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Unit Code: SOW1203

Book Title: Anti-discriminatory Practice [4ᵗʰ edition]

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ISBN : 9781403921604

Year of publication: 2006

Place of Publication: Basingstoke

Publisher: Palgrave Macmillan

Title of extract:: The Theory Base

Author of extract:: Thompson, N.

Page numbers of extract: 21 - 47

Name of Visual creator (as appropriate): JGibson

Name of Designated Person authorising scanning: K Cooper

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2 | The theory base

Social work theory derives from a wide range of sources although, traditionally, the social work literature owes much to social science thinking. In particular, the theory base outlined here draws heavily on sociology and social psychology.

This is not of course primarily a theoretical text – the major focus is on anti-discriminatory *practice*. But an understanding of the underlying conceptual framework, and the themes and concepts of which it consists, *is* necessary to ensure that such practice is based on intelligent and informed debate, rather than dogma, fad or ignorance. Indeed, discrimination and oppression as a field of study has been prone to more than its fair share of dogma and over-simplification over the years (Thompson, 1998b).

I shall therefore present an exposition of some of the key themes and issues and sketch out some of the linkages between the theoretical concepts and the social work concerns they are intended to illuminate. This will, of course, be a far from comprehensive account – a text of this size devoted entirely to such issues would still barely do justice to the complexity and scope of the subject matter (see Thompson, 2003a for a more detailed exposition of the theory base). This chapter is therefore very much an *introductory* exploration of the theory base. It is a beginning which, I hope, will have the effect of both equipping and motivating the reader to build on these foundations through further reading, discussion and above all, relating such theory to practice.

Social divisions and social structure

Societies are not, of course, simply amorphous masses of people. A society comprises a diverse range of people and is therefore characterised by differentiation – people are categorised according to social divisions such as class and gender. These divisions then form the basis of the social structure – the 'network' of social relationships, institutions and groupings – which plays such an important role in the distribution of power, status and opportunities.

It has long been recognised that people can be 'located' within the social structure in terms of the intersection of different social divisions (Berger, 1966). That is, who we are depends to a large extent on how and where we fit into society. And this, in turn, depends on the complex web of social divisions or social 'strata' (hence the term 'stratification'). These strata are many and varied but the emphasis here will be on the major social divisions, those of class (Roberts, 2001), gender (Richardson and Robinson, 1997), race/ethnicity (Skellington, 1996), age (S. Thompson, 2005) and disability (Oliver, 1996). This is not to deny the importance or relevance of other social divisions such as sexual identity, creed or linguistic group. It is simply a matter of having to be realistic in restricting the scope of the analysis for reasons of space (see Chapter 7).

Let us look briefly at each of these dimensions of the social structure before considering their significance for social work.

Class

There is a longstanding major debate within sociology concerning the definition of class (Roberts, 2001). There are those who, following Marx, define class in relation to ownership or control of the means of production (specifically, the means of producing wealth – land, factories, machinery and so on). There are others, who, following Weber, relate class to 'relations of exchange' (that is, buying power) rather than relations of production. (See Giddens, 1997, for an overview of these issues and Giddens, 1971, for a fuller discussion.)

Within social work the term tends to be used loosely, in a broadly Weberian sense, to indicate different levels of economic power. Low class position (equals low economic power due to low pay or reliance on benefits) is associated with poverty, poor quality housing, poor health and a general lack of opportunity. Dobelniece (1998) highlights the consequences of living in poverty:

> Poor people get less of everything that is considered important and necessary for a decent life, that is, less money, food, clothing, shelter. The deprivation experienced by poor people is pervasive. Children brought up in poverty are more likely to fail in school, to drop out of school. They are more

likely to develop mental health problems, are more susceptible to chronic illnesses, and are less likely to be covered by health insurance. They are more likely to lose jobs and to drop out of the labour force. They are more likely to experience hostility and distrust. They are less likely to participate in meaningful groups and associations. As the ultimate deprivation, they are likely to die at a younger age.
(pp. 5–6)

The relationship between class, poverty and social work is therefore a very significant one (Jones and Novak, 1999).

Gender

There are distinct and relatively fixed biological differences between men and women. These are *sex* differences. However, when we ascribe particular social significance to these differences, and allot roles accordingly, they become *gender* differences. That is, it becomes a matter of social construction rather than biological determination (Burr, 2003).

Boys and girls are socialised into differential patterns of behaviour, interaction, thought, language and emotional response. Different roles are assigned, according to gender, and so differential sets of expectations are established. These expectations are constantly reinforced through social interaction and the influence of the media, the education system and so on. Where people deviate from these gender expectations, sanctions are applied – boys who stray into feminine territory are labelled 'cissy' or 'effeminate' whilst girls who transgress are seen as 'butch' or a 'tomboy'. These childhood patterns become deeply ingrained and persist through to adulthood.

Gender expectations can also produce a situation whereby the same characteristic can be interpreted differently according to whether it applies to a man or a woman. For example, assertiveness in men can be seen as strength of character, whereas in women it can be seen as bossiness (Thompson, 2002a). The cycle is complete when biological sex differences are used to justify or 'legitimate' the inequalities inherent in social differences based on gender. This is an important point and so this link between the biological and the social will feature again below in the discussion of ideology.

Race and ethnicity

'Race', like sex, is often assumed to be a biological matter, but this is a misleading assumption to make. Blackburn (2000) argues that the assumed biological basis of 'race' is a common fallacy and goes on to point out that: 'biologically, there is one race – the human race – in its modest variety and overwhelming commonality' (p. 19). Similarly, Muldoon (2000), in discussing the history of slavery, argues that:

> The relationship between slave and master was fixed by a biological imperative. It was a law of nature that could not be repealed. The medieval notion that humanity was one and that humankind had the same capacity for transformation was replaced by a pseudoscientific view that people existed as biologically different races, the mental and moral capacities of which were fixed for all time.
> (p. 92)

It is partly for this reason that the term 'race' often has the word 'ethnicity' attached to it – to emphasise that it refers to a social grouping rather than a biological one. That is, it is the equivalent of gender rather than sex. For the same reason, many authors consistently place inverted commas around the word ('race') in order to indicate that it is not being used in its literal, biological sense.

Race is therefore a socially constructed way of categorising people on the basis of *assumed* biological differences. As with socially constructed gender distinctions, the notion of race entails:

● *Inherent inequalities.*   Racial categorisation involves not only *difference* but also implies relations of superiority/inferiority. This is the basis of *racism* (see Chapter 4).
● *Biological legitimation.*   The biological aspect of this social division is used as a justification for discrimination and inequality.

Some people might argue that, because it does not have a biological basis, race does not exist. It *does* exist, but it is a social construction, rather than a biological entity.

Age

The problems associated with sexism and racism have long been

recognised and are relatively well documented. Discrimination on the grounds of age, or 'ageism', as it has become known, is a relatively new addition to anti-discriminatory discourse. Fennell *et al.* (1988) define ageism in the following terms: 'Ageism means unwarranted application of negative stereotypes to older people' (p. 97). As we shall see in Chapter 5, old age is strongly associated with notions of frailty, mental and physical debility and dependency. This association is greatly exaggerated by common (mis)-conceptions about the nature of old age and the incidence of problems. This tendency to devalue older people and overemphasise the negative aspects of later life is characteristic of ageism. The distribution of power, status and opportunities is therefore dependent upon not only class, race and gender but also age. Age is therefore an important social division, a significant dimension of the social structure. The main focus of anti-ageism is old age but when we consider that very similar issues apply to children (Thompson, 1997; 2002b), the impact of ageism takes on additional significance. Indeed, we could go beyond Fennell *et al.*'s definition of ageism to include children: 'discrimination against any individual or group on the basis of age'.

Disability

Disability is a concept which distinguishes a certain proportion of the population (those with some degree of physical impairment) from the 'able-bodied' majority. Again, this is not simply a biological/physiological matter but has major social implications. By defining disability as primarily a physiological matter, the issues are personalised and individualised. In this way the social and political dimensions are overlooked. This leads Oliver (1989a) to comment:

> The growth of the disabled people's movement and, especially, its redefinition of the problem as social oppression has given rise to the concept of disablism which is inherent within the individual model of disability.
> (p. 192)

Thus it is argued that traditional, individualised approaches to disability mask the inherent marginalisation and dehumanisation involved in attitudes and policies in relation to people with disabilities. Once again, the biological level is used as a means of legitimating unequal power relations at the social and political levels.

Disablism is the term used to describe the oppression and discrimination implicit in this situation – the social division of disability.

practice focus 2.1

Pearlene was an experienced social worker whose work had mainly been in the field of mental health. However, her new post was in a disability team. As part of her induction programme she attended a meeting of the local disability forum. This was to be a significant event for her as she was amazed to see how much anger there was against local service providers and how patronised the disabled people at the forum felt by medically oriented social work and nursing staff. She realised that her common-sense views of disability and disabled people's needs would have to be reconsidered.

The psychodynamic focus of traditional social work has been criticised for its failure to take account of the social dimension. From this critique, systems theory developed with its explicit emphasis on social systems. This, in turn, has been criticised for ignoring the importance of conflict, structure and social divisions. Social work theory has now progressed to a level of sophistication at which the part played by social divisions and social structure is receiving increasing attention. However, what is needed is a conceptual framework which will enable us to develop a clearer understanding of how the problems social workers and their clients face can be located in this wider, structural context. PCS analysis, which I shall explain below, can take us some way towards this.

PCS analysis

In order to understand how inequalities and discrimination feature in the social circumstances of clients, and in the interactions between clients and the welfare state, it is helpful to analyse the situation in terms of three levels. These three levels (P, C and S) are closely interlinked and constantly interact with one another (see Figure 2.1).

P refers to the *personal* or *psychological*; it is the individual level of thoughts, feelings, attitudes and actions. It also refers to *practice,*

Figure 2.1 PCS analysis
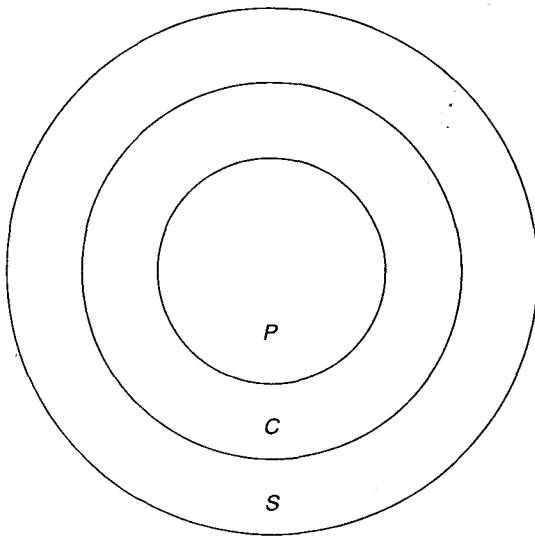
individual workers interacting with individual clients, and *preju-dice*, the inflexibility of mind which stands in the way of fair and non-judgemental practice. Our thoughts, feelings and attitudes about particular groups in society will, to a certain degree at least, be shaped by our experiences at a personal level.

C refers to the *cultural* level of shared ways of seeing, thinking and doing. It relates to the *commonalities* – values and patterns of thought and behaviour, an assumed *consensus* about what is right and what is normal; it produces *conformity* to social norms, and *comic* humour acts as a vehicle for transmitting and reinforcing this culture. It is therefore primarily a matter of shared meanings. It includes conventional notions of culture, such as religion, belief systems and nationality, but goes beyond these. The cultural level is a complex web of taken-for-granted assumptions or 'unwritten rules'. Culture is very influential in determining what is perceived as 'normal' in any given set of circumstances.

S refers to the *structural* level, the network of *social divisions* and the power relations that are so closely associated with them; it also relates to the ways in which oppression and discrimination are

institutionalised and thus '*sewn in*' to the fabric of society. It denotes the wider level of *social forces,* the *sociopolitical* dimension of interlocking patterns of power and influence.

The *P* level is, as Figure 2.1 illustrates, embedded within the cultural or *C* level – that is, the *C* level forms the context in which our personal experience occurs. Our thoughts, actions, attitudes and feelings are to a certain extent unique and individualised, but we must also recognise the powerful role of culture in forming our opinions, guiding our actions and so on.

The *C* level represents the interests and the influence of society as reflected in the social values and cultural norms we internalise via the process of socialisation – for example, manners, etiquette and rituals (such as to how to behave towards someone when it is their birthday or they have just become engaged). Peter Berger (1966) captures this point well:

> Only an understanding of internalisation makes sense of the incredible fact that most external controls work most of the time for most of the people in a society. Society not only controls our movements, but shapes our identity, our thoughts and our emotions. The structures of society become the structure of our own consciousness. Society does not stop at the surface of our skins. Society penetrates us as much as it envelops us.
> (p. 140)

This passage is particularly relevant to the cultural influence of forms of discrimination on individual consciousness. It lays the foundations for understanding the various forms of discrimination not simply as personal prejudice (the *P* level) but, more realistically, the discriminatory and oppressive culture base manifesting itself in and through individual thought and action. It is therefore a more complex situation involving the interaction of the *P* and *C* levels.

Humour is an example of how a discriminatory culture can subtly but powerfully influence individual thoughts and actions. For example, racist jokes can be seen as a vehicle for reinforcing and legitimating notions of racial superiority. The fact that humour is so highly valued as a social quality means that it is both a highly potent influence and relatively well defended from attack. Comments such as 'it's only a joke' or 'it's only a bit of fun' act as

Figure 2.2 Degrees of influence
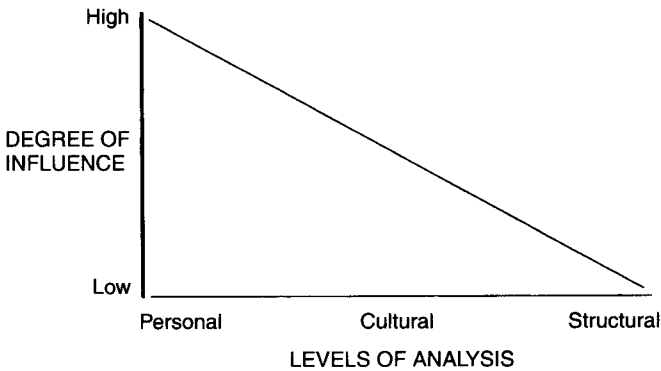
effective defences and help to maintain the discriminatory power of humour. This is not to say that humour is necessarily discriminatory – far from it – but where it does have oppressive potential we need to be wary of allowing ourselves to be seduced by it.

To say that the *P* level is embedded within the *C* level is not to suggest that the thoughts and actions of individuals are simply a 'reflection' of society or culture. PCS analysis is not deterministic; it does not imply that culture 'causes' our actions, but rather that individual behaviour has to be understood in the wider social and cultural context.

But even this cultural context needs to be understood in terms of a wider context – the structural. That is, the *C* level is embedded within the *S* level. It is no coincidence that we have the cultural and social formations that currently exist. These owe much to the structure of society – the interlocking matrix of social divisions and the power relations which maintain them. To understand the *C* level we need to relate it to the *S* level, the structure of society.

Marx argued that the economic base or 'infrastructure' conditions the 'superstructure' – that is, the political, social and cultural aspects (the *C* level). This is an argument about *class*, the class conflict in the economic base of capitalism. But, as was argued in Chapter 1, class is not the only structural dimension which merits our attention.

Feminists have convincingly argued the case for recognising the importance of gender in mapping out the social structure whilst the

anti-racist movement has built on the foundations of a plea for understanding the racially structured nature of modern western societies. These will both be discussed further in Chapters 3 and 4 respectively. The significance of age and disability as relevant dimensions of the social structure is also being increasingly recognised, as some of the discussions in this text will confirm.

Marx's analysis does not, therefore, take us far enough, but it is, none the less, a useful beginning. Indeed, I would contend that it is a grave mistake to reject marxism – a case of throwing the baby out with the bath water. I shall return to this point in the concluding chapter.

PCS analysis shows the different levels at which discrimination operates and how these levels reinforce each other. What is also worth noting, however, is that the degree of control and impact a worker can have on tackling discrimination is also related to the three levels, as is shown in Figure 2.2.

The further away one moves from the personal level, the less impact an individual can have. It therefore becomes necessary to move beyond the personal level, not only in terms of *understanding* discrimination but also in terms of tackling it. This involves individuals playing their part in collectively *challenging* the dominant discriminatory culture and ideology and, in so doing, playing at least a part in the undermining of the structures which support, and are supported by, that culture.

Structured inequalities and institutional oppression

One of the advantages of using PCS analysis is that it shows the inadequacy of explanations which stop short at the individual level. For example, it is not enough to explain racism as a personal prejudice or the wicked misdeeds of a bigoted minority such as members of extreme right-wing organisations. In fact, this more overt type of racial discrimination is referred to by many as 'racialism' (Nelson, 1990) to distinguish it from the wider concept of racism. As we shall see in Chapter 4, racism can be by omission as well as commission. It is not simply a matter of prejudicial beliefs.

If we accept that we live in a racist society (that is, a society that is geared to the white majority and thus discriminates against ethnic minorities – see the discussion of institutional oppression below

and of institutional racism in particular in Chapter 4), then it is not surprising that racist beliefs and practices will have been learned and 'taken on board' as parts of our personalities and what Berger and Luckmann (1967) call 'the taken-for-grantedness of everyday life'. Even if we are full of good intentions in relation to anti-discriminatory practice, unless we are actively seeking to eliminate racist thoughts and actions from our day-to-day dealings, they will 'filter through' from the culture and structure into which we were socialised and which constantly seek to influence us (through the media, political propaganda and so on). It is in this sense that we cannot remain 'neutral'. As the political slogan would have it: 'if you're not part of the solution, you must be part of the problem'. That is, the tide of discrimination (the C and S levels) is so strong that, unless we actively swim against it, it is more or less inevitable that we will be carried along with it.

I have used the example of racism but much the same can be said of the other forms of discrimination. For example, in terms of sexism, it is not simply a matter of a relatively small number of men who are overtly sexist or 'male chauvinist pigs'. Sexism subtly pervades our thoughts and actions and very often influences us in ways which we do not recognise until somebody points them out to us. (It is for this reason that 'Awareness Training' is an important prerequisite for anti-discriminatory practice – see Chapter 8.)

Oppression and discrimination cannot be explained simply by reference to personal prejudice. Katz's (1978) notion of 'prejudice plus power' takes us in the right direction but ultimately confuses the issue more than it clarifies it (Sibeon, 1991a). Discrimination is a reflection (and a reinforcer) of structured inequalities. The fact that we live in such a highly stratified society means that inequalities are part and parcel of the social order – there are inevitably winners and losers. Again, this is not an individual matter, as such inequalities are 'sewn in' to the fabric of society – they underpin social order.

This introduces the notion of 'institutional oppression'. Oppression does not derive simply from individual actions or 'praxis'. It can be, and often is, built in to structural and institutional patterns and organisational policies. Rooney (1987) gives a good example of how this operates. He describes how one local

authority used to recruit its home-help staff by word of mouth. When vacancies arose, the existing (predominantly white) workforce would be asked to let people know of such vacancies. They would, of course, pass this information on to their (predominantly white) circle of friends, some of whom would then be recruited. Consequently, this form of recruitment systematically marginalised and excluded potential black staff, albeit perhaps unintentionally.

There are many aspects of social work which run this risk of institutional oppression (the inherent sexism of some forms of family therapy, for example – see White, 1997). The concept is therefore an important part of the theory base of anti-discriminatory practice. An important point to bear in mind is that discrimination is a matter of outcomes rather than just intentions. That is, even where no discrimination is intended, if certain individuals or groups of people experience an unfair disadvantage, the discrimination has taken place and oppression is likely to be experienced as a result of it. Unwitting discrimination can be just as damaging (if not more so) as intentional discrimination.

PCS analysis: A note of caution

Since I first introduced PCS analysis in the first edition of this book and developed it in other publications (*Promoting Equality*, 2003a, for example), it has become very well established and widely used. While this can clearly be seen as a positive development, it has left me with two concerns:

1. In my role as an external examiner at a number of universities I have come across many examples of students simply referring to PCS analysis without showing any real understanding of it or how it can be used. It is as if it has become a 'mantra' to be uttered, rather than an analytical framework that can help us make sense of the complexities of discrimination and oppression. I am concerned to ensure that it should not be used in an unthinking or uncritical way. It should be used as a basis of critically reflective practice not as an alternative to it. Critically reflective practice will be discussed in Chapter 8.
2. I have encountered examples of PCS analysis being distorted and used inappropriately. For example, one group of participants on a training course I ran told me that a trainer on a

previous course had presented PCS analysis to them (without acknowledging its source) and had argued that, because racism exists at a structural and cultural level, then white people in this country *must* be racist at a personal level. This represents a gross distortion of PCS analysis, as it conflates the different levels. Personal racism and cultural and structural forms of racism are very different entities. Although they can be interrelated, it would be a grave mistake to equate them. Care should therefore be taken to ensure that the complexities of PCS analysis are appreciated and not allowed to form the basis of a reductionist approach.

Ideology: the power of ideas

An ideology is a set of ideas which are associated with a particular set of social arrangements. The ideology has the effect of 'legitimating the status quo' and thus justifies, protects and reinforces those social arrangements and the power relationships inherent within them. For example, patriarchal ideology promotes traditional notions of the respective roles of men and women and strongly discourages any deviation from these. The power interests inherent in patriarchy are therefore well served by the ideology of patriarchy. In short, the ideas base safeguards the power base. In fact, this is what characterises ideology – the *power of ideas* operating in the interests of *power relations*:

> Ideology refers to the power of ideas to maintain existing structures and social relations. For example, patriarchal ideology (patriarchy means 'the law of the father' – that is, male dominance) serves to maintain existing power relations between men and women by presenting gender roles as natural and inevitable (despite the considerable evidence to the contrary). Ideology is closely linked to power relations because it is largely through the role of ideology that power is exercised. That is, the subtle, often unquestioned, workings of ideology can be far more effective in maintaining power structures than the overt and explicit use of power, for example through force or coercion.
> (Thompson, 2000b, p. 56)

There are various ideologies at work in society but it tends to be

the ideas of powerful groups which become dominant or, to quote the marxist dictum: 'The ideas of the ruling class are, in every age, the ruling ideas' (quoted in Bottomore and Rubel, 1963, p. 93). The ideologies of capitalism, patriarchy and imperialism are examples of such dominant ideologies.

Ideology can be seen to operate in a number of ways – that is, a number of 'ideological devices' can be identified. The setting up of 'norms' is an important part of this. An ideology will establish what is 'normal' and, therefore, by extension, what is 'abnormal'. Ideology therefore defines deviance. 'Norm', however, is an ambiguous concept in so far as it can refer to a *statistical* norm, a quantitative measure. For example, heterosexuality can be seen to be 'normal' in so far as the majority of people are heterosexual. However, 'norm' can also be used in an idealised sense to reflect what 'ought to be', that is, an *ideological* norm. It is a common ideological device for the two types of norm to be conflated – for an ideological norm to masquerade as a statistical norm. For example, the ideological norm of the nuclear family is often presented as if it were a statistical norm whereas, in fact, only 22 per cent of households follow the nuclear family pattern of biological parents with their dependent children (*Social Trends,* 2005).

Another very common primary device is that of presenting particular goals or values as 'natural'. The use of the term 'natural' is a very powerful way of gaining approval – it is a form of legitimation. To describe, for example, the traditional male role of breadwinner as 'natural' adds a false, pseudo-biological air of legitimacy. This is a particularly significant device in terms of the ideological justification of oppression. Racism is premised on the false notion of biological/natural racial categories, sexism on the reduction of social gender roles to biological sex roles. Similarly, disablism hinges on a medical (hence biological/ natural) model of disability (Oliver and Sapey, 1999) and there is an almost direct parallel here with ageism. Indeed, the masking of the economic and sociopolitical dimensions (of old age) under the guise of a biological or natural decline is an ideological device, parallel with the 'biology is destiny' axiom of sexism and the 'racial superiority' fallacy of imperialism (Thompson, 1992b).

practice focus 2.2

Phillippa was the head of care at a large residential school where she was charged with implementing the organisation's equal opportunities policy. However, she found considerable resistance on the part of many staff. After months of trying to persuade her colleagues of the value of challenging discrimination, she began to recognise a pattern, a set of common themes that she kept encountering. She realised that biology was the reason commonly given for not promoting equality. Race, gender and so on were all seen as biological differences and therefore natural and not open to change. Phillippa therefore decided that she would need to think of ways of convincing them of the flaws in their argument, ways of showing them that biology was only one factor in a very complex situation.

The terms 'normal' and 'natural' both tend to have strong ideological overtones and so we should be very careful in using them and sensitise ourselves to their use by other people. The logic of discrimination is perpetuated by ideology and so we should be very wary of these common ideological devices. Ideology refers to both the set of ideas which 'serve as weapons of social interests' (Berger and Luckmann, 1967, p. 18), that is the ideas themselves, *and* this very process of serving such interests – reinforcing the power base of the status quo. A significant part of this is the process of 'stereotyping'.

An important distinction can be drawn between 'archetypes' and 'stereotypes'. An archetype is a 'typification' – that is, a set of typical characteristics and expectations we associate with a particular person, group or thing. It is a helpful way of simplifying the complexity of social reality and thus making sense of the world. It introduces and maintains a degree of stability and predictability. However, this helpful and constructive process can easily spill over into the much more harmful and destructive process of stereotyping.

A stereotype is a fixed set of ideas that come as a 'package'. A set of characteristics is assumed to apply in total to a person or group that is stereotyped. For example, stereotypical ideas about older people include assumptions that they are deaf, inactive, dependent and incapable of making their own decisions. Not only

are such assumptions patronising, they are also very problematic in so far as they distort reality by presenting oversimplified images of a complex reality.

What distinguishes an archetype from a stereotype is that we are likely to abandon an archetype as soon as we encounter information that negates our assumptions, whereas stereotypes tend to persist regardless of evidence or experience to the contrary. For example, someone who holds negative stereotypes about black people who meets a black person they get on with and feel positive towards, is likely to see that particular black person as an 'exception to the rule' and continue to hold negative views about black people in general, rather than abandon the stereotype.

This is a matter of assumptions. In forming a typification we make certain assumptions – often ideological assumptions – and, if we refuse to allow logic or evidence to challenge these, we run the risk of stereotyping, as we are more prepared to reject evidence than we are to reject our own ideology.

This concept of stereotyping is a particularly important one in relation to discrimination and oppression. Dominance, inequality and injustice are often maintained by reference to stereotypes, for example of disabled people, gay men, lesbians or bisexuals. Stereotypes are therefore powerful tools of ideology, and are thus significant obstacles to the development of anti-discriminatory practice.

In terms of PCS analysis, ideology can be seen as the 'glue' which binds the levels together. It is ideology which acts as the vehicle of 'cultural transmission' between the C and P levels. Similarly, it is ideology which explains how the C level reflects, maintains and protects the S level by presenting social divisions as 'natural' and 'normal' and thus desirable. In short, the relationship between the levels is an *ideological* one, a reflection of the meeting point of the idea of power and the power of ideas.

Before leaving the topic of ideology, it is as well to point out that ideology is not an abstract force unconnected with human actions. Indeed, it is in and through human action that ideology comes into being. It is part of the complex interplay of individual and wider social forces, it is the bridge between the external objective world of social circumstances and the internal subjective world of meaning. As such, it is an *existential* concept, a dimension of human existence rather than an abstract form in its own right (Thompson, 1992a).

The role of language

As ideology involves the communication of ideas, language is a central part of this process. It is therefore important to develop an understanding of the role of language in constructing and maintaining discrimination and oppression. It is a major subject in its own right and so the discussion here is necessarily selective (see Thompson, 2003b for a detailed discussion of the significance of language). I shall focus on just two aspects, firstly the discriminatory nature of some language forms and secondly a clarification of the terminology used in constructing a basis for anti-discriminatory practice.

Many words and expressions have derogatory, or overtly insulting overtones whilst others are more subtle and less obvious in producing a discriminatory effect. For example, the British Sociological Association (BSA) has produced a set of guidelines on anti-sexist language which states: 'When reference to both sexes is intended, a large number of phrases use the word man or other masculine equivalents (e.g. 'father') and a large number of nouns use the suffix 'man', thereby excluding women from the picture we present of the world.' Thus the use of 'masculine' language to refer to both men and women contributes to the 'invisibility' of women and thereby facilitates the persistence of the gender imbalance in terms of status and power. This is 'exclusive' language, as it has the effect of excluding women.

Similarly, the BSA has produced a set of guidelines on anti-racist language indicating which terms are appropriate and which are likely to have racist overtones. However, it is acknowledged that tackling these issues is difficult and far from straightforward:

> The issues are not always clear cut. There is disagreement as to whether some terms are acceptable or not and different political positions are aligned with different terms. Consequently, this guidance can only aim to promote an awareness of the issues in many instances rather than to prescribe or reinforce the use of particular terms.

The debate over terminology and racial discrimination will no doubt continue, and it is likely that a definitive lexicon of anti-racism will remain elusive. Indeed, it is not simply a matter of distinguishing between 'taboo' words and 'OK' words, as in the

sense of 'political correctness'. What is needed is not a simple list of proscribed words but, rather, an awareness of, and sensitivity to, the oppressive and discriminatory potential of language. This must be a fundamental part of anti-discriminatory practice, as the tendency to oversimplify language issues stands in the way of recognising, and dealing with, the complexities of the power of language and their role in perpetuating patterns of discrimination and oppression.

Language is also a key aspect of ageism. As I have argued previously:

> Terms such as 'the elderly', 'the old', 'EMI' are commonly used but are, none the less, very dehumanizing – they 'depersonalize' the people to whom they refer; language can also patronize older people through the use of terms such as 'old dear', or by using first names without checking that this is acceptable. . . . Language therefore plays a pivotal role with regard to dignity – it can either enhance it or act as a barrier to its realization.
> (Thompson, 1995a, pp. 11–12)

This passage is a good example of how the C level (culture as embodied in language) has a significant impact on the P level of our day-to-day practice. Furthermore, as Hugman (1994) comments, referring to the work of Featherstone and Hepworth (1990): 'the language which surrounds old age and older people tends not to provide the materials with which to construct a positive identity' (p. 78).

Much the same can be said of the language of disability. Whilst depersonalised terms such as 'the elderly' are frowned upon by the anti-discriminatory movement, so too is the term 'the disabled'. A more appropriate term is 'disabled *people*' or 'people with disabilities' (see Chapter 6).

Language therefore needs to be used sensitively and critically in order to avoid negative connotations. Davis (1988) points out that even officially defined terms can be discriminatory. For example, he distinguishes between the World Health Organisation (WHO, 1980) definitions of impairment and disability (with their individualistic emphasis) and those of The Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS) which underline the social nature of disability – the restrictions caused by *social organisation,* rather

than the impairment itself (UPIAS, 1976). This will be an important aspect of the discussions in Chapter 6.

Language therefore plays a significant part in the construction and maintenance of discriminatory and oppressive forms of practice. However, it has often been argued that the use of language is secondary to the good intentions of those using these terms. The argument goes: 'If people use such terms in good faith without intending any ill-will towards the groups concerned, surely it is petty to make an issue of the use of such language?'

This seems a reasonable argument on the surface but, when we look at it more closely, the pitfalls become visible. The major point we need to recognise is that language is not simply a reflection of oppression (and thus an innocuous route if paved with good intentions, it could be argued) but actually *constructs* such oppression. Foucault uses the term 'discourse' to refer to the way in which language and other forms of communication act as the vehicle of social processes (see Foucault, 1977, 1979). For example, medical discourse not only reflects the power of the medical profession but actively contributes to constructing, re-enacting and thus perpetuating such power.

Discriminatory language therefore both reflects the discriminatory culture and social structure in which we live, and also contributes to the continuance of such discrimination. Language is not a passive receptacle; it is an active encounter with the social world. Freire (1972) draws a similar conclusion:

> Human existence cannot be silent, nor can it be nourished
> by false words, but only by true words, with which men
> transform the world. To exist, humanly, is to *name* the
> world, to change it. Once named, the world reappears to the
> namers as a problem and requires of them a new *naming*.
> (pp. 60–1)

Language is part of the social world; indeed, it is one of the bridges between the personal and the social and, as such, it cannot be neutral (see Fook, 2002). The language we use either reinforces discrimination through constructing it as 'normal' or contributes, in some small way at least, to undermining the continuance of a discriminatory discourse.

Rojek *et al.* (1988) also stress the importance of language and its discriminatory potential when they argue that, 'the language which

social workers are trained to use in order to free clients very often has the effect of imprisoning them anew' (p. 1). This further underlines the need for a sensitivity to language and a critical approach to the forms of communication we commonly use. Indeed, it is largely for this reason that I shall now move on to clarify some of the key terms used in current attempts to promote anti-discriminatory practice. This is not intended as a glossary and is far from comprehensive in its coverage. However, I hope it will lead to a clearer understanding of some of the central issues, and thus make it easier to get to grips with the complexities of this intricate and thorny subject.

Discrimination

Unfair or unequal treatment of individuals or groups based on an actual or perceived difference; prejudicial behaviour acting against the interests of those people who characteristically tend to belong to relatively powerless groups within the social structure (women, ethnic minorities, old or disabled people and members of the working class in general). Discrimination is therefore a matter of social formation as well as individual or group behaviour.

Oppression

Inhuman or degrading treatment of individuals or groups; hardship and injustice brought about by the dominance of one group over another; the negative and demeaning exercise of power. It often involves disregarding the rights of an individual or group and is thus a denial of citizenship. Oppression arises as a result of unfair discrimination – that is, the disadvantages experienced as a result of discrimination have oppressive consequences.

Anti-discriminatory practice

An approach to practice which seeks to reduce, undermine or eliminate discrimination and oppression, specifically in terms of challenging sexism, racism, ageism and disablism (these terms will be defined in subsequent chapters) and other forms of discrimination or oppression encountered in practice. Social workers occupy positions of power and influence, and so there is considerable scope for discrimination and oppression, whether this be intentional or by default. Anti-discriminatory practice is an attempt to eradicate

discrimination and oppression from our own practice and challenge them in the practice of others and the institutional structures in which we operate. In this respect, it is a form of emancipatory practice (Thompson, 2002c).

Equal opportunities

A generic term for various forms of anti-discrimination, particularly with reference to employment-related issues – recruitment, promotion and so on. Implicit in the concept is the notion of *disadvantage* and the need to guard against it – by avoiding disadvantaging certain people (for example, through restrictive employment practices) and by promoting greater access to employment, training and promotion opportunities for members of disadvantaged groups (affirmative action). Equality of opportunity is closely linked to the notion of anti-discrimination and the anti-discrimination legislation (discussed in Chapter 1) which underpins it.

Diversity

A term increasingly being used to emphasise the differences between individuals and across groups *and* the fact that such differences are best seen as assets to be valued and affirmed, rather than as problems to be solved. Diversity and difference are the roots of discrimination, in the sense that it is through the identification of differences that discrimination (and thus oppression) takes place. The 'diversity approach' seeks to tackle discrimination by presenting differences as positives to be benefited from, rather than the basis of negative, unfair discrimination.

Prejudice

An opinion or judgement formed without considering the relevant facts or arguments; a biased and intolerant attitude towards particular people or social groups; an opinion or attitude which is rigidly and irrationally maintained even in the face of strong contradictory evidence or in the persistent absence of supportive evidence; a rigid form of thinking based on stereotypes and discrimination. Although prejudice operates primarily at the *P* level, it is closely linked with, and informed by, the *C* and *S* levels. Prejudices do not occur at random but, rather, reflect particular social divisions and social processes.

Radical social work

An approach to social work which seeks to locate the problems experienced by clients in the wider social context of structured inequalities, poverty, inadequate amenities, discrimination and oppression – to recognise the sociopolitical 'roots' of clients' problems, hence the term 'radical' which means 'at the root'. It sees social work as primarily a political venture, a *struggle* to humanise, as far as possible, the oppressive circumstances to which clients are subject. It is premised on the key notion of *empowerment,* the process of helping clients gain greater control over their lives in whatever ways possible – resources, education, political and self-awareness and so on.

Definitions can, of course, obscure as much as they clarify but the discussions and analyses in subsequent chapters will continue to cast light on these seven terms and related concepts and issues.

Commonalities and differences

There are many common themes across the various forms of oppression. These include:

● prejudice and judgemental attitudes towards particular individuals and/or groups;
● stereotypes;
● the dynamic interplay of the P, C and S levels;
● inequality and the denial of rights;
● power relations; and
● ideological legitimation based on biology.

There are also a number of others which have not been discussed here. For example, the concept of 'hegemony' is applicable across the board. This refers to the ideological dominance of one group over another or over a range of groups. One group, or 'social collectivity' (for example, men, white people, able-bodied people) gain power, status, position, prestige or some other advantage at the expense of other, less socially favoured groups (women, black or disabled people) and continue to maintain such dominance through the power of ideas which reinforce the 'naturalness' of the status quo.

Hegemony is therefore closely linked to the notion of exploitation, although not necessarily in any deliberate or intentional sense. It is also closely linked with ideology for it is primarily through the vehicle of ideology that hegemony operates. Clarke and Cochrane (1998) explain the link between ideology and hegemony when they comment that ideologies:

> try to organize and mobilize elements of common-sense knowledge as part of their world view and in support of the social interests they represent. Thus, dominant social classes will refer to, and make connections with, aspects of common-sense knowledge that reflect and support existing patterns of inequality and which legitimate the economic or political power of these dominant groups. Counter-ideologies will want to build connections with those other elements of common-sense thought that object to or are sceptical about the existing social order. . . . The aim is to ensure that there appears to be no alternative to the vision of society being presented that is capable of winning tacit or active support from people across a wide social spectrum. Gramsci used the term *hegemonic* to describe a political project that achieved these ends.
> (p. 33)

Part of the ideological basis of hegemony is the idea of an 'out group', a group of people defined in negative terms and assigned an inferior status. This can be recognised as part of the process of discrimination and oppression and is thus a further commonality.

It is important that social workers are aware of the common threads and are able to respond to them accordingly – through resisting or weakening their influence and softening or preventing their impact. The commonalities are also an important part of avoiding the development of a divisive 'hierarchy of oppressions', as discussed in Chapter 1. Understanding the common themes is a major aspect of fighting the common enemies, those of discrimination and oppression. However, there are also significant differences between the multiple forms of oppression. It would be a mistake, both analytically and tactically, to concentrate exclusively on the commonalities without paying due heed to the important differences.

practice focus 2.3

Darren had worked in a day centre for disabled people where he took a keen interest in issues of rights and equality. When he moved to a centre for older people, he expected to be able to continue his work on empowerment and was looking forward to challenging ageism in much the same way as he had tackled disablism in his previous job. However, he was soon to be disappointed as he found that many of the older people showed little or no interest in rights issues. At first, Darren was very worried by this as he felt that he would not be able to achieve any progress in his new job. However, after a little while, he regained his confidence and came to the conclusion that empowerment was not impossible, but he would have to make adjustments. His experience of dealing with one form of oppression could not be imported wholesale and uncritically into working with people experiencing another form of oppression.

It is beyond the scope of this book to give a detailed and thorough exposition of the differences and so I shall restrict myself to a small selection by way of illustration of the wider field. Race and gender issues can be contrasted with age issues in at least two ways:

1. In the former cases, people subject to oppression have recourse to the law whereas, in the latter in UK at least, there is no equivalent anti-discrimination legislation (although, at the time of writing, there are plans to develop such a legal framework).
2. The people affected by discrimination on the grounds of age (or disability) are subject to the dangers of 'medicalisation'. That is, old or disabled people are construed as 'ill' (and thus 'invalidated' Laing, 1967; Laing and Cooper, 1971) in a way which women and black people are generally not.

There are also varying levels of publicity given to the areas and different levels of public awareness of the issues, both within social work in particular and within the wider community at large.

There are also differences in the ways in which racism and sexism are experienced and combated. For example, womanhood is not a totally homogeneous, undifferentiated entity (it intersects with class, race/ethnicity, age and so on). However, it is a much

more homogeneous concept than that of race. There is, for example, no consensus as to which groups should be classified as 'black' – or 'Black' with a capital 'B' to emphasise that it is a political, rather than descriptive term (Williams, 1989, p. ix). The BSA guidelines on anti-racist language note, for example, that: '. . . some Asians in Britain object to the use of the word "black" being applied to them and some would argue that it also confuses a number of ethnic groups which should be treated separately'. There is a danger, however, of overemphasising the differences and we should be clear about the need to focus on the commonalities and thus the common steps that can be taken to challenge oppression and fight discrimination.

There is a danger in placing too much emphasis on the disparate elements of oppression and thus failing to see the links between, for example, racism and sexism (Bayne-Smith, 1996) sexism and ageism (Arber and Ginn, 1995) and so on. We can fail to see the patterns and common threads and thereby miss an opportunity for moving forward together as part of a wider anti-discrimination movement. It should also be remembered that the various oppressions are separated out for purposes of analysis and clarity of exposition but are, in fact, dimensions of the same existence. People do not feel oppressions in isolation but, rather, as different but related aspects of what Sartre called 'lived experience' (*'le vécu'*, Sartre, 1976).

This is a point which is particularly worthy of note in relation to the following chapters where the focus of attention falls on a particular form of oppression (beginning in Chapter 3, with sexism). The point again needs to be made that sexism, racism, ageism, disablism and so on are analytical categories and thus part of a wider and deeper social process (that of hegemony, social division and exploitation) rather than distinct and unrelated forms of discrimination.

Although substantially different, quantitatively and qualitatively and in both a historical and contemporary sense, these forms of oppression share enough in common to justify a unified theoretical approach to tackle the relevant issues in each of these areas.

This chapter has contributed towards the task of establishing such a theory base. However, it would be naïve in the extreme to assume that the theoretical tools given here are sufficient for the task of developing a genuinely anti-discriminatory practice. This

chapter, and indeed this book as a whole, can only be a beginning, a few relatively small, but none the less important steps in the right direction.

points to ponder
➤ Can you identify aspects of the culture you were brought up in that have discriminatory connotations (for example, in relation to gender roles)? ➤ How might these affect the way you practise as a social worker? ➤ Where would you locate yourself in terms of the structure of society (class and race/ethnicity, for example)? ➤ Can you identify ways in which the structure of society might affect clients, their circumstances and their problems? ➤ In what ways might you take these structural factors into consideration in your practice?

Guide to further learning

Social divisions are a major feature of the sociological literature and so a great deal has been written about them. For an introductory overview, see Abercrombie *et al.* (2000) or Giddens (2001). See also Payne (2000). Class in particular has a large literature base. General texts include Crompton (1993) and Devine (1997). Roberts (2001) is particularly clear and helpful. Literature relating specifically to social work includes Jones (1998) and Jones and Novak (1999). Donnison (1998) is also an important text.

PCS analysis is discussed at a more advanced level in Thompson (2003a) and, specifically in relation to older people and anti-ageist practice, in Thompson (1995a) and S. Thompson (2005). Bevan (2002) provides a worked example of PCS analysis in relation to loss and grief issues.

Diversity is discussed briefly in Thompson (2003a) and more fully in Kandola and Fullerton (1998). The importance of language in social work is explored in Parton and O'Byrne (2000) and is further emphasised in Taylor and White (2000). Thompson (2003b) is devoted to an extensive discussion of communication and language and makes frequent reference to issues of discrimination and oppression. In particular, it warns of the dangers of over-simplifying these issues.

An interesting discussion of stereotyping is to be found in Pickering (2001).

Ideology and hegemony are discussed at an introductory level in McLellan (1995). Fook (2002) is a very helpful text in this respect. Thompson (2003b) also contains discussion of these topics.