**Joint Social Work Education Conference (JSWEC)**

**Thursday 23rd June 2022**

**‘Reclaiming the ‘Social’ on Social Work’**

**Theme: Race, Ethnicity and Social work**

**Using group contact theory in the classroom to socialise and educate social work students.**

**Abstract**

**Summary**

Through dialectic lecturers, guest speakers, group activities and paired work in and out of the class, students were encouraged to integrate with members of ‘other’ groups. Exploration of empowerment, advocacy and communication skills, led to the questioning of why some believe they have a right to speak and others don’t.

**Abstract**

In social work today, as well as in wider society, discrimination and marginalisation remain a major issue. Segregation, ignorance, and prejudice still permeate attitudes, and aversive racism, as described by Rodenborg and Boisen (2013) is still a pervasive element of personal and professional judgement Weekes (2022),

The workshop will evidence that the teaching environment can be employed to improve the situation. When the reflective journals of students were analysed over the course of an academic year, most students were found to have deepened their awareness of self and developed a knowledge of ‘other’. However, outside the classroom, many in the marginalised groups continued to experience discrimination and prejudice, albeit more subtle, demonstrating whilst white students benefitted from learning about groups they do not belong to (Jackman and Crane, 1986; Tropp and Pettigrew, 2005; Dixon, et al, 2005; Brown, et al, 2019).

This presentation describes how module design and different teaching strategies can be used to maximise student integration, confidence, engagement and learning by encouraging the development of groupwork skills, emotional intelligence, critical reflection and practical social skills. The discussion will focus on the work of Allport, 1954; Pettigrew, 1998; Strayhorn and Johnson, 2014; and Strayhorn, 2015. Discussing how the work of Gray et al (2013), on identifying and reclaiming indigenous beliefs and practices, can be used by academics to evolve their teaching strategies to help students understand, and actively implement, anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory social work practices.

**1.0 Introduction**

In the UK, social work teaching is underpinned by the regulatory body Social Work England and the recommendations of the British Association for Social Workers (BASW), in conjuction with Research in Practice, an organisation which promotes the use of evidence-informed practice in social work. Teaching is guided by the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) for social work in England, which sets out nine common domains of capability that social workers are expected to develop, and which others can expect from the profession. The PCF is aligned with the global definition of social work, established by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), through the BASW Code of Ethics for social workers across the UK. Although the PCF covers nine domains of practice (professionalism, values and ethics, diversity and equality, rights, justice and economic wellbeing, knowledge, critical reflection and analysis, intervention and skills, context and organisations, and professional leadership), this paper focuses on just three. Namely are:

**Values and ethics**

Social workers have an obligation to conduct themselves according to the social work Code of Ethics, and must develop and maintain their understanding of ethical standards and the relevant law. (Reamer 2013)

**Diversity and equality**

Social workers should understand that human experience is shaped by diversity, which is characteristic of and critical to identity formation. They should recognise the importance of diversity in human identity and experience and apply anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive principles in social work practice, to promote equality among people (Nayak, 2013).

**Rights, justice and economic well-being**

Social workers have a duty to recognise and promote the fundamental principles of human rights, social justice and economic well-being, as enshrined in national and international law, conventions and policies (Davis & Reber, 2016). They should observe the principle of working in partnership with service users and carers whenever possible, and promote their rights and self–determination.

The paper will examine how the implementation of Intergroup Contact Theory in the classroom can support the teaching and application of these standards. First, it is worth defining some key concepts.

**2.0 Key concepts**

**2.1 In-groups and out-groups**

Essentially, an ingroup is a social group to which a person identifies as being a member, while an outgroup, perhaps self-evidently, is a social group to which an individual does not belong to. Groups, both in- and out-, are often defined on the basis of characteristics such as race, gender or religion, though research has shown that groups can form on almost any basis, including self-preferencing characteristics such as musical taste. The tendency to form groups in humans stems from a need to be ‘Us’, which, in turn, derives from our instinct for reciprocal altruism. By defining an out-group (‘Them’), we strengthen our sense of Us. When an out-group is formed, we conclude that everyone who shares the characteristics that define the group must have the same behavioural characteristics. Outgroups are usually considered to be in some way inferior, threatening and untrustworthy. Such generalisations lead to discrimination and racism.

**2.2 Othering**

Othering describes a phenomenon where groups or individuals are seen as outside the mainstream or norm. The effect of othering influences how people perceive and treat those viewed as part of the out-group versus those viewed as part of the in-group. Through othering, the individual humanity of a person is negated, and they are seen as less worthy of dignity and respect. It not only results in the formation of prejudices among people, but can play a vital role in the dehumanisation of entire groups of people, and can drive changes in institutions, governments and societies.

**2.3 Aversive racism**

This is a form of racial prejudice by individuals who outwardly agree with the idea of equality of opportunities, attitudes and values, but who, in reality, experience negative emotions in the presence of members of certain racial groups. These negative emotions are often maintained and exacerbated by the persistent avoidance of interaction with other racial and ethnic groups. Rodenborg and Boisen (2013) claim that this could impact cultural competency, as people believe they are unprejudiced but unconsciously have negative views about other out-groups. The authors point out that 'social work students live and work in the same segregated context as everyone else, hence their competency may be impacted for they may end up conforming to the same segregated patterns of the community members.’

**3.0 Literature Review**

The concept of ‘other’ is not new. In fact, ‘othering’ was first introduced by the philosopher G.W.F Hegel (1770-1831), who argued that it was an essential part of humans’ preoccupation with the self. Later, Edmund. D. Husserl (1859-1938), the founder of phenomenology, identified the other as a theoretical basis of inter-subjectivity and relationships among people. The philosopher Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) built upon this by developing the concept of the other as it relates to gender (the Man-Woman binary). “Otherness is a fundamental category of human thought,” wrote Beauvoir, adding that “. . . no group ever sets itself up as the one without setting up the other against itself.” Today, the notion of other is considered to play a fundamental role in the formation of prejudices against people and groups. It is the basis of the in-group/out-group way of thinking about human relationships, and usually involves attributing negative characteristics to people or groups as a way of negating their individual humanity and, consequently, seeing them as less worthy of dignity and respect.

In more recent decades, a considerable amount of thought has been given to the effects of other on social and cultural interaction, and what can be done to mitigate these effects. Samuel L. Gaertner and John Francis Dovidio, for example, are known for their (1963) research on the concept of aversive racism and on reducing people’s intergroup biases, while Prospera Tedam’s (2010) research focuses on culturally sensitive social work, equality, diversity, and anti-oppressive practice. T.L Strayhorn, professor of urban education, has significantly added to the literature with his contributions on issues of equity and diversity in higher education. One study, particularly relevant to this paper, was recently (2021) published by Tam Cane, lecturer and programme lead for B.A. Social Work at Sussex, ‘’Attempting to disrupt racial division in social work classrooms through small-group activities’’. Additionally, the concept of Effective Personal and Professional Judgement, based on the idea that “increased personal awareness increases professional effectiveness.” Was introduced by this papers author aimed at adding to the body of knowledge in this area in her (2021) PhD thesis entitled “The complexities of making recommendations for adoption and fostering panels: an investigation of the biographic and professional influences on panel members’ decision-making and attitudes” (Weekes, 2021).

One of the aims of this paper is to examine ways of raising awareness among students of the importance of understanding themselves, and how their actions impact others. This will help to increase their objectivity, fairness and professionalism, especially in the context of professional decision-making. This aim led using Allport Intergroup Contact Theory. Below the theory will be defined in greater depth, and how it can help social workers become more effective practiitoners.

**4.0 Intergroup Contact Theory**

The theory of intergroup contact (Allport 1954) is based on the idea that increasing contact between, and integration of, people from different groups will increase trust and reduce prejudice. The hypothesis rests on the idea that in-groups who have more interactions with a certain out-group tend to develop more positive perceptions and fewer negative perceptions of that out-group.

Intergroup Contact Theory highlights the fact that true/authentic contact – i.e. contact which is not casual, but instutional and structural within society – reduces prejudice and perceived differences. Allport introduced his theory after the US Supreme Court made, in 1954, what is widely recognised as one of the most important rulings in the Court’s history, by unanimously holding that the racial segregation of children in public schools violated the Fourteenth Amendment. It was a decision that helped inspire the American civil rights movement of the late 1950s and 1960s.

Allport suggests there are four ‘positive factors’ that, if applied, are likely to lead to better intergroup relations and reduced levels of prejudice.

**4.1 Allport's four conditions**

One of the conditions cited by Allport, that will lead to better intergroup relations, is equality of status: in any contact situation, hierarchical structures should be avoided, and group members should perceive each other as equal. Allport argues that equal status can promote positive intergroup attitudes, even when the members of those groups differ in status initially.

Another condition is common goals. This requires group members to rely upon each other achieve their desired goal(s) (Bridges & Tomkowiak, 2010). Shared goals will lead to more effective contact.

Intergroup cooperation is another important factor – for common goals to be attained, group members must cooperate rather than compete. The positive effects of intergroup cooperation in schools has been demonstrated by a number of studies, such as those by Brewer and Miller (1984), Johnson et al (1984) and Schofield (1986). One well-known use of intergroup cooperation is the ‘Jigsaw Classroom’, developed by Elliot Aronson in the early 1970s, a cooperative learning technique that encourages students from diverse backgrounds to work towards common goals, thus fostering positive relationships among children around the globe (Aronson, 2002).

The fourth condition is support from social and institutional authorities. This is because authorities can establish norms of acceptance and guidelines on how members of the group should interact with each other. There should, for example, be no laws which enforce segregation. The importance of this condition has been demonstrated in various circumstances, such as in the military (Landis et al, 1984) and in religion (Parker 1968). Legislation can also be instrumental in establishing anti-prejudicial norms, evidenced by, for example, the civil- rights acts in American society (Pettigrew & Tropp, 2005).

Entrenched prejudice results from viewpoints that are based on faulty generalisations and stereotypes, anxiety and fear (Blair et al., 2003). By facilitating intergroup contact under Allport’s four conditions, prejudice can be reduced by encouraging positive attitudes. These attitudes may be affective, cognitive, behavioral or empathetic, and result in the formation of relationships and friendships that lead to acceptance (Liebkind et al.,2014).

**5.0 EPPJ: a complementary theory**

If social work students are to develop skills to work effectively with vulnerable individuals, they need to understand what they bring to the work; the notion of the ‘wounded healer as defined by Carl Jung (1875 – 1961), equally important is what the service users brings to the interaction based on their own experiences. All people like to think they are naturally objective and broad-minded, but the facts do not support such a belief. In reality, everyone is biased as a result of their parenting and other aspects of their history. We are all affected by underlying attitudes that impact our decision–making. EPPJ (Effective Personal and Professional Judgement) is a methodology that can be used alongside Intergroup Contact Theory to help students become more aware of their biases, and control them to improve their professional effectiveness, particularly in a decision–making context.

**6.0 Student feedback on the module**

There were various reactions to this module, some of which are recorded below:

*"The module allowed me to learn with confidence and humility, with a teaching style that encouraged me to ask questions and think outside the box. The module removed me from my comfort zone, developing me into a team player amongst a diverse cohort. Learning from each other was encouraged as much as learning from the lecturers and the introduction of critical reflection led me down a path of self-awareness, teaching me how to be a better social worker and a better person overall."*

*"Maximised: Through interactive opportunities such as the role-play, debate, privilege walk and book review presentation, I found that the module design maximised confidence as we had the chance to share our learnings and experience and be critiqued."*

*Through dialectic teaching, my engagement and learning were maximised as I learned from discussions and people's experiences." "Arlene’s teaching style encouraged a lot of thought-provoking discussions and unique knowledge that I didn’t have before through discussions.”*

*“When we were put into groups and encouraged to discuss the lecture topic, it improved group work skills as we practiced how to engage in the group.” “When Arlene would notice who was quieter and encouraged them to be the leader of the designated speaker, it allowed an opportunity for all group members to be heard and advocated for.”*

*“Developed: Our emotional intelligence was developed through having guest lecturers like Marsha who taught us about critical thinking and how to put our own emotions aside when dealing with service users.” “There were also several other lectures which involved people with lived experience which taught us about empathy and how much we do not know about areas such as disabilities and their accessibility.”*

*“Our weekly reflective logs and hearing those who had hit the mark read out their log meant our development skills for the logs were developed and strengthened weekly.”*

*“Having done them weekly, it got us into the routine, and despite them not being marked – having the people who had completed a strong reflection of the week read theirs out was enough to develop our reflective skills.”*

*“Our development of practice skills was explored in many ways, and the role-play was one in which gave us insight to what it would be like, but we also learned many valuable lessons.”*

*“Anti-oppressive practice and lectures that gave us insight into racism and aversive racism all provided us tools and ways we need to ensure our practice is anti-oppressive and inclusive.”*

**7.0 Concluding thoughts**

It is important to continue developing and implementing anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practices in the module, and the social work course generally. The key elements of this plan are:

* To disrupt the classroom in terms of activities as detailed by Cane (2021). By engaging students in class activities about this topic, they will better understand the nature and form of anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practices, and learn strategies essential to overcoming them.
* Module content and presentation will reflect the fact that prejudice and discrimination are ubiquitous in higher education (Strayhorn, 2016), and that intergroup contact will only lead to behavioral changes when coupled with social justice activities (Byrd and Byrd, 2015). With these observations in mind, addressing the attainment gap will be achieved, as with decolonising the curriculum, by putting on extra classes for students who need it, encouraging them to explore their own identity, exposing them to their racism and gender bias, confronting unjust laws, and allowing them to show personal case understanding.
* Focusing on work that examines the day to day details of how ordinary people make sense of, and manage, their encounters with others in the wake of desegregation processes, as described by Dixon, Durrheim and Tredoux (2005).
* Giving specific attention to the concept of aversive racism. Without an understanding of this, students are unlikely to be aware of how the concept relates to them (Rodenborg and Boisen, 2013).
* Recognising the truth of Edmonson’s (2012) observation that ‘It is hard to learn if you already know – and we are hardwired to think we know.” This is particularly true of many white students, when their egalitarian self-image is challenged. Students will therefore be encouraged to be ‘curious about what others can bring’.
* Adopting Tedam's (2010) MANDELA Model of Engagement as an anti-discriminatory/anti-oppressive tool.

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