

The discrimination and empowerment in mental health social work essay



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This essay will firstly define what discrimination is and what it means to discriminate against something. It will then explain what it means to discriminate against someone or a group in social work practice. This will be a very broad definition that encompasses a variety of different service user groups. Examples will be used to demonstrate what discrimination may look like in social work practice and everyday life. To gain a better understanding the essay will critically explore theory and ideas around power and how power manifests between groups. This part of the essay will touch on the idea of 'othering'. The essay will use social constructionism theory to analyse this concept of power. The essay will then focus in on mental health. This part of the essay will firstly look at what a mental health problem is and explore the stigma of being labelled with a mental health problem. The essay will then go deeper to focus on how the western medical model can discriminate against Black and Ethnic Minority groups (BME), even if indirectly. The essay will then critically explore why BME adults, particularly men, are overrepresented in the mental health service. Links will be made to institutional racism and the fact that BME children are underrepresented in child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS). In its broadest definition, to discriminate means to "differentiate" or to "recognise a distinction" (Oxford Dictionaries 2012). In this broad sense it is a part of daily life to discriminate. For example, an adult may discriminate between lanes on a motorway and a baby will often discriminate between a stranger and their caregiver. Discrimination becomes a problem when the 'difference' or 'recognised distinction' is used for the basis of unfair treatment. This is the discrimination that social workers need to be vigilant for and strive to challenge. Discrimination is not always intentional (Thompson 2009) and <https://assignbuster.com/the-discrimination-and-empowerment-in-mental-health-social-work-essay/>

there are various types of discrimination (EHRC 2012). Discrimination can be direct, indirect, based on the perception that someone has a protected characteristic or discriminate against someone who is associated with a person who has a 'protected characteristic' (EHRC 2012). The Equality Act (2010) aims to protect people with a 'protective characteristic(s)' from victimisation, harassment and failure to make reasonable adjustments (Home Office 2012). The Equality Act (2010) also aims to protect people who may be associated with someone with a protected characteristic or the perception that they possess a protected characteristic. For example, a child may be treated unfavourably at school by a teacher because their parents are a same sex couple. The Equality Act (2010) does not however cover every marginalised group. For example, people who are homeless or people who experience difficulties with alcohol and drug misuse. PARAGRAPH AROUND EMPOWERMENT NEEDED HERE. Social workers act as 'mediators' between service users and the state. Social workers are in a role that can potentially empower or oppress (Thompson 1997). For this reason Thompson (1997: 11) argues that "good practice must be anti-discriminatory practice". All other areas of practice could be brilliant and the social worker could have very good intentions but if the social worker cannot recognise the marginalised position of some of the people they are working with their interventions could further oppress (Thompson 1997). Thompson (1997) reminds the reader many times throughout his book that "If you're not part of the solution you are part of the problem". I choose to include this because it reinforces that social workers need to challenge discrimination and take action against it. To accept it and to not 'swim against the tide' does indeed make us part of the problem. Where does discrimination come from and why <https://assignbuster.com/the-discrimination-and-empowerment-in-mental-health-social-work-essay/>

do people, institutions and systems discriminate and oppress people? This part of the essay will critically explore the concept of power, oppression and social constructionism in relation to discrimination and social work. Power is defined by Haralambos and Holborn (2000: 540) very loosely as " the ability to get your own way even when others are opposed to your wishes". This is of course a very simple definition of a complex concept, although I choose to include it because it can be applied to social work quite simply. For example, is a social worker doing what they believe is ' right' even when the service user opposes? On the hand a social worker could use this power to advocate for the service user against the state. A social worker's exercise of power can potentially oppress or empower. As defined by the Oxford Dictionary of English (2005) power is " the ability or capacity to do something; the capacity or ability to act in a particular way to direct or influence the behaviour off others or the course of events; or physical strength or force exerted by someone". Thompson (1998: 42) identified a common theme with power as " the ability to influence or control people, events, processes or resources". These common themes of power all have the potential to be used destructively in social work. Social workers have the ability and power to influence and control, whether this is on an individual personal level or as a gate keeper of services or an agent of control. Social workers need to be aware of power as they work with people who are marginalised and powerless in comparison; people who social workers could potentially oppress and even worse, abuse. Social workers need to be careful when using their authority. They can use it to ' direct' behaviour or to limit a person's capacity to exercise their own power (Roger 2008). From this definition power could be seen as a coercive force or authoritarian. However, <https://assignbuster.com/the-discrimination-and-empowerment-in-mental-health-social-work-essay/>

some theorists would argue that there is more to power than just coercion and authority. Parsons took a different view on power. He saw power as a way of maintaining social order instead of a force for individual gain (Rogers 2008). Parsons believes that to be able to enforce coercive action and justify it there needs to be a collective interest from the social system as a whole (Rogers 2008). Power is a key player in oppression and empowerment. When people form oppressive relationships the tendency is to make a strategic decision that excludes a particular group or individuals from accessing power and resources (Dominelli 2002). According to Domeneli (2002: 8) "oppression involves relations of domination that divide people into dominant or superior groups and subordinate inferior ones". As a result this devalues the characteristics or attributes that are deemed inferior and can potentially exclude people from resources (Domeneli 2002). Just simply looking at oppression as someone who has power over an individual focuses on oppression at just an interpersonal level (Domeneli 2002). This then leaves out the structural and cultural elements of oppression and power which can be located in institutions, government and cultural norms such as comedy (Thompson 1997). It is important to recognise how power can separate and subjugate groups but why are some groups seen as more superior? Social constructivism, the process of 'othering' and Thompson's (1997) PCS model will be used to analyse this question. In a simple sense social constructivism would suggest that superiority is a "product of human activity" (Rogers and Pilgrim 2006: 15). What is meant by this is that "oppression is a social construct" (Domeneli 2002: 9) and that oppressive relations are not pre-determined but they are reproduced between social interactions and routines (Domeneli 2002). Language is often used as a key part of social

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interaction and is also a very powerful tool. A person could choose different words to describe the same situation and depending on what words are chosen can depend on image or impression that someone else gets. This relates heavily to social work as social workers are responsible for writing reports on people and can be responsible for finding a residential placement for someone. Depending on how social workers choose to word these written pieces of work can indeed paint a very different picture of the service user they are working with. The use of labels will also feed into this. Labels help us to construct our social world and we use them to find similarities and differences to process the world around us (Moncrieffe and Eyben 2007). Although the process of labelling is " fundamental to human behaviour and interaction" (Moncrieffe and Eyben 2007: 19) social workers need to be aware of when these labels have the potential to be damaging, oppressive and reinforcers of discrimination. Labels can be used to change or sustain power relations which can have an impact on prejudice and on achieving equality (Moncrieffe and Eyben 2007). Although social constructivism and the use of language and labels can indeed have an impact on service users one needs to be careful not fall into the trap of simply accepting oppression is a social construct to do this would be to accept that it is natural and inevitable (Domeneli 2002) which could further oppress. Some writers recognise that it is not our realities that are socially constructed but our theories of reality (Rogers and Pilgrim 2006). So what we use to make sense of our realities. This would be a good point to move on to the process of ' othering'." Exclusion is rooted in the ' othering' process" (Domeneli 2002: 44). This reinforces the ' them' and ' us' divide. To establish a ' them' and ' us' there needs to be a difference. ' Othering' uses differences to make <https://assignbuster.com/the-discrimination-and-empowerment-in-mental-health-social-work-essay/>

divisions. Some people may be seen as the 'in crowd' or 'deserving' whilst the 'other' is the 'outsider', 'undeserving' or 'out crowd' (Domeneli 2002). The 'in crowd' is perceived to be superior to the 'out crowd' which is perceived to be inferior. This can then be applied to a number of social divisions such as; gender, 'race' and disability to just name a few. For example, men superior to women and black inferior to white.' Othering' can be experienced as multiple; multiple oppression. People can be 'othered' simultaneously due to a number of social divisions (Domenelli 2002), for example, being a black woman who experiences mental health issues.

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