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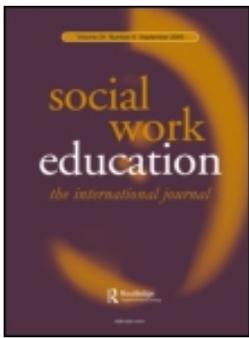
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# Anti-Oppressive Practice and Social Work Students' Portfolios in Scotland

Stewart Collins & Lynne Wilkie

*Anti-oppressive practice is seen by social work educators as a key approach to social work in the UK. However, controversies exist about its use in practice. Recent literature has criticised the complexities and problematics of anti-oppressive practice. An examination is made of the content of portfolios completed by social work students undertaking a final practice learning opportunity on a post-graduate programme in Scotland. The findings indicate that students gave considerable attention to power, empowerment and partnership but there was also an apparent general acceptance of agency policies, procedures and wider structural oppression. Also some aspects of social divisions and forms of oppression such as gender, age, disability and language received considerable attention while others such as 'race', class, sexuality and religion received less attention. Limitations of the research are noted. Suggestions for improvement in considering anti-oppressive material include a focus on both micro and macro issues, ranging from the structure for the portfolio and the content of supervision discussions through to agency policies and procedures and the national guidelines provided to social work programmes.*

*Keywords: Assessment; Anti-Discriminatory Practice; Higher Education; Practice Learning; Students*

## Introduction

During the 1980s social workers and social work educators in the UK began to focus more on discrimination, oppression, anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive approaches. Payne (2005) argued that there was an initial concern about ethnic conflict, racism and oppression but this widened to include discrimination against other social groups on the grounds of class, gender, disability, sexuality, age, religion and language. Differences such as these 'lead to social divisions and the focus

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on divisions is characteristic of anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice' with attention given to the power of dominant groups (Payne, 2005, p. 70). The intention of anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice was to transform social attitudes whilst also having direct consequences in the permeation of social work values and practice.

In the 1990s social work texts on all forms of oppression had emerged relating to anti-oppressive work (Dalrymple and Burke, 1995). The focus was to avoid placing different forms of discrimination into a hierarchy and prioritising one form of oppression over another; all were seen as equally important, for instance, the CCETSW requirements were changed during these years to reduce the emphasis on racism (CCETSW, 1995) with a movement towards a broader anti-oppressive approach. Macey and Moxon (1996) had criticised the pre-eminent emphasis on racism, although Williams (1999) and Heron (2004) argued against a devaluation of this topic. Macey and Moxon (1996, p. 30) argued that anti-racist approaches neglected the wider political and socio-economic context, high unemployment and poverty, while also undervaluing other inequalities, going on to claim that anti-racist approaches tended to be 'ill thought out, atheoretical and ahistorical'. At a micro level, Macey and Moxon (1996, p. 310) pessimistically perceived social work students to have 'been pressurised to adapt a "correct" discourse which [testified] more to the power of institutional imposition rather than meaningful learning or attitude change' and that it was naïve to expect social work students to challenge institutional racism.

However, anti-oppressive practice was seen as a 'safe house ... a repository of all oppressed groups' and 'making connections between oppressions [became] the radical project' (Williams, 1999, p. 220). The previous emphasis on class in radical social work, women in feminist social work and black people in anti-racist social work moved towards a need for placing different and diverse identities on an equal footing to consider commonalities and solidarity (Dominelli, 1998). Burke and Harrison (1998) highlighted the significant contribution of black feminists to this transition. In all, anti-oppressive practice became part of a wide ranging, emancipatory approach to social work, emphasising social justice and social change.

Dalrymple and Burke (1995) examined the power and authority of social workers in relation to oppression, with the latter 'being characterised by personal and social relationships based upon the assumption of inequalities of power [and] people [internalising] acceptance of their own lack of power' (Payne, 2005, p. 286). Therefore anti-oppressive practice required social workers to undertake minimal interventions, working in partnerships in empowering ways to enable users to become more aware of their own resources and take control of their lives (Payne, 2005). In recent years 'anti-oppressive practice has become a key approach to, and theory of, social work' (Wilson and Beresford, 2000, p. 554) and Clifford and Burke (2009) have produced a comprehensive account of anti-oppressive ethics and values.

Nevertheless, the relevance of anti-oppressive approaches to day-to-day practice and to service users' needs has been questioned by Sakomoto and Pitner (2005) and Millar (2008) in the context of agencies dominated by bureaucracy, high caseloads, strict accountability and lack of resources and time. Wilson and Beresford (2000)

have also suggested that anti-oppressive approaches may prescribe particular behaviours and attitudes that may actually undermine oppressed groups, neglecting their views of oppression, appropriating and taking away their control. Furthermore, the complexities and problematics of anti-oppressive work have been stressed by Williams (1999) and Millar (2008, p. 364) as 'multi faceted phenomena that should be investigated as such'. Millar (2008) has also questioned the availability of evidence to indicate that social work practice actually has become more anti-oppressive, while Sakomoto and Pitner (2005, p. 436) have suggested there is 'no consensus among scholars and practitioners on a definitive model of anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory practice'. Furthermore, Macey and Moxon's (1996, p. 298) hopes for a 'realistic appraisal of the possibilities [that] effective ... anti-oppressive policies and practices should be grounded in social scientific, particularly sociological theory and research' are seen not to have materialised by Wilson and Beresford (2000), Sakomoto and Pitner (2005) and Millar (2008). Also Heron (2004) has highlighted the long established difficulties for students in integrating university teaching and learning into practice experience, with a proliferation of competing theoretical paradigms in social work, including anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice.

### The Research

The research took place in Scotland where students undertaking the social work degree are required to meet the 'Standards in Social Work Education', outlined in *The Framework for Social Work Education in Scotland* (Scottish Executive, 2003). The Standards incorporate key elements of the Quality Assurance Agency's *Benchmark Statement* and replaced it in Scotland (Quality Assurance Agency, 2000). The Standards include six key roles and 22 foci.

In relation to anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice, students are required to demonstrate understanding of 'racism, poverty ... disability ... institutional and structural discrimination, empowerment and anti-discriminatory practices and ... links between processes contributing to social differences (for example ... class, gender, social and ethnic differences)' (Scottish Executive, 2003, pp. 26–27). Students also need to demonstrate understanding of 'legislation ... designed to tackle all forms of discrimination and knowledge of ... anti-discriminatory legislation and policy and ... social work roles ... in upholding the law in respect of discrimination' (Scottish Executive, 2003, pp. 35, 38 and 43). In addition students are required to acquire transferable skills 'to consider ... specific factors ... such as cultural, racial and ethnic identity, language differences ... communicate effectively across potential barriers [related to] culture, language, ability and age [and] analyse and take account of the impact of discrimination [while also analysing] ... oppression and ... challenge individual and structural discrimination' (Scottish Executive, 2003, pp. 27, 30, 37–38). Furthermore, students have to identify and respond 'to ... institutional discrimination and structural inequality' (Scottish Executive, 2003, p. 43).

Our concern was to examine the quantity and quality of students' comments about anti-oppressive matters in placement portfolios based upon their experiences in practice learning opportunities. It is appreciated that anti-oppressive practice will be considered by students during discussions in supervision sessions, in university lectures, seminars and tutorials and in other written assignments. Our intention, however, was to consider written portfolios. It has been argued that portfolios 'can enable students to demonstrate complex and multiple levels of learning' and they can be 'a key component of an overall assessment strategy' (Crisp *et al.*, 2004, pp. 12 and 15). In fact, portfolios are major assessment instruments used in the penultimate and final years of many social work programmes in the UK to test out and examine how students evidence competence and integrate theory with their work in practice settings (Slater, 1996; Taylor *et al.*, 1999; Coleman *et al.*, 2002). It is here the students encounter the demands of social work agencies and work with users in an organisational context where they have responsibilities for their professional practice, as well as academic work.

We examined written portfolios from one post-graduate programme directly linked with the final practice learning opportunity. In the *Practice Learning Module Handbook* (2006) and the guidelines for the final year placement portfolios written by programme staff for students and practice teachers, a statement on anti-oppressive practice required all students to recognise the structural inequalities in society which lead to discrimination and oppression, based on gender, age, religion, skin colour, age, disability, sexuality, class or culture. It was stated that it was essential for students to demonstrate an awareness and understanding of oppression and to begin to develop response strategies. Students had to consider the development of anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice and provide evidence of anti-oppressive work within the portfolio. They were also expected to challenge and confront oppression (*Practice Learning Module Handbook*, 2006). Challenging and confronting oppression has been described as 'the driving force of anti-oppressive practice' (Burke and Harrison, 1998, p. 232). Within the portfolio the students were required to summarise their previous learning experiences, describe the agency context and setting, their workloads and learning opportunities, contribute comments about goals for direct observations of their practice and respond to the practice teacher's comments about the observations. They also had to complete an extensive record of evidence for the learning foci required in Scotland. Also they were to write a final professional assessment and development review with particular emphasis on anti-oppressive learning.

The portfolio was formally assessed by the practice teacher and a tutor. Students had to obtain a pass before they could obtain the degree and a professional qualification. If the portfolio was assessed as not having met the requirements then a decision was made about whether to allow the student to resubmit. The intention of the portfolio was to enable students to demonstrate that by the end of the final period of practice they were able to practise as a competent social worker, having achieved all the requirements and standards set out in *The Framework for Social Work Education in Scotland* (Scottish Executive, 2003).

## The Study

The study comprised 30 placement portfolios completed by all students in their final year of a post-graduate programme at one university in Scotland. Twenty-one students were placed in statutory agencies, nine in voluntary agencies. Twenty-seven of the 30 students were female. Information was not available about students' ages or ethnic background, the types of degrees they had studied previously and previous experience of paid or voluntary social work. The researchers had access to the disks that contained the portfolios and evaluative comments. Permission to undertake the research and to have access to the disks was obtained from the social work programme concerned. Ethical approval for it was obtained from the institution to which one of the authors was attached and no ethical issues were raised. Students in the study had left the programme and it was ensured that material was anonymised so that no individual student would be identified.

The aims of the research were: to consider the quantity and quality of students' comments about power, empowerment, partnership, discrimination, oppression, anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice in the content of placement portfolios. Also to consider the quantity and quality of students' comments about social divisions and different forms of oppression, such as gender, 'race', religion, age, disability, language, sexuality, class and culture.

## Methodology

In examining the portfolios content analysis was used involving several single, individual words. Cohen and Mannion (1997, p. 56) in Heron (2004), highlighted that content analysis can:

Be used ... in the analysis of educational documents. In addition to elucidating the content of the document ... an analysis of this kind would tell us more about ... the social context and the kinds of factors stressed or ignored.

Krippendorff (1980, p. 1) has defined content analysis 'as a research technique for making replicable and valid inferences from the data to their context'. Hence, the focus is on content and context, the latter including 'the purpose of the document as well as institutional, social and cultural aspects, [with an emphasis on] reliability and validity [as] central concerns' (Robson, 2002, p. 350). The advantages of content analysis being based on documents are that it is unobtrusive, one can 'observe without being observed, the data is in permanent form ... [it] can be subject to analysis, allowing reliability checks and duplication and it can provide a form of longitudinal analysis' (Robson, 2002, p. 350). In this research the focus was on the manifest content, i.e. the words that were physically present and hence more likely to produce reliable results.

Various key words were used as a focus for the research, words such as power, empowerment, partnership, discrimination, oppression, anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice. The rationale for selecting these key words was based on social work literature and the content of the *Practice Learning Module Handbook* that focussed on anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice. Also words related to

social divisions and different forms of oppression, such as gender, 'race', religion, age, disability, sexuality, class, language and culture are seen as key terms emphasised within anti-oppressive approaches (Dalrymple and Burke, 1995; Burke and Harrison, 1998; Dominelli, 2002; Payne, 2005; *Practice Learning Module Handbook*, 2006).

In order to facilitate analysis we grouped together words such as, for example, empowerment and empowering, ethnic and ethnicity, discrimination and discriminatory, disability and disabled, culture and cultural. The content of all the portfolios was subject to a computer search using key words and this was followed up with a manual search. One of the authors undertook this task. Rather than just relying on 'counting' students' comments, we also believed it was important to also look at qualitative aspects in analysing the content of the portfolios, i.e. the nature of the comments made, the depth of exploration of some of the key words.

## Results

### *Power, Empowerment and Partnership*

Our findings indicated that all students gave considerable attention to issues surrounding power and empowerment. No student in the group failed to refer to these matters. Variations were evident in the frequency and depth of the comments about power and empowerment, but they permeated the content of portfolios. In all, the 30 students made just over 300 comments about power and empowerment, ranging from a minimum of four to a maximum of 21 by individual students. Here is an example:

My intervention had empowered the parents to decide on an appropriate course of action, as opposed to enforcing my values upon them, which would oppress them. I also reflected on the power imbalance and sought to reduce this by using honest and open communication ... as such I did not abuse my power. My commitment to anti-oppressive practice (Pollack, 2004), enabled me to empower the parents to make choices.

Over half of the group also linked empowerment with the use of the Exchange Model in assessment, where the service user is viewed as the expert on their situation (Smale *et al.*, 1992).

Almost all respondents in the group made statements about partnerships with users; only two students did not do so. The same two students also provided few comments about either discrimination/oppression, anti-discriminatory/anti-oppressive practice or social divisions; they were required to resubmit their portfolios. In all, 30 students made 148 comments about partnership with users. However, the comments about partnership were less frequent than those surrounding power or empowerment, ranging from a minimum of two to a maximum of 11 for individual students. In fact, the comments about partnership were often linked to empowerment. For example:

Partnership working allowed me to minimise the power imbalance between X and myself. Partnership working enables an empowering approach to practice when working with service users ... empowering practice was implemented through

working in partnership with X ... Therefore I promoted the Scottish Executive's (2006) policy on partnership working. Partnership working enabled me to demonstrate the use of empowering practice and the benefits that result from this.

Another student wrote:

I provided a full account of the ... [operation of the] decision making forum ... Providing a clear and honest account of the process engendered the concept of partnership working, which was furthered through my endeavours of representing the child and his family's views at the meeting. Further efforts to avoid disempowering [the] child involved sharing, discussing and negotiating the written report, prior to, and following the [meeting]. I aimed to promote the [child and family's] inclusion at every stage of the assessment process so that the ethos of empowerment and partnership working was not diluted.

### *Discrimination, Oppression, Anti-Discriminatory and Anti-Oppressive Practice*

As noted earlier, there is acknowledged to be some overlap between these terms. Six students did not use the word discrimination and four did not use the word oppression. However, only two students out of 30 used neither word. In all, the group made 71 comments about discrimination, ranging from 0 to 12 for individual students, with 78 comments about oppression, ranging from 0 to nine for individual students—a combined total of 149 comments about discrimination and oppression. As regards anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice, combining these categories together gave a total of 135 comments. Two students did not comment about either anti-discriminatory or anti-oppressive practice at all. The number of comments by individual students about anti-discriminatory practice ranged from 0 to seven; on anti-oppressive practice from 0 to nine. Responses were categorised into four groups related to discrimination, oppression, anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice (see Table 1).

Students had been asked by the programme to demonstrate their ability to challenge discrimination and oppression. Twelve (out of 30) discussed challenge. They tended to do so in general terms without giving specific examples; for instance, one student, while not directly offering a challenge, recognised that their group work should be:

congruent with ... underpinning professional values of empowerment and self determination. However, had this not been the case the responsibility of challenging the inappropriate or discriminatory practice is also set out in code 3.2 (Scottish Social Services Council, 2003). I would [then] have discussed any concerns with the co-leader, my link worker and in supervision.

**Table 1** Comments about Discrimination, Oppression, Anti-Discriminatory and Anti-Oppressive Practice

No comments	2
Minimal permeation (one comment)	0
Moderate permeation (between two and four comments)	13
Frequent, general permeation (more than five comments)	15

Another student commented:

It is part of my value system to actively challenge discrimination and oppression ... as this is not necessarily consistent with other professionals. Burke and Harrison, cited in Adams *et al.* (2002, p. 277) write that we have a moral, legal and ethical responsibility to challenge inequality and disadvantage.

However, the same person went on to say that following discussion in supervision it had not been thought necessary to challenge what might have been considered to be oppressive language, for instance, the use of the term ‘hen’ by some staff, which is a colloquial phrase of endearment, as this was acceptable within the context of the local community (also see Clifford and Burke, 2009). Similarly another student had challenged ‘patronising or oppressive use of language’—the use of the term ‘girls’ by some staff members in discussion amongst themselves about their work with adult women who experienced learning disabilities. The student then raised the issue at a weekly staff meeting to discuss it with team members. It was recognised this was a:

term everyone used and was accepted and ... was one that had a shared commonality and norm between the staff team and was not deemed as being used in an oppressive and derogatory manner.

Therefore, in this situation a challenge had been made, the matter had been raised, even if the behaviour was not felt to be oppressive.

Several students commented about challenging colleagues, other agencies and ‘service supports’ without giving more detail. One student talked about helping a user challenge poverty without being explicit, but one student did give an example in noting that she:

Challenged discriminatory language when a woman used the term “junkie”, by suggesting that she used the term “drug user” instead.

However, in all, from the evidence provided in these portfolios students did not find it easy to challenge discrimination and oppression, with few of the group providing specific examples of challenging either users or colleagues.

### *Social Divisions and Different Forms of Oppression*

The portfolios were examined to consider ways in which students considered oppression related to social divisions, different forms of oppression and multiple oppression (see Table 2). The students were placed in a range of settings that might have influenced their consideration of social divisions and different forms of oppression, for example, some worked primarily with young people, older people, women, people experiencing disabilities and minority ethnic groups. One student did not comment on any social division. Seven students—nearly a quarter of the total—commented on only one social division tending to focus on the primary user group with which they were working, i.e. where the agency concentrated on work with a particular group such as young or older people, women, people experiencing disability, minority ethnic groups. These students did not consider social divisions

**Table 2** Comments about Social Divisions/Forms of Oppression

No comments	1
Minimal permeation of comments confined to one social division/form of oppression (one comment)	7
Moderate, general permeation of comments about social divisions/forms of oppression (between two and four comments)	7
Frequent, general permeation of comments about social divisions/forms of oppression (more than five comments)	15

or different forms of oppression surrounding class, language, sexuality and religion and did not consider multiple oppression. On the other hand, 22 students—over two-thirds of the group—demonstrated either a moderate or frequent general permeation of a range of social divisions in their work.

Here is an example of one student's sensitivity to multiple divisions and her own position when analysing group work:

Currently all members are white and Scottish and there is a gender balance. I need to be aware that culture, race and language impact on the development of the group ... I realised that being white ... and female, as well as co-leader may well influence group dynamics.

Another example was seen in the following comment about working with young people:

Social workers need to be able to work in a society which is multi racial and multi cultural ... Moreover, it was important to ensure that the young person's needs were met and he was not discriminated against in terms of multiple oppression such as prejudice related to his culture (travelling people) and his "disability" (autism).

Other aspects of these findings included nearly two-thirds of the student group making reference to gender issues. Students' consideration of age, ethnicity, culture and disability was evident in half of the portfolios examined. Language issues were explored by a third of the students—even though these were not specified in the requirements for the portfolio. If comments about deprivation and poverty were combined together, two-thirds of the group considered these matters, but most of the comments about deprivation and poverty were in the description of the agency context and setting section of the portfolio. They were rarely linked to actual work with users, whose social background and circumstances were usually unclear and not presented in any detail.

Also, religion was only mentioned by four students, when most of the group undertook their practice learning opportunities in areas where sectarianism was likely to be evident—only one student actually mentioned sectarianism. Furthermore, class was neglected—mentioned by only four of the group. Sexuality, while mentioned briefly by one student, was not commented on by any other student. Several students mentioned structural oppression usually linking this to the PCS model which examines personal, cultural and structural aspects of oppression. This was helpful for

a fifth of the group in providing a framework for understanding oppression generally and the different forms of oppression (Thompson, 2006). Here is an example:

While on placement I was able to develop my knowledge of Thompson's (2006) PCS model. This ... allowed me to take a holistic approach as to how discrimination and oppression can effect a person. Taking the personal, cultural ... structural model into consideration allowed me to reflect on how each effects a person's life. This enhanced my knowledge of anti-discriminatory practice and how as practitioner I can implement PCS with my own agency.

The student who discussed 'patronising and oppressive use of language' in relation to the term 'girls' used by staff members to refer to adult women with learning disabilities:

[Used] ... understanding of Thompson's PCS model (1997), to analyse at what level the term has been used, it ... came from a structural and cultural level.

A further student also:

Used Thompson's PCS model to ensure that my language did not discriminate or oppress at any level.

Similarly, in relation to gender one student used the PCS model more precisely, because:

I did not want to discriminate or collude with existing oppression that the mother of the [family] ... was experiencing through the patriarchal ideology that pervades all levels of Thompson's (2006) PCS analysis.

The same person:

Valued the mother's perceptions and opinions which, while acting at the micro level of the personal by boosting her self esteem, may affect the macro level by addressing society's "sexist devaluation of women" (Thompson, 2006, p. 69).

As noted above, two-thirds of the group actively demonstrated sensitivity to gender issues, but few students considered agency documentation could have a gender bias—or any other bias. One student, working in a Criminal Justice setting, did highlight that a new Level of Service Inventory used in risk assessment:

had a number of changes from the former LSI-R; the first being that the assessment is designed to be less oppressive, as it can be used to assess men and women. One of the biggest criticisms of the LSI-R risk assessment was that it was based on theories of male criminology.

The same person observed that:

According to McIvor (2004) the Criminal Justice System is oppressive to women who offend and/or use drugs. Women who commit minor offences often receive high tariff penalties of maximum hours of community service, or incarceration, which should be restricted to more serious crimes ... [and] ... the "justice system fails to take account of women's needs" (Fawcett Society, 2006).

As regards age, also specifically referred to by two-thirds of the students, the following are examples of the comments made:

I practised anti-oppressively by striving to treat the young people with whom I work with as equals and worked in partnership with them in order to help them to overcome barriers to their empowerment (Dalrymple and Burke, 2007).

I was also aware that although it is important to encourage young people to develop their skills as individuals in order to overcome their issues, it is also necessary to understand the oppression they experience in a society which attaches negative labels to young people.

Discrimination related to disability was commented on by half of the group. The following is an example:

A has a mild learning disability and her background showed consequential oppression by her family in many areas of her life. Even now her sister believes she is incapable of making decisions ... Nowadays with oppression being discouraged, I find it unbelievable and upsetting that A is treated this way, especially by her sister. However, A's sister is ... years old, which may explain her actions as decades ago, oppression and discrimination were not as negatively perceived as nowadays (Thompson, 2006).

Although over half of the group commented about ethnicity, many of the comments were linked either to the proportion/percentage of people from minority ethnic communities in the area surrounding the agencies, the composition of the social work team, or to intended learning opportunities. Only five students made comments about specific minority ethnic groups, i.e. Sikhs, Slovakian and Polish people, Afro-Caribbean and Asian people. Few comments were made about ethnicity in relation to the actual work undertaken with users. Three students made comments about being 'white' and working with 'white' users. 'Race', racism and anti-racism were mentioned by a fifth of the group respectively. One student, although placed in a project linked specifically to black and minority ethnic groups, did not consider either 'race', racism or anti-racism. Three of the six students commenting about anti-racism did so only in the past or future learning needs section of the portfolio and not to any actual work with minority ethnic groups. Those students who had the opportunity to undertake anti-racist training events as part of their placement learning opportunities seemed to have been particularly influenced by such opportunities. Hence one person observed:

I have had the opportunity to work with people of many different heritages and religious groups that live in [the area], coming from a predominantly white community I found this [anti-racist] training very useful in how I can develop my approach to working with people from other heritages.

Another student who had undertaken anti-racist training on placement commented that:

The ... training has helped me to continue thinking about how racism can affect the lives of service users and, although during this placement I have not worked with anyone from an ethnic minority, I have accessed the Council's anti-racist policy documents and now have a clearer understanding of issues that effect ethnic minorities.

In fact, this was unusual in that all the other students in the group, apart from the student who commented about discriminatory policies in the criminal justice agency against women, did not seem to undertake work that involved developing their awareness of agency policies related to discrimination and various social divisions, or to make any specific comment on these policies (although they may have done so in other written assignments).

### Limitations of the Research

This study focussed on the written contributions of students to a very important document that summarised assessment of their learning from their final practice learning opportunity—the portfolio. However, the study had limitations in that it concentrated upon the portfolio alone, although students produced several other written assignments on the programme, one of which was a practice study linked to the placement. Therefore student comments about anti-oppressive practice should be seen within this context.

Another limitation of this approach is that it is difficult to assess causal relationships (Robson, 2002). For example, in this study, the analysis of the content of the placement portfolios could not effectively measure the progress towards the outcomes of teaching and learning about anti-oppressive practice in that it was not possible to know the base line, or starting point of knowledge from which students were coming from in relation to anti-oppressive practice, i.e. there was no pre tests or post tests (Carpenter, 2005). Overall this study has highlighted points made by Carpenter (2005) about difficulties in producing reliable studies on the effectiveness of educational processes and outcomes in social work education. For instance, it was not clear what the students actually did in their anti-oppressive practice and its impact upon service users (Carpenter, 2005; Millar, 2008). We do not know either the extent to which users, carers and their families benefited from the students anti-oppressive practice in terms of improving well being, self-esteem and quality of life, or user views of the students knowledge, attitudes, behaviours and skills (Carpenter, 2005). Trevithick *et al.* (2005) and Crisp *et al.* (2003) have also highlighted the lack of knowledge of the impact of social work education on the practice and professional behaviour of student social workers. In future studies it would be helpful to interview users and carers to obtain their perceptions. However, the research does demonstrate a cognitive skill—procedural knowledge—evidence of students' ability to internalise and demonstrate knowledge, (or lack of it) and write about anti-oppressive practice in particular situations in a portfolio based upon practice based work at the end of their programmes (Carpenter, 2005).

Furthermore, this study focussed on the final year portfolio and it would be interesting to make comparisons between portfolios completed in the penultimate and final years of programmes in order to monitor more carefully the progress of anti-oppressive content. An analysis of the significance of agency setting, statutory or voluntary, the contributions of agency based and long arm practice teachers and workplace supervisors to the portfolios also would be of interest, with a focus

on degree level rather than post-graduate work. In addition, this study concentrated on one cohort at one university in Scotland. It would be helpful to replicate the study with several other social work programmes in the UK in order to produce much more extensive data that could be subject to more rigorous statistical analysis. A larger scale study could also explore the impact of variables such as gender, age, previous experience of statutory/voluntary social work. Nevertheless, despite some important limitations, the present research did produce some thought-provoking findings that contribute another small step towards the empirical base of anti-oppressive practice (Clifford and Burke, 2009).

Dominelli (1998, p. 17) has commented that the integration of students' intellectual, practical and emotional understanding of anti-oppressive practice is a 'tall order'. This is revealed in the present findings. In the portfolios we are given a good indication of students' ability to write about anti-oppressive practice. However, from the present research it was difficult to gauge the extent to which students had intellectually understood the principles of anti-oppressive practice and methods of working, because they were not actually required to explain their meaning in the portfolios and sometimes there was no accompanying explanation or analysis—a point noted by Heron (2004). It was also difficult to evaluate students' belief in, or emotional commitment to, working in an anti-oppressive way—the extent to which either this was tokenistic, i.e. writing what was expected or required, or evidence of genuine engagement with anti-oppressive approaches. Carpenter (2005) has noted the difficulties in assessing modifications in social work students' attitudes and perceptions. In-depth interviews with students in a future larger scale study at the beginning and conclusion of their programmes would help to develop an understanding of students' emotional commitment to, and engagement with anti-oppressive practice, as Stalker and Campbell (1998) did in their interviews with PQ students linked to a person centred planning course, as well as examining the content of their portfolios. It was not within the remit of our research to explore student views of university teaching and learning opportunities linked to anti-oppressive practice, so we cannot comment on the effectiveness of these approaches.

### **Discussion, Reflections and Implications**

A recent study of experiences of students completing the new social work degree in England indicated that the teaching of values and anti-discriminatory/anti-oppressive practice received the highest level of satisfaction rating (Evaluation of the Social Work Degree Qualification in England Team, 2008). Also in a recent small scale study of seconded students returning to an agency from a social work programme in Scotland, students and their managers specifically referred to change and improvements in practice related to users' rights and anti-oppressive practice as a result of their experiences on the programme (Dunworth, 2007).

On the other hand, there are indications that practice teachers may spend limited time in supervision discussing power, oppression, structure and other matters at the heart of anti-oppressive practice (Maidment and Cooper, 2002). In addition, a minority of respondents to the recent study of the new degree in England believed the

preceding social work qualification—the Dip SW—more strongly addressed requirements for anti-oppressive practice. They expressed higher levels of satisfaction with teaching in that area on the Dip SW compared to the new degree (Evaluation of the Social Work Degree Qualification in England Team, 2008).

Positive findings to emerge from this study included the careful manner in which students considered issues surrounding power and empowerment, which permeated students' comments in the portfolios. Partnership with users also received positive attention and frequent comment. These findings seem to indicate that students had a strong commitment to the egalitarian, democratic, reciprocal relationships with users that are one of the characteristics of anti-oppressive practice (Dominelli, 2002). Some aspects of social divisions and different forms of oppression such as gender, age, disability, culture and language received considerable attention but other aspects were less evident, for example, the neglect of class, religion and sexuality. The evidence of students' lack of criticism, apparent general acceptance of agency policies and procedures and wider structural oppression in the portfolios was perhaps a cause for concern, as again these are central concerns of anti-oppressive practice (Dominelli, 2002). Wilson *et al.*'s study of post-graduate students indicated that when students were asked to list factors that had guided their placement work, anti-oppressive practice was rated significantly lower than agency policy and procedures, with some students 'suggesting an element of tokenism towards anti-oppressive practice and that, in some placements, it had not been an integral part of practice culture' (Wilson *et al.*, 2008, p. 44). Carpenter (2005) and Millar (2008) have also pointed out that, alongside other variables, the agency context may well have a significant impact on students' methods of working; that barriers can exist such as a lack of time, resources and limited support from managers and colleagues.

A lack of understanding—or lack of opportunity—meant that students offered only limited self-criticism of their own approaches to anti-discriminatory practice. Only five students did so. However, Heron (2006) has noted difficulties for students in offering critical analysis generally in their work on social work programmes while in this study the potential of portfolios to stimulate critical thinking appears to have not been fulfilled in the ways that Coleman *et al.* (2002) might have expected. Slater (1996, p. 199) raised questions about the role of portfolios as vehicles to assess practice learning—it has been suggested that 'they seem to throw in everything but the kitchen sink'. The students in this study were asked to 'pack in' a lot of material which made it generally difficult to describe and analyse anti-oppressive knowledge in depth. For example, in our research, students might have been asked to give and have given more attention to oppression and anti-oppressive practice in summaries of previous learning experiences and learning needs. Also more detailed attention could have been given to the environmental and structural context within which each particular user was located and how they perceived and experienced oppression. The most frequent concern of the students in Wilson *et al.*'s (2008) survey of practice learning focussed on the need to change and improve the system of providing evidence through portfolios. There seem to be implications here for involving students much more in the design of the structure and content of portfolios (Carpenter, 2005). In this study it was not clear

how students perceived their experiences in compiling the portfolios. This was not one of the aims of our work.

Arguments and disputes have been evident about the alleged lack of sufficient focus in anti-oppressive practice on either structural, institutional or individual change (Payne, 2005; McLaughlin, 2005; Sakomoto and Pitner, 2005; Strier, 2007). The evidence from these portfolios is that the emphasis here was very much on the latter—on individual and family change—and much less on changes related to legal, organisational, structural and political levels as suggested by Dominelli (2002). Therefore the limited evidence from this study perhaps runs counter to the claims of Payne (2005) and Sakomoto and Pitner (2005) that there is insufficient focus in anti-oppressive practice on micro and individual levels—rather the reverse—this examination of portfolios indicates that structural and political change appeared to receive less attention.

Overall, the findings also reflect the concerns of Williams (1999) about the ‘downgrading’ of racism and anti-racism in social work education. They are also similar to the research findings of Collins *et al.* (2000) and Heron (2004) who have highlighted social work students’ lack of attention to racism and anti-racism in placement reports/portfolios and other written assignments. Students rarely referred to wider structural or institutionalised oppression—only a fifth of the group did so—usually associating it with the PCS model. This tends to reflect the findings of Hawkins *et al.* (2001) and Williams and Soydan (2005), who argue that social workers become preoccupied with work with individuals and families to the neglect of structural oppression. Also the present findings were similar to those of Gilligan (2007) who suggests that social work students tend towards individualistic, microscopic, liberal reformist approaches rather than looking for change in society’s structures.

## Conclusion

The remedies for improving procedures and policies relating to anti-oppressive practice in portfolios are complex and multi-layered. In any experience in a practice learning opportunity many variables will act together to impact upon the performance of a social work student. These will include the structure of the portfolio, the characteristics of the student themselves, their interaction with colleagues, the content of their programmes, their workloads, practice teachers, workplace supervisors, the team, agency, environment and the structural context for learning.

The evidence from this study indicates that students referred frequently to power and empowerment, generally considered partnership, some aspects of social divisions, discrimination, oppression and anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice. However, they appeared to need more guidance, more help in looking at and making suggestions for challenging oppression within agency policies, general structural oppression and the means to combat this. The ways forward are complex and appear to range from macro perspectives, such as in the overall guidance and parameters provided by *The Standards in Social Work Education* (in Scotland), to social work programmes that could require more attention to be given to oppressive and anti-oppressive practice and to the micro requirements of the portfolio itself.

Students, practice teachers and tutors have a responsibility to ensure these matters receive more comprehensive attention in placement portfolios. The variations in the amount of attention given to anti-oppressive practice in the content of portfolios could also be, in part, a reflection of the amount and type of attention given to these topics in programme teaching and learning experiences and in supervision. Social work organisations themselves provide the setting for practice learning opportunities. The way in which managers and workers operationalise anti-oppressive approaches will also have a significant impact in facilitating or inhibiting student learning about these topics. As with anti-oppressive practice itself, movement towards further positive change in the way social work students evidence their knowledge, understanding and critical analysis of anti-oppressive practice in placement portfolios involves combining both individual and micro process matters with more appropriate attention to organisational and structural issues.

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