

How Do First-Year MSW Students Perceive Anti-Oppressive Theory and Practice? An Exploration

Amy Fisher
Susan C. Allen
Brittany L. Washington

Abstract: *Little information exists about how MSW social work students perceive oppression and anti-oppressive theory and practice, especially in the United States. This case study describes a qualitative exploration of MSW student perceptions of oppression and anti-oppressive practice. Content was infused into a one-semester foundation-level course covering direct practice with individuals in an institution located in the Southeastern United States. Thematic analysis of written reflections and focus group responses revealed changes in pre- and post-course knowledge and skills, as well as five themes: the normality of oppression, the desire for change, practice application at micro and macro levels, optimism for change and personal growth, and recognition of the difficulties and discomfort of engaging in the conversation. Recommendations for social work educators include infusing anti-oppressive practice throughout the curriculum while utilizing inclusive course materials; facilitating self-reflection by students, faculty, and programs; and taking intentional steps to respond to discomfort in discussing these issues.*

Keywords: *MSW, anti-oppressive practice, curriculum, course materials, reflection*

A focal point of social work education in the United States is the understanding of and ability to work to dismantle forces of oppression within our society. Until relatively recently, anti-oppressive practice (AOP) was not embraced as a means to achieve this in the United States (see Morgaine & Capous-Desyllas, 2015). Anti-oppressive theory has recently received renewed attention by United States social work educators in response to the shifting discourse on social justice in the profession (Hudson et al., 2017), along with increasing criticism of cultural competency and multicultural frameworks (Abrams & Gibson, 2007; Abrams & Moio, 2009; Gottlieb, 2020; Mehrotra et al., 2019; Nguyen et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2022), and finally, its inclusion in the 2022 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS; Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2022). Each student who graduates from an accredited school of social work is expected to demonstrate the ability to engage in anti-racist and anti-oppressive social work practice at the individual, family, group, organizational, community, research, and policy levels (CSWE, 2022, p. 10). Furthermore, all social workers are now ethically mandated to “take action against oppression” (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2021, Ethical Standard 1.05 (b)).

Anti-oppressive practice was developed to contribute to social work’s agenda of social justice and change (Amadasun & Omorogiuwa, 2020; Dominelli, 2017; Sinha, 2020). The practice seeks to support and emancipate people who have been oppressed by systemic injustices such as racism, poverty, and sexism, and works to aid with the reversal of a

Amy Fisher, J.D., LCSW, Associate Professor, Susan C. Allen, Ph.D., LCSW, Associate Professor, and Brittany L. Washington, LCSW, former Graduate Assistant, The University of Mississippi, Lafayette County, MS.

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disadvantaged social positioning (Amadasun & Omorogiuwa, 2020; Bilotta, 2020; Dominelli, 2017). Dominelli (2017) identified the role of anti-oppressive social work practice as one of highlighting social injustice and finding ways of eradicating at least those forms of it which are reproduced in and through social work practice. Internationally, social work educators have long embraced anti-oppressive theory and practice (Amadasun & Omorogiuwa, 2020; Campbell, 2003; Caron et al., 2020). Even so, there have been few studies that have explored student learning of anti-oppressive practice even outside the United States.

A central theme in the existing studies is the perceived gulf between macro-level awareness and micro-level practice. Sakamoto and Pitner (2005) suggest that critical consciousness, or the “process of continuously reflecting upon and examining how our own biases, assumptions and cultural worldviews affect the ways we perceive difference and power dynamics” (p. 441), is an essential bridge between a macro-level understanding of oppression and micro-level practice. A social work program in Greece analyzed social work students' views in relation to anti-oppressive practice at the beginning and the end of the entire program (Dedotsi et al., 2016). It found that the specific social work curriculum used did not raise the critical consciousness of students nor did it create a grassroots understanding of social structures of power, oppression and the political nature of social work within it (Dedotsi et al., 2016). The authors called for the addition of an explicit anti-oppressive curriculum focus to remedy this situation.

This theme is reflected in the findings of Bhuyan et al. (2017), who explored Canadian MSW students' experiences with social justice education, including anti-oppressive practice, and how they incorporated it into practice once in the practice setting. Most respondents saw social justice and clinical practice as distinct (Bhuyan et al., 2017). Furthermore, students in the study criticized the program for not teaching practical skills that would facilitate advancing social justice. Similarly, Amadasun and Omorogiuwa (2020) explored reflections by Nigerian students to understand how their education prepared them to apply an anti-oppressive approach to practice.

Results suggested that students were able to define the approach and were willing to challenge oppressive practices. However, they were not equipped to apply the approach in practice (Amadasun & Omorogiuwa, 2020).

One approach that was successful in bridging the perceived micro/macro gap was pedagogical modeling (Campbell et al., 2008). The authors explored the impact that pedagogical modeling practices grounded in anti-oppressive theory had on students' ability to transfer classroom learning to practice. They analyzed a Canadian MSW course entitled “The Theory and Practice of Anti-Oppressive Social Work” through use of student reflections and survey responses. Results showed that parts of the explicit modeling processes, co-constructing the course outline, self-disclosure, and critical reflection, were significant to student learning (Campbell et al., 2008). This research suggests that using a pedagogical model that itself incorporates anti-oppressive practice would have a positive impact on social work students' understanding of oppression and social justice in the field due to thorough classroom learning.

The Course

In the present study, the instructor infused anti-oppressive theory and practice into an existing MSW foundation-level course entitled Social Work Practice with Individuals. The course began with a review of the social work profession, social worker roles, and ethics. Traditional theories for practice were introduced (e.g., systems theory, strengths perspective), along with anti-oppressive theory. The instructor used Morgaine and Capous-Desyllas's 2015 text, *Anti-Oppressive Social Work Practice: Putting Theory Into Action*, in which the authors note that part of their aim was to bring AOP to the United States. They defined AOP as embodying Lena Dominelli's three core concepts. First, AOP is "[a] form of social work practice which addresses social divisions and structural inequalities in the work that is done with people whether they be users ('clients') or workers" (Morgaine & Capous-Desyllas, 2015, p. 24). Second, social workers need to both provide direct assistance while also seeking to change oppressive systems. Third, all levels of social work practice (micro, mezzo, macro) are "interconnected and interdependent" (Morgaine & Capous-Desyllas, 2015, p. 25). The discussion of oppression was augmented with selected episodes of the 1619 Project (Hannah-Jones, 2019) and the Seeing White (Biewen, 2017) podcasts. The discussion of these podcasts continued throughout the course of the semester.

Following the introduction of theories, the course turned to an examination of the planned change process. Each week, through readings, videos, and classroom discussion and activities, the students identified what that week's stage might look like using the lens of traditional social work theories as well as what the stage might look like using AOP. The Morgaine and Capous-Desyllas text includes a separate chapter on practice with individuals, and includes specific techniques and processes for each stage of the planned change process when working with individuals. Students were asked to compare and contrast how both traditional theories and anti-oppressive Practice would affect their work in each stage. There were two major assignments based on case studies: a role play/paper and a final direct practice analysis paper. For both assignments, students chose a theory to guide their actions and decision-making in each stage of the planned change process—anti-oppressive theory was an acceptable choice for both assignments.

The aim of this study is to explore how students in the United States understand AOP and theory. Because so little is known about how students learn about AOP in the United States, it is critical to start with an exploration of student's perceptions and understanding of this theory and practice approach.

Methods

Because research on how students learn anti-oppressive practice and theory is limited, we used a qualitative descriptive case study design to explore MSW student reactions to the course content. The research question was, "How will MSW students understand anti-oppressive practice and theory as it relates to social work?" After receiving exemption status from the appropriate institutional review board, the research team used both written reflections and a focus group to explore student perceptions of the course material.

The research team for this study consisted of one MSW student (Washington) and two social work educators (Allen and Fisher). Washington was an MSW student when this data collection began (not a participant in the study), but has since graduated and is currently employed in a mental health facility providing clinical services. Washington identifies as a Black, cisgender, middle-class, able-bodied female with master's level education. Allen identifies as a White, cisgender, woman who has taught BSW and MSW classes across the curriculum for over 20 years. Fisher identifies as a White, cisgender, middle class, able-bodied straight woman who has been teaching mainly MSW practice courses since 2012. Our research team is an outgrowth of shared experiences at our institution (Washington had been enrolled in classes taught by both Allen and Fisher previous to this study) as well as through a shared commitment to disrupting oppression in social work education. We acknowledge the potential for the privileged aspects of our positionalities to reify oppressive ideologies and have worked to remain vigilant while completing this project.

Washington enjoys a career as a clinical practitioner, and Allen and Fisher have extensive clinical practice experience. All authors have some exposure to anti-oppressive social work practice and theory. Fisher was the students' teacher for the course. Washington and Allen analyzed the pre- and post-assessments, conducted, and analyzed the focus group results. Allen has conducted numerous focus groups. We have foregrounded Washington's voice in the implications section.

Participants

Participants were a purposive sample consisting of a cohort of foundation-level MSW students enrolled in a course focused on direct practice with individuals. Nine students participated in this exercise. The median participating age was 23. Because of the group's small size, other demographic information such as gender and ethnicity may put participants at risk of being identified. We will not disclose that information, except to note that the majority of students embodied socially privileged positionalities.

Procedure

The Institutional Review Board for the institution granted exemption status for this study protocol. Per the exempted protocol, at the beginning of the semester and prior to completion of the reflection assignment included in the study, Fisher (course instructor) recruited students for participation in the study via email. Because the students were enrolled in one member of the research team's class, precautions were employed to protect the students (e.g., Comer, 2009). Students were assured that whether or not they chose to participate in the study, their grades would not be impacted: their reflections would not be collected and de-identified for data analysis until after final grades were entered and the focus group would not be held until after the beginning of the following semester. No incentives were offered for participation.

At the beginning of the following semester, participants for the focus group were recruited via email sent by Allen (not the course instructor for this class). Informed consent was confirmed for all participants via an information sheet. Again, there were no incentives

offered for participant engagement. In addition, students were asked if they were sure of their decision to participate before the focus group occurred. All students agreed to proceed. Data was collected through audio and video recording of the focus group. The recording was imported into NVivo software package 11 (QSR International, 2015) for transcription and assignment of participant codes to protect identity. Fisher (course instructor) was not involved in the recruiting, facilitation, or transcription of the focus group.

Written Reflections

Data were collected from written reflections. As part of the course assignments, students were asked to reflect on their knowledge and understanding of anti-oppressive social work practice both at the beginning of the fall semester prior to the introduction of course materials, and at the conclusion of the semester as a final reflection of knowledge and understanding. After a review of the relevant literature, the instructor developed questions for the reflections. For both reflections, the students were asked: 1) “Please write a paragraph describing your understanding of oppression in the United States”; 2) “Please write a paragraph describing your understanding of oppression and social work”; 3) “Please write a paragraph describing your understanding of anti-oppressive social work.” The reflections were matched and de-identified following the end of the semester (after grading) and prior to Washington and Allen’s analysis.

Focus Group

There was one focus group conducted at the beginning of the semester following the course under review. The focus group moderators, Washington and Allen (not the course instructor), asked participants specific questions or implemented specific verbal prompts about their experience with anti-oppressive practice learning that were developed after a review of the relevant literature. Some examples are: “Talk about last semester and what learning about oppression was like for you.” “What if anything did you learn?” “What else do you think you need to know about oppression and working with survivors of oppression?” “What, if any, skills or competencies do you think you have developed as a result of this exercise?” Fisher (course instructor) was not involved in the recruiting, facilitation, or transcription of the focus group.

Analysis

Data were analyzed using Miles and Huberman’s (1994) interactive model to reduce, display, and draw conclusions from the raw data. First, the deidentified responses of students as transcribed were independently evaluated by Washington and Allen to designate a coded summary for what was represented in the response of each participant. For example, student 1 reported the experience of “raised awareness” and “realized the pervasiveness” of oppression and this was coded as *awareness of reality* and *pervasive* by Allen. However, Washington coded it as *heightened awareness* and *realization of oppression*. Discussion following independent coding involved clarifying what each coder

saw as the essence of the meaning, and whether the interpretation was similar or different. Student 3 reported “surrounded by pretty much all the same...everyone was the same” and that “coming to college...makes you more aware”. Washington coded this as *brought up in homogenous community* and *college exposed to diversity* while Allen coded it as *surrounded by sameness* and *awareness my experience was not everyone's*. Through the process of coding independently and then discussing each interpretation, Washington and Allen came to agreement regarding the essential interpretation of what was represented by the statement. These were entered into a columned matrix in order to visualize whether the responses indicated general themes.

Using Saldaña's (2013) approach, after entering responses and codes into a matrix, Fisher was involved for final triangulation of interpretation of codes and themes. These themes were then categorized for additional themes and clustered into matrices (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). The authors reflected, compared, and discussed interpretations of the data. Following the iterative process of description, review and revision, conclusions were reached in each of the units of analysis: written pre-course and post-course reflections, and subsequent focus group interview responses. Data display was entered into table format using Saldaña's process for “findings at-a-glance” (2013, p. 255) as a means of providing a general overview of findings prior to additional discussion. This data reduction is useful to focus and organize data to illustrate conclusions through extended text that provides context for decisions and choices in describing the outcome (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Findings

Findings are categorized into each of the units of analysis to aid in understanding the experience of the participants. This section will identify an overall summary for each unit of analysis, present a “findings at-a-glance” table for further clarification and to aid in telling the story, and conclude with descriptors of the themes that were most useful in interpreting and understanding the experience.

Written Reflections Summary

This section is divided into three areas that track the reflection questions: 1) the student's understanding of oppression, 2) the student's understanding of social work and oppression, and 3) the student's understanding of anti-oppressive social work.

According to the written reflections at the beginning of the course, the students had little understanding of oppression and its impact. They also showed a lack of knowledge or awareness of anti-oppressive social work practice or awareness that social work as a profession could be oppressive. This was not unexpected given that five of the nine students did not have undergraduate social work degrees. Students who did describe their understanding of anti-oppressive practice expressed it more in line with the expected behavior or values of the profession, rather than specifically relating it to theory or practice. The areas of commonality included: the belief that oppression was deliberate action

intended to harm, that oppressed persons were unable to take action on their own behalf, and that oppression was systemic, culturally transmitted, and generally ignored.

However, students did have some familiarity with social work values embodied in the *Code of Ethics* (NASW, 2021), and a general belief about social work roles, such as projects or initiatives to end oppression or change policies. Invoking aspirational values, student 6 stated,

As we live out the value of the importance of human relationships, according to the NASW Code of Ethics, we are to engage people as partners in the helping process, whether fighting oppression within families, social groups, organizations or communities. We value the dignity and worth of the person, so we promote their socially responsible self-determination as agents of change.

At completion of the course, respondents were able to identify increased awareness about anti-oppressive social work. There was still a lack of certainty and they expressed hopefulness of learning more. Students did not achieve major leaps in knowledge or understanding in this area but they were able in some instances to expand on the understanding from the beginning of the semester. For example, student 7 indicated learning appropriate non-oppressive terms for individuals, learning about self-awareness and knowing one's own bias, and identified specific parts of the course content that enabled that awareness:

Oppression is systematic and nothing is without fault. The very foundations that social work has been built on has to be challenged when needed, as the rules needed and the rules that are in place do not always align. Being willing to adjust what is needed is anti-oppressive as a profession, but using anti-oppressive practice is different than that. There are certain skills needed within this practice, such as being accepting and open-minded no matter what the client brings to the table or displaying a kind of warmth and honesty as they give you the privilege of listening to their story. Treating that individual with value and knowing that they have the ability to make changes within their life while still respecting self-determination can be a balance, but it is one that must be learned.

The students did express knowing more about anti oppressive practice from the pre-course reflection, however. For example, student 6 wrote,

An example of anti-oppressive social work might be the feminist approach which questions and confronts the patriarchal system of government which has excluded women from certain jobs, or legislated women's reproductive rights. We are seeing this in advocates for Planned Parenthood. I hope to see more anti-oppressive social work in our current state of political affairs.

Table 1. *Findings From the Focus Group*

Emerging Theme	Datum Supporting Theme	Interpretive Summary
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Normality of presence of oppression • Ubiquitous presence • Not openly discussed • Mindset that individuals have choice • Homogenous environment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “There’s such a level of indoctrination to it. It was commonplace to have the mentality growing up you just don’t discuss it.” • “I grew up in a very homogeneous community. With oppression, I thought someone in that situation could change themselves.” • “I’ve lived in the same neighborhood for 20 years of my life. That was my whole world and there’s so much that you were just blind to, and you get stuck in that.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Exposure to difference and diversity is linked to change in perceptions or reality
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Desire for change • Awareness is not sufficient • Complicity in inaction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “You know it’s one thing being aware and learning you know and it’s there, but now I’m at a point where what are we going to do about it?” • “We can’t be complacent in it. By not doing anything you are letting it happen.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Questioning how to create change is linked to taking action
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practice application at micro and macro levels • Understanding resilience and using strengths perspective • Importance of practical experience • Assessing systems and access 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Knowing how they made it through it; where did they get that strength and what can we do to feed on that?” • “It’s one thing to read about the oppression that exists in textbooks or something, but it’s another thing when you listen to people who have actually gone through it.” • “Look at what’s keeping them from being able to have access, looking at the system of the individual because we grew up—many of us did—being poor is the poor person’s fault. It’s kind of like really nailing home you have to look at it from the other angle, because the majority of the time, it is from that angle.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seeing the work on an individual level is linked with greater practice relevance for students • Recognizing the value in understanding the lived experience is linked with growing awareness that oppression is systemic
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Optimism for change and personal growth • Self-assessment and examination • Realization it is present, not just past 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “It’s made me look at myself and realized how I played a part in it. It makes me look at everything differently and I think these conversations are really important. It allows a safe space for everybody to talk about it openly and without judgment and it furthers education in my opinion.” • “It’s been important for me to be able to see who is doing the oppression when it comes up—to see that it is very much...it’s not a part of our history, it is a part of our present. I think we have that opportunity for change that we would not have had if we hadn’t been made aware of the problem and the widespread nature of it.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding and examining privilege is linked with self-awareness and personal responsibility
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Awareness of difficulty and discomfort of engaging • Requires willingness and effort to become aware and face own bias and action 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “The will to understand there are people around you who face different things.” • “I think sometimes it’s also hard to talk about because as you talk about it you realize that you have done little things that are oppressive to other people, and you are not even realizing it. A lot of times people think it’s just like the really big stories on the news that are someone doing something that’s really racist but it’s not just that. It’s the little things, too.” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussion is linked to growing recognition of our own bias and oppressiveness and can be linked to potential for denial or self-blame

Focus Group

The focus group occurred at the beginning of the semester following the course. Participants were asked about their experience of anti-oppressive practice during the previous semester and what they learned. Five themes emerged from the focus group: the normality of oppression, desire for change, practice application at micro and macro levels, optimism for change and personal growth, and recognition of the difficulties and discomfort of engaging in the conversation. Table 1 provides findings-at-a-glance (Saldaña, 2013), with examples of the datum supporting the theme, followed by the researchers' interpretive summary of how the students linked their learning to cognitive and affective change and action (Saldaña, 2021).

The following discussion of findings provides more detailed support for the interpretation of the datum as related to student learning and the identified themes of the focus group and demonstrates the analytic process as indicated in the "findings at-a-glance" table.

Normality of Oppression. It was clearly difficult for students to openly discuss this question, and yet they grappled with the discomfort. For example, student 3 said having grown up in a community where everyone was the same, that sameness seemed normal. Going to college and being around others who were not the same assisted student 3 in realizing "my experience was not everyone's experience" and it "took me out of my little bubble." Students' thoughts and perceptions changed to an increased understanding about their responsibility for recognition of those different realities, and how their lack of knowledge and exposure to oppression affected their viewpoint. Two examples of this were most illustrative. Student 3 expressed this by saying,

I said earlier I grew up in a very homogeneous community. With oppression there were little bits and pieces of it that I thought that someone in that situation could change themselves. Going through this class, learning about white privilege, knowing that I don't face some of the challenges others face, that just changed and shifted my opinion.

Student 4 added,

I don't know if this is a misperception...not that I thought wrong about something, but I feel like I didn't know or didn't realize the extent that oppression affects people. I've just lived in the same neighborhood for 20 years of my life. That was my whole world and there's so much that you were just blind to, and you get stuck in that.

This exposure to difference and diversity within the university was a new experience for most students. The deeply rooted social segregation in Mississippi leaves students with little interaction across racial and socio-economic groups. This is particularly true for students from regions of the state where social and school segregation is still typical, and where students have different experiences related to public or private school attendance.

Desire for Change. Students also struggled with the lack of knowing what to do. Understanding the difference between knowing and doing was described by student 5 as,

I think it's given me a drive to figure out how to change it. You know it's one thing being aware and learning you know and it's there, but now I'm at a point where what are we going to do about it? How can we go out into the community and educate others and start making that change in society one community at a time? It's kind of given me this little impatient feeling...it's good to know and good to talk about it and be aware of it but now what are we going to do about it?

They were beginning to question how to create change and recognize that inaction is complicity. It seemed as if the more they questioned how to create change, the more they desired to learn how to create interventions that resulted in social and economic change.

Practice Application at Micro and Macro Levels. When asked what else they needed to know about oppression and working with survivors of oppression, they identified the importance of understanding resilience and using strengths. Students still tended to see the work on a personal and individual level through engaging with others to learn and understand, rather than at the macro, systemic and societal levels. However, as they continued to grapple with how to learn from individuals, they also began to express awareness that experiences from past trauma would continue to affect individuals. This level of thinking indicates students did recognize the value of understanding the lived experience. This was also expressed through growing awareness that oppression is systemic, and not solely individual.

Optimism for Change and Personal Growth. Students primarily saw the experience as helpful to realize and recognize oppression, gain confidence, and get to know others through interaction to create growth. They saw educating themselves and others about oppression as necessary. One student acknowledged growth in self-confidence to help others understand “why the situation might be this way and what we can do to improve it.”

The exposure also enabled students to look at varying aspects of their privilege differently, and express the importance of examining the layers of privilege as a personal responsibility, yet with opportunity to create change. For example, student 7 said,

It's made me look at myself and realize how I played a part in it. Like even though I am [described racial and gender identity], you know we can still be oppressive to other people, like the homeless. It makes me look at everything differently and I think these conversations are really important. It allows a safe space for everybody to talk about it openly and without judgment and it furthers education in my opinion.

In discussing the need to learn practice intervention methods, they were eager to have more experiential learning, such as the poverty simulation they had participated in, in order to “put you in those people’s shoes.” This indicated they were growing in the experience of social empathy (Segal, 2018) by having a greater understanding of the lived experience of different groups.

Awareness of the Difficulties and Discomfort of Engaging. One of the frequently mentioned aspects of grappling with this issue was that the discussion helped students increase recognition of their own bias and potential to oppress, which can lead to denial or self-blame. Several students expressed that the lack of comfort was from fear of offending

or hurting people's feelings because they had not had that experience themselves. While discussing their fears and growing awareness, they could agree that the realization they might have done something offensive or hurtful could result in avoiding the conversations altogether.

Discussion

The findings illuminate the students' level of understanding of oppression, its relationship to social work, and how to practice anti-oppressive social work. While there was a burgeoning awareness of the systemic structure of oppression among the students in the present study, it was clear that they were struggling the most with their own beginning awareness of the pervasive presence of oppression and their own complicity in the system, however unintentional it may have been.

In contrast to Dedotsi et al. (2016), the students in this study did experience some level of consciousness raising in that they learned new terms and understood more about culture, cultural humility and the need to acquire more knowledge. Both knowing that they did not know and achieving greater self-awareness were present at the end of the course. They could identify the importance of learning to understand themselves and their biases in order to avoid unintentional oppression and keep bias from interfering in practice. Nonetheless, students still tended to describe oppression as people being unable to do for themselves, without voice, access, or power rather than reflecting the key concept that social workers empower participants to address barriers. There seemed to be some movement toward this understanding, however, as evidenced by one student's awareness of the ethical duty to engage participants as partners. A striking result is that the students seemed to grow in their understanding of oppression and anti-oppressive practice over the winter break (between the post-course reflection and the focus group).

Consistent with the findings of Strier and Binyamin (2014) and others (e.g., Finn & Molloy, 2021) our students struggled with the ability to "both provide direct assistance while also seeking to change oppressive systems" (Morgaine & Capous-Desyllas, 2015, p. 25). It was evident that students care about these issues, along with their own responsibility. They just do not know what to do about it. This is consistent with Bhuyan et al.'s (2017) findings that most students saw social justice and clinical practice as separate domains and, furthermore, expressed that the curriculum was lacking in content about how to transfer "macro" knowledge to skill implementation with clients.

One of the key concepts of AOP is critical self-reflection. Perhaps what was most illustrative was how the students struggled with "muddling through," and in the unspoken dynamics that were present in the focus group, which are consistent with findings that discussions about oppression can generate anxiety and tension in students (Wilson & Beresford, 2000). Our students also experienced tension and anxiety during the discussions, generally expressed as fears of doing or saying something insensitive or oppressive through not having known or understood and thus harming someone rather than helping.

Awareness of the potential for social work practice itself to reproduce oppression was evident in some student reflections in which they expressed the desire to guard against themselves being oppressors. Similar to Dedotsi et al. (2016), however, most students did not seem to increase understanding of the relationship between the social work profession and oppression. Students expressed increased understanding of the relationship, but all did not show that they understood the need for and willingness to engage critical self-reflection. The lack of progress in this area for some was indicated by the discomfort and reluctance to experience that discomfort caused by participating in the discussion during the focus group. In fact, the present authors acknowledge that the possibility exists that the exercise itself reproduced oppression. In 2000, Wilson and Beresford had questioned whether anti-oppressive practice could exist in its then-current structure. They asserted that there was little evidence that those who argued for, taught, and claimed to practice the concept considered or questioned their role in the structure of social services, thus, oppressing service users by their very definition and practice. It is possible that educators and students may have become more cognizant of this potential in light of the more recent research and the focus on deconstructing and dismantling whiteness as the basis of social work knowledge (Abrams & Gibson, 2007; Almeida et al., 2019; Beck, 2019; Longres, 1972; Tascón & Ife, 2020).

Limitations

This study has several limitations. First, the sample size was small, and the study was conducted with a purposive sample of students who were enrolled in a single course contained in a program located in a university town in the Southeastern United States. As with all qualitative studies, these findings are not generalizable. Additionally, over three-quarters of the students in this study were white and were discussing their experience in a predominantly white institution (PWI). Social identity and context undoubtedly influenced our findings.

Further, focus group responses are prone to group opinion and responses keyed to social desirability more than individual interviews, which might have particular impact in this study due to the discomfort with the topic. We hope this was balanced by the use of the individual, anonymous reflections. However, because the instructor in this class was a member of the research team, there is a chance that social desirability was still an influence due to the students' concerns over their grades being affected by their responses.

Implications

The students in this study demonstrated beginning knowledge of oppression and its relation to social work, but also revealed gaps in knowledge and skills. As these students' perceptions were explored after only one semester of exposure to anti-oppressive practice, one approach to increasing their knowledge and skills could be to infuse anti-oppressive material throughout the program curriculum. For example, the students in the current study were in the first semester of their foundation year of the MSW program. Future courses include foundation-level practice with families, groups, communities, and organizations. The Morgaine and Capous-Desyllas (2015) text contains chapters on each of these practice

levels that could be used as a base for continued learning about AOP at a generalist level. In addition, the program under review has a clinical concentration. AOP materials for clinical classes are available, such as Jemal's (2022) model of Critical Clinical Social Work Practice and Slater's (2020) suggestions for integrating social justice into clinical practice.

The students in this study also expressed the desire to translate what they saw as macro-level knowledge into micro-level AOP skills. Addressing the artificial separation created between the micro, mezzo, and macro levels of practice has long been identified as a potential intervention point for social work curricula (Abramovitz & Sherraden, 2016; Jemal, 2022; Slater, 2020). The potential to bridge the artificial gap is present in both curricular design and in specific models. In the present institution, curricular design results in practice with individuals being taught in fall, while practice with communities is taught in spring. By the very nature of social work education practice classes, students learn discrete steps in skill building at the individual level and then macro level, with relatively little attention to helping students connect the two. One example of a program that brings the two together can be found at the University of Montana. Finn and Molloy (2021) describe in great detail that program's process of developing a program curriculum to support students' engagement in advanced integrated practice—masters-level social work that bridges the macro-micro divide.

Models that tie micro to macro practice are available in the social work literature (Avruch & Shaia, 2022; Jemal, 2022; Slater, 2020). Jemal (2022) and Slater's (2020) models are described above. Another potentially useful example can be found in Avruch and Shaia's (2022) Macro Motivational Interviewing (MI) model, which is designed to address socially engineered trauma. The authors suggest not only a overall model for embracing context in clinical practice, but also modifications of essential techniques of MI such as accurate empathy, providing feedback, and asking open-ended questions.

Thyberg (2023) investigated the knowledge, needs, and learning of MSW students regarding oppression and diversity and concluded that social work students are interested in a uniform approach to learning about these topics to better prepare them for field practice. One such approach is critical social work, defined as including both an understanding of the structural nature of inequity coupled with an understanding of the potential of social work to enforce the status quo by managing behaviors rather than seeking social change. Thyberg (2023) argued that critical social work starts the process of infusing anti-oppressive education into the social work profession. The author suggests the expansion of and further research on the effects of critical social work on students learning.

The use of inclusive learning materials is critical (Abrams & Moio, 2009). Learning material within the social work curriculum should not be dominated by authors of a certain race, sex, or any other demographic; otherwise, social work education remains complicit in maintaining oppression (Ortega-Williams & McLane-Davison, 2021; SWCAREs, 2020). One central aspect of white supremacy is the unnamed presence of white voices in educational materials, which can marginalize people of color's knowledge about their own lived experiences when it comes to learning (Almeida et al., 2019; Longres, 1972; Ortiz & Jani, 2010; Snowden et al., 2021; Tascón & Ife, 2020). In the current study, students expressed that the 1619 Project podcast developed and authored by Nikole Hannah-Jones

had a positive impact on the students' ability to recognize and understand others' experiences of oppression.

A key concept highlighted by this study's findings is the program's need to facilitate self-reflection as well as increase comfort in discussing oppression. One result of fear and anxiety about discussion of oppression can be that social workers focus on what to do, instead of a deep examination of self and the issue (Wilson & Beresford, 2000). This can be further complicated by social work education's focus on outcomes (in the United States, competencies), which can foster more concern with students demonstrating knowing what to do, and little about students doing the hard work of self-reflection on how ingrained experiences and socialization might be impacting one's ability to actually be with the lived experience of the service user. This was reflected in students in this study—the expression of “we know what oppression is, so now, what should we do about it?” This is precisely the reason that the educators in the current study implemented reflective social work and pre-course and post-course reflective self-assessments for students: to introduce them to the importance of self-reflection in practice. Deeper reflection might be needed.

To encourage deeper critical self-reflection on privileges and social locations and the ability to discuss oppression, as well as help students learn how to assess participants' experiences of oppression, social work education must address white supremacy along with all forms of oppression (Abrams & Gibson, 2007; Almeida et al., 2019; Beck, 2019; Longres, 1972; Tascón & Ife, 2020). Although exposed to the concept, the students in this study did not mention it—the closest they came was white privilege. When many students, especially those who are not of color, hear this concept they do not know what to do with it and cannot link it to their personal identity. There needs to be a thorough understanding of what white supremacy is, what it looks like, and what can be done about it. If this does not happen, white fragility can create a barrier to teaching and learning (Lerner, 2022). Lerner (2022) proposes a detailed approach to facilitating conversations on white supremacy grounded in acceptance and commitment therapy. Approaches to facilitating these conversations abound and can be found with a quick Google search. Finn & Molloy's 2021 article also contains specific examples of how programs can facilitate this deep work.

Perhaps the first step for encouraging AOP learning is for programs to engage in their own critical self-reflection. With a topic as complex as oppression, schools must ensure that the educators have what they need in order to tackle it – whether it be materials or training that they can take back to students. Students reported wanting action steps, but little is known about how prepared educators feel to provide that (Goode et al., 2021). Future research should focus on the feelings and needs that educators have when trying to teach about something so large and personal to diverse students.

One final implication is the need to emphasize the role of social workers as empowering others, rather than doing for others. Students were likely to describe social work's role as one of advocacy and challenging social injustice, and they were seemingly unaware that anti-oppressive theory is built on the historical social justice movements that were formed and led by marginalized groups, such as the civil rights, women's rights, Chicano Movimiento (Gutiérrez, 1999), LGBTQ, and disability activism for access (Campbell, 2003). It was also interesting, if not indicative, that in the midst of the Black

Lives Matter movement in Fall/Winter 2019/2020, none of the students mentioned it or its contributions in centering the voices of the oppressed and their allies. At completion of the course, they were still likely to see anti-oppressive practice as individual rules for conduct, (e.g., treating others with dignity and respect, or implementing AOP models and theories), but were unable to define it clearly.

Conclusion

Overall, the findings of this study provide important insights into these MSW students' understanding of oppression, its relationship to social work, and how to practice anti-oppressive social work. It is clear that the students learned, but that one semester provided only beginning levels of understanding for most students. Students were open to further learning. The findings highlight the need for both intentional curricular design around AOP and further research in this area.

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Author note: Address correspondence to Amy Fisher, Department of Social Work, University of Mississippi, P.O. Box 1848, University, MS 38677. Email: afisher@olemiss.edu