

PREFACE

For the authors, the first edition of *The Life Model of Social Work Practice* symbolized a long, adventurous journey. It began in 1972 at the Columbia University School of Social Work when we and another colleague, Mary Funnyé Goldson, were asked by the dean to develop a plan for the first year of social work practice courses. Earlier the faculty had decided to restructure the total curriculum to take into account emerging knowledge, new human needs, and developments occurring in practice itself as agencies sought to meet the challenges of that era. This led to our effort to reconceptualize practice and to develop an integrated social work method. Out of this joint work on a first-year practice curriculum came our further collaboration in workshops, consultations, and writing.

We found that ecological ideas helped us to understand how each of us became a source of learning for the other. Sometimes our different professional traditions, knowledge base, and practice experiences felt like barriers to mutual understanding, but actually facilitated and enriched the development of our ideas. The first edition represented a beginning attempt to work out the dimensions of integrated method practice with individuals, families, groups, social networks, and organizations. Our ideas rested on the assumption that there are many common skills in working with people, no matter on what level people are organized. The first edition also attempted to identify distinctive skills such as those used in forming groups or influencing organizations. The common skills, as well as the distinctive ones, were presented within an ecological perspective that offered a dual, simultaneous focus on people and environments. These skills were presented within the context of underlying diverse theories and knowledge at each level of human

organization—individuals, families, groups, bureaucratic systems, social networks, and the physical environment.

In the twenty-seven years since the publication of the first edition of *The Life Model of Social Work Practice*, and in the eleven years since the publication of the second edition, there have been dramatic changes in the profession and in the societal context of new social problems, new populations, and new public attitudes. Social workers today deal with profoundly vulnerable populations, overwhelmed by oppressive daily struggles with poverty, discrimination, and various life circumstances that they are powerless to control. Social workers in the 2000s confront daily the devastating impact of homelessness, substance abuse, chronic mental disorders, child abuse, unemployment, family and community violence, and AIDS and other grave illnesses. While social problems are growing more intractable, resources to mitigate them continue to decrease. In this new edition we respond to these pervasive changes and present a more fully developed life-modeled practice—a practice modeled on natural life processes. While retaining and refining the core of our previous work, we make use of new concepts and new content. We believe this book provides social work practitioners and students with the necessary knowledge base and practice guidelines to deal with the many professional, societal, theoretical, empirical, and ethical issues they face.

We remain committed to our original conceptions and have broadened and deepened them. The *ecological metaphor* continues to provide concepts that illuminate the continuous exchanges between people and their environments. In the second edition, we adopted a *life course* of human development and functioning. In this edition, we continue to develop the life course formulation. In contrast to traditional stage models of development, this formulation takes into account diversity in race, ethnicity, sex, age, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, and physical/mental challenges, and environmental forces within historical, societal, and cultural contexts. “Life course” is a multidisciplinary formulation (in anthropology, social psychology, social history, biology, psychiatry, and sociology), adapted here for social work. We use “life course” to replace the traditional, linear “life cycle” models and their assumption that emotional and social development proceed in fixed, sequential, universal stages without reference to the diversity of life experience, culture, and environments.

In this edition we further develop an *integrated practice*. We continue to believe that professional specialization should not determine whether a client receives individual, family, group, or community services. Rather, the service should be based on client needs and preferences. Two formulations are particularly helpful in developing an integrated life-modeled practice.*

*We use the term *life* model interchangeably with *life-modeled practice* in order to add still more emphasis to the fact that the practice is patterned on natural life processes. We are less concerned with whether the approach is a model in the technical sense and

The first, *degree of client choice*, differentiates common professional methods and skills in the initial phase by how much choice an individual, family, or group has in accepting or rejecting a social work service (i.e., whether the client sought the service or an agency offered or mandated a service) rather than by a particular modality. The second, *life stressors–stress–coping*, supports an integrated practice related to the assessment of and intervention in varied life stressors rather than to an agency's service mode. Life stressors and associated stress include (1) difficult life transitions and traumatic life events; (2) harsh social and physical environments; and (3) dysfunctional interpersonal processes in families and groups, and between workers and clients. Recent research and practice reveal that managing a life stressor of any kind can involve simultaneous changes in (1) social, psychological, and biological functioning; (2) interpersonal processes; and (3) altered environmental processes requiring new responses.

While we realize that any separation of phenomena distorts the reality of simultaneous processes, we think analyzing them separately has distinct advantages. Social work practitioners are overwhelmed by the nature, range, and intractability of life stressors faced by the people they serve. The life stressor–stress–coping paradigm covers an almost limitless variety of human plights and provides a useful schema for specifying, grouping, and organizing data throughout the helping process. The paradigm also provides heuristic guidelines that focus and direct interventions at any point during the helping encounter and links clinical practice with practice in growth-promotion and prevention programs. We caution readers that life stressors often must be managed simultaneously or, at least, any one of them may need to be managed in such a way as to have a positive impact on the others.

The oppression experienced by many of those we serve leaves their families, networks, and communities vulnerable to deprivation and deterioration. These realities have required us to work more intensely on building bridges between the clinical and social reform traditions of the profession. Social workers whose practice is life-modeled must be increasingly engaged in organizational, community, or neighborhood and policy practice. When working with individuals, families, and groups, many life-modeled practitioners expand their practice to populations of similarly affected persons, helping them to undertake social action and develop preventive and growth-promoting programs. We continue to make a determined effort in this book to explore the connections between people's life stressors (private troubles) and community, organizational, and legislative influence and change (public issues).

more concerned with ensuring the embodiment of those real-life processes that release human potential and lead to continued growth, empowerment, satisfying bio-psychosocial functioning, and effective action to improve environments and contribute to social justice.

The book is divided into three parts. Part 1 offers a historical, theoretical, and methodological overview. Chapter 1, “Social Work Practice and Its Historical Traditions,” is a new chapter and traces social work’s historical dialectics such as cause or function (social action or clinical treatment), generalist or specialist, and science or art. The current societal context, (economic, political, legislative, and cultural), and its impact on current professional developments, are explored. Chapter 2, “The Ecological Perspective,” reviews the theoretical perspective, including new concepts from deep ecology and ecofeminism. Chapter 3, “The Life Model of Social Work Practice: An Overview,” presents the defining characteristics and anatomy of life-modeled practice at this point in its development. It briefly delineates modalities, methods, and skills used to help people to cope with or meliorate life stressors. Chapter 4, “Assessment, Practice Monitoring, and Practice Evaluation,” is also a new chapter. It examines assessment tasks common to all practice approaches as well as a few underlying beliefs that are distinct to life-modeled practice. The chapter also examines the tasks and skills of practice monitoring as well as the strengths and limitations of different research designs used to evaluate practice outcomes.

Part 2 presents the knowledge, values, methods, and skills of life-modeled practice with individuals, families, formed groups, organizations, and social networks. Chapter 5, “Preparation: Settings, Modalities, Methods, and Skills,” another new chapter, examines the professional processes of skillfully entering people’s lives. People must feel safe and accepted before they can trust and confide in a professional. The chapter also examines the essential preparatory tasks in forming a group and in selecting the appropriate modality and temporal arrangement. Chapter 6, “Beginnings: Settings, Modalities, Methods, and Skills,” examines the initial phase of working together, that is, of getting started with individuals and collectivities. All helping rests on shared definitions about life stressors and explicit agreement on goals, plans, and methods.

Chapters 7 through 11 cover the ongoing phase. Specifically, chapter 7, “Helping Individuals, Families, and Groups with Stressful Life Transitions and Traumatic Events,” discusses the distinctive knowledge and skills of helping individuals and collectivities deal with painful life changes. Chapter 8, “Helping Individuals, Families, and Groups with Environmental Stressors,” considers the interrelated dimensions of helping individuals and collectivities negotiate their organizational, social network, and spatial and temporal environments. Chapter 9, “Helping with Dysfunctional Family Processes,” and chapter 10, “Helping with Dysfunctional Group Processes,” explore the issues of helping the family and groups reduce dysfunctional interpersonal processes that prevent the fulfillment of members’ individual and shared needs. Chapter 11, “Reducing Interpersonal Stress between Worker and Client,” explores interpersonal stress in the worker-client relationship, particularly the processes that interfere with helpfulness. Chapter

12, “*Endings: Settings, Modalities, Methods, and Skills*,” considers the ending phase, or termination, of the work together, and evaluation of practice.

Part 3 examines life-modeled practice at community, organizational, and policy levels. Chapter 13, “*Influencing Community and Neighborhood Life*,” focuses on helping communities and neighborhoods to achieve desired improvements in their quality of life. Chapter 14, “*Influencing the Practitioner’s Organization*,” discusses professional issues and methods of influencing organizational operations that do not serve their intended beneficiaries. Chapter 15, “*Influencing Legislation, Regulations, and Electoral Politics*,” embraces the commitment to a just society through the participation of practitioners in political activity. Social work’s purpose and its value system require us to help change the oppressive life conditions of many clients. We therefore regard community, organizational, and political advocacy for social justice as the responsibility of all social workers.

The appendixes contain samples of individual, family, and group assessments (appendix A); Records of Service, a practice monitoring instrument (appendix B); and Critical Incidents, a practice monitoring instrument (appendix C).

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