PRACTICAL SOCIAL WORK

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Anti-Racist Social Work

A Challenge for White
Practitioners and Educators

Lena Dominelli

Foreword by John Small

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Foreword to second edition

Within the eight years since this book was published there have been significant changes which have been amplified by the political transformation in Eastern Europe. These changes have resulted in hope and optimism in some quarters. However, behind this hope and optimism lurks fear and anxiety about the reactivation of the far right ideology which is manifesting itself through attacks on 'migrants' or black people. This has brought into focus the forces in society that are supporting attitudes that are adverse to the welfare of the black population. Social work and social services are key players in the process. The free market philosophy and privatisation have resulted in the trimming of the welfare state and a rolling back of the gains of black people which were achieved through hard struggles.

Against this background, *Anti-Racist Social Work* is revised in order to take account of these developments. These developments have caused consequential shifts in the social, political and economic landscape. Social work and social services must therefore be seen and analysed as political phenomena; not in the narrow party sense but within the context of the distribution and the use of power to reward or punish on the basis of race and colour. It is within this context that Lena Dominelli analyses social work and social services, by putting the discipline under the microscope and demonstrating how the 'purchaser', 'provider', 'community care', 'care management' and 'value for money', as the guiding principles of the new social work, have worked against the welfare of the majority of black people in Britain. Out of this process is emerging a new form of specialism in social work. This is being anchored in traditional social work, without any regard to the vital roles of racism within the structure of ideas that underpins the method. This revised edition of *Anti-Racist Social Work* forces us to recognise the political nature of social work and social services.

It shows how social work can influence ideas, structures, values, institutions, behaviour and also determine the types of relationship that exist between individuals within the client-worker relationship. In this regard, the challenges facing black people are not only those to do with separation from the familiar and attachment to the unfamiliar but

confronting the multi-dimensional characteristics of racism as they go about their daily lives. It is sad that even after such a long history of black people residing in Britain and the contribution that they have made to the development of the economy and society, nevertheless they are still regarded as aliens and are cut off from the main stream of British society and its institutions.

Anti-Racist Social Work shows that the major obstacle confronting black people in Britain today continues to be institutionalised oppression. As a part of this process, racism is still the fundamental barrier preventing access to opportunity, privilege, power and social justice for the majority of the black population. It is against this background that the book is written. It is designed to bring to the foreground the effect of racism in social work education and training and to demonstrate how the various elements of racist practice are stitched into the fabric of social work.

It has been said that the teacher today is teaching what has been learned at least two generations ago from textbooks that were written several decades before. In the field of social work this is certainly the case and in relation to social work with black people the problem is multiplied in that social work theoreticians have largely ignored the presence of the black population, and so in their theory-building little attention has been paid to the effects of racism on the black population. The immediate and central task of the discipline must therefore be to reorientate the value base of social work in a real way to confront racism in its various forms.

This book recognises the urgent need for transformation in the field of social work. Without work of this nature, stereotyping and the reinforcing of racist practices is likely to continue into the distant future without being challenged. The first task is to acknowledge differences and identify similarities but the danger, of course, is that often differences become generalised into stereotypes, and this we must constantly guard against. Lena Dominelli's work demonstrates that generalisation performs an important function in terms of making sense of new situations. However, as she shows, generalisation should not be a substitute for accurate description of new situations, of observation, analysis and logical deduction based on the level of current knowledge. This book illustrates how the process of generalisation can be transformed into stereotyping and then fed back into the structure of ideas, thereby reinforcing racism.

Dominelli shows that racist ideas have survived the past, exist in the present and will continue into the future, not as a result of the conservative nature of the society but because of the essential function that is

served by the phenomenon. In fact, racist ideas are often reactivated from the past to serve the same function in the present. Through a thorough analysis of racism she shows that although certain symbols of racism have changed as a response to the anti-racist onslaught others have taken their place, thereby articulating the old and bringing to the surface the adaptive nature of the phenomenon. With this analysis she shows that a change in symbolic form does not necessarily result in a concomitant change in symbolic function, in that the same function is served by new symbolic forms. It is therefore of critical importance that anti-racist strategies are brought into the social work profession to safeguard its value base.

This work shows that racism is a dynamic force, with the inherent nature to change over time and that it is profoundly influenced by the political, economic and social forces that are in operation at a particular period of time. It can be articulated through the medium of culture – ‘cultural racism’. For example, where certain cultural features are seen as British and desirable, or ‘black’ and undesirable and therefore ‘superior’ or ‘inferior’. It is also used to explain the poverty of black people in Britain or the existence of poverty in former colonial countries. In this way the underdevelopment and poverty in the countries from which the black population descend are not seen as due to imperialism and colonialism but as a result of cultural and genetic inferiority.

Dominelli shows that racism is inherently exclusionary and is embedded within the structure of the society. Consequently, it is vital that the variables be isolated and analysed in order to bring into focus its exclusionary characteristics, the elements within, its articulation, its persistence and the process of its operation through a dialectic of inclusionary and exclusionary representations. In this regard Dominelli conceives it as being of primary importance that individual and institutional racism are to be studied simultaneously in order to discover the interrelationship between them and the impact on individuals and society. To do otherwise would be to operate at a level of description and to leave her work unfinished.

In arriving at this position, Dominelli avoids the usual analytical problem of applying different meanings and different terms to the same phenomenon. In this work, racism is seen not only as discriminatory treatment on the basis of race and colour but also an ideology which fuels institutions by the use of power within a class society with conflicts permeating every level of the social structure. The exclusionary and inclusionary nature of the phenomenon together with its collective

representational forms provide her with a convenient tool of analysis, 'white' and 'black', which are the constituent elements of the phenomenon under study.

Lena Dominelli calls for positive action in the area of anti-racist practice and contextualisation of the black experience and white reaction in order to contribute to current dialogue with those who are becoming increasingly aware and concerned about the extent and effect of racism. She shows that racism does not only exist in the network of our institutions but also in our white students as they pass through the teaching institutions, as actors in society, and in their interaction with their black clients. The book appropriately begins with identifying the nature of racism and need for anti-racist training in which the context of the subject is clarified, and anchored within the real world, thereby suggesting that the white population must take positive action to eradicate racism and then goes on to show the ways in which racism permeates all aspects of society, thereby becoming a common concern for the theoreticians and the professionals alike.

The book shows how important the issue of racism is for the practice of social work with black people. It suggests that if social workers do not understand the dynamics of racism they cannot deliver effective services to black communities, since the experience of black people in Britain is being constantly shaped by racism. Lena Dominelli cautions us against conceiving the experience of black people as one lodged exclusively within the context of class, thereby conveniently avoiding the necessity to define, to analyse and to take action that enables social workers to become much more aware of the nature and effect of racism within the social work profession. Her analysis suggests that contemporary social work has given the impression that it has taken on board issues to do with class, gender, racism and ethnicity. However, this is not the case. In the process of conceptualising, imparting knowledge and in the application of social work principles, racism and the subjective experience of the black population in Britain are largely ignored. Consequently, the profession has maintained a pathological view of black families based on conceptualisations anchored in racism and transmitted through concepts of deprivation and maladaptation to the existing social order. This is no doubt true to and consistent with the tradition, framework and elements that govern the relationship between the colonised and the coloniser.

In this book, the power relationship between the black client and the white worker is brought out in a way that gives a glimpse into the

dynamics of social relationships between the races in an oppressive and racist society and also the intricacies and the part played by bureaucratic structures as they operate within teaching institutions and social work agencies. In this regard, the expertise of the black worker is seen as rooted in the knowledge and experience of the black community and so gives the black worker a special authority which threatens the white bureaucracy, whose authority is based not on the knowledge and experience of black people but on the authority of office rather than the authority of expertise.

Lena Dominelli does not fall into the trap of suggesting that social work can transform society or that the sole responsibility for anti-racist practices lies with social workers. Far from it; she recognises that 'there is much that the state can do which is not only consistent with liberty but is essential to it'.

In this book power is conceived within the context of social relationships. Therefore, the central concern must be with the process and phenomenon of institutionalisation which perpetuates certain social patterns causing them to endure over time, outlast the individual, transmitting behaviour and attitudes from one generation to the next. This work indicates very clearly that our lives are affected by our face-to-face interpersonal relationships. Consequently, the eradication of racism should necessarily increase the quality of life for both the black and white population.

Social work practice involves the use of the knowledge from a variety of traditions and disciplines, and so there are conflicting approaches and conflicting evidence. However, it is becoming increasingly clear that because of the nature of racism and ways in which it is embedded in the various traditions there must necessarily be a radical anti-racist approach to social work. Society has accepted the responsibility to educate and train social workers. Therefore society must also acknowledge the existence of racism and accept the responsibility for taking affirmative action to eradicate racism.

The book also describes the experience of the black population in Britain in terms of the entrenchment of racism not only in the national but in the local states. It emphasises the relationship between the development of racism both in its historical and contemporary context, and explains the processes whereby the black population is relegated to the lower strata of society and, at one and the same time, it shows how the colour-blind and pathological view is brought to the understanding of the needs of the black population. For example, Lena Dominelli gives us

a view as to how the pathology of the black family has developed among white practitioners and converged with white sexism, which is then played out among professionals and between the white professional and the black client alike. In order to create a profound shift, Lena Dominelli addresses the issue of positive action by tackling racism within the context of the organisation; and so calls for an anti-racist strategy in this area. But by what means can this be brought about? Lena Dominelli's proposal is to bring about the transformation of social work through the development of equal opportunities policy anchored in an anti-racist framework, followed by fair recruitment and selection processes, combined with training which attacks the values and norms of the organisation, together with checks and balances to monitor the process of implementation with appropriate feedback mechanisms to reflect a clear anti-racist path. Lena Dominelli sees a central role for managers both at the senior-management and middle-management levels, since any manager who manages others has a significant and supporting role in terms of implementing policy and ensuring that subordinates do not act in a discriminatory or racist manner. To this end, it is made clear that at the outset key managers must necessarily undergo anti-racism awareness training to become sensitive to how their own attitudes can perpetuate racism. Anti-racism awareness training should be related to the impact of discriminatory practice on day-to-day decision-making processes of higher- and lower-level managers alike, resulting in managers, and indeed practitioners, developing the requisite skills and appropriate attitudes in relation to the black population.

Irrespective of the increasing concern about racism in this society and its impact on black people and white people alike, teaching institutions, social services and voluntary agencies have paid little regard to the issue of racism. The welfare state and services have failed miserably in identifying the needs of black people and providing relevant services. As a result of racism a disproportionate number of black children are in the care of the state. These children are less likely to be re-united with their families. Many black children are placed transracially and, although the negative consequences are recognised and although black families are ready, willing and able to provide substitute care, there is little commitment on the part of the state to cease this destructive practice. In fact, there is now a rolling back of the commitment to place black children in black families. There is a disproportionate number of black youth in custody, a disproportionate number of black people in mental hospitals and more black children than white children are suspended from schools.

Black people face discrimination in housing, employment, health and their life chances are limited. Lena Dominelli is therefore pessimistic, but her pessimism has brought into focus the major challenge for social work, which must be the removal of racism – to constitute the starting point for the reconceptualisation of social work in a multi-racial society. It must be recognised that racism permeates all aspects of society and therefore educational institutions and social welfare agencies are affected similarly. Consequently, for Lena Dominelli, the effect of racism on social work practice should be obvious. The greater part of the problem which is currently being experienced by black people, she suggests, is engendered by the underlying structure of racism and therefore any attempt to alleviate this problem from the traditional casework basis is doomed to fail. It should therefore be clear that what is required is a radical rethinking and recasting of social work programmes based on an anti-racist strategy. The field of social work with black people is composed of contradictory philosophies, muddled thought and racist assumptions. Indeed, social work has been a moving frontier of confusion, particularly when it attempts to move across race and cultures. Lena Dominelli shows that the social work approach has moved from grand concepts of assimilation, integration, adaptation (and colour equals problems), to cultural explanations which currently leave the profession unwilling to change, and uncertain about challenging racism. Lena Dominelli's book goes beyond this method of thinking and practice; it will continue to meet the needs of social work practitioners and educators alike. It will continue to be an invaluable source for teachers, social workers, community workers, and people who are interested in the nature of racism and its effect on the black and white population and the process whereby measures can be taken to remove this destructive phenomenon from the profession in particular and society in general. It will undoubtedly continue to be a source of reference and practical assistance to those who are concerned with the creation of a truly multi-racial society.

JOHN SMALL, 1996
Co-ordinator, Social Work Unit
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*In honour of the struggles of little girls who long for
blonde hair and blue eyes, but learn after much hardship
and pain to be proud of their own attributes*

Preface to second edition

Racism in its myriad forms continues to flourish despite the spread of equal opportunities policies and the formal disavowal of racist actions on the part of politicians. Social work, like the rest of society, reflects this contradictory situation. Although more black people are now employed in welfare settings and within the criminal justice system than when the first edition of this book was written, their progress to the higher echelons of management and mainstream positions has been minimal. Indeed, in some instances movement has been backward. For example, the abolition of the Greater London Council and Metropolitan Counties has forced into retreat many of their anti-racist initiatives. Consequently, instead of the handful of black men as directors of social services departments, today there are none. No black woman has yet reached this level and there have still been no black chief probation officers. Moreover, social work has been at the sharp edge of the backlash against anti-racist initiatives. Yet, black people and white anti-racists have continued to fight for racial justice despite the unpropitious environment in which their work proceeds. The general climate of both hostility and indifference towards programmes seeking to end racial injustice has increased the necessity for more people to commit themselves to anti-racist struggles. Thus, it is timely for this book to be revised in a way that encourages greater numbers of social work practitioners and educators throughout the world to make their contribution to bringing about the demise of racist attitudes, behaviour, legislation, policies and practice.

The various travels and pieces of research I have undertaken since the original publication of this book have revealed the widespread nature of racism and the relevance of much of what I have said about the dynamics of racism in Britain for other countries. In this edition, therefore, I shall attempt to include developments in other countries. However, the extent to which I can do this is limited by the short length of a book that fits into the BASW–Macmillan series. In many respects, it is events in other parts of the world – for example, the ending of the apartheid regime in South Africa – which provide the impetus for great optimism about possibilities here at home. It is in this spirit that I ask all of you who read these words to join those of us who have already embarked on projects that aim to vanquish racial oppression.

LENA DOMINELLI

Acknowledgements

Black people and their struggles to assert their humanity and dignity in a racist world have been crucial in inspiring the reclamation of my own humanity following the experiences of being a non-patrial immigrant in several continents. The lessons I have drawn from these have influenced my thinking as well as my practice and are reflected in my approach to the question of eliminating racism. The insights I have gained from these experiences have led me to feel passionately that racism is more than evil, irrational prejudices held by individuals. It is also a powerful social force which operates coherently and systematically to invade and structure every human interaction. I want to thank my many friends, both black and white, who have helped in the writing of this book by making me think deeply of who I was and what I am. I also wish to express my gratitude to the many generations of Warwick students and practice teachers who have influenced my thinking about the subject and who have taught me a great deal, as did the clients and workers, black and white, who agreed to be interviewed by me in connection with this book. I should add that the material contained in the case studies has been altered to protect the identity of the individuals concerned. Finally, I wish to thank the readers of the text who have provided me with the encouragement and comments which have enabled me to maintain my arguments in an emotionally fraught and complex area. In particular, I would like to thank Paul Stubbs and Martin Willis. I also extend very special thanks to John Small for finding time in his busy schedule to write the Foreword.

LENA DOMINELLI