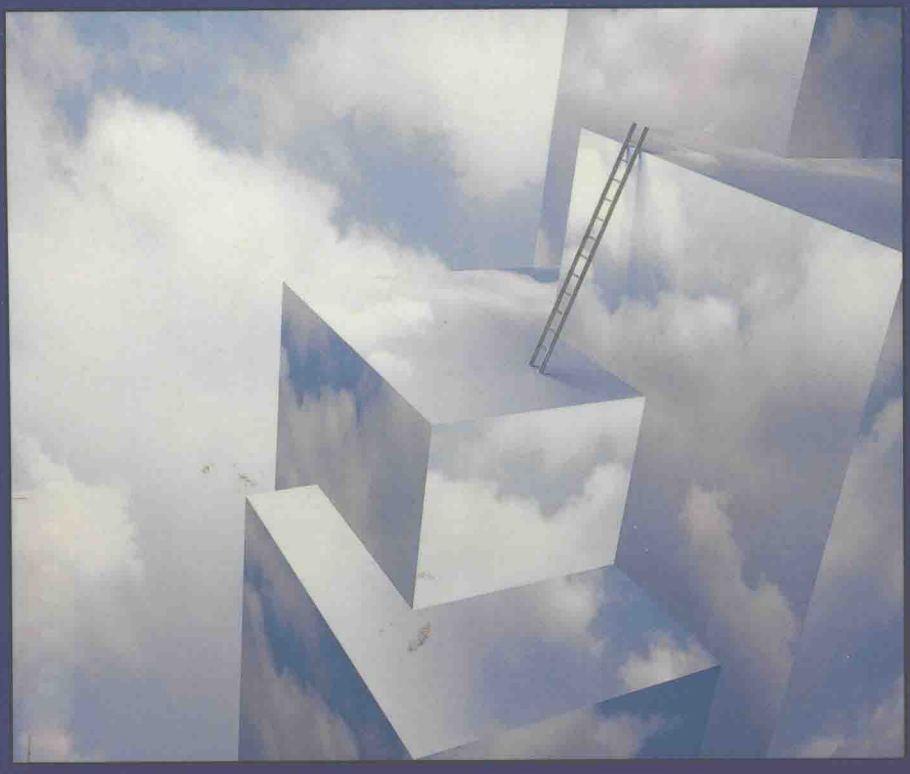
Empowerment in Social Work Practice

A Sourcebook



Gutiérrez Parsons Cox

EMPOWERMENT IN SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

A SOURCEBOOK

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EMPOWERMENT IN SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

A SOURCEBOOK

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To all human service workers—
past, present, and future—
working in partnership with communities
to create a more equitable world.

About the Contributors

Graydon Andrus, M.S.W., has worked for seven years with the Health Care for the Homeless project in Seattle. His work has been divided between two shelter-based sites: one for men over fifty years old and the other serving adults of any age. Though his primary work is with people experiencing mental illness, he has had the opportunity to work with a broad spectrum of the homeless population.

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PREFACE: THE EMPOWERMENT MODEL FOR PRACTICE

The concept of empowerment has gained currency within the past two decades. The literature in fields as diverse as nursing, education, social work, and management have proposed that one can use empowerment methods to increase consumer choice, contain costs, and reengage individuals in the lives of their organizations or communities. This broad application of empowerment has led some to question its meaning or to propose that social workers discontinue its use.

This lack of specificity and broad application of the idea of empowerment provided the motivation for developing this book. As practitioners, teachers, and researchers working from an empowerment perspective, we believe that the concept has not only meaning, but also a particular relevance in these times of growing inequality, diminishing resources, and increased intergroup conflict. As a philosophy, approach, or method of practice, empowerment provides one way to rethink social work practice.

Because of current and emerging social trends, empowerment should be of particular concern to social workers today and into the future. We view empowerment as a means to achieve needed social change, personally and politically, in ways that meet human needs. Given the growing inequality and intolerance in society that directly affect the communities social workers serve, such workers need to take a deeper look at empowerment theory and practice as a tool for individual and social transformation. Determining how social workers can gain a new consciousness, marshal their skills, and practice to advance social justice is a helpful path to pursue.

To provide tools for social workers who wish to engage in empowerment practice, we offer specific examples of how empowerment can be and has been conducted in the field. The literature on empowerment has emphasized the importance of developing and implementing methods specific to populations, issues, and contexts. Therefore, we asked our contributors to demonstrate how one can use empowerment practice in the various situations, groups, and problems addressed by social workers. Each chapter

would present a unique perspective on empowerment in order to clarify how one could implement this perspective in different contexts. In this way, we could demonstrate both the unity and the diversity of empowerment practice as it exists in the field.

In its most basic form, empowerment practice values multicultural perspectives and recognizes that these different perspectives can strengthen social work theory and practice. Therefore, we have asked a diverse group of people to contribute to this book, which includes the perspectives of academics, practitioners, men, women, gays and lesbians, European Americans, and people of color. The contributors were to provide in their given chapter some background on their population or issues, their particular perspective on empowerment, and ways in which this perspective can be and has been translated into practice. Within this general framework, contributors wrote in their own style, interest, and especially voice. Despite a common framework, then, this book offers diverse perspectives in these authors' descriptions of different practice frameworks, fields of practice, levels of analysis, and approaches.

Chapter 1 provides a framework for understanding the perspectives that follow. We focus on the widest view of empowerment and its implications for social work practice, describing the empowerment perspective, its assumptions, and its relationship to other forms of practice. Specific examples illustrate different dimensions or levels of empowerment.

The following section focuses on the implications of empowerment practice with specific populations often encountered by social workers: women, people of color, people with disabilities, and gays, lesbians, and bisexuals. Although one could add other oppressed groups, such as those with insufficient income, to this list, these groups were selected in part because the Council on Social Work Education has mandated their inclusion in social work curricula and because much of empowerment practice has already developed in relation to these groups. Ways in which the authors focus on these specific groups, however, suggest ways in which empowerment practice can be tailored to the needs and issues of other population groups.

In the third section of the book, the analytical lens sharpens to focus on empowerment practice in specific domains of practice: mental health, housing and homelessness, youth, and families. These domains were selected because they represent issues or levels of practice frequently encountered by social workers. In these chapters, practitioners and scholars articulate why empowerment is particularly relevant to their population or service domain and how this practice has been and can be conducted. They therefore help show how empowerment practice can be developed to work toward individual, family, and community change.

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The final four chapters look at ways in which social work administration and research methods can contribute to empowerment practice. The focus here is twofold: How can one conduct research and administration practice from an empowerment perspective, and how can these methods support the empowerment of clients, workers, and communities? These chapters mainly provide a holistic vision of how empowerment methods can influence, through social work practice, the creation of socially just institutions.

As a whole, this book provides information on the depth and breadth of empowerment practice and its use in different settings, with different populations, and in different levels of practice. Taking the long view, one can see similarities among the methods in various chapters and group them as participatory, educational, or capacity building in nature. Another similarity is the focus on working within a group context for providing services, building support systems, or engaging in social change. This closer look also reveals significant differences in application. For example, the use of cultural and religious practices with African-American grandparents differs qualitatively from the use of action research methods with homeless youth. However, in each example, the principle of tailoring one's methods to fit the community through dialogue reflects empowerment practice in general.

We hope this book will serve as a resource for faculty, students, practitioners, and researchers interested in understanding what empowerment practice is and how it can be conducted. Through dialogue with our contributors and the communities they represent, we have gained in knowledge and understanding of this concept.

Acknowledgments

This book has been a complex and enormous undertaking spanning more than three years and continents! So many individuals and institutions have contributed to this volume that it would be impossible to recognize them all. Specifically, we would first like to acknowledge the contributions of our students, whose questions regarding the applications of empowerment in the "real world" motivated us to take on this project. Their probing and often challenging questions led us into dialogue regarding the usefulness of a book such as this one.

The institutions in which we work have also supported our work on this volume. The universities of Denver, Washington and Michigan provided support in the form of time, staff, and helpful colleagues. We would like to acknowledge in particular the support of Nancy Hooyman at the University of Washington, who provided funds for the national conference

on empowerment practice that brought us together. Edith Lewis at the University of Michigan also deserves special recognition for providing informal and formal feedback and support.

The prepublication reviews were extremely helpful in giving us the feedback to revise and clarify the work. The following people have greatly influenced the development of this volume by providing timely and constructive input at various stages of writing: Jannah Hurn-Mather, Wilfred Laurier University; Arline Prigoff, California State University, Sacramento; Michael Reisch, University of Pennsylvania; Robert Rivas, Siena College; Lee Staples, Woodville, Massachusetts; Nancy Wall, University of Illinois at Chicago; Marilyn Wedenoja, Eastern Michigan University; and Stanley Wenocur, University of Maryland at Baltimore. Expert editorial assistance was also provided by Neysa Folmer, Molly Roth, Kylo-Patrick Robert Hart, and Greg Hubit. Special thanks must go to the staff at Brooks/Cole who made this publication possible, particularly Lisa Gebo, who had the foresight to see the potential for this work.

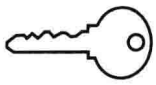
A final word of recognition goes to our families—particularly our partners and children—who lived with this book for many years and also came to know the many faces of empowerment.

Lorraine Gutiérrez
Ruth Parsons
Enid Cox

CONTENTS

Part One
AN INTRODUCTION TO EMPOWERMENT PRACTICE 1

Chapter 1
A MODEL FOR EMPOWERMENT PRACTICE 3
Lorraine M. Gutiérrez, Ph.D.
University of Michigan, Ann Arbor
Ruth J. Parsons, Ph.D.
University of Denver, Denver, Colorado
Enid Opal Cox, D.S.W.
University of Denver, Denver, Colorado
Introduction 3
The Empowerment Process 4
Elements of Empowerment Practice 5
Value Base 6
Sanctions for Intervention 6
Theory Base 7
A Framework for Practice 11
Intervention in Four Dimensions 14
Dimension 1 15
Dimension 2 16
Dimension 3 17
Dimension 4 17
Interrelationship of the Dimensions 18
Evaluating the Outcomes of Empowerment Practice 19
Summary 20
References 21



Part Two
EMPOWERMENT IN PRACTICE: POPULATIONS 25

Chapter 2
EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN 29
Linnea GlenMaye, Ph.D.
University of Las Vegas, Las Vegas, Nevada
Introduction 29
Three Conditions of Women's Oppression 31
Alienation from the Self 31
The Double-Bind Situation of Women 33
Institutional and Structural Sexism 34
Empowerment for Women 34
Definition of Empowerment 35
Model of Empowerment for Women 35
Development of Consciousness of Self 36
Reduction of Shame and Self-Blame 39
Assumption of Personal Responsibility for Change 39
Empowerment in Practice 41
Model Mugging 41
Empowerment for Victims of Domestic Violence 43
Beyond the Personal 45
Empowerment for Homeless Women 46
Conclusion 48
References 50

Chapter 3
EMPOWERING POOR COMMUNITIES OF COLOR: A SELF-HELP MODEL 52
Margo Okazawa-Rey, Ed.D.
San Francisco State University, San Francisco, California
Introduction 52
The Nature of the Problem 53
The Grandparents' Group 55
Health and Illness: The Context for the Group 55
Workings and Philosophy 56
Inside One Group 57
Actualizing the Goal of Empowerment 59
Practice Principles 62
Conclusion 63
References 64

Chapter 4

EMPOWERMENT PRACTICE WITH LESBIANS AND GAYS 65

Kathryn A. DeLois, Ph.D.
University of New England, Portland, Maine

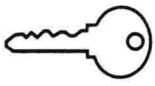
Introduction 65
Lesbians and Gays as an Oppressed Population 66
Oppression 66
Empowerment Practice with Lesbians and Gays 68
A Safe Climate 68
Consciousness Raising 69
Political Power 69
Updating One's Own Knowledge 70
Organizational Change 70
Conclusion 71
References 72

Chapter 5

EMPOWERING PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES: THE ROLE OF CHOICE 73

Richard Renz-Beaulaurier, Ph.D.
Florida International University, North Miami

The History of Rehabilitation 73
Medical Rehabilitation 75
Modern Movements 76
Empowerment: Goals and Impediments 77
Rehabilitation versus Independent Living 78
Empowerment Strategies 80
The Nature of the Problem 80
Self-determination 80
Consciousness Raising 81
Services 81
Specific Practice Principles 82
Summary 82
References 83



Part Three
EMPOWERMENT IN PRACTICE: FOCUSING ON FIELDS 85

Chapter 6
EMPOWERMENT IN MENTAL HEALTH PROGRAMS: LISTENING TO THE VOICES 89
Susan S. Manning, Ph.D.
University of Denver, Denver, Colorado
Introduction 89
Power and Powerlessness 90
The Medical Model: "Power Over" 90
Learned Helplessness 91
Blaming the Victim 91
Stigma 92
Impact of Mental Disability 93
Empowerment in the Mental Health System 94
Consumer Perspectives of Empowerment 95
Professional Attitudes and Roles 97
Social Work Role in Empowerment 98
A Program of Empowerment 100
CHARG 100
Empowerment as a Technology in Mental Health 103
Systems/Structural Issues 103
Human Factors and Empowerment 104
Principles for Practice 105
Attitude 105
Relationship 106
Social Work Role 106
Conclusion 106
References 107

Chapter 7
EMPOWERMENT PRACTICE WITH HOMELESS PEOPLE OR FAMILIES 110
Graydon Andrus, M.S.W.
Health Care for the Homeless, Seattle, Washington
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