Becoming an Ally: Breaking the Cycle of Oppression in People

Anne Bishop. (2nd ed.) Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 2002.

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Transforming the Field: Critical Antiracist and Anti-Oppressive Perspectives for the Human Service Practicum

Narda Razack. Halifax: Fernwood Publishing, 2002.

A popular theme of both education and social work literature has been the need for workers to recognize and confront oppressive structures and develop competence in working with diverse groups of people. In *Becoming an Ally: Breaking the Cycle of Oppression in People*, Anne Bishop offers a critical perspective on understanding the complexity of oppression in the lives of individuals and institutions and explores the depth of the structural, historical and political roots of oppression. Narda Razack's *Transforming the Field: Critical Antiracist and Anti-Oppressive Perspectives for the Human Service Practicum* provides a pedagogical and practice framework to respond to issues relating to racism and oppression and examines ways in which diversity and difference can be included in the curriculum of field education in social work. The intertwining themes of these two books highlight new perspectives on recognizing and understanding oppression that are useful for teachers, social workers, and academics alike.

As an insider of both the academic and social justice communities, Anne Bishop works as an adult educator, community developer, workshop leader, and activist, and thus is in a unique position to offer a rich analysis of oppression. The provocative central theme of *Becoming an Ally: Breaking the Cycle of Oppression in People* concerns how we can become critical of individual and institutional power, learn to look at the world from a 'structural' perspective, and position ourselves in alliance with one person, or various people. The book is divided into five main sections: 'Understanding Oppression', 'Understanding Different Oppressions', 'Consciousness and Healing', 'Becoming a Worker in Your Own Liberation' and 'Becoming an Ally' and Bishop's central organizing questions thoroughly ground the reader in thinking critically about oppression. She asks us to consider how oppression comes about, how oppression is held in place, how being raised in an abusive society translates into "understanding no other forms of power besides power over another or another's power over us" (p.73), and how consciousness raising and healing operate at both individual and collective levels.

Transforming consciousness and learning to resist multiple forms of oppression is a powerful theme also addressed by Narda Razack in *Transforming the Field: Critical Antiracist and Anti-Oppressive Perspectives for the Human Services Practicum*. With few exceptions, field education literature is written predominately from the perspective of academics whose role is to administer field experiences, observe and manage students and communicate with

professionals located in the field. The traditional topics of this discourse concern regulating the social work Practicum within the social service setting and dealing with increasing restraints within agencies, organizational structures, bureaucratic processes and hierarchical systems. This perspective, although vital, often fails to account for or effectively explain how to transform the curriculum and social consciousness in the direction of valuing cultural differences. Razack's provocative text examines "ways in which diversity and difference can be included in the curriculum of field education" (p.13) and demonstrates critical reflective analysis to produce new meanings for practice.

According to Bishop, working with ordinary people to build social change strategies requires teaching people to 'unlearn' the oppressor roles they have taken on in childhood and throughout their lives. She advocates a "structural and historical approach . . . wherein people are seen as part of larger systems, shaped by [their] context. The assumption is that we can change our institutions and culture only through collective organization and action" (p.125). To do this work, it is necessary to infuse a sense of desire and hope in participants. An effective social justice group, for Bishop, is one that practises "intellectual processes like critique, clear thought, [and] analysis" as well as "affirmation, acceptance, tolerance, pleasure, joy [and] humour" (p.148-149).

Bishop warns against a kind of 'hit and run' pop culture approach to educating for diversity and suggests that if we cannot work from the primary principle of educating allies, [that is seeking to understand oppression as structural and historical], then "doing nothing is sometimes better" (p.127). The author critiques diversity education attempted by institutions that appear to be committed to employee 'diversity training', but continue to reproduce oppressive structural practices.

Both Razack and Bishop emphasize the need for us to become aware of our own oppression(s) and our roles as oppressors of others. Bishop exposes the function of oppression in the lives of individuals and institutions and explores how and why we continue to "reproduce the social, economic, and political systems that formed us by playing out our internalised oppression against ourselves and others" (p.47). Razack echoes this theme by directing us to "begin with the self and understand forms of dominance, privilege and whiteness (p. 81); to practice "critical self reflection in order to fully understand how privilege and subordination are sustained" (p. 48); and to engage in "critical anti-oppressive approaches to practice" (p.102). The authors argue that the change and healing process depends on critical self/communal examination and reflection.

As I read Bishop and Razack, I felt I was being prepared intellectually, psychologically, and practically to work towards the transformation of power, privilege and dominance in myself and in those with whom I work. One of the major strengths in both volumes is found in the authors' invitations to us to critically examine oppression within the self and within relationships. Both authors offer worthwhile strategies for individual and group self-critique that can lead to understanding oppression and becoming less oppressive. This need to confront oppression personally and professionally strikes a personal chord within me. I am reminded of a recent academic department 'drama' that polarized

faculty members and divided the group into warlike camps. Over the years we had grown accustomed to a cooperative department culture based on mutual trust, consensus building and democratic decision-making. And although it was a constant challenge to keep the egalitarian ethos of the department alive in the competitive, hierarchical structure of the academy, that we could or would oppress one another was unimaginable.

We began the school year with the annual department retreat that was held in a rustic, mountain setting. Good food, good talk and good personal communication and personal connection were the order of the day. We focused on the following topics: promoting intellectual and spiritual growth, building relationships with colleagues and dealing with institutional power. The topic of dealing with institutional power evoked the most passionate responses as a change in college administration had brought in a 'business model' leader whose narrow views of the role of the institution had outraged most faculty members.

The department had been hit broadside by the administration's announcement that "flat budgets" across state campuses required an immediate "tightening of the belt". FTEs and budgetary measures became the main focus of attention and a 'Workload Committee' was formed to design and implement an equitable workload for full-time, tenure-track faculty. The following excerpts taken from the retreat notes reflect the concerns of the faculty:

How would the administration respond to a 30% – 50% increase in its workload (with no extra pay or support)?

I am foxed by the fact that the institution (administrators at different levels) works at cross-purposes with us (faculty). Aren't they also free thinking individuals who want to work for the best for the students? Why do we operate so differently when the goal is the same?

Should we act radically to change the institution or work within the institution to make small changes quietly?

Over the next few months, we debated high stakes 'work-load' issues with colleagues and the administration. Faculty members in the department began to relate differently with one another. Ordinarily our commitment to working for social justice and diversity supported respectful and open discourse but when we found ourselves very divided on the work load issue, we began to practice the oppressive 'power-over' techniques of relating to people described by Bishop. We became cold and calculating over details such as the criteria of capping student enrollments and reducing numbers of courses taught per year. We used attack and conquer tactics and railed against other faculty members who supported a different work load scheme that seemed to favor their own interests. We became secretive and manipulative of the larger group. Our discussions became battlefields as we struggled for the top position; and it was a bleak period in our professional lives that generated individual and collective anger and caused much pain and lingering resentment. One senior faculty member resigned and took another job, others retreated into the safety of silence; overall, the group

spirit and working relations were damaged beyond repair.

Bishop theorizes three possible actions for group members to take once controlling power plays and manipulations begin within a group. They can “band together in complete unity to resist the person’s attempt to take over” or one or more members can “lead the resistance, entering into the power struggle, which in turn demands the use of ‘power-over’ tactics and ends the cooperative nature of the group” (p.43). The last option suggested is for the group “to break up for the time being” (p.43). We practised option two and as a result sacrificed the “egalitarian, consensus-based nature of the group” (p.43). We now struggle to make sense of our history and try to move on.

Looking through the critical lenses provided by Bishop and Razack, I now see why we couldn’t challenge the *oppressive patterns of behavior* that gripped us. While we needed to exorcise “the demon—the practices of power-over”—without a deeper understanding, they would have “[fought back] almost as if they had a life of their own” (Bishop, p. 98). Perhaps we could have protected our ‘power-with’ group perspective and maintained the integrity of our consensus-based department had we known more about the workings of oppression.

Bishop and Razack invite us to practise critical self/institutional reflection and offer us valuable insights into the complexities of power, privilege and dominance. For those who yearn for something different in the way we relate to one another, their books offer us a sense of hope and possibility for changing oppressive practices within our personal and professional lives.

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