

SOCIAL
WORK
PRACTICE
for
SOCIAL
JUSTICE

From Cultural Competence
to Anti-Oppression

A Guide for Students

Second Edition

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Alexandria, Virginia

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PART I

Foundation and Conceptual Framework

An Introduction

Diversity and social justice have been established as defining issues for the social work profession. According to the National Association of Social Workers (2017), promoting social justice is an essential goal of practice, especially with regard to those who are oppressed. According to the Council on Social Work Education (2015), social workers must learn how diversity and difference shape the human experience and how to advance human rights and social, economic, and environmental justice for every person regardless of identity.

Despite agreement that social justice is a core value, ethical principle, and goal, agreement on a definition of social justice is a challenge that has not been achieved or resolved in the profession. Our goal in writing this book is to clarify substantive elements of what social justice and oppression mean. We hope to make socially just and culturally competent practice more concrete, possible, and relevant across all concentrations and practice areas. As pioneer social work educator Helen Harris Perlman (1976) said, “a value such as social justice has small worth except as it is moved, or is moveable, from believing to doing, from verbal affirmation into action” (p. 381).

What Is This Book About?

This book is based on the definition of culturally competent social work practice as engagement in effective interventions that are grounded in a commitment to promote social and economic justice with diverse clients.

In other words, cultural diversity and social justice are inextricably linked—one cannot be practiced in isolation from the other. In unison, they embody a core social work value, which, in practice has the ultimate goal of transforming “unjust and oppressive social, economic, and political institutions into just and non-oppressive alternatives” (Gil, 1998, p. 1).

Developing cultural competence is a daunting task and must be considered a lifelong journey. The many definitions of cultural competence include sensitivity, self-awareness, knowledge of culturally diverse groups, awareness of within-group differences, and specific clinical skills that include helping responses such as therapeutic alliances and interventions at different levels of practice (Sue & Sue, 2013). Essential to all avenues to cultural competence is cultural humility—a practice that includes acknowledgment of not knowing, self-awareness, openness to learning about diverse cultures, a willingness to learn from mistakes while developing skills in working with others whose culture is different from your own, and so forth.

In this book we move from cultural competence to anti-oppression social work practice. Our main premise is that cultural competence, in addition to understanding and effective interaction with people across cultures, requires an understanding of how difference and labeling people as the “other” is used to reproduce structural inequities. Although the terms *anti-oppressive practice* and *anti-oppression practice* are used often interchangeably, we favor anti-oppression because it signifies that the work we do to change systems and the world is inextricably connected with the work we do to change ourselves. In other words, dismantling oppression is bigger than a practice; it is not a status but an ongoing, never-ending personal process of learning, changing, and growing. Anti-oppression practice requires learning about and comprehending what oppression is and how it works, as well as its patterns, dynamics, and consequences. This involves learning about how oppressive systems discriminate and harm targeted groups based on their social identities and what oppression looks like at all levels of intervention, in all practice arenas, and in one’s own life.

The scope of this book does not include social work practice interventions and skills or learning about diverse cultures per se. It is not a social

justice practice text. Rather, it is intended to serve as a supplement to such texts as assigned in practice courses or diversity/oppression courses. Here, we focus on identifying and understanding the ways in which diverse groups are oppressed and the crucial role of social workers in overcoming structural inequity based on diversity. Under the umbrella of diversity, we include all groups that are targeted by oppressive systems, all those who are regarded as “other” or different from the “norm”—including Black, Indigenous, Latinx, other people of color, female, people with disabilities, noncisgendered, nonheterosexual, non-English-speaking or U.S. born, and non-Christian. The focus of this book is on the dynamics of denial of and exclusion from power and advantage.

The language we use either invites in or excludes people from conversations. It either confers or withholds power and advantage in community participation. Thus, in this text, we opt to use the term *Latinx* with an understanding that it is currently controversial and there is active discussion about the inception of this term. We do so with a commitment to be inclusive, to affirm all voices, and to support movement of those on the margins to the center. Although this choice of term does not reflect our individual preferences, it is based on the rationale articulated by Kivel. In addition, we opt to capitalize *Black* and use lowercase *white*, in line with the current racism literature. The choice is based on our view that capitalizing *white* represents a political statement regarding dominance.

I strive for respectful and inclusive language. That’s why I use the gender inclusive third-person pronoun “they” instead of “he” or “she.” It is also why I use the term *Latinx*, an alternative to *Latino*, *Latina*, and *Latin@*. Used by scholars, activists, and an increasing number of journalists, *Latinx* aims to move beyond gender binaries and is inclusive of the intersecting identities of Latin American descendants. (Kivel, 2017, p. xxx)

Based on the same rationale, we use the terms *Black* and *African American* interchangeably and capitalize *Black* as a way to confer respect and power to people with a shared political identity, shaped by colonialism

and slavery. It is important to understand that language matters and the debate over racial vocabulary is evolving amid a growing recognition across society of the need to tackle racism in all its manifestations.

To move from cultural competence to anti-oppression practice requires an understanding of the role of power, privilege, and advantage in the way society is structured. In this book we intentionally begin with centering on racism as the core system of oppression for several reasons. The United States was founded as a nation with a deep-seated belief in white supremacy that is woven into the very fabric of American culture, society, and laws. White supremacy has proven itself to be intractable over and over again, both historically and in the present. Racism, therefore, provides the framework for understanding and working toward the elimination of other systems of oppression such as sexism, heterosexism, cisgenderism, ableism, classism, ageism, anti-Semitism, and anti-Islamism.

This book will challenge you to have conversations about cultural diversity and social and economic justice that can sometimes be quite difficult. However, based on our experience, we believe that your thinking will be stimulated and that you will be rewarded with significant insights about our institutions and the world in which we live. You will gain skills that you can bring into your practice. Our goal is to support you in your journey from cultural competence to anti-oppression practice, and we believe that self-reflection, self-awareness, and sharing with others can make your learning not only meaningful but also transformative.

Who Are We?

While the skills of self-reflection and self-awareness are important in social work education in general, they are particularly critical in the process of moving from cultural competence to anti-oppression practice for social justice. Many of the exercises in this book are aimed at eliciting personal reflections and thought-provoking examinations about who you are; your unique, diverse self with all of your identities and your positionality in relation to privilege and systems of oppression; and the implicit, subjective attitudes and biases that you have inherited. We find that, just

as self-reflection is essential, so too is sharing with others what you learn about yourself. As partners with you on this lifelong journey, we share here a bit about ourselves.

Betty Garcia. I am a second-generation Latinx/Mexican American/mestiza, with an Indigenous maternal grandmother and family phenotype that reflects the broad range of mestizo presentations and Euro origins. I grew up in an atmosphere where much attention was paid to the range and valuation of skin colors. My maternal and paternal family origins are from a part of Mexico that is known historically for its white settlers. I grew up in the east part of Los Angeles County; my father grew up as a migrant farm worker and didn't complete junior high school; and my mother didn't finish high school. My father's employment as a union steel worker secured a steady income and health services; my mother began working before I was 5 years old and worked until her health made it impossible for her to continue. My neighborhood was multicultural (i.e., Mexican American and white), low income, and middle class; my father commuted to work for decades with an African American co-worker whose daughter was my classmate. We were raised to "be proud to be Mexican American," and family values included working hard and speaking the truth. Intergenerational and contextual dynamics played out in ways that created hurdles for my siblings to manage as we moved on to our new lives. Through it all, we always had toys for Christmas and new clothes for both Christmas and Easter; school became my refuge and I got recognition in various ways. I was impressed when my mother was almost arrested for interfering with an arrest of American Indian youths, who she thought were Mexican American. I have memories of marginal status related to summer visits to family farmworkers in California's central valley worker camps and an uncle with a troubled life who died homeless. I also learned that some homes in my hometown "don't sell to Mexicans." In high school, the sociopolitical context and discrimination seemed remote to me. However, I grew up learning about the Holocaust and was stunned by Emmet Till's brutal death, seeing U.S. military on LA freeways during the Watts riots, and Ruben Salazar's violent death

in the 70's. As an acculturated Chicana, I was involved with MAYA (Mexican American Youth Association) in high school and later with MEChA (Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano de Aztlán) in undergraduate school. My move to San Diego to get my master of social work (MSW) degree was transformative. The year I graduated with my MSW, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert Kennedy were assassinated. My field instructor, in a clinical setting, took the students to a city diversity forum where we observed the intense responses from different San Diego communities to Dr. King's death (e.g., La Jolla); this was empowering. They wanted to know what was going to be done! My experiences as a clinician at the University of California, San Diego, further transformed my political views of the world due to the 1973 events in Chile and campus activism that had a global and class-based analysis; my learning about what can divide movements or create solidarity was eye opening. Those years included working with Mexican immigrant workers who worked in the San Diego fields. Along with doing clinical work, I received a National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) grant to research Latinx dropouts in higher education, and I was involved in program development, teaching, and publishing. During that time, I began decades of international travel, first to all parts of Latin America, and these experiences inspired me to pursue my PhD in Boston, move on to teaching, and continue my writing.

Dorothy Van Soest. I grew up as part of a white working-class family in a small midwestern community. My father, who never graduated from high school, was a grocer, and my mother a homemaker with 1 year of junior college. Family life revolved around the church, Sunday mornings and evenings, Wednesday evenings, youth group on Fridays, and prayers and Bible reading before meals. My young mind took in but didn't understand the church's distorted moral narratives, such as how Black people were slaves and servants who had to obey their masters because of something called the curse of Ham and that slavery was common among the Israelites; how the Jews killed Jesus; and how the husband is the head of the wife as Christ is the head of the church, and that meant that wives

should submit to their husbands and that women were to be silent and submissive in all things. Did the good-hearted church people consciously intend to teach me those things? Maybe so, maybe not. How many of those oppressive beliefs did I absorb? A lot, I'm sure. Purging them from my unconscious has been and will continue to be a lifelong endeavor. The purging process probably started with my rebellious nature, but it took off when I left my small-town bubble for college in Chicago. It was in the 1960s at the height of the Civil Rights and anti-Vietnam War movements, and I was young and impressionable. When Martin Luther King, Jr., and his family moved into a rundown building in Chicago to oppose housing segregation, I volunteered in some of those programs. I attended movement meetings where, like a skinny wide-eyed sponge, I soaked in ideas I'd never been exposed to before about how antipoverty efforts are a matter of racial and economic justice. But it wasn't until I graduated from college and began teaching, first in Chicago and then the Bronx, that I learned from people directly impacted by systemic racism about how evil it really is. My second career, in social work, began on an American Indian reservation, where my understanding of racial oppression deepened through the many mistakes I made, the times my white guilt kept me from listening and collaborating, the times my anger at injustice took precedence and clouded my thinking. After years of direct practice, I moved into teaching social work at the university level, where I focused on teaching and doing research about diversity, peace, and social justice issues. It wasn't until my mid-40s, after going through a divorce, that I came out to myself, and then to others, as a lesbian. That was when I became personally aware of the sinister and deeply harmful effects of internalized oppression. My unconscious had so deeply absorbed heterosexist ideology that I had no clue about who I was. And so, with an acute sense of humility as a lesbian, cisgender woman with white privilege, I continue to unearth the many ways I am both privileged and impacted by oppressive systems and to use my privilege as an ally and accomplice in the struggle to create racial and social justice.

REFLECTION/JOURNALING EXERCISE 1.1**Who Am I?**

Take a few minutes to start your journal by responding to writing prompts such as the following:

- I am ...
- I was born ...
- My family was ...
- I grew up in ...
- When I think about engaging with this book, I ...

What Is in This Book? How Is It Structured?

We have organized this text into three parts, each one building on the other in a progressive way. In each chapter you will be encouraged to reflect on your personal beliefs and engage in critical thinking through various exercises.

In Part I we focus on foundational concepts and theories and provide a conceptual framework for moving from cultural competence to anti-oppression practice for social justice.

Chapter 1 introduces you to our main premise, to us as authors, and to the contents of the book.

Chapter 2 explores diverse views about what is just and about beliefs about what fairness individuals can or should be able to expect in life and on what basis. We present and raise probing and essential questions about how three prescriptive philosophical social justice theories have traditionally functioned to rationalize oppression. Two normative perspectives are then presented as consistent with our basic premise of anti-oppression practice: the racial contract that integrates diversity and oppression with social justice and the human rights perspective that builds on and broadens the racial contract to emphasize universal solutions.

Chapter 3 discusses two major obstacles on the journey to moving from cultural competence to anti-oppression practice: (1) difficulties when