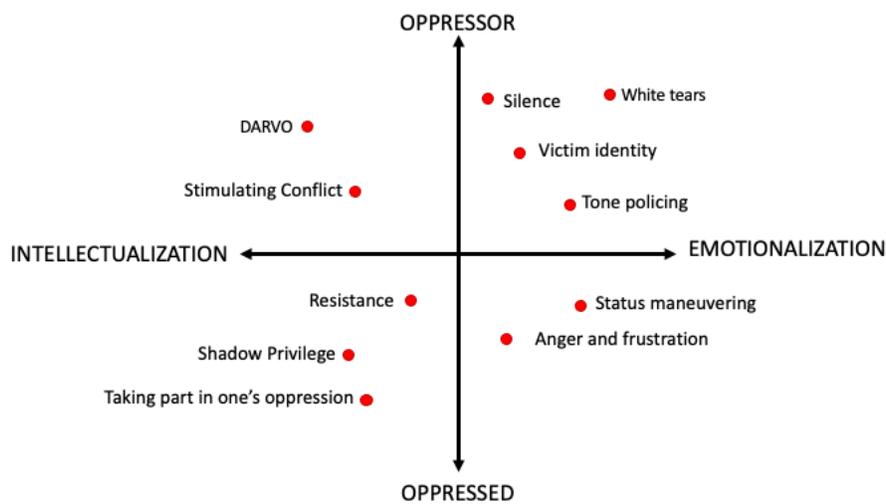
Oppression, like trauma, is timeless in that it is both historical and vicariously situated. All forms of oppression must end. Mullaly & West (2017) suggests that an anti-oppressive approach requires a shift in thinking regarding who must change, a move away from blaming those who are oppressed for their reactions to oppression they might have

experienced since birth, and a stop to the demand that victims change by assimilation or being told to speak in a way that is comforting to the oppressor.

We believe in the notion that an attack on one oppressed group is an attack on all oppressed groups. While there are hierarchies of oppression within our society, most people identify with multiple privileged and marginalized groups simultaneously, and their experiences differ even though they may belong to the same social categories. This leads to oppressive practice within a group toward each other (David & Derthick, 2013). Systemic and structural oppression also reinforce each marginalized group pitting against each other to maintain the power of the privileged groups.

Wherever we find ourselves on the oppression continuum, we might respond to oppression with anger, fear, loneliness, and grief, or numbness (Laub & Allard, 1998; Sortero, 2006). Some anti-oppressive advocates argue that social groups should reflect on our response to oppressive experiences to locate and regulate our emotions (hooks, 1993), integrate thoughts and feelings, and empathize with the feelings of others (Gerdes & Segal, 2009). Alternatively, some anti-oppression advocates argue that anger, rage, and frustration are useful tools that should not be diminished in favor of the emotional and cognitive needs of dominant groups (Falck, 1988; Gonzalez, 2017; Hamad, 2019). The authors of this paper can be placed along the continuum of regulating emotions to emotions as tools, which is common among the social groups with different relationships to oppressive structures.

Figure 2. *Action to Social Transformation*
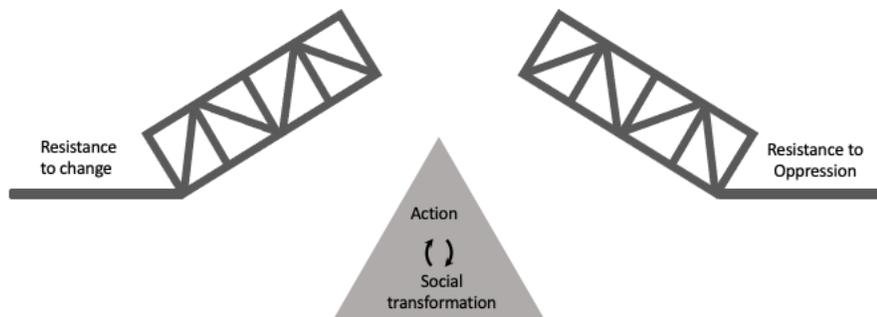
White persons and others who are positioned as oppressors can reach beyond their emotional discomfort "into the prolonged emotional investment in humanity, so necessary to undoing racism" and oppression (Matias, 2016, p. 61). Emotional investment, however, requires dominant groups to forgo the tactics and strategies used to resist displacing ownership for the groups' oppressive tactics and strategies while facing the emotionality of oppressed groups and their own reactions. When called to confront dominant social groups' participation in oppression, dominant social groups might react by resisting change known as negative resistance or may act by resisting oppression known as positive resistance. Social group members might feel empowered to move from negative to positive resistance to build a sense of social belonging, hopeful thinking, and commitment to common purpose (Freire, 1968/2014; Rowe, 2015; Synder, 2002), but this takes significant

personal and social effort to undue considerable socialization, intellectualization, and emotionalization training over one's lifetime. The effort to change a lifetime of socialization into an oppressive power structure illuminates the challenge when social groups neglect deep rooted and identity-challenging self-reflection to participate in the power dynamic within the social structure and continue the process of multiple marginalized groups continuing to hurt other subordinated groups instead of uniting.

In response to the discussions of oppression and oppressive structures within our department, different dominant and subordinate social group members attempts at intellectualization and emotionalization, and the legacy of oppression rooted in our social structure of the department, one of the authors used his social capital to invite a restorative justice expert to identify how this intervention might bring interpersonal and social change. Restorative justice practices are targeted as means to balance social transformation, action, resistance to change, and resistance to oppressions (Armour & Umbreit, 2018). The process of incorporating restorative justice practices into our response to oppression will be discussed in the implications section, but for now we will explain how the restorative justice practices we are incorporating strive to balance all forms of oppression embedded within our social structure and relationship while attending to the harms that subordinate populations have encountered in our department.

For example, faculty in our social work department identified inequities in the distribution of faculty work. Untenured faculty of color had heavier responsibilities for academic advising than tenured White men. When the disparate impact of advising assignments was framed as a matter of social justice, some faculty members reacted with surprise and denial. In meeting conversations and emails, some cisgender heterosexual, White male tenured faculty demonstrated emotionalization through angry outrage, intellectualization through efforts to reframe the issue as academic elitism, reversing victim and offender by focusing on the amount of labor put in with students, and silence. In contrast, many faculty members from marginalized groups felt emotionally assaulted by these egregious actions, and some White faculty experienced anger, outrage and disappointment.

While some tenured White faculty continued to engage in oppressive behaviors such as stimulating conflict and victim identity, other tenured White faculty engaged in anti-oppressive approaches. These activities included calling in, to provide education and space for their colleagues to reflect on their own actions. They also powered with marginalized groups: this is a use of interpersonal power, privilege, and relationship, yet differs from addressing the social structure that enabled the cisgender heterosexual White male tenured professors from considering the harm that subordinate populations would experience that adds to the harms brought into the social interactions from living in a society that maintains a hierarchy of oppression. At the same time, in anti-oppression meetings, we reflected on our own actions where we remained silent when we could have spoken out, to remind each other that we can all engage in oppressive actions while being oppressed. Although the department voted to revise the policy on advising, some faculty were left exhausted by the effort of effecting change because the policy might not change the factors that lead to disproportionate numbers of advisees.

Understanding and altering oppression is not an easy process. Based on our experiences, in the next section we attempt to answer the question: How do we assure that anti-oppressive work leads to constructive and hopeful action rather than destructive alienation and despair?

Intentional Action

In order to address oppressive practices in our department, which were strongly undergirded by White supremacy, patriarchy, and the antiquated, hierarchal power structure of academia, faculty sought out to work collaboratively in order to determine how we may meaningfully work towards creating a truly anti-oppressive departmental culture. The aim was to avoid tokenizing and symbolic demonstrations of solidarity or social justice, and instead to promote an active, anti-oppressive culture, in which all members of our team feel heard and valued. This process began with a voluntary meeting, where the group identified aims and initially agreed to meet weekly. This group then hosted regular meetings in which a group of about ten faculty met virtually over the summer of 2020, to discuss strategies for change; meetings were always open to all department staff. This group included tenured faculty, non-tenured faculty, and one adjunct faculty member; it was facilitated by two non-tenured faculty of color. The aim for this group was to provide mutual aid, raise critical consciousness, provoke appropriate discomfort, and promote shared accountability.

Space was intentionally created to allow for a participatory group process; participants were encouraged to be honest and vulnerable in sharing their perspectives and experiences, as well as to actively listen, with humility, and personally reflect on what was shared. Through this process, faculty identified both policies and processes that reinforce traditional and oppressive power structures within our department and discussed strategies for change. Faculty of color and faculty from other marginalized groups shared painful, personal experiences of feeling marginalized and/or exploited by others in the department, and at times this process helped other colleagues gain awareness of the complex nuances to their privileged experiences and reflect about personal behavior that essentially led colleagues to experience oppression. However, these difficult conversations did not always feel productive. At times, despite our collective best efforts, the group dynamic replicated oppression as dissenting voices dominated the discussion which inhibited further growth or reconciliation. The group also grappled with the fact that, though it was open to all, fewer than half of our departmental faculty and staff participated in the process. These contradictions were hard to understand, given that this is a department of social work, and that we are all trained and aligned with a profession that overtly is committed to social justice, integrity, and the importance of human relationships (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2017). After meeting for about 12 weeks, and in the face of escalating tensions and growing concerns about the potential implications of this discord on students and the broader community, the group explored external supports to help our department better facilitate this work.

Struggling with how to effectively instill anti-oppressive practices within the cooperative processes of our department, and foster a culture of shared accountability, our

anti-oppression group chose to proceed with a restorative justice approach. With the support of our department chair and dean, we sought the assistance of external consultants that are experts in restorative justice interventions, and familiar with both social work and academia. We chose a restorative justice approach because it ultimately aligned best with our group's aims and embraced our humanistic values as social workers.

According to the University of San Diego (USD) Center for Restorative Justice (2021), restorative justice is "a philosophical approach that embraces the reparation of harm, healing of trauma, reconciliation of interpersonal conflict, reduction of social inequality, and reintegration of people who have been marginalized and outcast" (para. 1). Stemming from indigenous culture and practice, restorative justice practices facilitate transformative change through community empowerment, engaged participation, active accountability, and social support. The methodology intentionally brings community stakeholders together to build trust, acknowledge harm and accept responsibility for wrongdoing, and repair relationships (USD Center for Restorative Justice, 2021).

Although peripheral in the professional literature, restorative justice has been used in social work practice for decades to address different types of injustices (Gumz & Grant, 2009; van Wormer, 2006); These most often have included victim offender mediation (Choi et al., 2010; Umbreit, 1994), and therapeutic family interventions (van Wormer, 2003). Restorative justice has also been suggested as a way for social work to actualize a restorative process towards social justice (Gumz & Grant, 2009), and reconcile its dual functions as agents of social change and social control (Burford & Adams, 2004). While restorative justice has been widely applied to school settings, we are not familiar with it being applied to a social work department within a university setting.

The pivot or shift from demeaning and subjugating power dynamics towards the Social Work ethical principle of social justice in which social workers pursue "social change, particularly with and on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups of people" requires attention to individual, interpersonal, organizational, and professional changes (NASW, 2017, p. 2). These multilevel and multidimensional changes can lead towards centering the humanness of all peoples as social workers come into their fullness as a human being and accessing one's full capacity in an embodied manner. Pivoting encompasses conflict, social stress, strategies and tactics to maintain White supremacy and oppression, as well as attempts to realign the power structures through stimulating conflict among people with identities and social locations that are marginalized in the department, academia, and society. Not all group members were or are comfortable walking through the coppice of thorny conflicts, however, some argue that pivoting requires a deep anchor that acknowledges and values the vibrancy of all living creatures as social beings, who desire and need each other to become our best selves. Eventually, a collective anti-oppressive mindset believes that individuals thrive when social groups and organizations thrive because no one group dominates at the expense of other groups. We have a long way to go, but we have just entered the coppice of thorny conflicts.

Creating a Process

Intrapersonal. Social workers develop awareness of the ways they have internalized privilege from their specific positionality – internalized dominance, internalized oppression, or a combination of dominance and oppression. Exploration of how one has been socialized into their privilege and biases, the beliefs and assumptions one has of self and others, and the costs to self and others are examined. Specific reflection on moments where harm has occurred can potentially spark intense emotions and reactions. This work optimally occurs in tandem with practices that build muscle for sitting with intense emotions, ground one within one's body, and utilize body practices that heal and nurture one's affirming relationship with self. Social workers cultivate awareness of how they engage in centering and distancing behaviors in relationship to their positionality, and practice how to assess and respond to psychological harm in various settings. Intrapersonal requires the following: Awareness of centering and distancing behaviors (Menakem, 2017); develop muscle to acknowledge harm done (Saad, 2020); and develop muscle to speak up in the moment (Haga, 2020).

Interpersonal. Social workers intentionally use a humanizing interdependent mindset when interacting with others to identify which groups are being centered, marginalized, or devalued. Intrapersonal practices support social workers' ability to speak in ways that disrupt complacency when others are indifferent or are fostering a "negative peace," and create spaces for restorative practices when harm occurs. Providing opportunities, in a safe space, with a trained outside professional/consultant with restorative practice experience, to respond to conflicts and harm. Affording opportunities for everyone to share their thoughts and/or experiences and to listen. Interpersonal requires the following: Accountability and disrupting complacency (Menakem, 2017; Saad, 2020); restorative practices for harm done and decentering whiteness (Haga, 2020).

Organization. A humanizing, interdependent mindset helps social workers plan activities that build relationships within and across multiple groups within an organization. Existing structures and ways of working are examined for the degree to which people impacted by decisions are meaningfully included in deliberations and decisions. An equity mindedness framework is also utilized with policies, programs, and procedures to identify and intentionally address inequities. To do this, some of the tasks would include providing a space to build up faculty and staff relationships, building a community of trust and respect, establishing a space to develop policy and procedures, addressing conflicts to change and prevent an oppressive culture, and developing a method to track progress and accountability. Ultimately, organizations require an equity mindedness lens for policies and procedures, relational activities, and accountability (University of Southern California Center for Urban Education, n.d.).

Professional and Institutional level change requires examination of underlying beliefs and assumptions to uncover biases and a culture of oppression. The non-profit industrial complex has promoted White saviorism without significantly redistributing resources or improving the well-being of low-income, distressed communities where many BIPOC live. Social work's investment in licensure and the delivery of clinical social work services keeps the profession dependent on an individually based fee for service reimbursement

funding stream by for-profit health insurance companies. While clinical social work services are necessary for individual and family healing, an over-reliance on this only perpetuates a culture of oppression since most social workers are dependent on that for their financial security. Student loan debt further perpetuates social workers' reluctance to challenge existing funding streams. Institutions must question beliefs and assumptions, such as White/male saviorism and non-profit industrial complex.

Implications

There is no escape from the oppression continuum. Fighting for social justice is a continuous process of raising awareness of oppression, reflecting on our responses, and working together towards a common goal. By calling in, eliminating bystanders, and powering with others, we can transform the oppression continuum into a virtuous cycle of change.

Figure 3. *Common Goal*
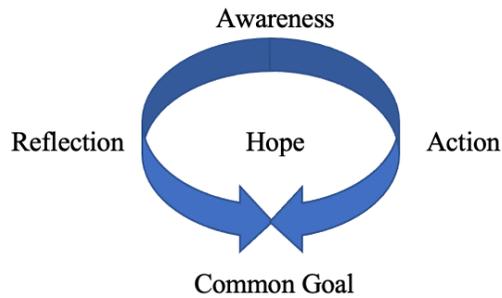
How do we assure that the pain of anti-oppressive work leads to constructive and hopeful action rather than destructive alienation and despair? Our department's experience exemplified the importance of group work for anti-oppressive social work education and practice. Social justice group work (Garvin & Ortega, 2016; Ortega, 2017) and restorative practice are effective means for building community, fighting against institutional and interpersonal oppression, and promoting individual and communal healing. However, the challenges of building trust, setting norms, and facilitating mutual aid call for specialized group work knowledge and skills. By restoring the prominence of group work in social work education (Simon & Kilbaine, 2014), we can build our profession's capacity to resist oppression and contribute to a socially just world.

Summary

This article describes the process that portions of our department of social work went through in responding to the exposure of oppressive practices in our program. In response to the murder of George Floyd, our all-White management committee sought to write a letter as did many other organizations in the U.S. The department realized we were unable to write a meaningful letter directed toward external stakeholders until we first grappled

with issues of racism and other inequities within our own department. Initially, some came to address anti-racism and racial justice while others redirected our efforts towards oppression and anti-oppressive practices that included dismantling White supremacy and racial injustice. Framing our purpose as anti-oppression challenges the social work profession to strive for social justice for each and every oppressed group, instead of repeating the legacies of a hierarchical oppression, which focuses on one group while allowing others to languish.

To that end, we had to challenge our own terminology, concepts, fears, and interpersonal differences to upend our roles in the department, our roles with each other, and our perspectives of the goals and purpose of the social work profession. This article has attempted to describe a group process in response to instances of racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression in our organization. The shift from a focus on anti-racism to anti-oppression allowed us to create processes to address oppression through anti-oppressive practices. This central insight reveals that if anti-racism is the goal, then anti-oppression is how we get there.

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