



Anti-Opressive Practice (AOP) at Durham Children's Aid Society

Questions and Answers

1. What is Anti-Opressive Practice?

Anti-Opressive Practice is a form of social work practice that addresses issues of power and privilege based on social location and institutional and systemic forms of oppression. This approach is particularly necessary for the institution of child welfare given the historical oppression that has been perpetrated against Indigenous, racialized, and minoritized communities. The Ontario Association of Children's Aid Societies' ([OACAS](#)) [Anti-Opressive \(AO\) Practice Framework](#) states: "Anti-oppression is the lens through which one understands how race, gender, sexual orientation and identity, ability, age, class, occupation and social service usage, can result in systemic inequalities for particular groups. Anti-oppression practice refers to engaging in work that critically examines how social structures and social institutions work to create and perpetuate the oppression and marginalization of those who have been identified as not belonging to the dominant group."

2. How is Anti-Opression different from diversity and inclusivity?

Anti-Opression is about examining power dynamics and the Anti-Opressive Practice framework is the only framework that addresses systemic oppression and aims to change the structure of child welfare in order to create equitable outcomes. Diversity simply means difference. Inclusivity is a way to address differences in a group so that everyone feels included. These are methods towards anti-oppression, but in and of themselves leave oppressive structures unchallenged. Anti-oppression has a far broader scope and deeper impact, and incorporates the very broad sense of diversity.

3. Why are we doing this?

There are many reasons why it is necessary that our organization commit to integration of anti-oppressive practice. As of 1999, the Canadian Association of Schools of Social Work (CASSW) mandated all Social Work Curriculum to include the analysis of injustice and oppression. As an employer of social workers, a service provider, and a very powerful institution, it is critical that we adopt an anti-oppressive practice and approach to all aspects of our organization.

Durham CAS has been working on AO integration for the last few years and on June 2, 2015 we held an AO Launch with our community.

[The OACAS AO Discussion Paper](#) indicates that “there is no shortage of research that demonstrates how child welfare practice often contributes to oppressive outcomes. Through the adoption of an anti-oppression framework, the system can begin to recognize and address the negative impacts on marginalized groups.”

[The OACAS commissioned the development of an AO Framework for Child Welfare in August 2010 with June Yee and Helen Wong of Ryerson University.](#) It is clear that previous diversity, inclusion or cultural competency initiatives will not be able to address the deep-rooted systemic nature of oppression in our system, as well as assist in healing and recovering from our oppressive historical beginnings with the 60s scoop and today’s forms of oppression such as the Millennial Scoop and overrepresentation of Black children in the system.

[The OACAS AO Framework](#) states: “The child welfare system has been criticized for imposing dominant values on marginalized communities, while at the same failing to take into account the reality of the deleterious effects of inequality on families and children. The net result is that the child welfare system has the potential to reinforce, if not deepen, the inequalities already experienced by many parents and children.”

4. What has Durham CAS already done?

Durham CAS has chosen to be a leader in child welfare and boldly commit to integration of anti-oppressive practices. The organization realized that this kind of systemic change needs to start from the top. The organization chose a change model that would start with the leadership and then permeate through every layer of employees. Once ensuring all employees had an understanding of anti-oppressive practice integration, on June 2, 2015, we launched this initiative into the community, including volunteers and caregivers. Click [here](#) to view a 15min video of the Anti-Oppressive Practice Launch.

In the last few years, Durham CAS has been working internally to develop its capacity. The agency needed to have a vision of anti-oppressive practice to help get started. After many discussions, the agency has declared its AO Directional Statement, ***“We are committed to anti-oppressive practice in which we challenge the impacts of power and privilege, eliminate barriers and are inclusive of the broad range of diversity in our community.”***

Some of the things the organization has done include i) hiring an anti-oppressive practice subject matter expert to lead this integration process; ii) commissioning an organizational AO needs assessment by an external subject-matter expert; iii) providing all employees with basic anti-oppressive practice training; iv) a review of policies through an AO Equity Lens tool; v) currently working the creation of an AO Road Map based on recommendations of the needs assessment.

5. But why fix something that isn't broken?

Unfortunately, the system *is* broken for many individuals and groups. Current child welfare statistics reveal a disproportionately high number of children in care from poor, Black, Indigenous, and single parent-led families, to name a few. For example, Aboriginal youth aged 0-19 represented less than 3% of the total child population in Ontario (Census 2006), but 14.4% of children in care (OACAS, 2008). In an urban centre of Ontario, where the Black population totals 8%, Black youth represent 65% of the youth in group care. This means that Black and Indigenous communities are overrepresented within child welfare. We are also aware that disproportionality is a risk in systems like child welfare and are working to ensure equitable outcomes. Most recently, the Children's Aid Society of Toronto released statistics that 41% of children and youth in their care are black, while only 8% of the Toronto population is black. This indicates an overrepresentation, and has recently been discussed in the media such as the [Toronto Star](#).

6. Is this about being politically correct?

No. It is sometimes assumed that diversity, inclusivity, and anti-oppression initiatives are about being politically correct. Usually being politically correct is motivated by the goal of not offending someone from a specific group. Anti-oppressive practice is about examining how power functions in all of the diverse aspects of our culture. Anti-oppressive practice is not with the intent of not offending, but rather with the intent of creating equity for all.

7. Is this because a small group of people have had their feelings hurt or are personally offended?

No. It is about our values as ethical service providers and to ensure that our organization is equitable and inclusive for all people. Every child, youth and family deserves and has a right to equitable outcomes.

8. Is this about bending the rules for minoritized people?

No. Anti-oppressive practice is neither about lowering our standards nor bending the rules. It is about examining the origins, and need for continuation of existing rules, judgments or practices. We will continue to hold all individuals accountable, whether it is parents, foster parents, volunteers, staff and/or stakeholders. Anti-oppressive practice provides new learning in order to work with people differently, use better approaches to complex matters, and offers more holistic solutions. This will change the way we do our work and eventually the outcomes experienced by individuals.

9. So how is anti-oppression relevant to us when we have little diversity in our community?

Diversity in the broad sense exists in every community. This would include ability, age, ancestry, class, culture, education, ethnicity, family make-up, gender, gender identity, gender expression, health/mental health, language, nationality, place of origin, race, religion, sexual orientation, and socio-economic status, as well as any other factors related to one's social location or identity. Certainly many of the families with whom we work are marginalized in many respects. Thus, just because it may not be visible to you, does not mean that diversity isn't present in your community.

It is important to note that our community is continuing to diversify in the various areas of social location listed above. These include:

- a) Other than English, languages spoken in our region include Urdu, Arabic, Farsi, Chinese, Spanish, and Tamil. Furthermore, our local Francophone community has recently asked that our Region become a designated French language service area under the Provincial French Language Services Act.
- b) In terms of faith, religion and spirituality, we have churches, temples, and mosques and most recently the Chabad Jewish Centre of Durham Region (located in Whitby).
- c) We have an increasing population of immigrants. A recent local report indicates that currently, immigrants make up 20% of Durham's overall population, with the majority of these individuals living in the municipalities of Pickering, Ajax, and Whitby. With this, the ethno-cultural make-up of Durham is also changing. For example, the Latin American community grew in size nearly 700% between 2001 and 2006. Significant growth was also seen in the South Asian, African and Eastern European communities.
- d) The above trends are also evident in the fact that the population of 'visible minorities' increased by nearly 50% in the same period. According to Statistics Canada, 'visible minorities' accounted for 57% of the overall population growth in Durham over the same period. Reports indicate that these trends will continue.
- e) It is estimated that at least 1 in 10 persons do not identify as heterosexual. If we consider the total number of children and youth that we serve, quite a large number may identify as LGTTBBQQ2sl. We are also aware that youth who may be challenging traditional gender norms may be more at risk of experiencing violence within the home.
- f) Aboriginal youth between the ages of 15 and 30 are the fastest growing segment of the Canadian population, a trend that we will see locally as well.

Again, these are just a few examples and there are many more. Our community is currently quite diverse and is continuing to become even more diverse. It is important that we recognize this (and associated impacts on power dynamics) and include this in our planning.

10. But I don't see any discrimination here?

In terms of looking at our organization as a workplace, Statistics Canada reports that about 36% of visible minorities have indicated that they have experienced unfair treatment or discrimination due to their ethnicity, race, language or religion. Of these, 56% faced discrimination in the workplace.

In terms of our organization as a service provider, it is important to know that current child welfare statistics reveal a disproportionately high number of children in care from poor, Black, Indigenous, and single parent-led families, to name a few.

In terms of our catchment area and the diversity of peoples whom we serve, a recent local report exposed the fact that experiencing discrimination in Durham for immigrants and non-immigrants is not uncommon. This included explicit and implicit forms of discrimination, as well as internalized discrimination (Diverse Voices, March 2011).

As a whole, it would be unlikely for there to be an organization or community completely free of discrimination and oppression, as this work is an on-going process. Sometimes when we are not directly at the disempowered end, we don't see how there may be a power imbalance, or how some people may be or feel excluded or marginalized. Remember that much of discrimination and oppression is not intentional, and much of it today can be covert and subtle. It is not our individual intent, but our greater impact as a system that is the focus of anti-oppressive practice.

This section is specifically for Foster Parents:

11. If I am a foster parent, who can I contact for more information or any questions I have?

Please contact your worker directly. Your worker is always a great first point of contact.

12. If I am a foster parent, what does this mean for me?

As a caregiver, you play a critical role in ensuring that children and youth are treated equitably. The Society has declared itself to be an organization committed to anti-oppression (AO). This means understanding what AO is, playing a helpful role in identifying AO matters and learning, and encouraging others to better understand anti-oppressive practice when providing care to children and youth in your home. You would work in a way that is consistent with our AO Directional Statement. The Society will be providing orientation sessions in the fall of 2015 specifically for caregivers and we would encourage you to ask questions at those sessions. We recognize that becoming an AO Champion is a process and you may require support; we will be incorporating AO in trainings specifically for caregivers. There will be much more to come so please stay tuned.

13. But I treat everyone equally, so why do I have to learn about anti-oppressive practices?

Anti-oppression moves us away from the traditional 'colour-blind' or 'gender-blind' approaches wherein we had the same rules for everyone. Those approaches were focused on equality, which is treating everyone the same and ignoring differences based on social location. We now know that those 'blind' approaches were ineffective and created considerable inequity and were not fair and just in practice. This is partly why bodies like the Ontario Human Rights Commission encourage organizations to collect statistics on race, sexual orientation and various aspects of social location and human rights data, and encourage organizations to have specific policies and practices to ensure that we proactively prevent systemic biases.

At Durham CAS, we believe that all of our staff, caregivers and volunteers have the best intent possible and genuinely want to help achieve our [Vision](#). Anti-oppressive practice is not about questioning people's intent, it is about us as a system looking at our greater impact on communities and families over generations and honestly assessing whether we have had the intended impact.

14. Do I have to change my beliefs?

Our AO journey is about creating equity and being an ally for change. Durham CAS Foster Parents sign a service agreement with the Society committing to promote and welcome diversity in the foster care services program. This would include the broad range of diversity including gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, spiritual and faith identities, and ethno cultural and racial identities.

This section is specifically for Volunteers:

15. If I am a volunteer, who can I speak with for more information or with any questions I have?

Please speak with the Volunteer Coordinator. You may also speak with the staff members you are working with directly.

16. If I am a volunteer, what does this mean for me?

As a volunteer, you play a critical role in helping to achieve our Vision and Mission. Like any other Society initiative, we want to make sure you are aware of anti-oppressive practice. Our organization is going through a major transformation, as are all individuals who make up Durham CAS. When you are working with us it would be important that you are working in a way that is consistent with the AO Directional Statement. In addition to these Q and As, in the Fall of 2015, the Society will be rolling out this initiative to volunteers. There will be an Orientation session that we encourage you to attend and a place where you can ask questions. As we move forward in our AO journey, there will be future opportunities for volunteers to get involved. There will be much more to come so please stay tuned.

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18. Do I have to change my beliefs?

When we are in a position of power and authority, and in a position to impact the life of another, then we have a responsibility to ensure we are not imposing our personal values, opinions and beliefs on to that person. This has been a huge factor in historical wrongs committed by institutions such as child welfare. Although we may have the best of intentions, often it is not possible to recognize our own personal bias that we bring to a particular situation and anti-oppressive practice is meant to assist us in matching our impact with our intent.

References

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4. AODA
5. Bill 168 included in the Health and Safety Act
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7. Community and Race Relations Committee of Peterborough's *Terminology for Decolonizing Anti-Racist Practice*, Nov 2011
8. *Diverse Voices: Understanding the Experience of Immigration in the Region of Durham*, Community Development Council Durham and Durham Local Immigration Partnership Council, 2011
9. Ontario Human Rights Code
10. Ontario Human Rights Commission <http://www.ohrc.on.ca/en/policy-and-guidelines-racism-and-racial-discrimination/part-1-%E2%80%93-setting-context-understanding-race-racism-and-racial-discrimination>

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13. *Particel: Anti-oppressive Practice in the Context of Child Welfare Supervision* by Leah Katan, 2011.
14. *Profile of Immigrant and Ethnocultural Diversity in the Region of Durham*, Community Development Council, 2008.
15. [Racism-Free Workplace Strategy](#), HRSDC
16. Article: [Tragic number of aboriginal children in foster care stuns even the experts](#)