

**ETHNIC-SENSITIVE  
SOCIAL WORK  
PRACTICE** SECOND EDITION

**WYNETTA DEVORE  
ELFRIEDE G. SCHLESINGER**

# **ETHNIC-SENSITIVE SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE**

**Second Edition**

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## Preface

In the preface to the first edition of this book, we pointed to an apparent gap in the social work practice literature. It seemed to us that knowledge about the lifestyles and needs of different class and ethnic groups had not been sufficiently integrated into the principles and methods of social work practice. Social work educators' and practitioners' positive response to our book and subsequent publication of other important work on this subject has suggested that there was and remains a need for systematic work on ethnicity and social work practice. This impression has been supported by the publication, in 1984, of the new Curriculum Policy Statement of the Council on Social Work Education that mandates that all undergraduate and graduate programs of professional education pay explicit attention to the lifestyles, needs, and problems of those groups that are especially oppressed in American society.

Therefore, when the time came to update and revise the first edition, we worked in a far different context from the one in which we found ourselves when we first began our work. There was now little doubt that the profession of social work wanted, needed, and used the knowledge and strategies that were and remain the substance of our work.

Other developments have taken place, too, emanating from forces external to the profession but with immediate impact on professional social work practice. These trends, in the incipient stages in the late seventies, had not then begun to capture major public or professional attention.

We refer to the large numbers of new immigrants—especially those of Asian and Hispanic origins—who have become an integral part of the population. Their rich cultures and histories, the varied circumstances under which they migrated, their contributions, and their needs have continuing impact on most regions of this country, especially the Southwest and the East. Some have likened this new wave of immigration and its effects to the vibrant, dynamic period of mass immigration in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Where appropriate, we have revised our earlier formulations in order to be sensitive to these developments. However, in our view, the basic conceptual formulations presented in the first edition encompass the perspective needed to respond to these population changes, and so our effort to reflect these changes consists mainly of increased attention, by use of example, to the ever-changing mosaic that constitutes the American population.

With these considerations as a backdrop, we made a number of decisions about how to approach the task of revising the first edition. The basic structure of the original work has been retained. Part One focuses on conceptual formulations that need to be understood by the ethnic-sensitive social worker. Part Two illustrates the assumptions and principles of ethnic-sensitive social work practice. Each section and chapter incorporates important new concepts and empirical findings that pertain to our focus.

Explicit changes were made and will be readily apparent in four chapters. Chapter 1 represents a more thorough and well-rounded treatment of the diverse perspectives on the roles of ethnicity and social class in American life. Importantly, the increased attention afforded this subject in the recent social work literature made it possible to present a critical review and assessment of the various definitions and use of such key terms as *minorities*, *people of color*, *ethnic groups*, and *ethnic minorities*. We believe this review enriches the work and highlights the important professional use of such terms as *ethclass*, *ethnic reality*, and *minority groups*. Explicit in Chapter 1, and stressed throughout the book, is our view that all ethnic groups have important histories, special problems, and well-established habits of coping that need to be understood by social workers. Those ethnic groups that are also minority groups and the object of special oppression are of course of particular concern to social workers. The principles of practice enunciated in this text, especially those calling for simultaneous attention to individual and systemic issues, serve to operationalize this element of professional conviction and concern.

Chapter 4 is a much longer chapter and reflects our effort to keep current with ongoing developments in approaches to social work practice and the degree to which these approaches facilitate ethnic-sensitive

practice. Constraints of space necessitated limiting our discussion to those new approaches with which most social workers are acquiring familiarity, and those that pay particular attention to the impact of ethnic factors. We decided to present a systematic analysis of the ecological perspective and of two new books focused on cultural and minority practice issues. Each of these books makes an important contribution that warrants analysis and critique, in keeping with the patterns we established in the first edition.

A substantial change was made in Chapter 5. We no longer refer to our work as presenting a model for ethnic-sensitive practice. Instead, we have come to believe that it is more appropriate to refer to the assumptions and principles for ethnic-sensitive practice that can and should be incorporated into any of the rich and diverse approaches to social work practice reviewed here and elsewhere. The reader should also note how Chapter 8, focusing on work with recipients of Aid to Dependent Children, considers the relationship between the increasing emphasis on "Workfare" and ethnic-sensitive work practice.

In addition to the people whose valuable help was most important in the development of the first edition, Vicki Knight, Administrative Editor at Merrill Publishing Company, and Anne Daly deserve our thanks for their patience and encouragement in seeing this edition to completion. And, always of major importance is the contribution made by secretaries and other clerical assistants. Special thanks to Nancy Lewis, Jeanette Indice, and Adrian Humphries of the Syracuse University School of Social Work, and Phyllis Telleri of the School of Social Work at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey. Thanks also to the reviewers, who provided valuable suggestions: Dr. Patricia Pickford, California State University, Fresno; and Dr. Robert Perry, Bowling Green State University. As was true with the first edition, we look forward to readers' comments, questions, and criticisms.

Wynetta Devore  
Elfriede G. Schlesinger

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## **PART ONE CONCEPTUAL FORMULATIONS**

Part One develops the conceptual base of ethnic-sensitive practice.

Chapter 1 reviews ethnicity and social class with an emphasis on how forces both internal and external to various groups serve to sustain the role of social class and ethnicity as powerful aspects of social life. The mechanisms by which ethnicity and work impact on dispositions to life's problems are reviewed, and the concept of the ethnic reality is developed.

Chapter 2 surveys prevailing models of life cycle stages and tasks. Our perspective on universal stages of the life cycle and the tasks that accompany each position is presented. Points of stress and coping mechanisms, particularly as these relate to ethnicity and social class, are identified.

Chapter 3 outlines the layers of understanding that call attention to the knowledge, values, skills, and self awareness basic to practice and to the ethnic reality that leads to ethnic sensitive practice.

Chapter 4 examines various approaches to social work practice and assesses the extent to which understanding of ethnic and class factors have been incorporated in the basic assumptions and procedures.

Finally, Chapter 5 presents assumptions and principles for ethnic-sensitive practice. The "Route to the Social Worker" is introduced as a tool for assessment and intervention.

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# CHAPTER 1

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# The Ethnic Reality

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There are many perspectives on how ethnic group membership, social class, minority group status, and culture affect individual and group life. In this chapter we examine and assess a number of these perspectives. In so doing, we are guided by one basic objective: to cull those insights that can serve as the basis for the development of practice principles to guide practitioners in their efforts to respond with sensitivity to the values and dispositions related to ethnic group membership and position in the social stratification system.

A vast body of knowledge identifies how ethnicity and membership in various social class groups shape approaches to the problems of living. When these approaches are examined in the context of American society, a number of themes emerge. One focuses on how ethnic groups and ethnicity are defined. Another emphasizes the sense of cohesion, identity, and solidarity (as well as stress and strife) that derive from association with one's own ethnic group. Another centers on the meaning of social class, the consequences of membership in different class groups, and the inequality of opportunity associated with membership in the lower strata.

Central to these themes are the relationships among ethnic group membership, minority status, social class, and inequality. Those who have been assigned official responsibility "to help" have a particular obligation to be aware of inequality as it derives from ethnic group

membership, minority status, and social class. Especially important are sensitivity to and awareness of the strength and coping capacity of those who are the major victims of inequality. Helping professionals often focus on peoples' stress and deprivation while ignoring their important strengths. This book presents some formulations that serve to highlight such understanding.

## MAJOR PERSPECTIVES ON THE ROLE OF ETHNICITY IN AMERICAN LIFE

The process by which diverse people who are different in culture, background, language, religion, color, national origin, and socioeconomic status accommodate to each other as they make a life for themselves in the United States has long intrigued both social scientists and the public. Hraba (1979) identifies three major schools of thought that have sought to explain the process and its impact on unique life styles and patterns of habits and thought. He terms these *assimilationism*, *ethnic conflict theory*, and *ethnic pluralism*. Integral to some of these perspectives are various views on the relative impact of ethnic and social class factors on ingrained patterns of feeling and action. Most important is the body of thought focused on how various types of group memberships constrain or expand opportunities for socioeconomic and psychological well-being.

A major question focuses on similarities and differences in the experiences of white ethnic groups and those groups some now term *people of color*, (e.g., Hopps 1982). Often explicit (and always implicit) are queries about whether the persistent inequities associated with color are of such magnitude as to preclude the usefulness of insights derived from the "white ethnic experience" for contributing to understanding of people of color.

In the next few pages we review briefly some of the major schools of thought that have sought to explain the role of ethnicity in American life. Next we present our view and the rationale for our adherence to a pluralistic perspective. We then elaborate on our formulations, which stress the importance of "ethclass" and the *ethnic reality*.

These concepts highlight the important relationship between ethnic group membership and social class. Gordon (1964) characterized the point at which social class and ethnic group membership intersect as "ethclass." He used this concept to explain the role that social class membership plays in defining the basic conditions of life and to simultaneously account for differences between groups at the same social class level. In this view, these differences are, in large measure,

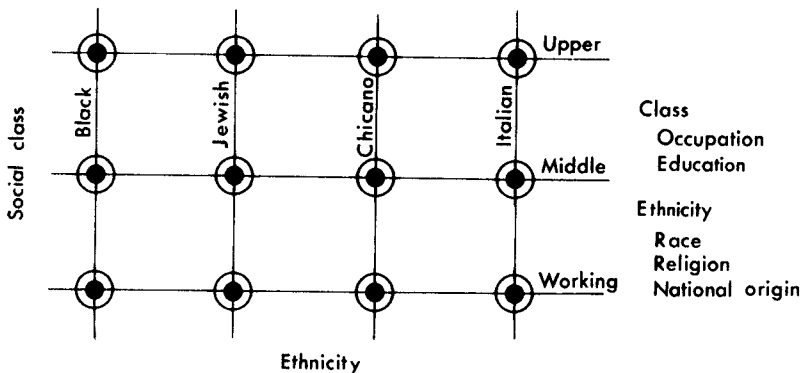


explained by ethnic group membership. We suggest that this intersect of ethnicity and social class generates identifiable dispositions and behaviors. We characterize these dispositions and the behaviors that flow from them as the *ethnic reality* or *ethclass* in action.

The concept of the ethnic reality, depicted in Figure 1, refers to dispositions on such matters as what are considered to be appropriate child rearing practices or proper ways of caring for the elderly. These dispositions and the behaviors that result from them are deeply embedded, though often subtle.

In beginning this discussion of the major views concerning ethnicity in American life, it is important to note a number of factors that guide these considerations: (1) the growth of civilization has altered and contributed to an increasingly complex basis of self-identification, and (2) the concepts of culture and subculture enhance understanding of the role played by ethnic group membership in shaping responses to the joys and problems of living.

In the past the rules governing family behavior and political life and the values guiding them were intricately intertwined. Group, family, and political life were culturally uniform and took place within a limited and clearly demarcated geographical place. Distinctions between family,



**FIGURE 1. The ethnic reality: ethclass in action.**

The "social space" created by the intersect of social class and ethnicity has been called *ethclass*. The disposition and behaviors that flow from this are termed the *ethnic reality* or *ethclass* in action.

Ethnicity and the associated sense of "peoplehood" are represented by the vertical axis and stress the fact that ethnicity is a component of social life at all social class levels. Social class is represented by the horizontal axes.

The circles represent the ethnic reality and suggest that as social class intersects with ethnicity a unique configuration is formed.