
Preface

This book offers a direct practice approach to social work practice undergirded by knowledge that can empower practitioners, students, and other helping professionals who work with people who are poor, living with oppression, and seeking liberation (openly or in the secret places of the heart). People called “clients” or “consumers of services” may also use it to empower themselves. The style of the book is consistent with the empowerment approach. In this approach the worker is a fellow human being who struggles with issues of daily life, developing vision, raising consciousness, taking action, and engaging in praxis (action, reflection on the action, return to action, and reflection) in order to develop critical perspective and challenge the indirect (internalized) and external power blocks that keep us oppressed. It is addressed to members of the oppressor group and the oppressed, for both must be transformed to win a local and global beloved community characterized by the ethic of love, care, power, and justice for all. Whenever possible and appropriate, the worker in this approach shares her own experiences with oppression and stigma in order to make bridges and coinvestigate reality with those who seek help. Hence I write at times in the first person and share both personal and professional experiences in these pages. Though it was not easy to blend the personal/political with the formalized style of most scholarly books, and though it opens my life to all who read it, it is an important modeling of the approach.

The purpose and the process of human liberation necessitate each human being saying her own word. This authentic word is equally important for the

helper and the helped in dialogic encounter (Freire 1973a). Hence we write as we speak and as we attempt to live, in authentic communication. We are known even as we seek to know. This may cause some discomfort or self-consciousness at first, but it helps tremendously in subjectifying (as opposed to objectifying) the client-worker relationship. In this way a potentially paternalistic relationship can become enlivening and transforming. In the best sense it is then a corrective relationship—one that presents the opportunity to develop empowerment in the context of genuine caring and mutual searching for that which disempowers. The names of several people called clients and others are therefore proudly acknowledged in the text. Their stories are written in the first person whenever possible, excerpting exact quotes from oral or written communication (so that the client's word does not get lost in the worker's words). Those who were directly known by the author and who would accept it were paid for their contributions to this book. Some clients are introduced in the introduction of the book and the early chapters, and they appear again in the chapters on empowerment work with individuals and families, special populations, groups, and communities working on personal and political issues. Hence we see the different ways in which people may become empowered. The names of actual social workers are acknowledged, and some also appear in the text. The credit for the work goes to those who did it and who continue to work on the front lines where the blows are the hardest.

The new and the old, a translation of critical understanding into clinical and political work, and tried and true social work principles and methodology are blended to create the empowerment approach. The book is written so that it can be used solely in direct practice courses or in conjunction with courses in human behavior, social welfare policy, human oppression, and practice methods courses in a unified curriculum. It can also be read as a scholarly work or by consumers in pursuit of empowerment. It is complex yet simple, broad, and deep. It is therefore not possible to digest it in one gulp. I am reminded of the novelist Chaim Potok's words:

I say it to myself today when I stand before a new class . . . or am about to start a new book. . . . All beginnings are hard, for I touch the raw nerves of faith, the beginnings of things. Often students are shaken. I say to them what was said to me: "Be patient. You are learning a new way of understanding." And sometimes I add what I have learned on

my own: Especially a beginning you make by yourself. That's the hardest beginning of all. (1975:9)

This approach is the beginning of a new way to practice social work. You, the reader/practitioner/consumer, will refine and develop it as you make it your own. You will find the “kinks” and experience the difficulties and the power of it. As you do, you will write your own word. I hope this is a start in your empowerment journey or an interesting turn in the road.

