

Tool 13: Intersectional reflection on anti-discriminatory practice

This tool helps you to reflect how intersectionality underpins anti-discriminatory practice.



Read the blog below

Why intersectionality is vital to anti-discriminatory practice.



Reflective questions:

- > How does the lens of intersectionality expose issues of power and discrimination?
- > How do you name vehicles of inequity and oppression in your practice?
- > What does intersectionality bring to your anti-discriminatory work?

You may find these thoughts from those who took part in the Change Project helpful:

- > *'There used to be a much greater focus on anti-discriminatory practice.'*
- > *'Intersectionality can enable a commitment for anti-discriminatory practice and bring this to the heart of practice.'*
- > *'It can be emotive to deal with oppression and discrimination as a practitioner, and so we need empowerment as workers to see how we can influence and what is in our control.'*
- > *'We need to think about how we can speak up against oppression and discrimination, and empower people to stand up and challenge things for themselves, and acknowledging the existence of structural causes of oppression.'*

Why intersectionality is vital to anti-discriminatory practice

Racism is a life and death matter – a fact borne out by numerous Serious Case Reviews where failure to assess the impact of racism and scrutinise professional unconscious bias were major factors (Bernard and Harris, 2018). And, because no one is just their race, and people impacted by racism are also simultaneously impacted by other forms of inequality and oppression, we need a method to understand the holistic impact of multiple oppression – that method is the Black feminist theory of intersectionality. See the [Institute for Race Relations](#) research on ‘fatalities and racism’.

Oppressive social structures produce, and reproduce, compartmentalisation and divisions – hierarchies are a classic example. Racism and other forms of social inequality function through divisions based on difference. A way of managing the psychological impact of multiple oppression is psychological compartmentalisation. Oppression produces a problem that we reproduce in trying to manage the problem. If ‘What is to be done [practice] depends on what you think is going on [theory]’ (Howe, 2008:9), it follows that models, concepts, or lenses that re-produce categories, divisions, and fragmentation will fail to challenge racial oppression. The question is, what models are our anti-racist, anti-discriminatory practice based on?

Intersectionality enables practitioners in their legal (*Equality Act 2010*), ethical duty, codes of conduct and statutory responsibility to recognise differences across diverse communities, challenge the impact of disadvantage and discrimination on people, families and communities, promote social justice, confront and resolve issues of inequality ([Social Work England professional Standards](#) 1.5; 1.6).

Application of intersectionality opens bigger questions of the extent to which the theories and methods used in professional social care practice with children, young people, and adults are fit for purpose in an intersectional racist world. The relationship between the theory of intersectionality and the lived experience of multiple oppression, distinguishes intersectionality from other methodologies of practice as the tool for Global social justice and peace. Intersectionality (like other Black feminist concepts) automatically includes the ‘indigenous knowledge’ (IFSW, 2014), voice of the client/service as experts by experience because intersectionality was born from and rooted in Black women’s experiences of simultaneous multiple disadvantages and struggles for intersectional anti-racist social justice.

The Global definition of social work is a political imperative – there is nothing neutral about a profession charged social justice based on human rights ([IFSW](#), 2014). However, too often we use tools that appear neutral. Social work tends to use theories and tools where the oppression of racism, sexism, class, and other constructions of subjugation are not explicitly mentioned or named. We speak of – systems theory, Erikson’s stages of development, Bronfenbrenner’s ecological theory, attachment theory, we speak of task centred, solution-focused, holistic person-centred approaches, and here is the danger – it is possible to use these without ever naming racism, classism, dis-ableism, patriarchy, capitalism, and homo/transphobia – this needs to be kept in check, with an insistence that inter-dependent multiple dimensions of oppression are named explicitly. We should ask, where do our theories and models of social care practice come from? Why are the most frequently used models of reflection produced by White male professors (i.e. Schön, 1983 and Gibbs, 1988)? Why is the most frequently used social work model of anti-discriminatory practice produced by a White male academic (i.e. Thompson’s PCS model, 2012)? The questioning here is not personal to these White men or about the content of their scholarship – it is a questioning of what is absent and why. Where are the models and theories produced by those positioned as marginal?

The [Oxford Dictionary](#) defines intersectionality as ‘the interconnected nature of social categorisations such as race, class, and gender, regarded as creating overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage’. Intersectionality provides a framework of practice that explicitly addresses the mutually constitutive relationship between social contexts of inequality due to divisions based on difference and the psychological impact of inhabiting divisive contexts.

The value of intersectionality is that it explicitly names and foregrounds the issue of social inequality and unequal power relations (Nayak & Robbins, 2018). Furthermore, intersectionality encompasses specific reference to the play of power dynamics arising from context. Intersectionality locates the (re)production of identity in the conditions of context; thereby resisting reductionist formulations of mental distress, which stigmatise individuals and groups. The importance of emphasising location or context enables a repositioning of shame and blame from the individual to the situations they inhabit. If the experience of oppression is intersectional and ‘the [intersectional] space and place we inhabit produce us’ (Probyn, 2003:294), surely the ethical position for anti-discriminatory practice is an intersectional position.

Intersectionality is ‘the notion that identity is formed by interlocking and mutually reinforcing vectors of race, gender, class and sexuality’ (Nash, 2008:3). Crenshaw states that ‘the intersectional experience is greater than the sum of racism and sexism’ (Crenshaw, 1989:140). What did she mean? What are the implications for our practice? The key is in the words ‘greater than’. The inextricable inter-dependency of simultaneous multiple parts is greater than individual parts. Intersectionality proposes that the mixture of many ingredients is greater than an ingredient plus an ingredient plus an ingredient equation.

Put simply, using the analogy of baking a cake, the ingredients of eggs, sugar, flour, and butter only make a cake when mixed together, and when mixed, the individual ingredients cannot be separated, and when mixed and heated something happens to the eggs, flour and butter that produces something different to the individual ingredients themselves. The ingredients of people’s identity and contexts are intersectional. Intersectionality provides an argument for resistance to the split between theory and practice, centre, and margin, individual and collective, subject and context, and paternalistic service provider/professional and service recipient/user binary relations. Intersectionality enables thinking and practice with the ‘multidimensionality’ of experience and practice and refuses a ‘single-axis’ analysis.

To be clear, intersectionality is not about having multiple identities – you have three, I have six and so on – it is about how structures make certain identities the vehicle for vulnerability – it is about context, and therefore the term contextual intersectionality is useful. The analogy of a traffic intersection illustrates that racist oppression can hit in simultaneous multiple directions. (Crenshaw, 1989: 149). The dynamic aspect of intersectionality recognizes that subjectivity is always in transition or open to change. In terms of social work, occupational therapy and allied professions, this dynamic aspect of intersectionality fits with the principle that change is possible and people do not have to be trapped in internalised ruts of hopelessness.

In a world where intersectional racism is a chronic violation of human rights there is a need for society to embrace ways of thinking and action that equip everyone to tackle the discrimination of intersectional racism. The starting point is that ‘racist social structures create racist psychic structures’ (Oliver, 2001:34). A certain logic flows from this, we all live in a racist society, this racism shapes who we are regardless of race or creed; and even though this operates and is experienced differently, dependent on racialized power, privilege, and position, we will not advance one millimetre towards anti-racist social justice if we do not recognise this.

Author

Dr. Suryaia Nayak is a Senior Lecturer in Social Work, qualified social worker, psychoanalytic psychotherapist, and group analyst with expertise in intersectionality. Suryaia has over 40 years’ experience applying anti-racist intersectional feminist activism in national and international contexts.



Twitter: @suryia_nayak

Resources:

[Claudia Bernard: Why intersectionality matters for social work practice in adult services](#)

[Intersection of traffic metaphor](#)

[Kimberlé Crenshaw: What is Intersectionality?](#)

[What is Intersectionality and Why is it Important?](#)

Professional responsibilities to intersectional anti-racism ;

[Social Work England Professional Standards](#)

[BASW Code of Ethics](#)

[HCPC standards of proficiency for occupational therapists](#)

References:

Bernard, C and Harris, P. (2018). Serious Case Reviews: The Lived Experience of Black Children. *Children and Family Social Work*, 24(2): 264-274 <https://doi.org/10.1111/cfs.12610>

Crenshaw, K. (1989) 'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics.' *The University of Chicago Legal Forum. Feminism in the Law: Theory, Practice and Criticism*, 1989, pp.139-167.

Diangelo, R. (2018) *White fragility: Why it's so hard for white people to talk about racism*. Beacon Press.

Gibbs, G. (1988). *Learning by Doing: A guide to teaching and learning methods*. Oxford: Further Education Unit. Oxford Polytechnic.

Howe, D. (2008). *An introduction to social work theory*. Farnham UK: Ashgate Publishing Co.

IFSW (2014). Global definition of the social work profession. <https://www.ifsw.org/what-is-social-work/global-definition-of-social-work/>

Nayak, S. and Robbins, R. Eds. (2018) 'Intersectionality in Social Work: Activism and Practice in Context'. Abingdon: Routledge.

Oliver, K. (2001). *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Probyn, E. (2003). 'The Spatial Imperative of Subjectivity' in Anderson, K. Domosh, M. Pile, S. Thrift, N. (2003) *Handbook of Cultural Geography*. Sage publications. UK

Schön, D. (1983). *The reflective practitioner*. New York: Basic Books.

Thompson, N. (2012). *Anti-Discriminatory practice: Equality, diversity and social justice, 5th ed., New York: Palgrave Macmillan*.