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Empowerment of oppressed clients requires of social workers to act as advocates and to assist clients in changing the dynamics which contribute to self-oppression or the oppression of others. The paper explores a five-stage process wherein oppressed individuals contribute to the social order that devalues them and, in the process, also participate in the oppression of others. The practice implications of a structural approach to social work committed to client empowerment in each of these stages are described.

A structural approach to social work (Moreau 1979, 1983, 1986, 1989) is presented in this paper. Its central objective is to empower clients, that is, to render them freer and more powerful vis-a-vis those who oppress and dominate them. Freedom is defined as "the power of individuals or groups to shape the conditions in which they live and to change these conditions, according to their needs and desires for self-fulfillment and self-transcendence" (Gorz, 1973). The approach rests on the assumption that one group (the dominators) in our society successfully maximizes its life chances by minimizing those of another (the dominated) (Wineman, 1984).

Objectives of a Structural Approach

The structural approach discussed here calls for two interrelated roles on the part of social workers, roles congruent with international social justice, human rights, and the profession's Code of Ethics. The first role is to explore with clients the sociopolitical and economic forces at play in their individually experienced difficulties, in order to collectivize rather than personalize and individualize their source and solution. This role

requires workers to act as case and class brokers, as mediators and as advocates for their clients' rights.

The second role is to change client consciousness in order to reverse the process of self-disempowerment or of internalized oppression. The worker helps clients recognize and modify any ideas, values, feelings and behaviors that contribute to their own oppressive situation or to that of others. It is in this second role that this structural approach differs from Middleman and Goldberg's structural approach to social work (1974, 1989). Unlike their assumption that "clients are seen as adequate people who accurately construe reality" (Middleman and Goldberg, 1989, p. 64), it is assumed in this approach that the social order may seriously impair a client's capacities to accurately construe reality.

Empowerment Through Case and Class Advocacy

A structural approach to social work assumes that contemporary social, political and economic arrangements in both East and West are more or less racist, sexist, classist, ageist, handicapist and homophobic. Thus, when working with clients, a structural social worker is attentive to the economic, ideological and political strikes that may exist against them because of race, ethnicity, sex, class, age, health, religion, marital status and sexual orientation. The worker explores and tries to understand the possible relationships between, on one hand, clients' health, feelings, ideas and actions toward themselves or others, and, on the other hand, the extent to which clients are kept inferior and powerless by their social location. A key concern is to prevent clients from unduly scapegoating themselves or others for material situations that are largely out of their personal control, to collectivize rather than to individualize their situation, and, where possible, to change their material conditions prior to working together on personal change.

The Importance of Working Conditions in Social Assessments

The worker searches for links between a client's health, feelings, thinking and actions, and the objective place the client

occupies in the prevailing organization and division of work. In practice, this means, for example, exploring possible links between the low self-esteem that old, young or handicapped clients may experience, and the fact that they are excluded from meaningful and rewarding work while extolled to consume and to ascribe to the work ethic. When trying to appreciate the health of clients, and their way of thinking, feeling and acting, a structural social worker pays attention to the sensory and relationship requirements, and to accessible resources involved in their work. Most jobs, especially in technologically advanced societies require splitting, rather than integrating thinking, feeling and acting (Braverman, 1974). All jobs also involve particular social relationships: one is employer or one is employee. Occupations may involve working alone or with others. A particular job may require that one compete rather than cooperate with others. The social relationships experienced at work may be carried over at home. For example, if a person has little power at work, that person may abuse the use of power in the home. Whoever has to make decisions all day at work may refuse to do so within the home. Not only family and individual psychodynamics, but also working conditions are investigated as possible central sources of stunted personal growth and development.

In practice, this investigation would involve exploring with women clients the possible links between the feelings of futility and depression which many experience, and the fact that the domestic and child rearing work they are relegated to, remains unpaid, devalued, isolated, interminable, repetitious, boring and monotonous. Workers may find a link between some women's fears of succeeding outside the home and the possibility that they may be punished by "society" for doing so. They may find a link between some women's fears of displeasing others and the real possibility that their economic dependence on men might be jeopardized, should they assert themselves.

Priority to Resource Provision

Key assessment questions include: Are clients in need of a resource the existence of which they are unaware of? Does the use of a needed resource create new difficulties or aggravate existing ones? or contradict the use of an equally needed

resource? Does a needed resource really exist (Pincus and Minahan, 1973)? When possible, priority is given to resource provision. Workers make needed resources known, act as mediators and advocates to reduce, or eliminate, the damage that the use of a needed resource inflicts and they work to create needed resources. When workers refer a client to a needed resource, they expose the conflictual interests of the worker, client and agency. They consider the possibility that the agency-client relationship may be either one of service as a right or one of service as a privilege, either one of service as a support or one of service as a regulation, either one of dependence of interdependence, hierarchy or equality, indoctrination or dialogue (Leonard, 1975).

It is not easy to turn a blind eye to discriminatory policies of social agencies and the State to ally oneself with clients when their interests go against the agency's. It calls for the worker to develop "functional noncapitulation strategies" (Reisch, Wenocur and Sherman, 1981). The worker must be comfortable with conflict, be ready to exercise diplomacy, and be capable of resorting to what Mispelblom (1985) has called silent or low-key practices.

The reasons for unmasking the power relations between the client, the worker and the social agency are two-fold. First, to ensure that clients do not undeservingly scapegoat themselves when they are confronted with the contradictions that most social agencies embody. Second, to bring to the fore, rather than to hide, the areas of conflict against which both worker and client will have to struggle to obtain needed services to resolve the client's problem situation.

Establishing a Dialogical Relationship

In working with clients, the worker tries to establish a relationship of dialogue with them as opposed to a relationship of vertical imposition (Freire, 1971). This is done by reducing unnecessary social distance between worker and client. Practically, this requires, among other things, sharing information and demystifying techniques and skills used to help. It means making every effort to have clients control which services are provided to them and how. Clients are also given access to their

own files and no case conferences concerning them are held without their presence.

The Limits of Intraorganizational Change

Because social work is not separate from, but an integral part of, the social, political and economic structure, there are institutional limits placed on much of the practice of agency-based social workers. In other words, there is a limit to the level and kind of questioning and actions social agencies and their funding bodies will tolerate from within. An agency-based social worker can only bite the hand that feeds and get away with it for so long before being reprimanded, if not fired. Some agencies may permit their workers to regroup clients for mutual aid and for the purposes of creating new needed resources. Some progressive agencies may even permit their workers to organize clients against unjust policies of other agencies. Few agencies however are likely to permit their workers to organize clients against their own practices. Work within agencies from a structural perspective must, therefore, be linked to related struggles for social change outside agency walls.

In practice, this means the worker needs to keep in touch with and support parallel social change movements going on outside of social agencies. In particular, the structural worker will be interested in supporting the struggles of women and gay people against sexism, of older people and children against ageism and of native peoples and others of color against racism. Social movements calling into question existing patterns of production and consumption (for example, food and housing co-ops and conservationist movements) are supported. Since collective organization is a major vehicle for the implementation of structural intervention at the institutional, political levels, a structural worker also supports and fights for the unionization of workers. In cases where the platforms of unions limit themselves to liberal reforms, the worker supports efforts to redefine their struggles to include more radical changes (Gorz 1967).

Empowerment through Consciousness
Raising about Internalized Oppression

If the structural approach promotes brokerage, mediation/ negotiation and advocacy to empower clients, it also concerns

itself with the mechanisms clients develop in order to survive the oppression they experience — mechanisms that, in the end, not only support their own oppression but all too often that of others. In the structural approach, changing macro structures without, at the same time, changing individuals is considered as meaningless as changing individuals without simultaneously changing social, political and economic structures. How oppressed individuals come unwittingly to contribute to the same social order which devalues them, as well as how some contribute to the domination of others, are important questions structural workers must address. How can workers help oppressed clients, not accommodate to and comply with their own domination, but, instead, actively resist and oppose it? In what concrete ways do persons who, for one reason or another, discover they are devalued, perpetuate their own oppression? Adam (1978) provides useful insight into this question. The practice implications for social work of Adam's theories are developed in this paper.

The Dynamics of Self-oppression

Adam explores how inferiorized people engage in dynamics of complicit self-destruction which contribute to defeatism, and, ultimately serve to perpetuate their own oppression and, that of others. Exploring and comparing the historical conditions, of three socially inferiorized groups (Blacks, Gays and Jews) and their model responses to domination, Adam develops a theory of self-hatred common to inferiorized individuals. He suggests that inferiorized people inevitably follow a common process of accommodation, compliance, and resistance in their struggle to cope with their domination. He posits that they go through five interrelated stages in the development of an oppressed consciousness: (a) Mimesis, (b) Guilt-Expiation Rituals, (c) Psychological Withdrawal, (d) Social Withdrawal, and (e) Contraversion. Understanding each of these stages sheds light on the work involved in reversing the tendency oppressed people have to disempower themselves and others in the process of coping with their own domination.

Mimesis

> In the first stage of the development of an oppressed con-
> sciousness: the person who discovers himself or herself as a
> member of an inferiorized group is presented with a nega-
> tive composite portrait which purports to define him or her.
> The portrait is accompanied by a range of social penalties
> guaranteed to produce a more difficult and insecure life than
> could be expected by membership in a more highly valued
> category... The first impulse, not surprisingly, is to move
> toward escape... The inferiorized person perceives an ini-
> tian choice: 1) acceptance of categorization as an inferiorized
> member with the composite portrait of undesirable traits, or
> 2) rejection of or lack of recognition of self in the composite
> portrait, with lack of identification with the inferiorized
> group. This pseudo-choice locks the subject into a social
> conundrum, leading to one of two debilitating results and
> frequently, oscillation between the two: 1) guilt, self-hatred,
> and masochistic responses, or 2) flight from identify, denial,
> or "bad faith." (Adam, 1978, p. 90)

There is usually a price to pay for the person openly to accept
being categorized as an inferiorized member. Most inferiorized
people experience fear and many deal with it by overconform-
ing, at least initially, to dominant norms. They hide what they
really are, as they try to pass themselves off for members of the
dominant group. In this stage of identification with the
oppressors which Adam (1978) calls Mimesis, many may be
hostile toward members of the inferiorized group to which they
belong, because these persons painfully remind them of what
they are.

Guilt Expiation Rituals

Unable to avoid being reminded of what they really are,
even while in hiding, most inferiorized people quickly move
on to a second stage. In this stage which Adam calls guilt
expiation rituals, oppressed persons are typically riddled with
internalized self-hatred and guilt and they engage in circular,
self-destructive rituals, which serve to punish them, and ulti-
mately reinforce the portrait they have of themselves as deval-
ued persons.

A number of magical ideologies come into play in the mind of oppressed persons to support the vicious circle of self-hatred, guilt, setting themselves up to be masochistically punished, punishment, and resultant self-hatred. To permit hope for its alleviation, suffering, for example, may be interpreted as a personal inadequacy, because rectification of personal failure remains within the perceived competence of the individual. Suffering in some cases may be mentally defined as temporary, to be endured, because it will be compensated for in another world. In other cases, suffering is defined as a situation that makes the inferiorized persons superior to their oppressors. More commonly, suffering is defined as a fate one deserves. Mentally, the oppressed persons consciously, or more frequently unconsciously, fantasize an exchange whereby they will be free if they atone and obey the negating other.

And so, typically, oppressed persons systematically set themselves up to be devalued and be put down by others in a variety of ways. Such moves provide an illusory feeling of temporary release and freedom from the tyranny of the oppressor because the inferiorized individuals are the ones who order personally their own punishment. Considered in this way, guilt is understood as a defense, a kind of protective measure developed to cope with a fundamental lack of freedom. To use Adam's words, it is "a self-negating project aimed ultimately at self-affirmation" (Adam, 1978, p. 100).

Work can be painstaking and long with inferiorized clients in this second stage of oppressed consciousness, especially when patterned habits have set in. First, workers must seize any opportunity they can construct with the persons to enable them to replace self-hatred with self-respect and self-care. Genuine care, reassurance and support must be provided in efforts to deguilt them. Considerable attention must be given to helping the client confront and reclaim repressed, disowned feelings of fear, hurt, and anger in order that these feelings may be validated and connected to their true source, that is, rechannelled outwardly instead of against oneself. Selected techniques drawn from Gestalt therapy (Perls, 1969), from Transactional Analysis (Steiner, 1974), and from Bioenergetic Analysis (Lowen, 1969) may be useful in this process. With the help of cognitive restruc-

turing (Beck, 1979) and selected psychodramatic techniques, such as Rule Reconstruction (Satir, 1968, 1971), the worker must try to challenge the magical ideologies the clients use to rationalize their passive submission to their own situation of suffering.
Psychological Withdrawal

Oppressed people are lead into psychological withdrawal — a third stage in the development of an oppressed consciousness — when they must deal with frequent double binds, an inordinate amount of unreliability in their lives, and when they experience repeated cognitive dissonance in the form of disjunctures between means and ends available to them. In the end, the compartmentalization of meaning structures takes its toll on their minds as they become unable to make accurate associations between themselves and their situations. In this stage, the inferiorized persons sometimes recognize, consciously or unconsciously, that it is so painful to be what they are that "they conclude they are not what they are and what they do". The resultant flight from identity, and in some extreme cases from reality, as when there is a psychotic break, only further isolates the individual from others sharing the same fate.

Work with oppressed people in this third stage depends on the extent to which they have come to survive by cutting off and divorcing themselves from reality. Minimally, it calls for the worker to help such clients find time and especially a safe place that will permit them to reconnect with reality, without having to endure further pain and humiliation. Small, community-based psychiatric facilities, which allow such persons the necessary time and proper services to rebuild their lives, without shocking, drugging or abusing them in more subtle ways, are extremely rare (Szasz, 1978). The need for the development of such facilities cannot be underscored. The work to be carried out with clients in this phase is also long and difficult. For, they must be ultimately helped to sort out who they are in relation to those who oppress them, and, helped to confront outside, as well as internalized, sources of their oppression.
Social Withdrawal and Contraversion

The passage to the fourth and fifth stages in the development of an oppressed consciousness — the separatists' social

withdrawal and contraversion phases — in which a new version
of reality is created on the basis of the reappropriation of one's
own historical condition, depends on two factors. First, people
must be inferiorized on the basis of specific, shared, selected
characteristics — for example, their colour. It is, in part, this
sharing of a common, negative status which is visible that makes
it possible for oppressed individuals to recognize their common-
alities. When they separate or socially withdraw from their
oppressors, they develop a sense of community among them-
selves, by communicating with one another, and they begin to
move from a recognition of themselves as individuals to a recog-
nition of themselves as belonging to a group.

Second, to move from positions of accommodation and com-
pliance with one's domination (the first three phases described
above) to a position of resistance, represented by the social
withdrawal and contraversion phases, requires that oppressed
individuals perceive alternatives to their personal situations. It
is, according to Adam (1978), the witnessing of differential treat-
ment and the variance in reactions of like-situated, oppressed
others that serve to rupture hegemony and permit the percep-
tion of alternatives among subordinates. However, the more
there are internal cleavages between people in the same group,
the more the formation of community is complicated.

The principal role of the social worker in helping oppressed
clients in these fourth and fifth separatist stages is to insure that
these stages are accorded their proper time and place. If workers
are the least bit uncomfortable with conflict, they may find
it difficult to assist oppressed clients to separate themselves
from those that dominate them. They may thus prematurely
encourage oppressed groups to engage in dialogue with their
oppressors without their first having had the time and oppor-
tunity to define and consolidate their own identity.

A second complementary role is to insure that, in the long
run, oppressed separatist groups are not kept ghettoized by
their dominators. Once oppressed groups are ghettoized and
offered a place to be and to function, it is relatively easy for them
to curtail their expectations and aspirations. They are more
prone to accept and be grateful for concessions obtained, rather
than to press for additional demands.

A Historical, Holistic Perspective

There are several difficulties with the fourth and fifth phases of the development of an oppressed consciousness as described by Adam (1978). For one thing, in reality, each form of oppression is not caused and sustained by an autonomous set of economic, political, and social factors considered to have a major effect on a sole distinct group of oppressed people. Neither, as the conventional Marxist, the radical feminist or the Black nationalist-separatist and other monist perspectives suggest, are all forms of oppression rooted in one single cause. The experiences of the 70s found many working class organizations to be racist, many Black organizations to be homophobic and lesbian and gay organizations to be classist. These experiences underscore the point that all other forms of oppression do not automatically disappear, once one organizes against one form that is alleged to be overdetermining.

The plain reality is that most people are multiply oppressed on several grounds. In real life, no one is just female or just black or just poor; women are young or old, or middle class or occasionally rich; blacks are male or female; poor people are one race or another, and so on. Real people are always more than the single categories by which they are described, defined and kept in their place (Wineman, 1984, p. 100).

Moreover, divisions based on hierarchical gradations of wealth, status and power exist, within and between inferiorized groups. The more the members of any inferiorized group, who are subject to any one oppression, conform to and emulate dominant, white, heterosexual, male, middle-aged, middle and upper class norms, within and outside their group, the more power they usually hold within their group.

In addition, gradations within a particular oppressed group frequently motivate some members with relative advantages to defend their superiority. To compensate for their experienced deficits, those who are oppressed from above are in turn often driven to oppress those below them. In other words, "the experience of either superiority or inferiority on any one continuum of oppression can induce people to seek or maintain positions of superiority on other continua of oppression" (Wineman, 1984, p. 169).

All forms of oppression are in reality interrelated, mutually reinforcing and overlapping. For example, sexism and ageism intersect in the continued low social status accorded to mothers and children, through the insignificance given to child rearing. The longevity of women forces ageism and sexism to overlap. The fact that children of poor parents are more apt to be removed from their families by the State, than children of wealthy parents, even though child mistreatment occurs across class lines, is evidence that ageism and class standing intersect. Prevailing homophobic child custody practices are proof that heterosexism and ageism intersect. The fact that Black, female-headed families, at least in Canada and in the U.S., are twice as poor as white female-headed families, suggests that sexism, racism and class standing intersect, and so on (Wineman, 1984).

While retaining their own specific features and not minimizing their differences in severity, all forms of oppression are based on an identical ethos of domination and subordination. All forms of oppression equate value, self-esteem and self-worth with superiority, privilege and domination over others rather than equality with them. No continuum of stratification can be addressed in isolation from all forms of domination. Reacting against one form of oppression and ignoring others reproduces and reinforces divisions and oppression among people.

There are several implications of this view for social work. First, in social assessments no a priori assumptions should be made about any hierarchy of different forms of domination. Only empirical investigation of a particular society and of a particular client and problem at a particular time can verify the existence or nonexistence of a hierarchy of dominations in that particular case. More often than not, rather than a hierarchy of oppressions, there will be a holistic interweaving of oppressions (Albert et al., 1986, p. 19).

Second, oppressed groups need to be helped not only to come together but also to recognize the realities that keep them divided. They must be helped to develop a critical consciousness which enables conflict among autonomous, oppressed individuals and groups to be inverted into solidarity (Wineman, 1984). This requires creating mechanisms for oppressed groups to identify with one another's struggles and, where possible, to

forge common demands and goals. In practice, this means help-
ing members within oppressed groups reflect on how their own
privileges within their respective groups potentially oppress
others. It means helping members not to reproduce any form of
oppression within their own ranks.

Conclusion

Objective as well as subjective factors and dynamics are
involved in the perpetuation of the oppression of individuals.
Hence, empowerment of oppressed clients requires that a social
worker not only act as an advocate with and on their behalf but
also help them identify and change the dynamics that enable
them to contribute to their own situation of oppression or to that
of others. The practice implications of a structural approach to
social work committed to client empowerment and to the oppo-
sition of all forms of oppression, of domination and subordina-
tion were outlined. At this stage of its development, the
structural approach is an ongoing working hypothesis which
needs to be validated by its continual confrontation with the
realities of practice. As such, it offers some hope for the time
heralded commitment of social work to the person in their
environment.

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