

❖ PREFACE

The *Handbook of Social Work Practice with Vulnerable Populations* was first published in 1991. The first edition focused on the debilitating life circumstances, events, and conditions faced by large sectors of the client population served by social workers. The associated life stressors are either chronic or persistent, or they are acute and unexpected. An individual's impaired internal resources and/or external supports exacerbate these stressors. When these factors are present, social workers help people at risk of physical, cognitive, emotional, and social deterioration.

Historically, the profession of social work has been assigned the task of providing social services to populations with problems that impede their ability to become fully functioning and respected members of society, including homelessness, family and community violence, or mental illness. The societal response to the needs of these populations has become increasingly punitive and rejecting. While providing general knowledge and skills, most social work practice texts did not sufficiently examine the specialized knowledge base and the different assessment and intervention skills required to effectively help people with diverse life conditions, circumstances, and events.

To this end, the *Handbook* met a significant need. The book was adopted by advanced clinical and generalist programs. Moreover, the text received very positive reviews. A common chapter outline integrated the chapters. After the book's publication, I had a significant concern. The *Handbook* had not described how people survive and cope with such debilitating problems as hunger, homelessness, AIDS, family and community violence, and traumatic losses or vulnerabilities such as the consequences of mental illness, developmental difficulties, imprisonment, or job loss. By limiting

ourselves to a pathology explanatory model, we emphasized vulnerability and risk factors, the deficits and negative aspects of individual, family, and community life. Consequently, other dimensions of the human experience such as resourcefulness, courage, coping, and recovery received insufficient attention.

In the second edition, published in 2001, the focus was expanded to include resiliency and protective factors, the positive poles of the human experience, in order to examine such questions as: Why do some people break down under certain life conditions and circumstances while others remain relatively unscathed? What accounts for the marked individual variations in people's responses to stress and adversity? What accounts for the surprisingly large number of people who somehow, at times miraculously, manage their adversities? How do people adapt, cope, overcome, and meet the challenges of physical and mental conditions, severe losses and traumas, chronic discrimination, and oppression? Why do some people thrive and not simply survive in the face of life's inhumanities and tragedies?

Since many of our theoretical approaches focus on individual pathology, people's strengths and capacities are unrecognized. This unbalanced perspective may further marginalize and oppress our clients. Developing knowledge and curiosity about the positive as well as the negative poles of people's lives, social workers are more likely to formulate balanced assessments and responsive interventions. People's life stories, for example, represent their search to find meaning and coherence in their own lives. By inviting and attentively listening to people's life stories rather than fitting their behaviors into diagnostic schema and labels, we are more likely to discover how people have managed to survive in stressful or traumatic circumstances. And their strengths provide the foundation and motivation for further mastery.

Children dealing with parental alcoholism or divorce, for example, find ways to disengage and to develop psychological distance from daily

conflicts and hassles. The social worker must assess the potential functional and dysfunctional dimensions of the emotional distancing. Adaptive distancing requires the ability to disengage internally while pursuing and sustaining external connections. The combination of internal distancing and external reaching out represent significant protective factors and processes. In contrast, a flight into social as well as emotional isolation symbolizes risk factors and processes. For another example, in helping a disheveled, odorous, homeless woman, the social worker must understand the coping function that smelling and unattractiveness have in coping with sexual vulnerability and potential violence as well as the dysfunctional aspects of alienating potential support networks. To reflect this reconceptualization, the book's title was changed to *The Handbook of Social Work Practice with Vulnerable and Resilient Populations*.

In the last eleven years, new demographic patterns, research findings, and theoretical developments have evolved. The third edition takes these changes into account, as well as new economic and political realities, legislative developments (immigration laws and policies, health care reform), social policies, and changes in the role of government, and explores their implications for the various populations and respective social services. New chapters have been added on cutting-edge scholarship in emerging life conditions, circumstances, and events. These include autism spectrum, bullying, men of color, returning servicewomen and veterans, survivors and victims of terrorism, and survivors of torture.

The third edition is organized similarly to the prior editions. What does the social worker need to know and be able to do to provide resourceful programmatic and clinical services to the identified populations? The *Handbook* explores these questions, according to two distinctive sets of issues. Part I, "Life Conditions," examines social work practice with vulnerable and resilient populations who essentially have to cope with chronic life conditions, which have a dynamic genetic, biochemical,

and physiological bases. Chapters on AIDS, alcoholism and other drug addictions, autism, borderline personality, depression, eating problems, schizophrenia, and serious physical illness all explore the theoretical, empirical, demographic, programmatic, and clinical issues with which social workers need to be familiar to provide relevant and empowering services.

Part II, "Life Circumstances and Events," examines social work practice with populations that often confront desperate life circumstances such as homelessness and very stressful life events such as the death of a family member. Why do some people collapse under relatively minor life strains while others remain relatively unscathed by traumatic experiences such as extreme poverty, racism, homophobia, family violence, sexual and other forms of abuse, or loss of a loved one? Why do some people emotionally survive catastrophe while others become bitter, jaded, and less of a person than they were previously? How do some people forge ahead when life seems unbearable—when trust and hope might have been taken away? Yet others are so emotionally vulnerable that seemingly minor losses and rebuffs can be devastating. Chapters on adolescent pregnancy, bullying, child abuse and neglect, children in foster care, crime victims, death of a family member, gay and lesbian persons, homeless people, immigrants, intimate partner abuse, older persons in need of long-term care, returning servicewomen and veterans, suicide and suicidal behavior, survivors and victims of terrorism, survivors of torture, young men of color, and women of color similarly explore the theoretical, empirical, demographic, programmatic, and clinical issues. Chapters in both Parts I and II are alphabetically arranged, which makes it easy to use and does not privilege one content area over another.

A common chapter outline integrates the chapters, as each contributor begins with a

theoretical, empirical, and political examination of the subject. This discussion is followed by a demographic exploration of the specific population and its subpopulations. For example, in a discussion of homeless people, the problems and needs of those who are mentally ill are differentiated from those who became homeless because of job loss and eviction. Each chapter examines the respective population's and subpopulation's vulnerabilities and risk factors as well as resilience and protective factors. Each chapter also describes programs and social work contributions and discusses how the social worker assesses clients' (individual, family, group, community) life stresses, their internal resources and limitations, apparent obstacles and available environmental supports, and how the social worker intervenes depending upon her or his understanding of the condition, circumstance, and event. Distinctive practice principles and skills are highlighted. Finally, each chapter concludes with the presentation of an illustration.

While, historically, the profession of social work has assumed the task of providing social services to disadvantaged and vulnerable populations, this task has become significantly more difficult to fulfill. The stubborn truth is that problems have been increasing, while resources to mitigate them decrease. Those with less get less! The societal response to the needs of these populations has become increasingly punitive and rejecting. Given these bitter realities, resilience and heroism are required not only from the client population but from the social work community as well. And this has actually been the case among many social workers in their efforts to provide meaningful services. Through descriptions of responsive social programs and social work's contributions to them, as well as presentation and discussion of practice illustrations, this book attempts to capture the profession's resilience and creativity.

❖ ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to express my deep appreciation to the contributors for their willingness to prepare a chapter for the *Handbook*. They accepted and carried out a difficult and comprehensive assignment.

I appreciate their conscientiousness in following a demanding outline, their openness to editorial suggestions, their willingness to rewrite drafts, and their good spirit about my constant e-mailing and calling to “inquire” about their progress. I hope you will be as pleased as I am with their significant accomplishments and contributions to the profession’s literature.

I also would like to thank Jennifer Perillo, senior executive editor, and Stephen Wesley, editorial assistant, at Columbia University Press for their interest in and commitment to this project.

I thank my faculty, administrative, and staff colleagues at the University of Connecticut School of Social Work for their stimulation and support.

Finally, I am most grateful to my wife, Naomi, daughter, Sharon, son, Daniel, daughter-in-law, Amy, and grandchildren, Max and Claire, for their ongoing support and love.

A.G.
