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## INTRODUCTION

**ALTHOUGH REALITY IS** socially constructed and socially reproduced, the forces these social constructions generate and the institutional acts they spawn are real. *Poverty* is real, a function of a social construction, capitalism. A larger percentage of people of color are poor, a function of socially constructed *racism*. *Violence against women*—battering, rape, sexual harassment—is real, a function of patriarchy. The relationships in each instance are power relations; that is to say, they are political.

In most instances, those who benefit from the oppression of others are hidden from ordinary scrutiny, as are the dynamics of power and the connections of the personal to the political. Social constructionism and deconstruction can help us understand the roots of these problems and unmask the power dynamics involved in creating and sustaining them, but it takes political action to contest them and their consequences.

This third edition of the book attempts to apply both ideas—the social construction of reality and the political realities that social constructions generate. The structural practice principles now include one that is explicitly devoted to the deconstruction of taken-for-granted social discourse, as well as a chapter on narrative therapy and the role of the therapist. Deconstruction and narrative practice fit nicely within a direct practice model geared toward meeting social need through social change, promoting social justice, alleviating oppression, and increasing people's options in life. An additional chapter to guide grassroots community organizing also bolsters the practitioner's ability to help clients confront the oppressive political realities created by reification of social constructions.

In the more than thirty years since the first edition of *The Structural Approach to Direct Practice in Social Work* was published, the world has changed in dramatic ways. Having shifted focus from Vietnam to Iraq, we are

once again involved in war; the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in Manhattan on September 11, 2001, set the scene for new perspectives on homeland security; the 2004 holiday tsunami that devastated Asia awakened compassion from the global community; and the rapid technological advances of the past three decades herald a new age. What has not changed is the continuing despair of large numbers of people in not only the United States but also the entire world, and the continuing worldwide need for well-trained, compassionate social workers.

The social work profession continues to ebb and flow in relation to public opinion and political agendas as well as its own internal shifts of priorities as the dialectics of the times fluctuate. Social work and other professions have changed, as they cannot be divorced from the economic and political zeitgeist in which all thrive or try to survive. Since the 1970s, social work has shifted from a philosophy of changing the system to meet the needs of people back to a system of changing people to meet socially constructed norms. This is a continuous philosophical dance that had its genesis in the divergent philosophies of the Charity Organization Societies (changing people) to the settlement house movement (changing society). It continues to shift, depending upon the ideology of the times. With the epistemological shift from modernism to the postmodern worldview, and the rise of social constructionism and deconstruction, perhaps we are again at a point where system change will be considered more important than changing people. This is the hope of the structural approach.

## WHAT MATTERS

Social workers have traditionally valued human dignity and have fought for the disenfranchised populations in society. Some of the values of social work are not popular in the dominant culture (a concern for those who have no voice). Social workers tend to see as important members of society who may *cost* society (for example, welfare recipients, the mentally ill) rather than those who provide a *gain* for society. There is, and will always be, a tension between human rights and profit.

Social work has been seen by some as a “foreign body” within mainstream capitalism (Farris and Marsh 1982). A foreign body is an irritant. A grain of sand in the eye must be quickly washed out. Yet the same grain of sand in an oyster can, over time, become a pearl—a thing of value. Such a stance has characterized social work’s value base, norms, ethical imperatives, and tradi-

tions. It is a mentality concerned with social costs and human loss. Social work must continue to evolve and fulfill its historical imperatives.

*It matters* that the social work profession continue to attend to oppressed people. No other profession has held this societal mandate. By oppressed, we do not mean merely the poor—we mean all the disenfranchised populations. We mean minorities of color, disabled persons, women, gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transgender persons, raped and molested persons, battered women and children, and the many other strugglers who have the pressures of life's circumstances stacked against them. Oppressed persons and social workers are well known to each other.

*It matters* to this profession that the real income of many in this country has decreased in the past thirty years, that children born in the 1960s may not have a more financially secure life for themselves and their children than their parents, and that poverty continues to persist and grow at an alarming rate.

*It matters* that social workers continue to challenge and change the status quo by identifying deleterious discourses and hegemony. Social work has a mandate to question what is and work toward making society a better place for everyone.

*It matters* that diversity be honored. This means that social workers must operate from a perspective that recognizes there are multiple realities and respect each culture's and each person's frame of reference.

*It matters* that we be involved with persons different from ourselves and that we reach out to each other with compassion and humanness. The differences may be obvious (age, sex, race) or subtle (marital status, sexual orientation, spirituality), yet each difference is profound, and without awareness of and willingness to confront and discuss this, differences can obscure a meaningful working connection. The awareness of and use of process in working with others may be the component that makes the client/worker relationship "work."

*It matters* that social workers embrace the provision of goods and services as a major part of their work especially in eras when resources for the least powerful people are scarce if existent at all.

*It matters* that all practitioners take seriously an obligation to work for social change. This mandate should not be left for macro-focused social workers, who are usually middle managers or administrators. Rather, it should be a central part of each direct practitioner's professional responsibility. It represents a structural approach mindset to the welfare both of one's clients and of oneself.

*It matters*, finally, that there never be an end to the “it matters” list. You need to add your own “it matters” to this list and check yourself from time to time to see if you are attending to what you have noted.

### ORGANIZATION OF THE TEXT

The text is in four parts. The first, Infrastructure, comprises three chapters that set the stage for the remainder by providing the frame of reference for social work practice, describing the philosophical and theoretical bases for structural social work practice, and examining ethics in terms of structural social work practice. The second part, Principles and Processes, articulates the core concepts of structural social work practice by presenting both an analytical model and a process model. The third part, Roles, describes eight core social work roles (conferee, broker, mediator, advocate, therapist, case manager, group worker, and community organizer) in terms of how each is used by the structural social work practitioner. For this edition, each role has been rewritten to reflect current thinking. The fourth part, Context, includes some content previously not included that expands the direct practitioner’s view of her organizational setting. The last chapter explores what we have called a paradigm dilemma that will allow practitioners an opportunity to ponder the future of our profession.