

Applying anti-oppressive approach to social work practice in Africa: reflections of Nigerian BSW students

Reflections of
Nigerian BSW
students

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Solomon Amadasun and Tracy Beauty Evbayiro Omorogiuwa
*Department of Social Work, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Benin,
Benin City, Nigeria*

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Abstract

Purpose – As the next generation of social workers in a continent bedecked by oppressive customs, it is cardinal that the voices of social work students be heard. This study aims to share the reflections of Nigerian BSW students about anti-oppressive approach to professional practice.

Design/methodology/approach – Drawing on a qualitative approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted among fourth-year social work students at one of the elite universities in the southern region of Nigeria.

Findings – Results reveal that, although willing to challenge oppressive practices, social work students are ill-equipped to apply anti-oppressive approach to social work practice in Nigeria.

Research limitations/implications – This study makes an important contribution to the field and to the existing literature because the findings have broader implications for social work education in Nigeria.

Practical implications – In enforcing the suggestions of this study, it is expected that social work education will become able to produce competently trained students who are only knowledgeable about anti-oppressive social work but are equally prepared to address Nigeria's myriad oppressive practices that have long undermined the nation's quest for social development.

Social implications – The application of the anti-oppressive approach to social work practice is integral to ridding society of all forms of overt social injustice and other forms of latent oppressive policies.

Originality/value – Suggestions are offered to Nigerian social work educators toward ensuring that students are not only well equipped in the understanding of anti-oppressive social work but also ready to apply this model to professional social work practice following their graduation.

Keywords Anti-oppressive practice, Social work students, Nigeria, Social justice, Empowerment, Social work education

Paper type Research paper



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Introduction

Unique to the social work profession is the focus on people in their environment, allowing for the usage of varying degrees of practice approach conducive for meeting individual, group and community challenges and also advancing socioeconomic justice (Weiss-Gal, 2006, 2008; Thompson, 2005; Amadasun, 2020; Haynes, 1998; Miller *et al.*, 2008; Bowles and Hopps, 2014). One such approach that is integral to the attainment of the dual mission of the social work profession is anti-oppressive practice. Such a practice model is particularly germane to the African context given the pervasive acts of social injustice and human rights infringements, deriving from both age-old and novel oppressive policies and practices. In this regard, it has been vehemently argued that unless social workers draw on this approach in their daily practice, they will continue to make an insignificant contribution to addressing Africa's structure-induced social problems (Amadasun, 2020; Idyorough, 2013; Mwansa, 1992; Jaja, 2013; Onokerhoraye, 2011). Yet, there is slim evidence regarding the extent to which social workers are being prepared to practice from an anti-oppressive perspective in the continent. The focus of this study, therefore, is to share the reflections of social work students in Nigeria regarding their knowledge of this practice approach. Significantly, as the next generation of practitioners in the region as a whole, what social work students know about anti-oppressive practice would prove cardinal in:

- mainstreaming social work as a social justice-oriented profession in a context in which the relevance of the profession is increasingly being called to question (Mmatli, 2008; Mupedziswa, 2005); and
- determining whether they are ready to apply this approach to practice.

Furthermore, this study will be making an important contribution to the field by providing an African perspective (a marginal voice) to the anti-oppressive discourse of the social work profession.

The section that follows includes a brief review of the relevant literature of anti-oppressive practice. Next is the description of the research methodology, followed by a presentation and discussion of students' reflections. Following the consideration of the research limitations, this paper concludes by offering suggestions to social work education in Nigeria.

Literature review

Discourse on anti-oppressive practice must first begin with a conceptual clarification of what oppression represents. Oppression is seen as a social construction to create a categorical organization of people and groups within societies (Baines, 2011; Cudd, 2006; Dalrymple and Burke, 2000). Such categorical organization derives from the concept of intersectionality, in which societies label and oppress individuals and groups, thereby creating multitudes of categories. As Baines (2011) points out, multiple social labels are often wielded in discriminating against powerless individuals and groups on the basis of race, gender, class and so forth. By implication, identity and societal labels play a pivotal role in allocating power and privilege to different societal members such that powerful individuals, groups and systems marginalize and oppress other groups. The preceding concurs with Baines' (2011) observations that "oppression takes place when [a] person acts or policy is enacted unjustly against an individual or group because of their affiliation to a specific group [. . .] includ[ing] depriving people of a way to make a fair living, to participate in all aspects of social life, or to experience basic freedoms and human rights" (p. 2). Phrased alternatively, oppression is typified in the form of interpersonal discrimination and prejudicial policies wielded or enacted by powerful groups and institutions. Dominelli (2002)

discussed the concept of “othering” as a critical process in social oppression by which a dominant group constructs an individual or group as “others” and, as a result, the “other” is excluded from hierarchies of power and privilege, as those under such categorization are viewed as inferior, powerless or even pathological.

Anti-oppressive practice is a social justice-oriented practice model or approach embraced by a wide swath of social workers in clinical, community and policy settings which is taught in a number of schools or departments of social work around the world (Adams *et al.*, 2009; Clifford and Burke, 2009; Cocker and Hafford-Letchfield, 2014; McLaughlin, 2005; Mullaly, 2002). It draws its strength primarily from its compassionate embrace of humanity in all its diversity and adversity, as well as its unflinching commitment to social justice in both long- and immediate-term. Anti-oppressive practice, rather being a unipolar approach to practice, is an integrated model drawing on a number of social justice-oriented approaches to social work practice, including feminist, Marxist, critical, postmodernist, indigenous, poststructuralist, critical constructionist, anticolonial and antiracist and discriminatory perspectives (Baines, 2011; Dominelli, 2002, 2012; Millar, 2008; Waaldijk, 2011; Dalrymple and Burke, 1998, 2006; Cocker and Hafford-Letchfield, 2014; Garrett, 2014). At the most basic level, it aims to analyze how power is used to oppress and marginalize people and how such power can be equally used to fast-track the liberation and empowerment of people across a broad spectrum of social settings, relations or systems (Tew, 2006).

Tracing the roots of anti-oppressive practice

Charity and social justice movements are the major roots necessitating the emergence of anti-oppressive practice in social work (Wilson and Beresford, 2000; Thompson, 2002, 2003). Social work, in being a unique profession, contains several distinct approaches and philosophies regarding care, what it constitutes and how to stop or slow social problems that generate the need for care. With social work emerging from charitable roots (Mullaly, 2002; Abramovitz, 1988) and practitioners employed by several organizations (including Mary Richmond’s Charity Organization Society), these Victorian-era social workers frequently provided the poor with enthusiastic lectures on morality and hygiene – as those who were poor were, at the time, considered immoral and unrighteous – and infrequent but much-needed food baskets or clothing boxes (Abramovitz, 1988; Reamer, 2014). As some scholars noted, these interventions did little more than place leaky Band-Aids on deeply rooted social problems, failing to challenge systems that exposed the poor and sustained the wealthy (Mullaly, 2002; Thompson, 2003; Millar, 2008; Preston-Shoot, 1995).

At about this same period, other groups such as the settlement house movement (popularized by Jane Addams, another prominent founder of the social work profession) began to advocate for a macro focus in their practice approach. This intervention strategy allowed these workers to not only relieve people of their emotional pain and immediate difficulties but also challenge structural forces that perpetuate poverty, inequality and other forms of social injustice. Put together, these efforts, as Haynes (1998) pointed out, were fundamental in the enthronement of social work as social justice-inclined profession. Today, the commitment to developing socially just ways of practicing social work is palpable in policy statements of international social work-governing bodies. For instance, the International Federation of Social Workers, in its recent definition of social work, asserted that principles of social justice and human rights are fundamental to the profession (IFSW, 2014). Such entrenchment of social justice orientation to practice underscores the import of an anti-oppressive perspective in social work practice.

Why anti-oppressive practice?

The anti-oppressive practice offers a viable alternative to the prevailing remedial or mainstream social work practice in the continent. Mainstream social work, rooted in clinical practice or casework, refers to a practice that may, to some degree, alleviate people's suffering but that depoliticizes social problems, as it jettisons the larger interplay influencing social problems (Amadasun, 2020). Depoliticization involves processes that discountenance the influence of politics or that relegate political awareness out of social issues to control these issues and those seeking to change it. While often claiming the opposite, mainstream social work emphasizes individual shortcomings, pathologies and inadequacies instead of structural dysfunction or deficiency (Amadasun, 2020). Baines (2011) explains mainstream social workers' obsession with psychoanalysis, with their overarching concerns for professionalism, career advancement and the authority of experts while having little or no space for the struggles of service users, communities and larger social justice causes.

In contrast, anti-oppressive approach to practice concentrates on changing oppressive policies and practices even as it addresses an immediate crisis. Scholars such as Dominelli (2002), Thompson (2003) and Baines (2011) accept that anti-oppressive social work re-politicizes issues while acknowledging the problems that service users undergo as stemming from socially conditioned limited choices in which service users have little awareness, power and control. Additionally, anti-oppressive practice acknowledges the power of language to shape identities and opportunities, and hence practitioners relying on this model are careful of their use of language by avoiding derogatory labels and instead trying to use mutual or collaborative designations. As Hick *et al.* (2005) and Mullaly (2007) pointed out, thoughtful critique and skepticism are important reflexive practices used by anti-oppressive practitioners when addressing social problems.

Students' preparedness for anti-oppressive practice: insights from past studies

Over the years, research exploring the extent to which anti-oppressive practice is embedded in the education and training of social work students has been conducted (Bronstein and Gibson, 1998; Coleman *et al.*, 1999; Chand *et al.*, 2002; Collins and Wilkie, 2010). Pointedly, Bronstein and Gibson's (1998) study found that while course contents on oppression were gaining traction in the preparation of student social workers to embrace a social justice-oriented practice, they conclude that students were more likely to engage in clinical practice as against engaging in social justice advocacy and practice for which the course was designed in the first place. Similar findings were reported in the study by Chand *et al.* (2002). It is instructive to note that these studies were conducted in developed countries where the use of clinical or casework approach to practice is predominant. Besides, given the limited socioeconomic injustice (such as poverty, oppressive traditional practices and exclusionary policies targeted at vulnerable groups) in Western countries comparable to developing societies such as Africa, it is not unusual that students would opt to practice in areas in which their services are more needed, such as mental health settings, for which casework practice is most suitable.

Theoretical framework

Anti-oppressive social work addresses social divisions and structural inequalities in the work done with clients and workers. It aims to change the structure and procedures of service delivery through macrosystemic changes at the legal and political level (Beresford and Croft, 2004; Clifford and Burke, 2005; George *et al.*, 2007). According to Dominelli (1996), anti-oppressive practice embodies a person-centered philosophy, an egalitarian value

system concerned with reducing the deleterious effects of structural inequalities upon people's lives, a methodology focusing on both process and outcome and a way of structuring relationships between individuals that aim to empower users by reducing the negative effects of social hierarchies on their interaction and the work they do together. Karabanow (2004) supports the notion that anti-oppressive social work should attempt to build safe and respectful environments for marginalized populations. Evidently, any systematic implementation of anti-oppressive practices in social work services would require extensive changes in the organizational structure and culture of social services.

Strier and Binyamin (2010) identify the theoretical rationale for an anti-oppressive transformation of social services to include developing non-hierarchical work relations between clients (i.e. service users) and social workers (i.e. service providers), promoting social rights, adopting structural and contextualized views of clients' social problems and developing client representations. In addition, the rationale includes responding to social, class, gender and ethnic diversity, acknowledging unequal power relations with clients, creating a non-bureaucratic organizational culture, developing alliances with clients and critical consciousness among clients and workers and promoting reflexivity between workers and clients. Amadasun (2020) posits that anti-oppressive social work seeks to dismantle neoliberal economic policies in the light of its deleterious impact on social conditions among large sections of the population. Neoliberal policies, as Kus (2006) notes, have eroded the image of public services and have provided the ideological rationale for systematically dismantling the welfare state. In many countries (as is extant in many African states), neoliberal policies have consistently favored social policies that generate high levels of poverty, anti-welfare political climate, punitive welfare reforms, periodic budgetary cutbacks and the subsequent decay of the social service sector (Harvey, 2005; Morgen *et al.*, 2010). Carey (2008) asserts that mainstream social work is being transformed by privatization and market-led policies in ways that lead social services to abandon service users. Implicitly, these skewed policy actions have harmed the ability of many social workers to respond to the needs of their most vulnerable constituencies, and they also have undermined social workers' capacity to fulfil their historical value commitment of the following:

- promoting social change and development; and
- advancing the liberation and empowerment of underserved, undervalued and at-risk populations through the instruments of anti-oppressive-allied social justice models and human rights principles.

Objective of this study

The objective of this study is to explore and describe Nigerian social work students' reflections about the following:

- how they conceptualize anti-oppressive social work;
- their experiences of anti-oppressive practice relative to their education and training; and
- how they intend to practice from this perspective upon graduation.

Methodology

Research design

A qualitative evaluation research design was used in this study. Babbie and Mouton (2001) discuss the relevance of evaluation research in developing countries, such as Nigeria, that is

interested in assessing whether, for instance, the quality of social work education in the country is consistent with international best standards in terms of producing competently trained social workers, who are well grounded in the knowledge and application of anti-oppressive social work approach. Drawing on this research design, therefore, enabled the researchers to identify the strengths and weaknesses of social work education in Nigeria. More so, a qualitative approach to the gathering of data was used because the “data that was needed was descriptive and exploratory, and information was required directly from people who were assumed to have the required information” (Hofstee, 2009, p. 132).

Sample and procedure

The participants in this study are fourth-year undergraduate social work students from one of the major universities in southern Nigeria. Students in their final academic year were purposively recruited because they have undergone almost all the courses in the bachelor’s (BSW) program and were on the verge of graduating from the social work department and getting set for practice. Before the commencement of this study, flyers were posted in strategic locations within the social work department, in which the objectives of this study were boldly highlighted, and students were invited to participate. Through this procedure, 15 students of a total of 47 final-year students indicated interest to participate in this study. However, on the scheduled date for the commencing of the investigation, 3 students withdrew their consent, thereby bringing the total study participants to 12 student social workers, comprising 9 female and 3 male students. Such composition comes as no surprise as it reflects the widely held view of social work as a “female-dominated” profession (Earle, 2008, p. 23).

Data collection and analysis

A semi-structured interview schedule based on one-on-one interviews was used as a means of data collection. Before the commencement of the exercise, a pilot study was organized among a group of third-year students to check for vagueness regarding the questions. The students reported no ambiguity and, as such, no alteration was made. As Hofstee (2009) notes, interviews conducted in a relaxed atmosphere work well to build rapport and authenticity. To that end, the interview was conducted in the department’s conference room and lasted 20–30 min each. Data saturation (Bowen, 2008) was observed after ten interviews, leading to the termination of the two outstanding interviews.

The data were analyzed according to the steps intrinsic to interpretative phenomenological analysis. In this regard, transcripts of the interviews were written up and analyzed, and themes were identified and connections were made between transcripts to develop a set of master cross-transcript themes (Houston and Mullan-Jensen, 2011). Reliability and authenticity are important in qualitative research, and strategies such as recording data objectively and comprehensively, a count of events and the use of audio tapes assist in ensuring rigor and validity (Seale and Silverman, 1997). The six steps as suggested by Smith *et al.* (2009) were followed in the course of data analysis:

- (1) reading and re-reading;
- (2) initial noting;
- (3) developing emerging themes;
- (4) searching for connections across emergent themes;
- (5) moving to the next case; and
- (6) looking for patterns across cases.

As a further step to ensure the validity of the qualitative data, Maxwell's five validity categorizations in qualitative research were used (Maxwell, 2008). Descriptive validity is based on an attempt to accurately describe the data using transcripts of verbatim responses. In this regard, no information was left out or altered, and the use of an integrated independent coder also contributed to the descriptive validity. Interpretive validity was ensured by the use of the transcript that included both the verbal and non-verbal data to justify interpretations. The use of a purposive sampling technique and a thorough description of the implementation of the research methodology ensured the transferability of the findings to other similar contexts. To ensure theoretical validity, a literature control was done once the themes and subthemes were identified through data analysis. Evaluative validity was achieved by ensuring that the evaluation was based on the findings that emanated from the process of data analysis.

Ethics

In addition to the approval by the social work department to conduct this study, ethical approval was equally sought and secured by the authors' university research and ethics committee. Ethical issues addressed in this study include informed consent, voluntary participation and privacy and protection from harm. Accordingly, identifying details of the participants and the institution in which they represent are anonymized. Furthermore, their responses are presented as a collective story to further obscure individual identification.

Results

The result is presented on the basis of the three themes (Table 1) that emerged from the qualitative data: conceptualizing anti-oppressive practice, anti-oppressive practice in social work education and practicing from an anti-oppressive perspective; they are illustrated with verbatim responses of the student social workers to allow their voices to be heard.

Theme 1: conceptualizing anti-oppressive practice

As a first step in exploring their perspectives, the participants were requested to reflect on the term "anti-oppressive practice" and share their thoughts regarding what they could deduce from the concept. Drawing ideas from the phrase, they construed anti-oppressive

Theme	Subtheme
Conceptualizing anti-oppressive practice	Anti-oppressive practice as enforcing the liberation and empowerment mandate of the social work profession Anti-oppressive practice as a framework for achieving social justice and enforcing human rights Anti-oppressive practice is about challenging oppressive yet dominant policies and practices
Anti-oppressive practice in social work education and training	Lack of local content and non-adaptation to locality relevance Limited field practicum experience
Practicing from an anti-oppressive perspective	Challenging oppressive and discriminatory policies and practices through education Engaging in policy practice and advocacy Liaising with organizations and professionals committed to social justice

Table 1.
Thematic framework
for the results

practice as a framework model for achieving the social justice and human rights mandate of the social work profession. One student explains:

[...] this [anti-oppressive] approach may be taken to mean a strategy through which social workers can address oppression and marginalization of less-privileged people in society to reduce the injustice that they undergo.

Others defined the approach along the path of empowering social workers to challenge dominant ideologies that restrict and strangle the liberation of people. According to one of the students:

[...] anti-oppressive social work is about combatting all forms of injustice tolerated by the society [...] it is geared towards tackling economic, social, political and cultural injustice and deprivation so that those who are victims will be freed.

Theme 2: anti-oppressive practice in social work education

Regarding the degree to which anti-oppressive practice was embedded in their professional training and education as exemplified by coursework and field placement, the participants acknowledged the content of anti-oppressive discourse in their class instructions but that the course content lacked depth. Such a situation, they argued, stems from the lack of local content on a text about anti-oppressive practice in social work and the lack of operationalization or adaptation of concept to the African experience. Commenting in this regard, one student spoke of how:

[...] the ideas and concepts of foreign authors concern anti-oppressive practice are brilliant no doubt [...]but our lecturers must make it even better by giving clarity or practical examples that takes into consideration the peculiarity of our environment [...] so we can be well informed about the workings or applications [of anti-oppressive practice] in our country.

In spurring social work educators to action, another student points out:

[...] lecturers need to start writing textbooks about anti-oppressive social work to augment foreign textbooks or, at least, they should seriously consider inserting African or Nigerian perspectives to this course to bring meaning to learning.

Pertaining to their field placement experience, all but two of the participants were unanimous in their assertions that they did not receive significant fieldwork training in relation to practicing in organizations committed to challenging social injustice and oppression. While acknowledging their anticipation of such practice opportunity, they, however, expressed discontent with the way and manner they were assigned to majorly statutory organizations whose goals are at variance with the underlying tenets of anti-oppressive practice. As one student purports:

[...] my field practicum was in a government welfare agency where the approach was mainly about providing counseling to people on an individual level [...] in this agency, social justice, which is about advocating for less-privilege or disadvantaged people, is hugely frowned upon [...] left to me, I would have loved to be posted to advocacy or social justice organizations instead of that agency where all they like to do is controlling people's lives.

Still, on the discourse, another student asked the following:

[...] we have several organizations especially those in not-for-profit agencies which operate to challenge social injustice but may lack the theoretical techniques or models [...] so, why can't the department [of social work] enter an agreement with such bodies so that we can learn from their

concrete experience while we enrich them with our theoretical knowledge? Is this not what social work is all about, seeking partnership based on respect for both parties?

Theme 3: practicing from an anti-oppressive perspective

Given their impressive conceptual clarification, the participants were urged to reflect on how they intend to practice social work from an anti-oppressive perspective following the completion of their degree program. While the majority of the participants commented in this regard, two among them, who had conducted their field placement training in an advocacy organization, specifically shed more light in this discourse by identifying the three practice strategies which can be used while practicing social work from an anti-oppressive perspective. First, they spoke of challenging oppressive and discriminatory policies through recourse to the advocacy and educator role of social work. One of the students points out:

[. . .] from experience, since many people are oppressed but too afraid to speak up, it is incumbent on us as social justice practitioners to raise their consciousness level in order to embolden them to know the source of their oppression and to demand accountability from authorities in the area of equitable resource allocation.

Second, they underlined the imperative of engaging in policy practice and advocacy, as it is critical in making an impact at a broad societal level. One student expressed this thought lucidly:

[. . .] policy practice enables anti-oppressive practitioners to reduce inequality and exclusion resulting from oppressive policies at a wide scale [. . .] being aloof in this [policy] arena, especially in a place like Nigeria, is tantamount to scratching the surface in problem-solving.

Third, the students conclude that practicing from an anti-oppressive practice warrants collaborating with other professions or disciplines who share a similar social justice mission of the social work profession. Such collaboration, they purport, is not exclusive to helping professions only as organizations, and communities are also potential partners for the elimination of unjust policies or practices meted out on vulnerable groups. As one student cogently articulates:

[. . .] as an anti-oppressive practitioner, alliances must be built and synergies must be formed on a mutual basis if significant milestones are to be recorded [. . .] this implies that anti-oppressive social workers must sharpen their human relationship skills to bring about this desirable outcome of an oppression-free society.

Limitations of this study. The major limitation of this study is relative to the small sample size of the research participants. Although consistent with the norms in qualitative research, the sample size limits the prospects of generalizability of the research findings. Notwithstanding, this study has made an indelible contribution to the limited body of literature on social work education in Nigeria and indeed Africa. As an exploratory study, this study may become a reference point for future research pertaining to not only social work education but also anti-oppressive discourse in the continent.

Discussion

The findings of the interviews in relation to how the students conceptualized anti-oppressive practice are consistent with the existing literature (Bronstein and Gibson, 1998; Chand *et al.*, 2002; Garcia and Van Soest, 2006; Poole, 2010; Heenan, 2005; Hancock *et al.*, 2012; Dustin and Montgomery, 2010; Collins and Wilkie, 2010; Coleman *et al.*, 1999). Baines (2011) cogently describes the anti-oppressive practice as a social justice-oriented practice whose

wholehearted commitment to social justice and human dignity emanates from its compassionate embrace of humanity in all its adversity and diversity so that those under structural stranglehold could experience both immediate and long-term freedom.

The finding pertaining to the degree to which anti-oppressive practice was embedded in social work education, and training may be explained by revisiting some pertinent issues and trends relative to social work education in Nigeria. This, however, would be summarily highlighted owing to paucity of space. Formal social work training in Nigeria began in 1976 at the University of Nigeria through the influence of the series of international surveys conducted by the United Nations in collaboration with the Nigerian Government who were, at the time, concerned with the advancement of social development, exemplified by Decree 12 of 1974 prioritizing social development in all public parastatals across the country. Although the then social work unit under the department of sociology was charged with the mandate of producing development-inclined practitioners, this responsibility fell short of expectations because most of the social work educators were trained in Britain and America where the clinical or casework model overrode other practice methods (Amadasun, 2019; 2020). By implication, social work education since its inception in the country has been characterized by the overwhelming reliance on the remedial or curative model as the means of training of practitioners. However, about a decade ago, social work education experienced a major change in its curriculum content, following repeated calls by some scholars (Anucha, 2008). Through the Canadian Government's funded Social Work in Nigeria Project – a joint partnership involving three Canadian universities (York University, University of Windsor and University of British Columbia) and a Nigerian university (University of Benin, Benin City) – social work education and training were made to embrace a generalist model in which the person-in-environment paradigm would attain priority, thereby allowing for the usage of all three, namely, micro-, mezzo- and macro-level models and intervention strategies (Amadasun, 2020). Implicit in the foregoing is the inclusion of several social justice-oriented approaches, including anti-oppressive approach, to the training and education of social workers in the country. As this approach to training is relatively novel, it is hardly surprising that the participants, while appreciating the course, seemed dissatisfied with the lack of local content in available resources and the dearth of exemplification of the African experience relative to oppressive policies and discriminatory practices.

The finding pertaining to the suggestions of the students regarding how they intend to practice from an anti-oppressive perspective corroborates the professional literature (Adams *et al.*, 2009; Hick *et al.*, 2005; Hancock *et al.*, 2012; Dustin and Montgomery, 2010; Dominelli, 2002; McLaughlin, 2005). Baines (2011) summarizes the practice methods of anti-oppressive practice as concerned with assisting individuals in meeting their needs in participatory and transformative ways while equally focusing on challenging those forces embedded in systems in society that benefit from and perpetuate inequality, inequities and oppression.

On the surface, the findings of this study demonstrate that social work students are not only knowledgeable about anti-oppressive practice but also equally well poised to practice from this perspective. However, such interpretation should be exercised with caution, as it was two of the participating students who had undergone their field practice training in social justice-allied organizations who offered the bulk of these insights. Thus, the reverse may have been the case had they not undergone their fieldwork in such agencies. This situation has yet again underscored the imperative of field practicum training to social work education, and it is in this light that the implication of this study would be majorly directed at enhancing the quality of field training as a cardinal aspect of social work education in promoting effective anti-oppressive approach to professional practice in Nigeria.

Implications for social work education in Nigeria

Following the findings of this study, especially in reference of anti-oppressive practice in social work education, the following suggestions are offered to social work educators in Nigeria with the outlook of strengthening the depth of anti-oppressive discourse in both classroom instructions and field placement training with the aim of enhancing the formidability of social work education and training in the country and, by extension, in the continent.

- (1) As conveyors of social work knowledge, skills and values, social work educators are duty-bound to broaden the discourse on anti-oppressive practice in Nigeria, and this must first begin by pointing out salient issues associated with norms that lend credence to oppression and acts that amplify it. In other words, without mainstreaming discussions about oppression and its varied forms, students may not develop an interest in anti-oppressive practice. One way students' interest could be stoked in this regard is through the inclusion of modules that:
 - detail the knowledge of culture;
 - discuss oppressive cultural practices; and
 - identify the victims of such harmful cultural practices to stimulate students' reflexivity.

Self-reflective practice involves the use of abstract (imaginative) or concrete (experiential) themes and learning tools to stimulate interest, and subsequent actions, of students toward a given phenomenon (Yip, 2006; Gould, 2004; Knott and Scragg, 2007). For instance, educators, in applying self-reflective practice, may urge students to assume an imaginative role of what it would mean for them if their significant others or relatives are victims of oppressive customary practice (such as child marriage and/or widowhood inheritance rights) and how they would respond to salvage them from such enslaving situation. In this context, mainstreaming self-reflective practice in the education of social work students regarding anti-oppressive practice would act to not only increase their interest in the subject but also goad their critical thinking skills in terms of responding to oppressive policies and practices (Gibbs and Gambrell, 1999). The knowledge of culture is one prime example of the structural undertone of oppression. Educators could also complement this knowledge with those of repressive politics and exclusionary economic policies to expand the knowledge base and/or understanding of students about oppressive actions.

- (2) To make anti-oppressive practice more rooted in the local context, social work educators should consider writing texts or notes on anti-oppressive discourse to simplify concepts and themes which students may struggle to comprehend or relate with to foreign materials. Such text should be precise and concise and should highlight, with vivid examples, salient issues about oppressive practice in the country and anti-oppressive strategies so that students would be equipped with not only the knowledge but also the skills necessary for challenging oppressive acts meted against powerless groups.
- (3) As the signature pedagogue of social work education (Council on Social Work Education, 2008), the import of field practice training cannot be overemphasized. As Bogo (2015) dispassionately points out, "the ability of social work education to graduate ethical, competent, innovative, effective clinical social workers is highly dependent on the quality of the field experience" (p. 317). Consequently, administrators of schools and/or departments of social work in Nigeria should, as a matter of urgency, expedite action toward ensuring that their field practice

training embraces all practice approaches and orientations in the social work profession and is not overly tilted to assigning students to agencies who rely on one practice model. Furthermore, the field education unit in the departments of social work across the country should be open to consultations with student social workers before they are assigned to practice in any agency or organization. After all, research has shown that social work students' involvement regarding field practicum sites contribute to the success of field experience (Fortune and Abramson, 1993; Bogo, 2010; Amadasun, forthcoming; Domakin, 2014).

- (4) Situations in which there are inadequate social service agencies within the field education unit of the social work department, collaborations should be sought and secured from and among the multitudes of both statutory and voluntary human service organizations within the country. Such a contract should be premised on a mutual understanding that creates a safe and effective learning environment for students, so they could enhance their knowledge from the field while consolidating the theoretical foundations of such organizations.

Implications for further research

Given the ostensible dearth of literature on this subject area, combined with the accelerating pace of social work's growth and development in Nigeria, it is expedient that further research be conducted in this regard to develop and broaden the literature on social work generally in the country and to ensure that social work education live up to international best practice standards of graduating competent practitioners who are equipped with not only the knowledge of anti-oppressive approach but also other social-justice-oriented practice so that they can help address personalized and structural challenges faced by individuals, families, groups, organizations and communities in the country. Such future research is not exclusive to social work researchers alone, as research is equally the responsibility of all social work professionals (educators, practitioners and students). In the context of anti-oppressive practice, research endeavor could be geared toward exploring whether social workers use this approach in their daily practice in the country, and the event that this approach is used by practitioners, exploring their experiences so as to promote its usage and enhance the quality of anti-oppressive approach to social work practice in Nigeria. This way, the profession would be meeting its traditional value commitment to people in their environment, and perhaps, more cardinal, social work relevance in Nigeria and indeed Africa would be unquestioned.

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About the authors

Solomon Amadasun is the pioneer first-class graduate of the Department of Social Work, University of Benin, Nigeria. A widely published scholar with multiple academic awards, he is renowned for his unflinching commitment to the development of social work in Nigeria in relation to quality-driven professional training and education. His research interest situates in developmental social work, international social work, social welfare administration and medical social work. He is the Author of the flagship text: *Social Work for Social Development in Africa*. Solomon Amadasun is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: amadasun.s@yahoo.com

Tracy Beauty Evbayiro Omorogiuwa is a PhD from the University of Johannesburg, South Africa, and she is currently a Senior Lecturer in the Social Work Department of the University of Benin, Nigeria. Her research interests focus on mental health issues, child protection and development, gender-based violence, developmental social work and international social work. A recipient of Recirculate Residency grant from Lancaster University, United Kingdom, she has to her credit three texts on social work which have continued to serve the needs of social work students and practitioners across Nigeria.

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