



School of Social Work

BSW Glossary of Terms

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Glossary of Terms

The following list of terms has been assembled in an effort to help you become more familiar and comfortable with words that you will see frequently in your required readings and hear often in lectures and class discussion. Please familiarize yourself with these terms, as they are imperative to your ability to read articles and texts with a high level of comprehension and critical thinking as well as contribute to class discussion. The Academic Welcome Committee would like to recognize Dr. Brenda LeFrançois, Dr. Delores Mullings, Dr. Ken Barter and Dr. Janet Fitzpatrick for their contributions to this initiative.

Ableism: “An assemblage of laws, policies, attitudes, words, and actions that privilege the able-bodied and disadvantage people with disabilities. Ableism stems from the time-worn discriminatory prejudice that disability is a “defect” that renders its bearers less capable than their able-bodied counterparts of contributing to society and participating as full citizens”. (LeFrançois et al, 2013, p334)

Adulthoodism: “The oppression experienced by children and young people at the hands of adults and adult-produced/adult tailored systems. It relates to the socio-political status differentials and power relations endemic to adult-child relations. Adulthoodism may include experiences of individual prejudice and discrimination as well as systemic oppression. It is characterized by adult authoritarianism towards children and adult-centric perspectives in interacting with children and in understanding children’s experiences”. (LeFrançois et al, p334)

Ageism: “Prejudiced thoughts and discriminatory actions based on differences in age; usually that of younger persons against older”. (UMass Lowell, p. 2)

Agency: “A person’s power or ability to influence a situation, and their own sense of this”. (Fook, 2012, p193)

Anti-Oppressive practice (AOP): “A reaction to the ‘mainstreaming’ of social work, and rise of neoliberalism, and part of a move beyond class, AOP is an approach to social work that began in the United Kingdom during the late 1980s. Part of the critical social work tradition, it addresses social divisions and structural inequalities, and embodies a person-centred philosophy as well as a focus on process and outcome. Key practice principles include critical self-reflection and critical assessment of users’ experiences of oppression, empowerment, partnership, and minimal intervention”. (LeFrançois et al, p334)

Binary oppositional thinking: “Thinking which involves categorizing phenomena into two opposing categories only (the whole population of the phenomena in question must belong to one or other of the categories) which are mutually exclusive and in which one is usually defined in terms of criteria which define that other, and therefore is seen in terms of what it is not, and also therefore devalued”. (Fook, 2012, p193)

Classism: “Prejudiced thoughts and discriminatory actions based on difference in socio-economic status, income, class; usually by upper classes against lower”. (UMass Lowell, p. 3)

Commodification: “Refers to the process whereby a phenomenon is spoken about, and treated as if it is a physical or material entity, which can be exchanged or traded. The commodification of power is a major way in which power is conceptualised in modernist thinking”. (Fook, 2012, p193)

Conscientization: “A term popularized by Brazilian educator Paulo Freire – a form of consciousness-raising that prioritizes dialogue, reflection, and action. It is the attempt to humanize the world, to name the world in order to change the world”. (LeFrançois et al, 2013, p335)

Creativity: “Creativity in social work practice occurs when a social worker intentionally envisages beyond the presumed levels of good practice required in their roles and functions, and accepts a challenge which often leads him or her to utilize uncommon, unfamiliar, or previously unconsidered means to pursue greater social justice and heightened empowerment” (Turner, 2002, p. i)

Critical approach: “A critical approach on its own refers to an approach based on an analysis of how power (relations and structures) is created and maintained at all levels, but in particular how personal and social power is linked”. (Fook, 2012, p193)

Critical self-reflection: “A process of reflecting on experience in order to learn from it. The process may be stimulated by searching for tacit and taken-for-granted assumptions. It becomes critical when fundamental assumptions are exposed (and reworked) and new meaning is made, which can serve as principles or guidelines for further action. It is also critical when a critical analysis of power is applied in order to provide further understanding, so that new meanings which are made are also potentially transformative. In the workplace, critical reflection can function to help improve practice, but also to create new practice theories, and therefore to help practitioners function in situations of uncertainty”. (Fook, 2012, p194)

Critical thinking: “challenge[s] the idea of immutable scientific knowledge in a number of ways: by asking what constitutes ‘acceptable’ knowledge, and whether and why some forms of knowledge are valued over others; by focusing on how we know, as well as what we know; by drawing attention to different perspectives on what and how we know; by drawing attention to the perspective of the knower, and how it influences what is known and how it is known (reflexivity)”. (Fook, 2012, p40)

Deconstruction: “Involves uncovering dominant ways of thinking (discourses), particularly by searching for hidden, multiple or suppressed discourses. Deconstruction typically ‘unsettles’ or ‘decentres’ dominant discourses”. (Fook, 2012, p194)

Dialogue: “implies talk between two subjects, not the speech of subject and object. It is a humanizing speech, one that challenges and resists domination.” (hooks, 1989, p. 131)

Dichotomous thinking: (see Binary oppositional thinking)

Dilemma of difference: “This involves the problem of how to name (validate) difference without perpetuating further discrimination because of that naming. It is argued that it is important politically to locate the source of the difference in social relations (i.e. the need to name it for political reasons) rather than an inherent difference in the named people themselves. The dilemma of difference is also tied up with identity politics”. (Fook, 2012, p194)

Discourse: “The ways in which social phenomena are spoken about, which implies thinking about power arrangements, and how these are constructed. Typically language, and the specific terms and phrases which are used, are focused on as the major element of discourses. However

other communications may also be included (such as communications implied in physical arrangements, non-verbal communication, and so forth). Discourses which are dominant tend to be those held or perpetrated by dominant groups, which means that their view of situations is maintained, and so therefore their relative power is maintained”. (Fook, 2012, p194-195)

Egalitarian: “processes and practices based on the belief that all people are equal and deserve equal rights and opportunities, including social, political, and economic ones.” (Baines, 2011, p. 26)

Equity: “not to be confused with ‘equality’, equity helps us focus on treating individuals fairly rather than treating everyone the same”. (University of New Brunswick)

Essentialize: “To claim that particular attributes are a necessary part of a specific entity; to consider particular attributes to be a natural or inborn part of a specific entity; to reduce complex phenomena associated with particular groups or identities to simplistic biological or cultural explanations”. (LeFrançois et al, 2013, p336)

False Dichotomies: (see Binary oppositional thinking).

Healthification: “The conversion of social problems into health problems. As with the medicalization of human distress at the level of the individual, healthification functions to divert attention from the systemic and hegemonic conditions that undermine human well-being. In the process, healthification privileges (bio)medicine as the primary instrument of individual recovery and social betterment, to the exclusion of political engagement, institutional reform, structural change, and the pursuit of human justice”. (LeFrançois et al, 2013, p336)

Hegemony: “Refers to systemic dominance generally, although it is most commonly employed in reference to dominant ideological beliefs and the words that accompany them. When beliefs are hegemonic, they are so widely accepted that the average person takes them as common sense – in other words, is not aware that they are part of an ideology at all, never mind part of a regime of ruling”. (LeFrançois et al, 2013, p336)

Heteropatriarchy: “A term used to refer to the intersection between the structures of heteronormativity and patriarchy. Heteronormativity designates fixed and binary categories of sex (male/female), gender (masculine/feminine), and sexuality (heterosexuality/homosexuality), and assumes a relationship of coherence between sex, gender, and sexuality whereby sex = gender = sexuality (male = masculine = heterosexual). Patriarchy assumes that masculine attributes and ways of knowing are superior to feminine ones. The intersection between heteronormativity and patriarchy produces the naturalization of heterosexuality and the privileging of masculinity within social institutions. Importantly, heteropatriarchy is racialized and classed, and therefore, largely reflects the norms and values associated with the dominant white, middle-class, and heterosexual group”. (LeFrançois et al, 2013, p336-337)

Heterosexism: “The presumption that everyone is, and should be, heterosexual”. (UMass Lowell, p. 4)

Identity politics: “Political engagement organized around group identification, common interest, and shared experience of oppression (as in the politics of gender, class, race, disability, sexual identity, and Mad identity)”. (LeFrançois et al, 2013, p337) “Power plays which are involved in issues of who defines the identity of groups. Typically this is an issue for marginal groups

whose identity is normally determined by more powerful groups, such as policy makers. It is seen as an integral site for marginal groups to create more power for themselves” (Fook, 2012, p195)

Intersectionality: “...intersectionality posits that socially constructed categories of oppression and privilege, such as race, class, gender, and age, simultaneously interact to create unique life experiences...Challenging former feminist perspectives, feminist women of color...argued strongly that race, class, and gender are inseparable determinants of inequalities that interdependently ‘form interlocking patterns. The interlocking patterns in turn serve as a basis for developing multiple systems of domination that affect access to power and privileges, influence social relationships, construct meanings, and shape people’s everyday experience’ (Andersen, 1996, p.xii)”. (Murphy et al, 2009, p7)

Logocentrism: Refers to the modernist tendency to believe that there is one unified ‘truth’ which is unchangeable, and can be arrived at through progressive and cumulative approaches to knowledge (i.e. successive research attempts can build upon knowledge which has come before, and each successive attempt yields better and more accurate knowledge)”. (Fook, 2012, p195)

Mad Studies: “An umbrella term that is used to embrace the body of knowledge that has emerged from psychiatric survivors, Mad-identified people, antipsychiatry academics and activists, critical psychiatrists, and radical therapists. This body of knowledge is wide-ranging and includes scholarship that is critical of the mental health system as well as radical and Mad activist scholarship. The field of study is informed by and generated by the perspectives of psychiatric survivors and Mad-identified researchers and academics”. (LeFrançois et al, 2013, p337)

Madness: “A ubiquitous term for a range of phenomena (eg. Violence, extremity, creativity, excellence, chaos) historically used in the West to indicate irrationality, confusion, or distress in a situation or an individual (e.g., mania, melancholy, lunacy). Madness discourse was formulated into psycho-medical terms (e.g., psychosis, depression, asociality) and psycho-legal terms (e.g., insanity, incapacity), but has recently been reclaimed for broader social, cultural, even liberatory approaches to medicalized experience, especially by people treated involuntarily. Mad people (not the trope of madness per se) provide the grounds for these new discourses, often in tension with dominant explanations of experience”. (LeFrançois et al, 2013, p337)

Marginalized: “Excluded, ignored, or relegated to the outer edge of a group/society/community”. (UMass Lowell, p. 5)

Matrix of domination: “Black feminist sociologist Patricia Hill Collins introduced this concept as a cornerstone of intersectionality theory to capture the overlapping, relational experiences and effects of multiple oppression based on gender, race, class, culture, sexual orientation, youth, seniority, disability, and corresponding axes of domination and subjugation”. (LeFrançois et al, 2013, p337)

Narratives: “Narratives are regarded as particular constructions of a situation or event, told from the perspective of whoever is constructing the story, and for particular purposes. It is recognised that, in one sense, everybody creates narratives or ‘stories’, as they can only be communicated through language, whose meanings are limited by time and context. Narratives in this sense can normally only represent one perspective, or version of what happened. They may or may not be regarded as true, depending on the perspective of the listener”. (Fook, 2012, p195)

Narrative identity: “Narrative identities are the versions of how people see themselves, through the narratives they construct about themselves”. (Fook, 2012, p196)

Neoliberalism: “A political philosophy and an economic system that gives expression to Margaret Thatcher’s infamous maxim that ‘there is no such thing as society’. Since the 1980s, neoliberals have dominated geopolitical and domestic governments in the ‘developed’ world, promoting policies of ‘free’ market economy, globalization, state minimalism, the expansion and deregulation of ‘private enterprise’, lower taxation for corporations and the rich, the hollowing out of systems of social provision (including health, welfare, and education), and the celebration of the autonomous, self-governing, ‘responsibilized’ citizen”. (LeFrançois et al, 2013, p338)

Normalization: “The social processes that allow for particular ideas, behaviours, attributes, and so on to be understood as normal/valuable within a given society. Those who deviate from a society’s norms are required, if deemed possible, to go through rehabilitative procedures in order to attempt to achieve normalcy”. (LeFrançois et al, 2013, p338)

Oppression: “Results from the use of institutional power and privilege where one person or group benefits at the expense of another. Oppression is the use of power and the effects of domination”. (UMass Lowell, p. 5)

Othering: “A process in which social difference is constructed. Binary categories are created (usually ‘us’ and ‘the other’) and differences are constructed in binary oppositional ways. Social differences are then usually constructed as oppositional and in relation to characteristics of ‘us’, therefore becoming automatically defined in terms of the first group (‘us’) and also by definition, devalued”. (Fook, 2012, p196)

Participatory democracy: “An organizational philosophy that prioritizes the collective over the individual and seeks to democratize social or political groups by enabling broad-based decision-making and equal participation, thus rendering traditional hierarchical power relationships null. An organizing principle of anarchist republicans in the Spanish Civil War, of the leftist groups of the 1960s and 1970s, and the Occupy movement of 2011, participatory democracy is connected to the notion of small world networks, but is inherently political in nature”. (LeFrançois et al, 2013, p338)

Performativity: “A term used to refer to how the compulsory repetition of speech and language, acts, expressions, and behaviours brings into existence that which it names. Judith Butler (1999) has used the concept of performativity to reveal the illusion of gender as naturally and logically arising from some *real* substance of the self. It is through the repetition of gendered acts, expressions, and behaviours that gender gets produced on the surface of bodies. Gender is conceptualized as a performative speech act through which bodies are materialized and ‘naturalized’ as man and woman”. (LeFrançois et al, 2013, p338-339)

Positionality: “Involves an ability to recognise one’s social position and its influence in any one context, and therefore to act in ways which take this into account. Awareness of social position should allow reflexive practice, and an ability to act from both within and outside a situation”. (Fook, 2012, p196)

Postmodernism: “Refers to both a way of thinking, and also a label for the current period of history. In simple terms it refers to a critique of logocentrism, or the belief in unified theories or

ways of thinking. Postmodern thinking opens the way to accept many different perspectives and ways of knowing”. (Fook, 2012, p196)

Poststructuralism: “Often related to postmodern thinking but refers more specifically to the analyses of language and discourse aspects. It is a critique, in particular, of structural thinking, i.e. that phenomena can be completely explained in terms of underlying structures or thinking. Poststructuralism essentially argues that meanings are much more open, and subject to interpretation in context”. (Fook, 2012, p196)

Racism: “Prejudiced thoughts and discriminatory actions based on difference in race/ethnicity; usually by white/European descent groups against persons of color”. (UMass Lowell, p. 6)

Radicalism: “Meaning ‘of the root(s)’, radical refers to political policies, attitudes, or practices that advocate more sweeping political, economic, or social change than that traditionally supported by the mainstream political parties or mainstream society”. (LeFrançois et al, 2013, p339)

Reflective practice: “The ability to reflect on the assumptions (hidden theory) embedded in practice, and to expose these to examination, in order to improve practice”. (Fook, 2012, p196)

Reflexivity: “Being able to locate one’s influence in context, and to understand how one’s self and actions are constructed in relation to context”. (Fook, 2012, p196)

Refusal terms: “Terms that people – oppressed communities in particular – use when combatting the hegemonic words of those in power. In various ways and to different degrees, just by being uttered or written, ‘refusal’ terms call the hegemonic terms into question (see ‘hegemony’ above)”. (LeFrançois et al, 2013, p339)

Residual: “a view of social policy which ‘severely limits the role of the state to intervening or assisting only when other resources of family, church, and neighbourhood have been exhausted’”. (McKenzie & Wharf, 2010, p. xiii)

Sanism: “Originally coined by Morton Birnbaum but popularized by Michael Perlin, director of the Mental Disability Law Studies Program at New York Law School, sanism describes the systematic subjugation of people who have received mental health diagnoses or treatment. Also known as mentalism (see Judi Chamberlin’s work for more information), sanism may result in various forms of stigma, blatant discrimination, and a host of microaggressions. They may include low expectations and professional judgments that individuals with mental health issues are ‘incompetent, not able to do things for themselves, constantly in need of supervision and assistance, unpredictable, violent and irrational’ (Chamberlin, 1990, p2)”. (LeFrançois et al, 2013, p339)

Situated subjectivity: “The notion that people’s ideas about themselves and how they are made or constituted, are subject to changing contexts and interpretations. Their own subjectivity is therefore dependent on changing situations”. (Fook, 2012, p196)

Social constructionism: “Also known as social constructivism, this tradition of sociological theory advances the view that social facts are not inherent to people and things, but are rather the contingent product of historical processes, institutional contexts, discursive practices, and social relations”. (LeFrançois et al, 2013, p339)

Social Justice: “A broad term for action intended to create genuine equality, fairness and respect among peoples”. (UMass Lowell, p. 7)

Structural social work: “emphasizes the way that everyday problems are social in nature; that is, they are shaped by social structures and relations interacting with individuals, their personalities, families, and communities, which are social in nature”. (Baines, 2011, p. 9)

Structural violence: “Understood as an institutionalized form of violence that is ingrained in everyday practices of institutions or social policies that disenfranchise some people but not others. Structural violence is hard to recognize because there is usually no individual perpetrator of violence and it receives no objection from society. Schools, hospitals, organized religions, and psychiatry can all engage in structural violence, while those who work within them can be unaware of the full implications of their taken-for-granted practices”. (LeFrançois et al, 2013, p340)

Systemic racism: “The social and institutionalized processes that support and solidify racial discrimination and inequality as they are embedded in institutional, legal, organizational, economic, and everyday policies and procedures”. (LeFrançois et al, 2013, p340)

White liberal discourse: “A (neo)colonialist tradition of narratives and truth claims that presents itself as upholding progressive, ‘tolerant’ perspectives on ‘race relations’, while implicitly marginalizing the histories and experiences of racialized peoples, and centring whiteness as the racial category against which all others are judged and found wanting”. (LeFrançois et al, 2013, p340)

White settler supremacy: “White settlers in Canada are those who have settled within this nation-state and by doing so continue to partake in the displacement, forced assimilation, attempted genocide, and spatial containment of Indigenous peoples. White settler supremacy embodies the ongoing social, political, economic, and legal narratives that allow white settlers and their frameworks to be understood as central in origin to this land. By enacting white settler frameworks as dominant, all other people and their frameworks are understood as minority and marginalized”. (LeFrançois et al, 2013, p340)

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