

CONFRONTING
OPPRESSION,
RESTORING
JUSTICE

From Policy Analysis to Social Action

SECOND EDITION

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COUNCIL ON SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

Alexandria, Virginia

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Van Wormer, Katherine S.

Confronting oppression, restoring justice : from policy analysis to social action / Katherine van Wormer, Laura Kaplan, and Cindy Juby. — 2nd ed.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-0-87293-148-0 (alk. paper)

1. Social justice. 2. Social advocacy. 3. Oppression (Psychology) 4. Equality. 5. Social policy. I. Kaplan, Laura. II. Juby, Cindy. III. Title.

HM671.V36 2012

303.3'72—dc23

2012030358

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper that meets the American National Standards Institute Z39-48 standard.

Council on Social Work Education, Inc.

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Alexandria, VA 22314-3457

www.cswe.org

Second Edition

FSC logo [TK from printer]

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PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

The world has changed in many ways since the first edition of *Confronting Oppression, Restoring Justice* was published in 2003; sweeping changes have taken place in the United States and beyond, changes related to the market economy, immigration, wars and revolutions in the Middle East, and political leadership. The nation at this juncture, under a different administration and during a time of economic crisis, is at a crossroads. It is not yet clear whether we will move in the direction of a paradigm shift, toward a stronger safety net system, the treatment of drug addiction as a public health rather than a criminal justice concern, and the passage of health care and human rights reforms, but one thing does seem clear—that the dominant groups will maintain their positions supported by laws that they get passed through campaign financing and political lobbying. Looking back over the past 5 or 6 years, we can conclude that the multiple forms of oppression that were discussed in the book of 5 or 6 years ago—for example, economic, racial, gay/lesbian, anti-immigrant, and gender-based oppression—have been affected in both positive and negative ways in the intervening years.

The financial crisis that engulfed the world and that began in the United States in 2008 has had far-reaching effects on social institutions and social welfare systems worldwide. Meanwhile, the world has continued to grow ever smaller through expanding information technologies and financial interdependence. The technological advances have created a revolution in manufacturing and labor related to increased productivity and political

influence by the corporations while eliminating much of the need for human labor. In a climate of job retrenchment and a related housing crisis, the livelihoods of the rich have increased by leaps and bounds.

The effect of economic globalization, in short, is seen in the concentration of wealth at the upper echelons of society, an increasing gap between rich and poor, and the erosion of social and political supports at all levels. This effect is further evidenced in the depletion of natural resources and the reliance on soup kitchens, food banks, and shelters for the homeless. The most salient aspect of this phenomenon is its universality.

So, in economic terms, the oppression of the people and the sense of injustice have grown worse since the publication of the first edition of this book. This is not to say that there have not been many positive developments in other spheres: the election of an African American to the presidency of the United States, the entrance of more women into leading roles in politics, progress toward regarding drug addiction as more of a public health problem than strictly a criminal justice problem, a slowing of the use of the death penalty, and significant social and legal strides toward acknowledging the human rights of gays and lesbians.

In this context we offer a new edition of this text. Yes, there are now three of us to accomplish this task of exploring the dynamics of oppression and injustice. The additional coauthors bring highly relevant expertise to this task. Laura Kaplan, a Diversity Fellow at the University of Northern Iowa, has completed research related to oppression and taught diversity-themed stand-alone courses for 7 years. As a Diversity Fellow she initiates programs to make the university a more inclusive learning community at individual, relational, classroom, and structural levels. As a social worker and community activist she has extensive political and personal experience in advocating antioppressive practices and policies. Cindy Juby has an extensive background in policy, research, and practice in child welfare. Her research has focused on social welfare policies that affect the oppressed (including Temporary Assistance for Needy Families), international policies and their effects on immigrants (e.g., the North American Free Trade Agreement), and policies and other issues related to child welfare. In practice, she worked with Title IV-E and protective service programs.

Moreover, this book is informed by the international experience of the first author, Katherine van Wormer, who lived and worked in two foreign countries, one of which was more oppressive than the United States—Northern Ireland during the start of “the troubles” in the 1960s—and one of which was considerably less oppressive than the United States—Norway in the late 1980s. Van Wormer brings to this effort the memory of an upbringing in the segregated Deep South as a member of the oppressor class, an upbringing that led to a personal acquaintanceship with oppression and injustice and a resolve to confront them. Most recently, she has coauthored *The Maid Narratives: Black Domestic Workers and White Families in the Jim Crow South*.

NEW TO THIS EDITION

Readers of the first edition will note the following extensive changes to this text:

- An expansion of all chapters to take into account recent social and political developments
- The addition of two chapters, one devoted solely to the economics of oppression and one to globalization and global oppression of minority groups
- A complete rewriting of most chapters, such as the biology of oppression and developments in restorative justice by the profession of social work
- Links throughout the book to the recent educational policies of our social work accrediting organization, the Council on Social Work Education
- A strengthened focus on the intersectionality of multiple categories of identity, such as race, gender, and class, that exacerbate one’s experience of oppression and injustice
- Relevant content throughout the book consistent with the National Association of Social Work’s (NASW) recognition of social work as a global and human rights profession
- Added boxed readings on contemporary topics of diversity, such as the resilience of older African American women of the Great Migration; the mass immigration raid in Postville, Iowa; racial

discrimination in South Korea; and efforts to promote disability rights in Ghana

Without understanding the impact of world capitalism, people will find it difficult to effect changes in policies to improve the social life of their communities. Much of the oppression we see in the world today is directly or indirectly related to forces in the wider economy. Injustice arises through inequalities in the distribution of resources and punishments. Injustice also arises through scapegoating as some people, disturbed by economic insecurities, displace their aggression onto others. So how can the forces of good overcome the forces of oppression? That is one of the questions that guides this work. The text ends on a high note, with descriptions of the possibilities of restoring justice through restorative justice.

TASKS OF THIS BOOK

The four major tasks of this book are to provide a conceptual framework for understanding the nature of oppression and injustice, to describe the skills of critical analysis needed to confront oppression and injustice, to provide illustrations of successfully conceived and instituted programs, and to forge a conceptual link between the oppression and injustice configuration and strategies of empowerment.

We can conceptualize oppression as stemming from inequities in the power structure and the ideologies that reinforce them (see Chapter 1). The first task of this book is to provide a context for the pursuit of policy-making, to help readers develop skill in the critical analysis of social welfare policies and proposals. This context, one that has received little attention in social work policy analysis texts, let alone in the textbooks of related mental health disciplines, is enunciated in the *NASW Code of Ethics* (2008). As stipulated in Section 6.04(c),

Social workers should promote conditions that encourage respect for cultural and social diversity within the United States and globally. Social workers should promote policies and practices that demonstrate respect for difference, [and] support the expansion of cultural knowledge and resources.

Apart from considerations of professional influence, the age-old question facing social workers is this: Working within the system or from the outside, how can we avoid participating in oppression? Or, working from the outside, how can we help the casualties of economic restructuring or the victims of structural or interpersonal violence? Here is where training in particular skills of writing up program proposals, lobbying Congress, and using the Internet for grassroots actions comes in. Attention to such policy-influencing efforts constitutes the second task of this book.

Third is the presentation of exemplary programs and other initiatives. In this time of economic transformation and political turmoil, visions of the possible—innovative approaches to meeting people's needs, resolving conflicts, and restoring justice—assume major importance. One such example that is presented in this volume is the social activism on behalf of and in collaboration with poor people by the controversial Kensington Welfare Rights Union (described in Chapter 8). The concept of empowerment is the link that ties this series of grassroots initiatives to the social policy agenda.

The intended audience for *Confronting Oppression, Restoring Justice* consists of frontline social welfare professionals, reformers, victim assistance advocates, sociologists, and all other people associated with the system's casualties. The subject matter of this book assumes a special relevance as globalization breeds both corporate political might and worldwide coalition building for social justice.

STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

Forgive the long title. Aesthetics gave way to practicality in this choice. The need was for a title that proclaimed both the problem and the solution in one neat phrase. The second need was to reveal the policy analysis focus of the book. Policy analysis, conceived here as a stepping-stone on the journey to social action, entails the knowledge and the method involved in setting up alternative designs (e.g., restorative justice formats) as a means of ensuring social justice. The title thus includes multiple key elements in a nutshell.

Oppression and injustice are linked, but not inextricably. For heuristic but mainly organizational reasons, we are focusing on matters most closely related to oppression in one section of the book and to social justice and

NOTE TO INSTRUCTORS ABOUT THE CORE COMPETENCIES

Confronting Oppression, Restoring Justice emphasizes the following core competencies as delineated by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE, 2008). We list the most relevant competencies here and the chapters in which each is emphasized.

EDUCATIONAL POLICY 2.1.2: APPLY SOCIAL WORK ETHICAL PRINCIPLES TO GUIDE PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE

“Social workers have an obligation to conduct themselves ethically and to engage in ethical decision-making. Social workers are knowledgeable about the value base of the profession, its ethical standards, and relevant law” (CSWE, 2008, p. 4)

Practice Behaviors

Social workers

- recognize and manage personal values in a way that allows professional values to guide practice;
- make ethical decisions by applying standards of the National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics and, as applicable, of the International Federation of Social

Workers/International Association of Schools of Social Work Ethics in Social Work, Statement of Principles;

- tolerate ambiguity in resolving ethical conflicts; and
- apply strategies of ethical reasoning to arrive at principled decisions. (CSWE, 2008, p. 4)

Chapter 3 most thoroughly covers discussions of ethics in its listing of ethical values and presentation of ethical dilemmas related to the prevention of oppression. The value of social justice is infused throughout Chapters 1–10.

EDUCATIONAL POLICY 2.1.3: APPLY CRITICAL THINKING TO INFORM AND COMMUNICATE PROFESSIONAL JUDGMENTS

“Social workers are knowledgeable about the principles of logic, scientific inquiry, and reasoned discernment. They use critical thinking augmented by creativity and curiosity. Critical thinking also requires the synthesis and communication of relevant information” (CSWE, 2008, p. 4)

Practice Behaviors

Social workers

- distinguish, appraise, and integrate multiple sources of knowledge, including research-based knowledge, and practice wisdom;
- analyze models of assessment, prevention, intervention, and evaluation; and
- demonstrate effective oral and written communication in working with individuals, families, groups, organizations, communities, and colleagues. (CSWE, 2008, p. 4)

Chapter 2 elicits critical thinking skills in its presentation of biological, psychological, and sociological theories on the nature of oppression as diverse research-based sources of knowledge.

PART I

CONFRONTING OPPRESSION

This book is designed to meet a specific need in social work education, a need addressed in both the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics and the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) guidelines for professional education. This need is for a knowledge base in social and economic justice and the forces in oppression as a background for social policy practice.

Part I of this text, Chapters 1 through 8, moves from an examination of the nature of oppression to a discussion of the fundamentals of policy analysis as a way of resisting oppression to a consideration of the empowerment process in social work.

The major task of the first chapter is definitional: to offer a conceptualization of oppression and injustice and of their opposites, empowerment and social justice. Think of Chapter 1, which is relatively abstract, as an attempt to lay the theoretical groundwork for the subsequent material relevant to our study of oppression and injustice. Much of the terminology

introduced in this chapter, terms such as *antioppressive practice*, *intersectionality*, and *restorative justice*, are drawn from international and U.S. sources. All these terms and the more familiar ones, such as *social justice*, relate to social work practice and policy innovations. Succeeding chapters in this section analyze oppression in terms of biopsychosocial components (Chapter 2), privilege (Chapter 3), confronting social exclusion and oppression (Chapter 4), economics and oppression (Chapter 5), oppression worldwide (Chapter 6), antioppressive policy analysis for social change (Chapter 7), and empowerment as a social work tradition (Chapter 8).

CHAPTER I

What Is Oppression?

*I swore never to be silent whenever and wherever human beings
endure suffering and humiliation. We must always take sides.
Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages
the tormentor, never the tormented.*

—ELIE WIESEL, 1986, THE NOBEL ACCEPTANCE SPEECH

IMAGES OF OPPRESSION

Oppression takes many forms. It can occur when one race or group of people exploits and suppresses another race or ethnic group; it can affect whole families and classes of people who are economically oppressed by the system; it can occur within the family, taking the form of gender violence or child abuse and neglect. Membership in a disempowered group has both personal and political ramifications. In his unforgettable memoir, McCourt (1996) takes us back to his humble Irish origins:

People everywhere brag and whimper about the woes of their early years, but nothing can compare with the Irish version: The poverty; the shiftless loquacious alcoholic father; the pious defeated mother moaning by the fire; pompous priests; bullying schoolmasters; the English and the terrible things they did to us for eight hundred long years. (p. 11)

Angela's Ashes tells of ethnic hatred, mistreatment of children, and economic oppression in early-20th-century Ireland. On the American continent, we see yesterday's oppression in the jolting words of bell hooks (2009), who recently returned to her roots in the hills and hollows of Kentucky:

I was a little girl in a segregated world when I first learned that there were white people who saw black people as less than animals. Sitting on the porch, my siblings and I would watch white folks bring home their servants, the maids and cooks who toiled to make their lives comfortable. These black servants were always relegated to the back seat. Next to the white drivers in the front would be the dog and in the back seat the black worker. Just seeing this taught me much about the interconnectedness of race and class. . . . I was the girl they [the workers] did not see, sitting in the swing, who felt their pain and wanted to make it better. (pp. 148–149)

To hooks (2009), healing occurs through collective organization and personal testimony. Healing takes place within us as we speak the truth of our lives. Consistent with hooks's teachings, this chapter, like this book, is intended to break the silence, to help therapists, administrators, and community organizers embark on a journey toward the truth.

HOW DO WE DEFINE OPPRESSION?

What do we mean when we say a group or individual is oppressed? The answer may appear simple: a dominant person or group denying access to resources to a subordinate group, or a group of people who hold power over another group although the powerless group may outnumber those in power. Is oppression having few if any choices in life? We often hear of oppression occurring in other countries; it is seen in extreme examples of war-torn areas, "dowry killings," and the stoning of women who were raped. As U.S. citizens we hear these terrible things are oppression, but we do not have anything like this in the United States. Can this be true? Can we be oppressed in some circumstances and be the oppressor in others?

Etymologically, the word *oppress* comes from the Latin *opprimere*, which means "to press on or press against" ("Oppress," 2007). As defined in the

Encyclopedia of Social Work, oppression is “commonly understood as the domination of a powerful group—politically, economically, socially, culturally—over subordinate groups” (Van Soest, 2008, p. 324). According to Van Soest, the underlying theme of most definitions of oppression is the notion of power. Other key variables related to this concept are exploitation, deprivation, and, as we suggest in Chapter 3, privilege. A group’s deprivation of necessary resources may or may not be deliberate; for example, a whole society may suffer from famine. In contrast, exploitation is deliberate. As defined by Mullaly (2010), *exploitation* “refers to the social processes whereby the dominant group is able to accumulate and maintain status, power, and assets from the energy and labor expended by subordinate groups” (p. 55). Each of these notions is ingrained in the institutional arrangements of racism, sexism, ethnocentrism, ableism, heterosexism, classism, and sectarianism (Appleby, Colon, & Hamilton, 2011). In each form of oppression—economic, racial, ethnic, sexual—a dominant group receives the unearned advantage or privilege, and a targeted group is denied the advantage (Ayvazian, 2010).

In short, the notion of oppression requires that one group benefit by subordinating another group (Marsiglia & Kulis, 2009) and that oppression dehumanize both groups. Oppression may be based on socially defined labels such as race, sexual orientation, class, education, gender, ability, language, culture, or other identities that are determined by the oppressor group as “others.”

Loosely speaking, oppression can be defined as inhumane or degrading treatment of a group or individual based on some defining characteristic (Dalrymple & Burke, 2007). Sometimes the meanings of words can best be known through their opposites. Societies are *nonoppressive*, notes Gil (1998), when all people are considered and treated as equals and have equal rights and responsibilities concerning their land, resources, politics, and bodies. *Oppression*, like *nonoppression*, is a term favored by social activists and a central concept of political discourse; it would not ordinarily be used by the mainstream and is inconsistent with the language of individualism that dominates U.S. politics (Young, 1990). In traditional usage, the word might be used to describe conditions in a foreign country such as North Korea, Afghanistan, or Syria. It also might be used to refer to the historical treatment of American Indians and to the exploitive treatment of many undocumented immigrant workers.