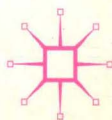


**Neil Thompson**

Practical Social Work

Fifth Edition

**Anti-  
Discriminatory  
Practice**



Neil Thompson

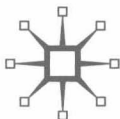
# Anti- Discriminatory Practice

Equality, Diversity and  
Social Justice

Fifth Edition

palgrave  
macmillan





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First edition 1992  
Reprinted five times  
Second edition 1997  
Reprinted four times  
Third edition 2001  
Reprinted five times  
Fourth edition 2006  
Reprinted six times  
Fifth edition 2012

Published by  
PALGRAVE MACMILLAN

Palgrave Macmillan in the UK is an imprint of Macmillan Publishers Limited, registered in England, company number 785998, of Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire RG21 6XS.

Palgrave Macmillan in the US is a division of St Martin's Press LLC, 175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010.

Palgrave Macmillan is the global academic imprint of the above companies and has companies and representatives throughout the world.

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ISBN-13: 978-0-230-25013-0 paperback

This book is printed on paper suitable for recycling and made from fully managed and sustained forest sources. Logging, pulping and manufacturing processes are expected to conform to the environmental regulations of the country of origin.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1  
21 20 19 18 17 16 15 14 13 12

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

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Published in conjunction with  
the British Association of Social Workers



Founding editor: Jo Campling

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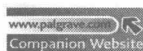
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For Susan and Anna



## Preface to the fifth edition

In the Preface to the fourth edition of this book, I wrote: 'When a book reaches its fourth edition, it is a sure sign that it has achieved a significant measure of success'. The fact that this is now the fifth edition clearly reinforces that message. This is partly, no doubt, due to the importance of social justice and a commitment to tackling discrimination and oppression as basic social work values and partly – if the feedback I have received is to be believed – because the book presents a clear and helpful picture of the complexities of developing anti-discriminatory practice and provides a foundation of understanding that casts important light on how we can rise to the challenges involved.

It is now almost twenty years since I started writing the first edition of this book. Times have changed a great deal during that period and we have made some significant advances in tackling discrimination and oppression. However, the challenges we face remain enormous and represent a long-term project. At the time of writing the first edition I was a team manager in a social services department and in daily contact with many of the issues covered in this book. For the past fourteen years my role as a trainer and consultant has brought me into almost daily contact with practitioners, managers, students and educators who are wrestling with the challenges of ensuring that social work interventions are positive and empowering, rather than disempowering and demeaning. I am therefore very aware that there is a need for this book and that it has an important part to play.

Despite the fact that some writers have misrepresented my work (see Chapter 9), such distortions have not prevented this text in its various incarnations from helping generation after generation of social workers to appreciate the importance of tackling discrimination and oppression and providing a foundation of basic understanding on which to build over time. This new edition has been developed to build on that success by incorporating the latest key developments in the field. In this way it can help the next generation of practitioners to be reflective and empowering in their

approach to their work. It differs from previous editions in the following ways:

1. It has a new opening chapter which focuses on equality, diversity and social justice. The aim is to locate anti-discriminatory practice in the context of these three important concepts and values. A key point I want to get across is that, while 'anti-discriminatory practice' is a long-established term in the social work vocabulary (some might even see it as old-fashioned now), the ideas on which it is based are as relevant and pressing now as they were decades ago. The introduction of new terminology and new ideas should be seen as part of the development of anti-discriminatory practice as a vibrant field and not as a replacement for it.
2. There are two additional chapters, one on sexuality and heterosexism and the other on faith and religious discrimination. This change reflects the growing interest in these two areas of discrimination and helps to reaffirm the important message that we need to think broadly when it comes to forms of discrimination and not make the (once very common) mistake of focusing mainly if not exclusively on race and gender as a focus of discriminatory behaviour, assumptions and language.
3. The book as a whole has been updated to reflect new ideas and developments (and to show continuities over time) and, in so doing to engage substantively with wider developments and new directions in intellectual and professional debate (for example, the valuing diversity and cultural competence approaches). However, it remains the case, of course, that a short introductory book like this cannot realistically incorporate our knowledge base in anything approaching a comprehensive or exhaustive way.
4. Each chapter now begins with a short overview to ease readers gently into the discussions that follow. This additional feature, combined with the practice focus illustrations within the chapters and the 'Points for reflection' section at the end of each chapter, helps to make this a user-friendly text for students and beginning professionals.

This book was written specifically with a social work readership in mind. However, I have become aware that it is also widely used by others within the human services or helping professions (for example, nurses, advice workers, and youth and community



workers). It is to be hoped that readers in this latter category will not find the constant references to social work too discouraging for them. Tutors and others involved in supporting learning may find it helpful to encourage readers, whenever they encounter the term 'social work' to stop and think about how the point being made applies to their own professional discipline. In many cases it may be very similar, but this will not always be the case. Making these comparisons between social work and their own discipline can be an important part of learning.

Whether the book is used in its originally intended field of social work or in what has become its wider constituency of the people professions more broadly defined, it remains an *introductory* text. In the Preface to the third edition of this book, I made the following comment:

Throughout the process of writing this book there has been no doubt in my mind that its role is as an *introductory* text, a gateway to the broader and more advanced literature. It is certainly not intended as an 'all you need to know on the subject' type of book. I have therefore found it quite sad, especially as an external examiner at various universities, to note so many students using the book as if it were the only one available on the subject! I am, of course, pleased that the book has become established as a key text, but this does not alter the fact that it is a key *introductory* text and should therefore not be used as a substitute for reading more widely or for engaging with the more advanced texts available. ... If you find this book helpful, then that's great, but please use any benefits you have gained from it as a launch pad for further learning, and not as a source of complacency that stands in the way of further development.

I still wish to reinforce that message as I continue to see the potential problem of the book's strengths becoming a weakness by discouraging further reading and learning. I hope that tutors, trainers and practice educators will play their part by emphasizing this point.

Wanting to emphasize the introductory nature of this text leads me to point out that, in between the publication of the first and second editions of this book, I was approached by a number of people who urged me to write a follow-up text, a more advanced book which examined in more depth and detail some of the key issues outlined here. This led to the publication in 1998 of *Promoting Equality*. A second edition was published by Palgrave

Macmillan in 2003 and a third edition in 2011. References at various points in this book to *Promoting Equality* relate to that book. It is perhaps helpful to see *Anti-Discriminatory Practice* as a first-level, introductory text, while *Promoting Equality* is a follow-on text, for readers looking to explore more deeply and widely.

To prevent any unnecessary confusion, I feel it is important to clarify two issues relating to the use of terminology. First, at one time it became the practice of some people to distinguish between anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice. For such commentators, the former was reserved for a narrow, legalistic perspective that did not take on board wider sociopolitical concerns. It is therefore important to clarify, right from the start, that this is not a distinction I shall be drawing here. As the arguments presented in this book should make very clear, I adopt a holistic perspective on anti-discriminatory practice – that is, I see it as a broad undertaking that needs to incorporate sociological, political and economic concerns above and beyond narrow legal requirements. In my view, discrimination is the process (or set of processes) that leads to oppression. To challenge oppression, it is therefore necessary to challenge discrimination. Anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice are therefore presented here as more or less synonymous terms, on the grounds that a legalistic perspective is too narrow to challenge discrimination and the ensuing oppression, and does not therefore merit the title of ‘anti-discriminatory’. I shall revisit this point in Chapter 1.

Second, the term ‘client’ is one that I use throughout this book and indeed in many of my writings. It is important to recognize that this is a contested term. Many people have abandoned it in favour of ‘service user’. However, many people object to this latter term, especially when it is shortened to ‘user’. In my view, client is a term of respect and is consistent with the notion of professionalism (see Thompson, 2009a, for a fuller discussion of this).

Finally, I am hopeful that readers will find this revised and updated edition both interesting and useful and that it will serve as an important foundation for developing their knowledge and understanding further.

*Neil Thompson*



# Acknowledgements

In developing this new edition I have once again had the support and assistance of a good many people. My thanks go yet again to those who provided helpful comments in the development of the original edition – their contributions continue to be of value.

It has become something of a habit for me to express my gratitude to Susan Thompson for her unwavering support – moral, practical and intellectual. That continues to be the case for this edition. I would be lost without her.

Other friends who have helped in the development of my thinking and whose influence can be seen here are Denise Bevan of St Rocco's Hospice, Warrington, John Bates, formerly of Liverpool Hope University, Bernard Moss, Emeritus Professor, Staffordshire University and Colin Richardson, Fellow of Keele University.

Catherine Gray at the publishers has continued to be very helpful whenever called upon, and can always be relied upon to respond in a friendly and supportive way. Her colleague, Kate Llewellyn, has also played an important role in bringing this project to fruition. I am very grateful to them both for their help. I must also once again express my thanks to Penny Simmons for her excellent copyediting work and her friendly and helpful way of relating to authors.

I would also like to say thank you to the very many participants on courses I have run over the years who have shared their experiences and views with me and who have reaffirmed my commitment to developing forms of education and training geared towards tackling discrimination and oppression which are not in themselves oppressive.

This edition follows the pattern of the first four in that it is dedicated to Susan and Anna, the two most important people in my life.

*Neil Thompson*



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# Introduction

During the late 1980s social work education became increasingly aware of the impact of oppression and discrimination on clients and communities. There was a growing awareness and recognition of the relative neglect of such issues in traditional approaches to social work. This emphasis on combating discrimination is part of the process of establishing an awareness of discrimination and a commitment to challenging it as fundamental building blocks of qualifying training and subsequent practice. They were therefore seen as an essential part of the curriculum and the evaluation process and continue to be regarded as such, as is shown by their inclusion in the curriculum for the current qualifying programmes in social work.

This major development in education and training has also been reflected more broadly, to a certain extent at least, in social work policy, theory and practice (although it would be naïve not to acknowledge that much progress remains to be made in these respects). Anti-discriminatory practice has therefore been featuring as a regular and high priority item on the social work agenda for some time now, although there sadly continues to be a great deal of misunderstanding and oversimplification of the issues.

But it is not only students as new entrants to the profession who need a grounding in the theory and practice of anti-discriminatory social work. There remain very many practitioners, managers and trainers who can benefit from developing a fuller understanding of the complexities involved and begin to appreciate that we need to wrestle constantly with these issues, rather than find some sort of easy answer or ultimate resolution.

The primary aim of this book is to provide just such a grounding – for qualified staff, for those seeking qualification, for practice teachers, trainers and managers and for others with a general interest in contemporary social work, equality and diversity or related issues. The text seeks to clarify and to answer, in part at least, a number of important questions:



- What are the factors underlying discrimination and oppression, especially as they relate to social work theory and practice?
- What are the common concepts and issues across the various forms of discrimination – sexism, racism, ageism and so on? What are the key differences?
- Why is the development of anti-discriminatory practice so important?
- What are the necessary steps towards constructing a social work practice based on principles of anti-discrimination and the promotion of equality?

## Structure and outline

In the first chapter, I discuss the key underlying concepts of equality, diversity and social justice. I show that these are not only concepts, in an intellectual sense, but also values in a practice sense – that is, principles that can and should guide our actions. I argue that we cannot really understand discrimination and oppression without first having a good understanding of these three key issues.

Another major feature of this chapter is the emphasis I place on the argument that unfair discrimination is something that needs to be tackled in all its forms and not only the more well-established ones or more fully documented ones. Anti-discriminatory practice is a matter of a principled commitment to equality, diversity and social justice, rather than simply following political, intellectual or other fashions.

Chapter 2 examines a range of other theoretical concepts which can be seen to underpin anti-discriminatory practice. The major themes are explained and links with social work practice are drawn in order to begin to build a bridge between theory and practice. Indeed, the need for a clear practice focus, illuminated by theory, will be a primary concern throughout the book (Thompson, 2000a; 2010). This chapter will also tackle the thorny issue of language. The topic will be approached from two angles: first, to understand the role played by language in constructing and reinforcing discrimination; and, second, to clarify the terminology used in this text – that is, to define the key terms and concepts.

This chapter sets the scene for the following analysis of the various forms of oppression and processes of discrimination. This is achieved by explaining the common theory base which acts as a framework for understanding the complex issues discussed in