ANTI-OPPRESSIVE COMMUNITY WORK PRACTICE

AND THE DECOLONISATION DEBATE

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Coloniality (Giraldo 2016)

- **Modernity-coloniality ...** is one of the decolonial option's central ideas ...

- The core ideas of the decolonial option hinge on the question of modernity, considered as a global phenomenon, originating on 12 October 1492 ...

- [It] implies ... that '**Europe's centrality within the world-system** is ... a basic effect of the discovery, conquest, colonisation, and integration (submission) ...

- The decolonial option starts from the premise that modernity is the visible side of coloniality ...

Coloniality cont.
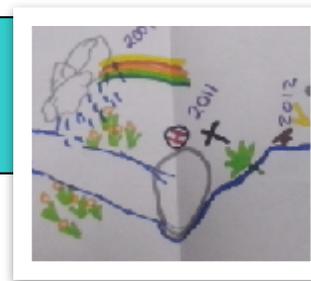
- [The] central notion of '**coloniality of power**' invokes the structures of power established with ... colonisation ...

- These structures are first and foremost arranged along the **axis of race**, an idea built on the perceived phenotypical differences between conquistadores and conquistados.

- 'Race' was established ... as an instrument of **social classification**.

- Since social relations between colonisers and colonised were configured as **relations of domination**, those newly established racial categories ... were automatically hierarchized ... This is what constitutes the 'colonial difference' ...

Coloniality cont.

- Derived from the term colonialism, 'coloniality' ... [points] to what is most insidious in colonialism:

- The invisible threads of power that emerge in colonial situations but extend well beyond a strictly colonial setting and period. Hence, coloniality outlives colonialism:

- **Coloniality is the logic**, and **colonialism the enactment** (Mignolo) ...

- The term coloniality ... reveals that the relations of power established with the colonial invasion, and on the basis of the colonial difference, are still very much at work in the world ... Coloniality then refers to the symbolic, invisible and indelible traces of the colonial experience.

Neoliberalism as Coloniality

- Global developments in how capitalism from the early 1970s onwards: *Neoliberalism*

- The term *neoliberalism* signifies a global shift in power balances in favour of corporate capital accumulation strategies.

- Some of its effects worldwide:
  - Increasing constraints on states' ability to serve as regulative, ameliorative and redistributive agencies (Sewpaul and Hölscher 2004).
  - Worldwide, governments have been forced to curtail public spending – particularly in the fields of education, health, and welfare (Bauman 1998, Sayers 2015).

- These effects have been different, and more pronounced in countries of the Global South.

- Local dynamics and causes aside, the global neoliberal regime has affected South African social work profoundly, as evidenced among others is:
  - Study conditions;
  - Working conditions;
  - Rise in social work unemployment, in particular graduate unemployment.

- Neoliberalism is an important vehicle through which coloniality works in South Afric
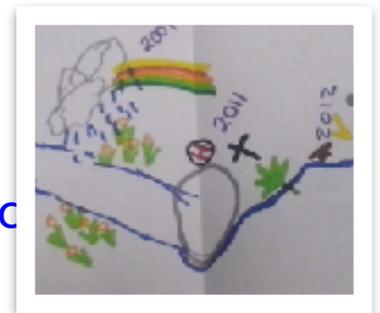
Social Work Student profile at UKZN: Continued patterning of poverty and unemployment

Total numbers	Annual Total
2016	700

Year	Female	Male	Annual Total
2016	519	181	700

Year	African	Coloured	Indian	White	Other	Annual Total
2016	691	3	5	1		700

Quintile	2016
1	81
2	167
3	117
4	161
5	116
Unkown	58
Annual Total	700

Year	N	Bursary	Scholarship	Council Loan	NSFAS Bursary	NSFAS LOAN
2016	700	67	17	0	291	271

What do we make of the fact that a profession that is predominantly accessed by poor black students is now one hit by unemployment?
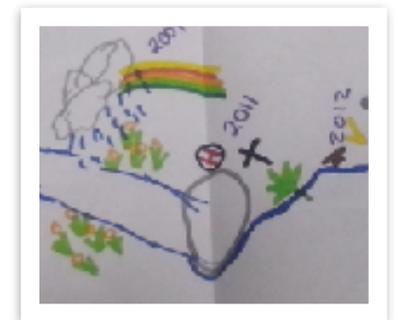
Anti-oppressive theory and practice

The notion of _oppression_ refers to –

- "Situations where a powerful person or group exerts a **tyrannical influence** over others…
- Structural injustices which arise from (often) **unintentionally oppressive assumptions and interactions** which occur as the result of _institutional and social **customs**, economic **practices**_ and **rules**.
- **Oppression** thus **operates at both structural and personal levels** at the same time" (Clifford & Burke 2009, p.18).

- Anti-oppressive theory and practice: Level 3 Social Work course at UKZN. According to the Handbook and module outline, its purpose is to:

- **Equip students with the basic knowledge, value and skills required to identify, critically engage with, and respond to dominant modes of oppression in contemporary South Africa**, including the following:
  - **Key theoretical concepts** underpinning anti-oppressive social work;
  - Some of the **sources of**, and possible responses to **oppression** and injustice;
  - Engage with different **approaches to anti-oppressive social work practice**;
  - Develop capacity for critical reflexivity in relation to their future roles as social workers, including
    - An exploration of some of the contradictions, tensions and limitations social workers experience in the field, as well as the openings they provide for responsibility-taking, resistance, respectful and anti-oppressive practice.

Students use of anti-oppressive theory and practice

- Eight UKZN level 4 social work students in 2016 decided to explore:
  - The workings and dynamics of oppression in their own lives (albeit without reference to concepts of (de)coloniality)
  - Openings for action and change
- Points of interest to students
  - Identity and identity markers
  - Internalised forms of oppression
  - Responses of people to different forms of oppression in their lives.

Student research drew attention to the following challenge:

- Dominance of writers writing on AOP from the Global North, and the lack of applicability thereof in countries of the Global South.
  - In South Africa, this includes a **merging of social work student population and those populations that are traditionally targeted for social work "intervention"** including community development initiatives.
  - **Forms of oppression operating in service user communities, also operate in students' lives.**
  - Importantly therefore, often-taken-for-granted assumptions about distinctions between service provider do not apply. "*We* are not helping *Them*"

# Student Project: Main purpose and objectives
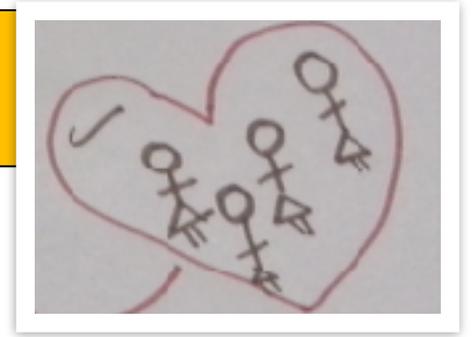
- Problem statement:
  - "The problem that we seek to address ... is that level 4 social work students have shown a lack of political action in the face of graduate unemployment
  - This needs to change, but for that to happen, the reasons for the students' inaction need to be better understood. The concepts of identity and oppression can help us to develop this understanding"

- Aim:
  - "To seek better understanding of social work 4 students' lack of political action in the face of unemployment, using concepts of identity and oppression"

- Objectives were to explore/better understand
  - Participants' perceptions of themselves and others;
  - Factors of both oppression and liberation in participants' lives;
  - Participants' feelings about becoming social workers;
  - Factors that either prevent or encourage political action among participants

Student Project: Methodology

- Participatory Action Research; Participatory Learning and Action (Chambers 2006; Bozalek 2011, 2013; Wang 2006)

- Three recorded group sessions:
  - Rivers of Life
  - Community Maps
  - Photovoice

- Thematic Contents Analysis

- Concepts that turned out to be helpful to students in making sense of their data:
  - Identity and identity markers (Dominelli 2002)
  - Oppression including internalized forms of oppression (Mullaly 2010)
  - Responses of people under conditions of oppression (Dominelli 2002)

Student findings: Identity makers and internalized forms of oppression
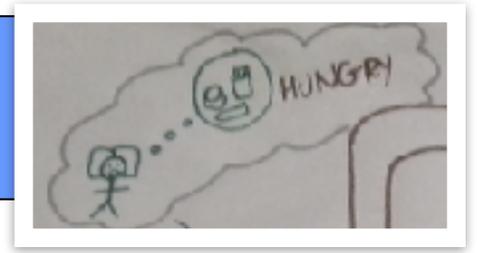
Race:
- "I feel like that sometimes because I am black what I say will not really make a difference"
- "There is a Black Café and the White Café [on campus] … Students who stay at the White Café … tend to … [see] themselves as superior and students at the Black Café are seen as disadvantage"

- "At one point or another, the race issue was brought up … and its association with powerlessness and inferiority" (Manqoba)

Class:
- "My mother … is not working [and] even now, [she] is sick [and] earning a grant. So she cannot give me any money … so I was like shy, or have a low self esteem of coming to university while I know my background"
- "My parents are waiting for me to work; they are depending on me"

- "Many of our participants [were] the first in their households to acquire education and they want to change the economic conditions because their parents did not get that opportunity under apartheid" (Manqoba)

Gender:

- Not included in research report, but…

[These] identity markers … [had] a significant influence [on participants'] actions" (Manqoba)

Student Findings: Responses to threat of unemployment

Acceptance:
"The reason why I didn't take action is ... [that my only hope] is to branch out from the profession and look for other degrees"
"I feel like why be active when I know it won't help"

Accommodation:
"What really turn[s] my spirit down not to participate [in political action] is that I have funding from NFSAS so I believe that ... next year ... I ... have hope that I will find a job

Rejection:
No quotes (Manqoba)

Participants	Acceptance	Accommodation	Rejection
1		✓	
2	✓		
3	✓		
4		✓	
5	✓		
6		✓	
7		✓	
8			✓

BELONGING
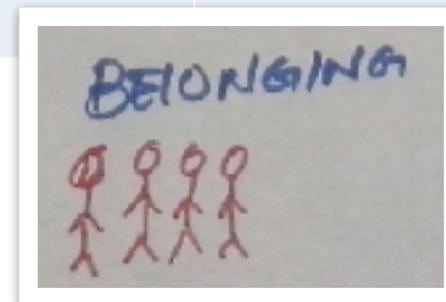
Conclusions and Recommendations

- Need to unsettle taken-for-granted assumptions about social workers as "us" and service users as "them": the lines are blurred.

- Need to appreciate that neoliberalism is a form of coloniality that affects social workers and service users.

- Social workers cannot work against oppression in the lives of their service users if they themselves find it difficult to resist oppressions in their own lives.

- Thus, in the current South African context, anti-oppressive social work practice must begin with the community of social workers