ANTI-OPPRESSIVE PRACTICE:
A GUIDE FOR MOVING FROM THEORY TO ACTION
PART 1

CENTRE FOR INNOVATION IN
CAMPUS MENTAL HEALTH

ANTI-OPPRESSIVE PRACTICE:
A GUIDE FOR MOVING FROM THEORY TO ACTION
PART 1

Contents

What is Anti-Oppressive Practice?

Anti-Oppressive Practice is both a theory and an approach that has a very broad scope. When defined as an approach to social issues, it focuses on how larger systems create and protect the unearned privilege and power that some groups have while at the same time creating, maintaining, and upholding difficult and unequitable conditions for other groups of people (Baines, 2017). These inequitable conditions created by larger systems lead to power imbalances between them. Anti-Oppressive Practice centres the experiences of equity-deserving groups in order to build structures and systems that work for everyone.

Anti-Oppressive Practice vs Anti-discriminatory Practice
Anti-discriminatory Practice is an approach which calls for people to be treated with respect and holds that people should not be treated badly or unfairly because of their race, gender, sexual orientation, impairment, class, religious belief or age. It also champions the implementation of policies that fight against discrimination (Okitikpi & Aymer, 2012).

Anti-Oppressive Practice recognizes the oppression that exists in our society/space and aims to mitigate the effects of oppression and eventually equalize the power imbalances that exist between people. It also recognizes that all forms of oppression are interconnected in some way, shape or form (Aquil et al., 2021).

Anti-Oppressive Practice primarily traces its roots back to the realm of social work where it has been applied at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels in order to do things like mitigate power imbalances between social workers and their clients as well as the power imbalance between their clients and society at large. As it is a broad concept, Anti-Oppressive Practice draws on several different disciplines in order to deepen our understanding of the world and enable us to think more critically. These disciplines include areas like anti-racism, decolonization theory, feminism, queer theory and disability justice among others. Anti-Oppressive Practice strives to use these disciplines to give people the tools needed to better understand how power and privilege work within society at all different levels (Aqil et al., 2021). It also supports the development and facilitation of programs and practices that can shift our societal dynamics in ways that decrease and eliminate oppression (Aqil et al., 2021). Like many theories, Anti-Oppressive Practice is one that is continually evolving. In as such, it is a theory that requires continuous learning and engagement.

Equity deserving groups are communities that identify barriers to equal access, opportunities, and resources due to disadvantage and discrimination, and actively seek social justice and reparation. This marginalization could be created by attitudinal, historic, social, and environmental barriers based on characteristics that are not limited to sex, age, ethnicity, disability, economic status, gender, gender expression, nationality, race, sexual orientation, and creed.

Oppression works at three interacting levels within our society – structural, cultural and personal (Scammell, 2016).

Type of Oppression	What it Includes	Examples
Structural	The entities and organizations that are responsible for distributing resources and delegating power in society	Legislative bodies, government policy, cultural institutions (education systems, health care systems, justice systems, houses of worship, libraries)
Cultural	How language and categorization can contribute to oppression by influencing cultural values and creating structures that label groups of people as either dominant or other	White vs. Racial minority Heteronormative vs. Non-heteronormative Neurotypical vs. Neurodivergent
Personal	Individual interactions, everyday work practices and the values we hold and may share with others	Discrimination against a person based on prejudicial thoughts A microaggression enacted against a Black person

Sources: Baines, 2017; Scammel, 2016.

Anti-Oppressive Practice also aims to help those who engage in it to improve their skills in critical consciousness. Critical consciousness is the combination of critical action and reflection (Aqil et al., 2021). It requires that we step back and think about our practices or policies and ask probing questions about how they impact those around us and those we work with and then act on the conclusions of these thoughts in tangible ways (Department of Education and Training – Victoria, 2007). Through this sort of practice, we see changes occur not just in systems, but within individuals as well.

Microaggressions are everyday, subtle, intentional — and oftentimes unintentional — interactions or behaviors that communicate some sort of bias toward historically marginalized groups (Nadal in Limbong, 2020). Although these actions are labeled as being micro, they can have an extensive impact on a person's life and can happen towards any equity deserving group.

Anti-Oppressive Practice is a complex and broad approach that aims to bring many important lenses into one space. By considering the many levels at which oppression acts and how we can question it, we can begin to better understand how our campus structures operate.

How Does Anti-Oppressive Practice Intersect with Student Mental Health?

The current model of mental health that is implemented on many campuses is a medical model. It takes a more individualistic approach to mental health and seeks to support students through biomedical and western, eurocentric treatments. This model does not include within its scope the cultural, structural, and societal factors that influence the mental health of students (Corneau and Stergiopoulos, 2012). Anti-Oppressive Practice, through its aims of correcting structural and personal power imbalances, takes a wider view of the potential causes of mental health issues by focusing more on how the systems and structures that we work within influence mental health and contribute to mental health outcomes (Corneau and Stergiopoulos, 2012).

Students from equity-deserving groups face an increased burden on their mental health issues because of the stressors they are exposed to based on their intersecting identities. Many of these students are impacted by stigma and discrimination that is rooted in racism, sexism, anti-2SLGBTQ+ sentiment, disability status, etc. This extra layer of stressors that students experience because of how they are treated based on their identities can impact their well-being. It can lead to things like deterioration of health status and increased risk of some mental health issues (Corneau and Stergiopoulos, 2012; CMHA Ontario, 2022). Students in equity-deserving groups are constantly having to defend themselves and adapt in the face of various forms of oppression. This continuous exposure to oppression can lead to exhaustion and psychological distress, as well as wider impacts on their well-being. It can also lead students to internalizing the negative thoughts others have about them, leading them to doubt themselves and question their inherent worth (Corneau and Stergiopoulos, 2012).

It is very important to note that the absence of students from equity-deserving groups amongst those accessing services, whether on campus or in the community, doesn't automatically indicate a preference for taking on mental health issues by themselves or only within their communities. It is more often than not due to the fact that the services and programming that currently exist do not adequately meet their needs (Hulko et al. in Bains, 2017). Oppression can create barriers to accessing mental health supports and services. This can happen in several different ways. Students may lack information about services because they haven't been actively engaged when these services were promoted. Dismissive attitudes from support providers in positions of power may sway students away from help-seeking. A lack of cultural humility or the presence of cultural mistrust may lead students to avoid services available on-campus. When it comes to community support, there may be financial constraints that impact students' abilities to utilize these services.

The use of Anti-Oppressive Practices allows us to approach mental health in a way that considers the student in their entirety. When we are able to see students as their whole selves, we can better understand the impact that campus structures have on their lives.

Why Should We Be Using Anti-Oppressive Practices to Support Student Mental Health on Campus?

There are several reasons why Anti-Oppressive Practices are a key component of helping us to advance our systems in order to better support student mental health. The first is that, by its nature, it is a whole-campus approach. Anti-Oppressive Practice requires us to look at individual level practices as well as institution-wide practices. Practices and policies on all levels are necessary to create cultural shifts on campus. There is a role for every person on campus to play in the implementation and use of these practices. No one must take this on by themselves or go it alone.

Anti-Oppressive Practices can serve two major roles at post-secondary institutions – to make our campuses more accessible, welcoming spaces for students and to help staff become more aware of how their own roles are situated within our campus structures.

Anti-Oppressive Practices also make space for the different perspectives and lived experiences that students have. It allows these perspectives and experiences to exist laterally. No one is better or worse or more right or wrong than the other (Amoakohene, Harris-Mungo & Pankewich, 2021). When we bring Anti-Oppressive Practices into our work, we can better understand the experiences of others, as opposed to evaluating them through the lens of our personal experience. This increased understanding better positions us to be able to see how the systems within our post-secondary institutions can impact students of varying identities differently.

Anti-Oppressive Practices also encourage curiosity and learning on our campuses. When we begin to critically question the practices and procedures we have always followed, it allows us to uncover information about the unique experiences of students from varying intersections on campus. This means that we can then create common ground and understanding of our unique experiences and begin to learn together, as opposed to calling people out when they make mistakes or get things wrong, when trying to understand students' experiences. (Amoakohene, Harris-Mungo & Pankewich, 2021).

Our post-secondary institutions are also well positioned to take on the work of Anti-Oppressive Practice. Since the 1990's, universities and colleges have had offices on campus that focus on work and initiatives related to equity, diversity, and inclusion. This work has taken place in many departments including human rights offices, equity offices, diversity offices and human resources offices (Henry et al., 2017). These offices hold institutional knowledge about how equity issues have been addressed in the past and how we can work towards creating more equitable campus policies and practices. With further resources and support, they can be spaces that support individual and community evolution in Anti-Oppressive Practice as well as structural and cultural shifts on campus.

Anti-Oppressive Practices can also have great benefits for the individuals who engage in them. When we engage in Anti-Oppressive Practice, it helps us to become more self-aware. As we come to better understand the intersection of our own identities, we realize that others also have many components to their own identities and that depending on the context or scenario that one is in, certain identities may be more salient than others in that moment (Amoakohene, Harris-Mungo & Pankewich, 2021). We become more reflexive as we question practices and policies and identify how they may be negatively impacting students. Once we realize this, we gain a better understanding of the students we are working with. This can lead to better interactions with students and facilitate stronger relationships and partnerships with them based on empathy and mutual respect.

Anti-Oppressive Practices also ensure that students feel recognized in our campuses spaces and that they both belong and are welcomed on our campus. When students truly feel that they are part of the campus community, as opposed to being unwelcome outsiders, this feeling of belonging contributes positively to their mental health and well-being and can encourage them to become more engaged with campus life (Amoakohene, Harris-Mungo & Pankewich, 2021).

When we engage in Anti-Oppressive Practices, campuses become communities where students do not just simply feel welcomed and part of the community, but where they are actively being welcomed into the community. Through the actions we consciously take to dismantle the barriers they faced by restructuring our systems and intentionally planning our programs, courses, etc. This kind of work takes time and is an ongoing process.

Some Helpful Terms in Anti-Oppressive Practice (not an exhaustive list)

2SLGBTQIA+	Two Spirit, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer (or Questioning), Intersex, Asexual. The placement of Two Spirit (2S) first is to recognize that Indigenous people are the first peoples of this land and their understanding of gender and sexuality precedes colonization. The '+' is for all the new and growing ways we become aware of sexual orientations and gender diversity.
Ally	A person with particular privileges who is guided by oppressed communities and learns how best to fight oppressions, like ableism, ageism, audism, classism, homophobia, transphobia, racism, sexism, etc.
Allyship	An active, consistent [and arduous] practice of unlearning and re-evaluating, in which a person in a position of privilege and power seeks to operate in solidarity with a marginalized group.
Barrier	A belief, policy, practice, object, or environment that prevents or limits people's access to opportunities, benefits, or advantages available to other members of society.
Bias	An opinion formed without reasonable justification that limits a person's ability to make fair judgements.
Cultural Competence	A person's ability to interact effectively with people of different cultures. Cultural competence comprises four components: (a) Awareness of one's own cultural worldview; (b) Attitudes towards cultural differences; (c) Knowledge of different cultural practices and worldviews; and (d) Cross-cultural skills. Developing cultural competence results in an ability to better understand, communicate with, and effectively interact with people across cultures.
Decolonizing	The removal or undoing of colonial elements. In post-secondary, and more broadly, there is not a consensus about what the end goal of decolonization should be. The important point to remember is that decolonization is a process and not an end point (continuous work to be done).
Discrimination	Consciously or unconsciously treating someone else unfairly or holding them to different standards based on conscious or unconscious prejudiced beliefs, and not because of individual merit.

Diversity	Differences in the lived experiences and perspectives of people that may include race, ethnicity, colour, ancestry, place of origin, political belief, religion, marital status, family status, physical disability, mental disability, sex, gender identity or expression, sexual orientation, age, class, and/or socio-economic situations. It is a concept meant to convey the existence of people's unique combinations of differences and how those contribute to their experiences, both positively and negatively.
Equity-deserving	Communities that identify barriers to equal access, opportunities, and resources due to disadvantage and discrimination, and actively seek social justice and reparation. This marginalization could be created by attitudinal, historic, social, and environmental barriers based on characteristics that are not limited to sex, age, ethnicity, disability, economic status, gender, gender expression, nationality, race, sexual orientation, and creed.
Equity-seeking	Equity-seeking groups are communities that experience significant collective barriers in participating in society. This could include attitudinal, historic, social, and environmental barriers based on age, ethnicity, disability, economic status, gender, nationality, race, sexual orientation, and transgender status, etc. Equity-seeking groups are those that identify barriers to equal access, opportunities, and resources due to disadvantage and discrimination and actively seek social justice and reparations. 1. This is a great example of changing language. Currently moving from equity-seeking to equity-deserving (the idea is that fundamentally, people should get [i.e., they deserve] equitable treatment, they should not have to seek it out/ask for it).
Inclusion	Inclusion is an active, intentional, and continuous process to address inequities in power and privilege and build a respectful and diverse community that ensures welcoming spaces and opportunities to flourish for all.
Intersectionality	The interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage. This term was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989.
Marginalization	Excluding whole groups of people from meaningful participation and confining them to the outer edges of society.
Mental Health	A state of well-being in which an individual realizes his or her own abilities, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and is able to make a contribution to his or her community. Mental health is fundamental to our collective and individual ability as humans to think, emote, interact with each other, earn a living and enjoy life.

Power	One's ability to influence or control people, events, processes, or resources. We each have different levels of power in different situations depending on our personal combination of privileges and oppressions.
Prejudice	A negative opinion formed about a person without looking at all the facts.
Privilege	Advantages given to some people, but not others, based on their identity or position in society. People are not always aware of the privileges they have until they learn that someone else does not have that same privilege.
Social Determinants of Health	The social determinants of health (SDH) are the non-medical factors that influence health outcomes. They are the conditions in which people are born, grow, work, live, and age, and the wider set of forces and systems shaping the conditions of daily life.
Social exclusion	It refers to the ways in which certain groups of people in society are pushed to the margins and not included (is a social determinant of health).
Social location	The combination of factors including gender, race, social class, age, ability, religion, sexual orientation, and geographic location. This makes social location particular to each individual; that is, social location is not always exactly the same for any two individuals.
Stereotyping	Assumptions about a person based on untrue and harmful tropes. These can sometimes seem positive or complimentary but are harmful because they are generalizations about a person or entire group of people not based on actual experience.

References

Allyship. (2017, November 28). Retrieved from https://theantioppressionnetwork.com/allyship/

Amoakohene, C., Harris-Mungo, T., Pankewich, C. (2021, Augst 12-13). *Anti-Oppressive Practice: An Interactive Conversation* [Virtual]. Collaborations for Change Virtual Conference, Calgary. https://bp-net.ca/news-updates/collaborations-for-change-virtual-conference/

Aqil, A. R., Malik, M., Jacques, K. A., Lee, K., Parker, L. J., Kennedy, C. E., Mooney, G., & German, D. (2021). Engaging in anti-oppressive public health teaching: Challenges and recommendations. *Pedagogy in Health Promotion, 7*(4), 344–353. https://doi.org/10.1177/23733799211045407

Baines, D. (2017). *Doing Anti-Oppressive Practice: Social Justice Social Work*. Fernwood Publishing.

Centre for Teaching and Learning. (n.d.). Retrieved from https://www.queensu.ca/ctl/teaching-support/decolonizing-and-indigenizing/what-decolonizationindigenization

CMHA Ontario. (2022). *Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans & Queer identified People and Mental Health*. Retrieved from https://ontario.cmha.ca/documents/lesbian-gay-bisexual-trans-queer-identified-people-and-mental-health/

Corneau, S., & Stergiopoulos, V. (2012). More than being against it: Anti-racism and anti-oppression in Mental Health Services. *Transcultural Psychiatry, 49*(2), 261–282. https://doi.org/10.1177/1363461512441594

Cjr. (n.d.). The origin of the term 'intersectionality'. Retrieved from https://www.cjr.org/language_corner/intersectionality.php

Department of Education and Training - Victoria. (2007). A *"critical" Reflection framework*. Retrieved from https://www.education.vic.gov.au/Documents/childhood/professionals/support/reffram.pdf

Equity & Inclusion Glossary of Terms. (2021, February 03). Retrieved from https://equity.ubc.ca/resources/equity-inclusion-glossary-of-terms/

Henry, F., Dua, E., James, C. E., Kobayashi, A., Li, P., Ramos, H., & Smith, M. S. (2017). *The Equity Myth: Racialization and Indigeneity at Canadian Universities*. : UNIV OF BRIT COLUMBIA PRESS.

Inclusion and Diversity Committee Report: What's Your Social Location?: National Council on Family Relations. (n.d.). Retrieved from https://www.ncfr.org/ncfr-report/spring-2019/inclusion-and-diversity-social-location

Limbong, A. (2020, June 9). Microaggressions are a big deal: How to talk them out and when to walk away. NPR. Retrieved February 16, 2022, from https://www.npr.org/2020/06/08/872371063/microaggressions-are-a-big-deal-how-to-talk-them-out-and-when-to-walk-away

National Council for Jewish Women. (n.d.). Learning Resource Anti-Oppression Terms List. Retrieved from https://www.ncjw.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Anti-Oppression-Terms-List-FINAL.pdf

Okitikpi, T., & Aymer, C. (2012). Key concepts in anti-discriminatory social work. SAGE.

Scammell, J. (2016). 'prioritise people': The importance of Anti-Oppressive Practice. *British Journal of Nursing, 25*(4), 226–226. https://doi.org/10.12968/bjon.2016.25.4.226

The 519. (n.d.). The 519's Glossary of Terms, facilitating shared understandings around equity, diversity, inclusion and awareness. Retrieved from https://www.the519.org/education-training/glossary

World Health Organization. (n.d.). Mental health: Strengthening our response. World Health Organization. Retrieved from https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-health-strengthening-our-response

World Health Organization. (n.d.). Social Determinants of Health. World Health Organization. Retrieved from https://www.who.int/health-topics/social-determinants-of-health#tab=tab_1