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**ANTI-OPPRESSIVE PRACTICE AND SOCIAL TRINITARIANISM: AN
INTERCONNECTION OF FAITH AND SOCIAL WORK PRINCIPLES**

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Abstract

Anti-oppressive social work (AOP) provides an important model towards identifying and maintaining empowering client relationships in the context of existing oppression in society and practice. Yet for Christian social workers, the question remains whether such a model, which is postmodern in nature, can be upheld alongside faith values. Through examination of the Social Trinitarian model, key theological principles are shown to reinforce AOP as a worthy model for social workers to implement in practice. Drawing on the works of theologians Miroslav Volf and Jurgen Moltmann, and social theorist Lena Dominelli, this paper demonstrates how a Social Trinitarianism theology of love, equality, and openness to the other connects to core AOP principles of empowerment and critical consciousness.

Keywords: Anti-oppressive Practice, Social Trinitarianism, Empowerment

Think of what defines social work practice. The term “oppressive” is not usually the first adjective to come to mind. After all, social work, as defined by the International Federation of Social Workers, is a profession seeking to “*promote* social change, *problem solve* in human relationships, and *empower* people and groups to enhance [overall] well-being” (IFSW, 2012). However, as contradictory and perhaps painful it is to admit, social work *is* associated with oppression simply because it deals with broken human relations. Plain and simple, relationships in every facet incorporate elements of exclusion and oppression resulting from sinful human identities. In turn, Christian social workers bear the responsibility of analyzing the nature of oppression in personal and professional relationships as a fundamental step in implementing the type of service and profession defined above.

Social work practitioners seek to work by values and ethics which uphold social justice and respect for the dignity of the other. Similarly, in Christianity believers seek to carry out biblical commandments urging mankind to “love the Lord your God, and your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:29). So in response to oppression, how do Christian social workers merge professional and religious mandates? As a leading social work model in response to the existence of oppression in practice, AOP aligns with a Social Trinitarian model to provide key insights for equitable relations in social work practice. Ultimately, through examining the nature of oppression, the benefits of anti-oppressive theory, and the dimensions of Social Trinitarianism, it becomes evident that Trinitarian themes endorse AOP methods, which Christian social workers can adopt to increase empowering practitioner-client relations.

Exclusion

Before considering the use of AOP one must consider the *need* for it. One must consider the nature of oppression, how it relates to and is present within social work, and how AOP is a model Christian social workers can adopt.

The nature of oppression infiltrates all aspects of life. Lena Dominelli (2002), a leading social work theorist, defines oppression as “relations that divide people into dominant or superior groups and subordinate or inferior ones. These relations of domination consist of the systematic devaluing of the attributes and contributions of those deemed inferior, and their exclusion from the social resources available to those in the dominant group” (p. 8). Exclusion, which ultimately results from oppression, is a significant concern for social workers.

Theologian Miroslav Volf speaks considerably to the nature of exclusion and injustice in his book, *Exclusion and Embrace*. When humans experience a perceived threat to their personal identities and lack the ability to maintain and affirm a unique identity, they exclude others by contrasting themselves against a constructed, and inferior, identity of the other (Volf, 1996). To better understand this, consider condemnation. According to psychologists, “people who form patterns of condemnation frequently do it to enhance their own self-esteem because blaming or criticizing another person makes one’s own qualities and behaviors appear better or superior” (Hull & Kirst-Ashman, 2009, p. 312). Furthermore, Dominelli (2002) suggests that the very nature of identity formation includes understanding one’s identity in relation to another. This process is often evaluative, where the individual ends up measuring him/herself in a hierarchy against the other based on the personal values he/she holds. Consequently, Dominelli (2002) argues, hierarchy results in one identity or trait being regarded as superior to the other, thus creating an “us-them” dynamic resulting in division and posing risk for oppression.

An additional component of exclusion and identity formation relates to how individuals analyze their identities based on how they conform to larger societal expectations. As Volf (1996) explains, people “are uncomfortable with anything that blurs accepted boundaries, disturbs our identities, and disarranges our symbolic cultural maps” (p.78). Exclusion occurs when individuals are either accommodated or rejected by society’s standards (for example, consider xenophobia or stigma against single mothers as deviating from the traditional family model). Thereby, exclusion acts as a way to “perpetuate the othering process which confirms unequal social relations” (Dominelli, 2002, p. 39). Moreover, identity includes many cross-sections including dimensions of age, race, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, physical appearance, and more, which may jointly result in a dynamic and complex form of oppression. Lastly, the role of identity formation in oppression is universal. From a Christian standpoint, oppression aligns with a Reformed view of the fallen nature of man—humans both experience and perpetuate it (Newman, Suarez, & Reed, 2008).

The concept of oppression and exclusion concerns social workers because it opposes values of self-determination and respect for the dignity and worth of all people (NASW, 1996). Christian social workers must not only consider its existence in society but also its existence in the very nature of social work practice. Acknowledging that identity formation and power play an important role in oppressive practice, social workers must realize their professional identities are tied to power, which can play an influential and sometimes unconscious role in causing oppression.

Recognizing the power associated with the social work profession can be an uncomfortable realization, especially considering the various anti-oppressive ethics which seek to guide its practice. As Dominelli (2002) attests, for social workers to identify themselves as

the oppressors “can cause feelings of paralysis and guilt, especially where it is difficult for the individual concerned to extricate him or herself from [the] privileged status” (p. 46).

Nevertheless, best practice methods include acknowledging these power structures and addressing them at the following two levels. First, practitioners must explore to what degree their personal social status aligns with the dominant social status of who holds power in regard to policy decisions and accepted societal norms (Newman et al, 2008). What structural inequalities does one’s lifestyle or very class reinforce? In reference to the population group the practitioner works with, how does the practitioner’s lifestyle impact oppression faced by that population group on a micro, mezzo, or macro level? For example, it is crucial for the practitioner and client to consider the role of race in a therapeutic relationship if one is from a dominant race/ethnicity and the other from a minority group. This recognition encompasses being aware and resistant to reinforcing “hegemonic value systems and ways of knowing and viewing the world” which may further disadvantage the client (Dominelli, 2002, p. 92).

Second, practitioners must examine to what extent they practice “authoritative work.” In its nature as a helping profession, social work has the potential to be paternalistic in that the role of the social worker is often to help or bestow knowledge on a vulnerable client group (Pitner & Sakamoto, 2005). Dominelli (2002) critiques the traditional approach of viewing a client as passively requiring the knowledge and skills of the practitioner. She argues that identifying clients in need as “defective, percolates this configuration of the person and sets the context for power-over dynamics to be (re)produced rather than egalitarian ones” (Dominelli, 2002, p. 98). After all, Pitner and Sakamoto (2005) raise an interesting point—“who knows more about oppression, those who teach it, or those who live it?” (p. 439).

Social workers must acknowledge their roles as having the potential to perpetuate oppression in practice, primarily through homogenizing tendencies around client groups and treating clients with the hope of outcomes rooted in personal values ingrained in the social worker's identity. For example, a social worker may unconsciously promote a nuclear family model as a best outcome through reinforcing prescribed gender roles around custody and parenting issues (Dominelli, 2002, p.51). Social work can also be oppressive through what Dominelli (2002) refers to as the "acquisition of information approach." This concept refers to a practitioner's aim to gain cultural competency through educating her/himself on a particular identity group. For example, the social worker learns key facts about the other as if those cultural identities are static, which reinforces the social worker, rather than the client, as the expert (Dominelli, 2002).

In addition, this way of creating space for the other rarely considers how the social worker's identity relates to the client's identity (Dominelli, 2002). Exposure through education does not eliminate power divides—rather, "in naming or viewing the other as different, [social workers] affirm their own identity as the norm, and fail to appreciate the significance of its interactive capacity and exclusivity" (Dominelli, 2002, p. 53). Dominelli (2002) contests that through the process of consciously or unconsciously applying stereotypes, social workers deny a client's agency and self-determination, including his/her "capacity to contest culture or engage in its creation and recreation" (p.53). Anti-oppressive writers have written against modern theory endorsing social work practice as "neutral" in respect to social bias, stating that it remains embedded within a white, middle class perspective (Vanderwoerd, 2009). Social workers must examine how practice may unconsciously reinforce marginalization. When practitioners strive to allow client self-determination in practice without examining the influence of personal values

and biases in guiding client engagement, social workers may be reinforcing marginalizing tendencies, even when it would be difficult to identify it as such (Coholic & Todd, 2007).

Oppressive Identities

Despite the collaboration and empowerment that occurs in social work, practitioners cannot disregard the presence of *personal identities* as reinforcing oppressive structures and encounters. As promoted by Newman et al. (2008), deconstruction of how “dominant discourses are shaped, whose interests social workers serve and whose they may subjugate and the exposure of the marginalized perspective, is an essential part of understanding power dynamics and the risk of reinforced oppression” (p. 409). A commitment to social justice in social work practice also involves personal reflection and responsibility beyond structural and societal advocacy. Anti-oppressive theory, a post-modern perspective drawing on themes from feminist, constructivist, ecological, and system theories, provides a social work model in reaction to oppressive and dominating discourse in practice as further described below (Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005).

The Anti-Oppressive Model

In social work, the anti-oppressive model aims to function and promote equal, non-oppressive social relations between various identities. As Dominelli (2002) defines it, “in challenging established truths about identity, anti-oppressive practice seeks to subvert the stability of universalized biological representations of social division to both validate diversity and enhance solidarity based on celebrating difference amongst peoples” (p.39). Traditionally and still today, this model analyzes and advocates against macro levels of oppression. It remains dedicated to principles of social justice, which is also upheld in NASW values, by

acknowledging diversity within oppression and considering the intersection of the “isms” (Pitner & Sakamoto, 2005). However, progressive AOP models emphasize social justice against oppressive practice at the micro level through analyzing the sociological and psychological components of oppression. A fundamental aspect of this analysis is through the discipline of critical consciousness. Newman et al. (2008) explain critical consciousness as the reflective and critical process of “challenging domination” on a personal, interpersonal, and structural level. It is a “deconstruction of one’s stories or accounts of practice in which [the social worker] works towards identifying [his/her] assumptions (theories or construction about power) and changing these along more empowering lines” (Newman et al., 2008, p.409). Pitner and Sakamoto (2005) outline two main methods for accomplishing critical consciousness. First, they endorse standpoint theory in which practitioners are called to examine personal social identity and status to gain self-awareness on their inherent biases. Second, social workers must be aware of their “professional training schemas” through which they consider and interpret information within practice (Pitner & Sakamoto, 2005). Anti-oppressive social work as a schema therefore “guides [social workers] to listen for oppression” in practice with individuals, society, and structures (Pitner & Sakamoto, 2005, p. 443). In turn, practitioners advocate against oppression through social work practice by promoting increased respect for the “inherent dignity and worth of all people,” and “social justice” (NASW, 1996). Acknowledging NASW values, along with “the importance of human relationships,” remains an integral part of building empowering client-practitioner relationships (NASW, 1996).

AOP & Christianity

Anti-oppressive practice remains an important model for the progressive implementation of social work values; however, Christian social workers face the challenge of balancing the post-modern approach with the modern “truths” fundamental to the Christian faith. Coholic and Todd (2007) consider the compatibility of Christianity and AOP. They state that historically, social work and religion have been closely tied. Historical examination reveals that “religious interventions have contoured social work as a practice of beneficence and self-sacrifice in which people, not institutions and cultures, are the object of change” (Coholic & Todd, 2007, p.9). Moreover, they question whether Christian social workers have the ability to separate fundamental religious values from impacting their ability to uphold client self-determination (Coholic & Todd, 2007). Especially in response to the gradual academic and societal shift in ideas on spirituality and sexuality, the authors question whether Christians, who profess to uphold some kind of orthodoxy or “right practice,” inherently create exclusion or self-separation as a way to preserve their “tradition” as truth (Coholic & Todd, 2007, p.8). Is it possible then for Christians to maintain faith values and the truth of Christ while carrying out anti-oppressive practice? Coholic and Todd (2007) may argue no, however, based on the examination of Trinitarian themes, anti-oppressive social work does actually correspond with Christian ideas on biblical human relationships, as will be demonstrated further on.

Before one considers the relation between AOP and Trinitarian themes, it is valuable to contemplate whether AOP is a model Christian social workers should follow in the first place. Several critiques against AOP exist and warrant explanation. First, AOP is criticized as being post-modern and subjective in its attempt to validate people and views in an effort to remain un-

oppressive. As Volf (1996) promotes, extreme post-modern subjectivity can itself result in oppression since it generalizes “new forms of exclusion by the very opposition to exclusionary practices” (p.64). A subjective view of exclusion results in “non-order” where there is no clear boundary on what is permissible or not in society, resulting in chaos (Volf, 1996, p. 64). Second, another limitation of this model is the lack of consensus on a clear definition of AOP due to the number of dynamic perspectives on what oppression encompasses (Pitner & Sakamoto, 2005). Responses against oppression vary. For example, some see it as getting rid of all the ‘isms;’ others focus on a hierarchy of oppression; others view it as eliminating all power differentials; still others see it as incorporating empowerment approaches (Pitner & Sakamoto, 2005). Lastly, the AOP model is criticized for being too idealistic or “discouragingly lofty,” especially considering one of its main objectives is “the eradication of all forms of structural oppression,” making it largely unattainable for social workers to fully carry out or measure progress due to the complexities of structural inequalities (Pitner & Sakamoto, 2005, p.438).

In response to the critique against post-modernism, AOP is less about determining truths and values about society than it is about the greater concept of human relationships and the challenge of balancing the reality of post-modernism in Christian social work practice. Ultimately, social workers must practice in accordance to NASW ethics which identify values to uphold in response to ambiguous ethical situations (Vanderwoerd, 2009). Though the concrete definition of AOP is up for debate, there are key components fundamental to all the varieties of the model—namely, that *exclusion and oppression exist* and it relates to personal *identities* and *relationships* to other human beings. In addition, though AOP remains idealistic in its attempts to eradicate oppression in social work and society, it challenges apathy against injustice and oppression by working toward the social work value and Reformed practice of social justice, the

opposite of oppression, in practice settings. Social workers are not alone in working against the extensive problems in society, but rather create a “task-force” of individuals striving for more just relations and structures (Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005).

Examining the Trinity as a Model for AOP

Back to the question at hand: Can Christianity provide a model of how interpersonal relationships fit with anti-oppressive principles? The answer is yes, and the explanation lies within an analysis of Trinitarian theology.

The Trinity, a fundamental aspect of Christian theology, has been historically debated by theologians regarding its role in understanding Christian discipleship. To understand how the Trinity can be a model for just and equitable social work relationships, specifically from a social Trinitarian viewpoint as is considered in this paper, one must first consider its historical and theological basis.

Historically there have been various changing approaches to the Trinity’s place in Christian scholarship. In fact, during the Enlightenment, thinkers such as Kant and Schleiermacher largely dismissed the Trinity as a valuable aspect of Christian doctrine (Seamands, 2005). The Trinity was viewed as a complex, opaque doctrine, a reality which deterred its ethical implications for the modern Western church (Thompson, 1996). A Trinitarian renaissance, along with renewed controversy on its meaning, only arrived in the twentieth century with the emergence of postmodernism and the work of theologians such as Rahner and Barth. Despite “renewed controversy,” this renaissance highlighted the Trinity as fundamental to the Christian Doctrine of God and thereby imperative for theological study (Thompson, 1996).

The emergence of postmodernism in the twentieth century brought with it a push for a more relational and dynamic understanding of principles, including theological ones. This has encouraged dialogue between the two approaches to Trinitarian theology established in the eleventh century, which have traditionally separated Western and Eastern Trinitarian thinkers. The first approach, embraced by Western theology, is rooted in Latin Trinitarianism and fathered by the works of Augustine and St. Thomas Aquinas (Rea, 2009). Within this camp, the Trinity is approached with an “overwhelming unity claim tended to efface the personal distinctions of Father, Son, and Spirit, leaving many with the acute (and still popular) impression that in confessing the Trinity, one was affirming the three persons were also at the same time one (person)” (Thompson, 1996, p. 10). As Cornelius Plantinga Jr. explains, “for Augustine the Father is great, the Son is great, and the Holy Spirit is great, and yet there are not three greatnesses, nor three greats, nor even three who are great, but only one great thing...in the Trinity each of Father, Son, and Spirit is identical with this one thing, with this one divine essence” (Plantinga, 1988, p. 45).

The twentieth century shift brought increased dialogue and Western consideration of the second Trinitarian approach developed by the Cappadocian Fathers. This traditionally Eastern approach considers a social or relational approach to the Trinity by examining the “threeness” of God as a way to understand God’s identity (Kinnison, 2008). To understand the persons of the Trinity, one must consider how the Trinitarian persons inter-relate in its identity as one “divine substance,” which is the essence of Social Trinitarianism (Kinnison, 2008). Plantinga explains that a social view of the Trinity accounts for the Trinity as “a transcendent society or community of three fully personal and fully divine entities: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. These three are wonderfully unified by their common divinity, by the possession by each of the whole

divine essence—including, for instance, the properties of everlastingness and sublimely great knowledge, love, and glory” (Plantinga, 1988, p. 50). An understanding of perichoresis, “the mutual indwelling and co-inherence of the persons of the Trinity,” is a Greek term used by John of Damascus to describe the inner-relation of the Trinity, and allows Christians to further consider the concept of Trinitarian unity within Social Trinitarianism (Kinnison, 2008, p.264). As described by the Evangelical Dictionary of Theology, “the divine modes of Being mutually condition and permeate one another so completely that one is always in the other two. Trinitarian *perichoresis* begins with the unity of natures or a strict consubstantiality and affirms a reciprocal interrelation. Each person has being in each other without any coalescence” (2001, p. 907).

Re-emergence of the Trinity’s importance did not just occur because it is considered “an essential tenet of the confessional tradition; the Trinity is now being declared indispensable ethically [and] practically” (Thompson, 1996, p. 7). Examining the Trinity, specifically from a social perspective, provides unique insights on practical implications of Christian discipleship, and on major considerations such as freedom, inclusion, dialogue, and issues of justice (Thompson, 1996). As the perspective considered in this paper, a social view of the Trinity has become an embraced and preferred approach for many theologians. A social analogy not only offers “a much more coherent account of the Trinity, [it] better clarifies a fundamental vision of [a Trinitarian] God” (Thompson, 1996, p. 45).

Naturally however, there is no universally accepted theology and a social perspective on the Trinity brings its own critiques. Therefore, before examining how a Social Trinitarian theology applies to anti-oppressive practice, it is important to consider some of the limitations of this theological approach.

Rea (2009) critiques Social Trinitarianism as an “inadequate” way to understand the Trinity by arguing that a social model relies on social analogies between the Trinity to materials that are concretely distinct yet inter-related, promoting the Trinity more as a social relation than one, unified, divine relation between the Godhead. However, the writings of the Cappadocian Fathers demonstrate that the social model of the Trinity does indeed uphold monotheism. The Cappadocian Fathers emphasized *relation* as a unifying element of the Trinity; they understood the Trinity as perfectly unified in “communion” so that “he who receives the Father virtually receives at the same time both the Son and the Spirit” (Pembroke, 2004, p.355). Moreover, as Moltmann (1981) describes, “the unity of the divine tri-unity lies in the union of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, not in their numerical unity. It lies in their fellowship, not in the identity of a single subject” (p.95). Volf (1996) promotes that a social understanding of the Trinity is actually preferable, opposed to the Latin Trinitarian or unipersonal perspective. He argues that the unipersonal perspective understands God as an “indissoluble” subject and “as one God in threefold repetition,” which is too similar to the “logic of the same” to fully understand the complexity of God’s reality as “radically multiple, radically relational, and infinitely active” (p.176).

Nevertheless, “systemic theology properly includes both dogmatics and ethics” (Thompson, 1996, p. 9). A Social Trinitarian theology holds merit and the study of the unified Trinity can surely enable better discernment for the presence of unity in the diversity of human relations (Kinnison, 2008). The Trinity is the essence of God’s nature, and is consequently integral to Christian faith. As Volf affirms, as “baptism into the Triune name attests, beginning the Christian pilgrimage does not simply mean to respond to God’s summons but to enter into command with the Triune God; to end the Christian pilgrimage does not mean simply to have

accomplished an earthly task but to enter perfect communion with the triune God” (Volf, 2006, p. 3). Communion with God “presupposes a certain degree of likeness. There is an affinity between human beings and God and, therefore between the way Christians—and by extension all human beings—ought to live and the way God is” (Volf, 2006, p. 4). Therefore, if one considers Jesus’ words about the Sermon on the Mount to “be...as your heavenly Father is” (Matt 5:48), is the consideration of the Trinity not an imperative relation to examine? And to what degree does the Trinitarian relationship, its themes and implications, pertain to humans?

Christians can seek to model their lives according to the perfect relation of the Trinity, while acknowledging their inability to *fully* achieve this due to the sinful nature of mankind. As Paul describes in Romans 7:22-23, “For I delight in the law of God in my inmost self, but I see in my members another law at war with the law of my mind, making me captive to the law of sin that dwells in my members” (Seamands, 2005). Without being polar in response by either “copying God in all respects, which is impossible, or claiming there are no analogues to God in creation” at all, Christians bear the responsibility to continually “look to the Lord and his strength, seek[ing] his face always” as a way to live in the redemption and manifested shalom of God’s continuing restoration of creation (Psalm 105:4; Kinnison, 2008, p. 263). As will be explored next, Social Trinitarianism brings to light several themes to guide kingdom-building relationships in practice: love, mutuality and equality, and openness to the other. These highlight truths about identity and fundamentally endorse principles of anti-oppressive practice.

Connecting the Themes

The first of these themes is love. Love establishes the Trinitarian relationship by laying the foundation for mutuality, openness, and equality. As a relational act, love is rooted in the

understanding of identity and is what allows one to fully carry out anti-oppressive practice (Volf, 1996). The very commandment to “love your neighbor as yourself” is itself a primary consideration for the need and importance of AOP. However, how one goes about “loving his/her neighbor” can be ambiguous. Therefore the model of love as it connects to identity can help in understanding this concept: “in their Tri-unity, Father, Son, and Spirit are one by virtue of their eternal love. In their relations, they also realize themselves in one another by virtue of their self-surrendering *love*. It is a mutually sustaining cycle” (Kinnison, 2008, p.273).

The self-giving love which characterizes the life of the Trinity and the ultimate self-sacrifice of Christ for mankind points to the following two acknowledgements. First, self-giving love is not a self-denying act, but rather one that reaches out towards the other in fellowship over the common human bond (Volf, 1996). Second, the concept of self-giving love includes creating space for the other and allowing them to find space in oneself (Volf, 1996). As a result, one’s self-giving love “*remains in the other* and is not transformed into an inessential extension of the self” (Volf, 1996, p.189). Social workers know from anti-oppressive literature that the ‘other’ is integral to self-understanding, and that analyzing one’s identity to the ‘other’ through exclusionary comparisons and judgments results in oppression on both an individual and societal level. Rather, practitioners must implement ideas of self-giving love as a basis for how to reconsider personal identity in relation to clients within social work practice.

With self-giving love as a foundation, the second major Trinitarian theme to consider is mutual egalitarianism. Debate continues amongst Trinitarian thinkers around the issue of subordination and whether God the Father as the “origin” is the superior “Monarch deity” above Christ and the Spirit (Kinnison, 2008). Moltmann explains that God the Father may be primary in the constitution of the Trinity, but this does not result in the subordination of the other persons

(Kinnison, 2008). This may seem contradictory—how can the Trinity be truly equal if God the Father is the primal source? There is a distinction between the constitution, and the Trinitarian communion as studied here. In the constitution, God the Father is first, but through self-giving love, the Father imparts equality to the Son and glorifies the Son: “in constituting the Son, the Father gives all divine power and all divine glory to the Son. As the source of divinity, the Father therefore constitutes the mutual relations between the [Trinitarian] persons as egalitarian rather than hierarchical” (Volf, 1996, p. 180).

This idea of a mutually interdependent community within the Trinity returns to an understanding of perichoresis. As explained briefly before, perichoresis refers to the mutual indwelling between the Trinitarian persons. A leading theologian on this material, Boff (1988) explains this concept descriptively:

Each divine person permeates the other and allows itself to be permeated by that person. This interpenetration expresses the love and life that constitutes the divine nature. It is the very nature of love to be self-communicating; life naturally expands and seeks to multiply itself. Thus, the divine three from all eternity find themselves in an infinite explosion of love and life from one to the other. The effect of this reciprocal interpenetration is that each Person dwells in the other: The Father is ever in the Son, communicating life and love to him. The Son is ever in the Father, knowing him and lovingly acknowledging him as Father. Father and Son are in the Holy Spirit as mutual expressions of life and love. The Holy Spirit is in the Son and the Father, as source and manifestation of life and love of this boundless source (p. 15).

What does this suggest for social work relations? Within human relations, all are equal and unified as subordinate to the God of the cosmos. Yet, in this unity, mankind must still preserve their unique identities in a way that upholds Trinitarian equality as not to perpetuate the hierarchical structures that result in oppression. According to Seamands (2005), the persons of the Trinity are defined by their relation to the other persons—they are equal and never separate, but at the same distinct—“they never blend or merge or are consumed by another” (p. 34). Identity as a core principle of AOP can be understood as belonging to a person, which in turn defines identity in light of its relation to other persons (Seamands, 2005). Equality between persons follows the Trinitarian principle of acknowledging the unique distinctions others bring to the relationship as equally valuable. AOP aligns with Trinitarian ideas of equality through considering the *process* of practice with clients as collaborative. This incorporates engaging the client as the primary agent of change out of respect for their equal value as human beings (Dominelli, 2002). Clients are not merely passive recipients of services; when social workers respect their unique identities, including their agency, voice, values, and culture, practitioners move toward empowerment and unity by establishing recognition for what both the practitioner and client bring to the therapeutic relationship (Dominelli, 2002).

Lastly, alongside love and equity is the Trinitarian theme of openness to the other, a principle of communion. Boff (1988) explains this theme beautifully,

The three Eternal ones, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, are turned toward one another. Each divine Person goes out of self and surrenders to the other two, giving life, love, wisdom, goodness, and everything possessed. The Persons are distinct (the Father is not the Son and the Holy Spirit and so forth) not in order to be separated but to come together and to be able to give themselves to one another. For there to be communion

there must be direct and immediate relationships: eye to eye, face to face, heart to heart. The result of mutual surrender and reciprocal communion is community. Community results from personal relationships in which each is accepted as he or she is, each opens up to the other and gives the best of him or herself (p. 3).

Perichoresis, the indwelling of the Trinitarian persons, exists *without* any of the persons losing their unique distinctiveness (Kinnison, 2008). “Openness” is also demonstrated by the very act of divine grace towards creation by God. Therefore, having been embraced by God, and acknowledging the model of “space” for the other within the Trinity, this concept carries implications for the level of openness Christians should give to the “others” in their lives (Volf, 1996). In AOP “openness” involves promoting the collaboration and the self-determination of clients while simultaneously maintaining personal and professional boundaries. Volf (1996) describes this concept:

Stepping out of their culture, [Christians] do not float in some indeterminate space, looking at the world from everywhere and anywhere. Rather with one foot planted in their own culture and the other in God’s future—internal difference—they have a vantage point from which to perceive and judge the self and the other not simply on their own terms but in the light of God’s world. (p. 53)

Social workers must personally maintain their unique identities, as well as Christian beliefs, but not at the cost of oppressing the other to see “their way.” Fortunately, creating receptivity in practice is a concept that upholds anti-oppressive practice.

In practice, part of the social worker’s role is to “open *discursive spaces* in which clients can develop their own interpretive story, that is, one that gives meaning to their experiences”

(Dominelli, 2002, p.86). By validating the client's experiences instead of viewing therapy as a way to change deviant behavior, by giving the client space to live out their diversity in their unique objectives and action steps, by respecting clients as experts of their lives, and by using normalization, practitioners can implement receptive and empowering practice. One way Dominelli (2002) asserts social workers can do this is by having intentional dialogue about the client's perception of their own identity so the practitioner can appropriately collaborate with them. For example, in the ambiguities of discourse around working with diverse populations, social workers risk "relying on stereotypes (even well-intentioned ones), which reduce their capacity to critically engage with clients" (Dominelli, 2002, p.93). Instead, social workers should engage with clients about their identities as a way to disengage ambiguities.

Another anti-oppressive component that allows social workers to have space for the "other" is through critical consciousness, which is the reflection of how personal bias and values impact the interpretation of difference and power. There are several applied dimensions of critical consciousness. First, inter-group dialogues are intentional discussions between diverse people on the role of their social status and identity in creating "statuses of oppression and privilege" (Pitner & Sakamoto, 2005, p.445). Facilitating inter-group dialogues can cultivate critical awareness on the part of social workers to the presence of unconscious power dynamics that limit the space allowing the oppressed to fully utilize their voice. In turn, social workers can intentionally work against identified oppressive dynamics to promote social work relationships of collaboration and empowerment (Pitner & Sakamoto, 2005). Therefore, AOP does not begin with the social worker as the primary agent in identifying oppression experienced by the client. Rather it begins with exploring the *client's* perception of their status, requiring the social worker

to “relinquish preset beliefs and professional training in order to effectively listen to how their service users describe their own issues” (Pitner & Sakamoto, 2005, p.448).

Moreover, a fundamental component to successfully carrying out AOP is through continuous self-awareness and reflection on the practitioner’s part. Newman et al. (2008) define this process as examining the manner to which one’s “internal and external identities interact and influence each other and vary according to changing contexts” (p. 409). In order to create space for discourse, one must examine how the dynamic intersection of his/her social identity (on various levels of race, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, etc.) influences his/her worldview and consequently his/her ability to hinder or host receptivity to diverse clients (Newman et al., 2008).

Lastly, critical consciousness as a way to have boundaries in carrying out AOP leads to the principle of “double vision,” a concept promoted by both theologians and social work theorists. Volf (1996) describes double vision as the ability to see from “there”—meaning one steps outside oneself to examine the perspective of the other—and “here”—one’s own perspective (p.253). In social work, one must have a developed concept of one’s personal identity and status while also having the openness to allow another to share his/her perspective and identity, even if it contradicts or identifies oppressive discourse related to oneself. Out of this openness, and through dismantling oppressive discourse and biases upheld by dominant persons unconsciously maintaining the benefits of his/her status, the opportunity for reconciliation and truth is realized.

Conclusion

Social work values as the basis for anti-oppressive social work are important to Christians and congruent with Social Trinitarian themes for just and biblical identities and

relations. However, ultimately social workers must remember that the Trinitarian model is just that—a *model*. In acknowledging a Reformed stance, social workers must remember they are just human, not God, and must acknowledge that they will never *completely* be un-oppressive or be *fully* able to carry out the perfect, self-giving love demonstrated in the relation of the Trinity. Nevertheless, social workers can carry out anti-oppressive models of practice on various levels and intentionally seek critical consciousness. By upholding the ultimate command to view and respond to clients as one loves oneself and by relying on the Reformed faith of a beautiful and perfectly relational God, who will one day fully bring all human relations into full restoration, social workers can help create a more just and equitable practice.

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