



# **The Skills of Helping**

**Individuals, Families,  
and Groups**

**Third Edition**

**Lawrence Shulman**

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**Boston University  
School of Social Work**



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**To My Wife Sheila**



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Lawrence Shulman



## Introduction

This book is about skill. The focus is on method—what social workers do as their part of the helping process. I believe that the dynamics of giving and taking help are not mysterious processes that defy efforts at explanation. Helping skills can be defined, illustrated, and taught. The process is a complex one; to present it clearly, it must be broken down into manageable segments. Simple models need to be developed to provide tools for understanding. Developing these models is the goal of this book.

I also believe that there is an underlying process that can be identified in all social work helping relationships. This process and its associated set of core skills can be observed whenever one person attempts to help another. These are the constant elements of the helping process. Elements of the process may vary according to the setting of the engagement (e.g., school, hospital, welfare agency); the age and stage of life of the client; the particular life problem the client brings to the encounter; and whether the client is voluntarily or involuntarily involved. The social worker will also introduce vari-

ant elements to the process, such as education and experience, life events, effectiveness of the support available to the worker, and so on.

In spite of the many differential aspects to practice, when the interaction is examined closely, the similarities emerge. This book addresses a range of helping situations in the belief that each social worker can incorporate the models into his or her own work context. In addition, findings drawn from my own studies of social work practice, supervision, management, and medical practice will provide some empirical support for the importance of these core skills that make up the constant elements of practice.

An additional assumption is the existence of common elements in our work with individuals, families, groups, and other people in the social systems that are important to our clients (e.g., teachers, doctors, other social workers). The skill model developed in this book is illustrated by a range of encounters. The reader will find that the core processes and skills identified in the chapters focusing on individuals reappear as the discussion shifts to questions involved

in family and group work. For example, the contracting skills discussed in the beginning phase of work with individuals are also applied in first group sessions. These skills are common elements. In addition, the unique dynamics of first sessions with groups illustrate the variant elements.

In a like manner, the common elements of beginning work with different types of groups (e.g., people with AIDS, children, survivors of sexual abuse, psychiatric patients, residential living groups, citizen community action groups) are presented. Unique aspects introduced by the setting and the purpose of the work are also considered.

This book is an effort to further conceptualize a generic model for generalist practice without losing the detail of the specific ways we practice. The focus is not on what is common about what we know, value, and aspire to, nor on our common structures for describing clients (as in systems theory), but rather on the common elements and skill of the helping person in action.

### NEW IN THIS EDITION

A systematic effort has been made to update the examples and illustrations used in this edition. The second edition was published in 1984. Since then an unsettling number of new practice areas have emerged. The AIDS epidemic, homelessness, problems of addiction to crack cocaine, and sexual violence have all been brought to the forefront of our practice. Illustrations drawn from these areas bring the practice theory closer to the realities familiar to today's students

and practitioners. Also, an effort has been made to more tightly tie the book to social work practice. Other professionals may still find its constructs useful.

As in the second edition, theories and constructs about human behavior, some supported by research and others drawn from experience in practice, are shared when they are relevant to specific practice issues. In this way, what we know about the dynamics of helping, oppression and vulnerability, group process, family interaction, and so on is directly linked to the worker's interactions with the client and with relevant systems. This author's more recent research and theory-building work (Shulman, 1991), designed to develop a holistic theory of practice, has been integrated into this edition. This theory recognizes the complexity of our practice. Focus on the social worker-client interaction alone ignores many factors—such as supervision, availability of resources, client motivation and capacity, the impact of cost-containment efforts, and client-related traumatic experiences (e.g., the death of a client)—and their influence on both the worker and the client. These and other elements of practice are more systematically addressed in this edition.

A major emphasis has also been placed on integrating constructs from oppression psychology for practice with oppressed and vulnerable populations. This socially oriented framework for understanding individual and group behavior is presented in the first chapter of the book and then referenced in connection with appropriate examples throughout the text.

The section on social work with families, which consisted of one chapter in the second edition, has been expanded

to two chapters. The first, Chapter 6, focuses on social work with families, both in the community voluntary family counseling agency and the child welfare system. In this chapter, the family and its development is in the foreground. In the second chapter, Chapter 7, the focus shifts to how social workers practice with families when other issues or concerns (e.g., school, employment, drugs and alcohol, AIDS, mental health, and aging) are in the foreground and the general family issues recede to the background.

Also new to this edition is an exploration of the historical roots of the social work profession and the values and ethics that guide our work. Illustrations of the impact of legislation and court decisions in areas such as confidentiality, mandated reporting laws (e.g., child abuse), and informed consent and duty to warn a client or third party in danger are used to help the reader become more attuned to the ways in which our society, governments, courts, and professional associations influence our practice.

A glossary of key terms (boldface in the text) has also been provided at the end of each chapter. In addition, a special index of the many case examples is provided. This index is cross-referenced by the type of problem (e.g., addiction, AIDS, sexual abuse); the processes illustrated (e.g., acting out, resistance, denial); the population (e.g., single parents, adult children of alcoholics, pregnant teens); the skills illustrated (e.g., contracting, setting limits, ending skills); special issues (e.g., race, ethnicity); setting (e.g., medical, psychiatric, residential); and modality of practice (individual, family, group, community, organization).

## ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

In order to simplify this complex task of describing method, a single frame of reference—the interactional model—is presented. Introductory comments help to place this point of view about practice in context with other models. This approach includes a description of a framework of the helping process, a number of models (middle-range descriptions) that provide the important connections between the framework and practice, and the identification of skills needed to put the framework into action.

The interactional model was developed by William Schwartz. This colleague's original thinking helped to focus my early curiosity about method. Published and unpublished works, conversations about practice, and other collaborative efforts have all contributed to Schwartz's influence on the contents of this book. I alone, however, must take responsibility for the final shape of the following chapters. While a single framework provides the unifying structure for the book, many of the skills and models can fit comfortably into other frameworks.

Part I (Chapter 1) consists of a chapter introducing the major theoretical constructs of the theory. Part II (Chapters 2–5) focuses on work with individuals, examining this process against the backdrop of the phases of work: preliminary, beginning, work, and ending phases. As the helping model is developed, illustrations from a range of settings help to point out the common as well as variant elements of the work. Parts III (Chapters 6–7) and IV (Chapters 8–16) move into the more complex issues of working with more than one client at a time, focusing especially on



social work with families and then groups. The common elements of the model established in Part I are reintroduced in the family and group contexts. The special dynamics of working with more than one client are introduced. Part V (Chapters 17–18) explores the skills involved in working with people in the systems important to the client. Conversations with teachers, doctors, and politicians help to illustrate effective impact.

This book is intended to address the needs of the social work student. However, the more experienced practitioner will also find it helpful. The book will provide models that help explain and articulate concepts already developed through experience in practice. Using these models, any practitioner can be more systematic. A clearly developed framework will increase consistency and help explain more quickly why some sessions go well and others do not.

Because of its structure, the reader with substantial experience in work with individuals, but none with groups, will discover that the foundation of skill developed in the individual context can be used in group engagements. The novice practitioner will find that explanations proceed logically with each idea building on previous ones. Although the entire book will be comprehensible to the beginner, the ability to put skills into action will be limited by lack of experience. The book will provide a starting point and an agenda for future work.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

A number of research studies, which I directed, have also contributed to the insights shared in this book. Starting

with Schwartz's framework, instruments were developed to measure social work practice skill and relate skill use to effective helping. The findings were then used to analyze the practice approach critically, to confirm some hypotheses while also generating new assumptions for future research. Each successive study built on the preceding ones and the knowledge base developed in social work and related professions and disciplines. Appendix A provides a summary of the methodology of my studies, which are discussed in this book. The reader is referred to other publications (Shulman, 1977, 1978, 1979b, 1981, 1984, 1991; Shulman & Buchan, 1982; Shulman, Robinson, & Luckyj, 1982) for more detailed descriptions of the methodology of each study and their findings. Although all findings reported in this text are considered to be tentative and should be considered in light of the limitations of each study, some findings have been repeated in a number of my studies and the studies of other researchers. Our confidence in these findings increases with each replication.

While the reader is urged to read the more complete discussion of methodology in Appendix A, a brief summary of the author's study most often quoted in this text follows (Shulman, 1991).

## Study Design

This study was conducted in a government child welfare agency in British Columbia, Canada. Project staff reviewed family files that had been recently opened in 68 district offices. Of the 1056 families identified as potential subjects, 348 (33%) agreed to participate. The final sample consisted of 305 families with 449 children served by

171 social workers in 68 district offices.

Most of the data were gathered during the first three months of the project. Home interviews were conducted with the parent(s). A mail survey of staff at all levels (workers, supervisors, managers, etc.) was carried out at the same time. Project staff also read the participating clients' files. Much of the analysis is based upon the data obtained during this time period. Follow-up data were obtained through surveys mailed to clients and staff at intervals over the subsequent 15-month period. The family files were also reviewed by project staff every three months. Twenty-three questionnaires and interview guides were developed and tested for this study.

### **Description of Study Participants**

The five executive directors had M.S.W. degrees. However, only 60% of the regional managers, 44% of the district supervisors, and 20% of the social workers held that degree. When M.S.W.s, B.S.W.s, and other professional degrees were included, 90% of the managers, 60% of the supervisors, and 68% of the social workers held professional degrees.

Two thirds of the families were headed by a single parent. One third of the families also reported "some" or "severe" disability with respect to physical and emotional health, learning problems, or drug and alcohol problems. Fourteen percent reported some minor or severe alcohol or drug problems for themselves. Eight percent reported that their spouses had similar problems. Unemployment was present for one third of the families. Forty-

seven percent of the families were living on welfare or unemployment insurance benefits. Finally, in 10% of the families at least one family member was a Native American (of Canadian origin).

Family problems included periodic and severe neglect, inability of parents to care for children (illness, addictions, etc.), and physical and sexual abuse. By the end of the study, 28% of the families had been listed on the child abuse registry. Forty-nine percent of the families had at least one child in care during the study period.

### **Limitations**

The study is limited by the self-selection of the families involved. We compared the participating and nonparticipating groups on a number of variables and found no significant differences between the groups.

Our ability to generalize the findings to the broader practice of social work is limited by the setting of the study, which is child welfare. Future studies in other fields of practice are needed to determine which findings are universal and which may be particular to this setting and population.

Finally, a major limitation of the study was the introduction of cutbacks in staff and services six months after commencement of gathering data. Much of the study data was gathered during the months preceding these events and thus was not affected. Rather than abandoning the second phase of the study, we incorporated the impact of these cutbacks into the design.

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