Introduction

From the 1980’s onwards the linked concepts of diversity and oppression have become pivotal to contemporary understandings of social work theory and practice. They occupy a central aspect of the discourse and political challenges mounted by a wide range of marginalised groups against what were deemed to be oppressive and discriminatory public services. This resulted in challenges to both the power that professionals exercise and the knowledge base from which they make judgements about diverse groups of service users. However, there still remains much confusion about both concepts, both at the theoretical and practice level. Both bear upon society in complex and dynamic ways and it is therefore important for students to develop critical insights into these concepts and the processes which emanate from them. This guide is designed to offer a clear basis for addressing these within the qualifying social work curriculum.

Terminology

‘Diversity’, can be understood in two distinct ways. First, it relates to the subjective feelings and thoughts that people develop about their personal identity associated with real or imagined differences configured around such things as gender, ethnicity, race, religion, health status, class, sexuality and age. Second, in an objective sense, diversity can be understood as a social relation, a product of social and political discourses and institutional practices. Similarly, the concept of ‘oppression’ can be understood in two distinct ways. Historically, it has resided within the field of political theory and has been deployed to characterise particular tyrannical regimes. In this context the term is related to systematic acts of violent brutality, subjugation, dominance and conquest perpetrated by powerful rulers (Cudd, 2006). In contrast to the classic construction, contemporary applications of the term oppression are influenced by new social movements in their quest for social justice. In this context, as Young (1990) in her ‘five faces of oppression’ model suggests, it be understood along a continuum, ranging from ‘exploitation’, ‘marginalisation’, ‘powerlessness’, ‘cultural dominance’ and ‘violence’.

Key curriculum issues

Given that diversity and oppression represent the ‘real’ and complex struggles of people for dignity and justice, the curriculum design challenge is to avoid overly abstracting the concepts, on the one hand, and over simplification on the other. Hence frameworks such as Neil Thompson’s widely used Personal, Cultural and Structural (PCS) model (Thompson, 2011), although very useful, need to be situated in a critical understanding of the real lived experiences and historical struggles of oppressed groups (See Heron, 2004). Such an approach will offer both an appreciation of the experiences of different oppressed groups and an understanding of the intersections of diversity and oppression.

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Whilst individual casework will remain the primary way in which social workers think about questions of diversity and oppression, it is crucial to avoid a myopic approach that fails to see the way in which institutional practices and economic realities can have a significant bearing on service users and carers. In planning when and where these issues should appear in the curriculum, designers will need to take into account three key aims:

- to enable students to locate and process their own perceptions and experiences of encountering and negotiating diversity
- to enable students to explore experiences of power, powerlessness and oppression and to make links between these and the broader conditions in which they are produced.

To offer students an opportunity to move from simple to complex understandings of diversity and oppression. All these are most likely to be achieved by offering a combination of discrete learning opportunities/modules for students to focus on diversity and oppression and integrated learning opportunities, where issues of diversity and oppression are in a sense woven into the fabric of the whole curriculum, both class and practice based. These considerations should be applied to each stage/level of the course with a view to gradually developing complexity of understanding. Moreover, every opportunity to ground the issues in practice through the use of case studies and problem based learning should be developed.

Lastly, although much of social work education makes emotional demands on students, teaching that requires students to focus on identity/difference and to reflect on the experience of oppressions is likely to prove particularly challenging. Therefore, considerable care should be taken when designing teaching to protect students who may have painful experiences of oppression. It is also important to ensure that stories of resilience and resistance are also heard – thus capturing a holistic picture of people’s experiences.

**Key content areas**

1. **Understanding key concepts**
   ‘Diversity’ and ‘oppression’ are generic terms that incorporate a wide range of other related concepts, which needs to be explained and understood in their own context, such as power, values, culture, difference, discrimination, inequality, anti-oppressive practice, anti-discriminatory practice, empowerment, anti-racism and black perspectives, disabled/able bodied, social and medical model, and service user.

2. **Theoretical Approaches**
   Identify, explain and critically appraise the use and limitations of a range of theories as follows:
   - **Psychological:** prejudice and hate, in-group/out group behaviour, ethnocentrism, scapegoating, social identity formation, labelling, western/non-western models, internalisation of oppression and self identification.
   - **Sociological:** Conflict and consensus theories of power, oppression and dominance. Exploration of diversity expressed as culture, ethnicity, race, religion, gender, class, sexuality or immigration status (asylum seeker and refugee). Contemporary theories associated with critiques of modern capitalist society and oppression e.g. Feminism (patriarchy and misogyny), Marxism (Alienation, exploitation, ideology and...
hegemony). Moral panics, multiculturalism, anti-racism, and postmodernism. Critical understanding of the impact of social change on family structures.

- **Political theories:** To place discussions of difference and oppression within a broader historical and societal context it is important to introduce students to philosophical and theoretical ideas associated with the European Enlightenment and the emergence of ideas such as freedom, democracy, human rights, secularism, universalism, cultural relativism, modernity, social justice, equality, critical theory, colonialism/post-colonialism, identity politics and new social movements, ecological theories, migration and asylum and globalisation.

3. **Levels of Oppression:**

- **Personal** - Prejudicial behaviours and attitudes, objectification, impact of real and symbolic violence, resilience, surviving and healing.

- **Cultural** – language and the discourse of difference, cultural pathology, cultural representation of social and physical differences (popular and historical), conceptions of ‘normal’ and ‘abnormal’, construction of binary oppositions.

- **Structural** – Sociological imagination, linking structure to individual agency, institutional and economic oppression, social determinants of health and care, impact of social exclusion and poverty on different groups. The multi-dimensionality of oppression including how oppression interconnect and interact.

4. **The key principles of practice:**

- Comparative examination of models of diversity awareness, cultural competence, anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory practice.

- Understanding the impact of diversity and oppression for each assessment, intervention and plan.

- Exploration of appropriate intervention strategies at each of the levels identified above, ranging from direct action through to campaigning and activism.

- Developing skills and strategies for building trust and working with and across difference (e.g. language considerations, cultural sensitivity/competence) including understanding the different perceptions that ethnic minorities may have of social work.

- Having a clear understanding of the legal and policy requirements under the Equality Act 2010.

- Undertaking identity and advocacy work with service users who may have experienced high levels of stigma and trauma associated with ‘being different’ in some way.

- Developing critical reflective practice and an awareness of self-identity and how this may impact judgements about others (fellow professionals and service users)
Links to other curriculum areas including other guides (⊗)

In order to avoid a simplistic and reductive approach to diversity and oppression, it is important that all areas of the curriculum address these issues. Indeed, it would be a mistake to single out any one area given the wide range of consideration identified in the above curriculum. However some obvious links would be:

- Migrants, refugees and asylum seekers (⊗): reasons why people move home and the impact, short term and long term on them
- Mental Health (⊗): Stigma and stereotyping, power and discourses of oppression
- Communication Skills (⊗): Cross cultural communication
- Children and families and Safeguarding (⊗): Understanding cultural differences and the impact of social exclusion on child care practices, whilst at the same time realising that culture is/should never be an acceptable excuse for abuse
- Assessment and risk (⊗): the impact of difference on perceptions of risk
- Law (⊗): Anti-discrimination and human rights legislation

Key resources

8. Centre for Disability Studies - [http://www.leeds.ac.uk/disability-studies/links.htm](http://www.leeds.ac.uk/disability-studies/links.htm)
9. Institute of Race Relations - [http://www.irr.org.uk](http://www.irr.org.uk)