

**The Intersection of Liberation Theology, Structural Social Work,
and Empowerment Practice**

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Abstract

This paper examines liberation theology and the structural approach to social work as they relate to empowerment practice. The concepts and strategies of both liberation theology and the structural approach are discussed. Based on this discussion an integrated practice model for empowering marginalized groups is presented.

Biography

Dr. James Allen is an Associate Professor in the School of Social Work at Saint Louis University. Dr. Allen teaches practice courses at both the undergraduate and graduate level. Dr. Allen has a particular interest in liberation theology and its application to social work practice.

The Intersection of Liberation Theology, Structural Social Work, And Empowerment Practice

The concept of empowerment has long been a part of the tradition of the social work profession. Empowerment is discussed as both a process and a product. Both structural social work and liberation theology provide a model for empowerment practice. The purpose of this paper is to examine the intersection of structural social work, liberation theology, and empowerment practice. The paper begins with a discussion of the nature of empowerment and empowerment practice and then examines the concepts of structural social work and liberation theology as they relate to such practice.

Empowerment

As used in social work practice, empowerment is viewed as both a desired state to be achieved and a means of achieving that state. As a state to be achieved, empowerment involves “a sense of competence, mastery, strength, and ability to effect change” (Miley, O’Melia, DuBois, 2001, p. 82). To be empowered is to believe in one’s personal capacity to change one’s circumstances. Achieving such a sense of competence occurs within the context of an individual’s experience with their environment (Miley, O’Melia, DuBois, 2001). One’s perceived success or failure in bringing about needed environmental change shapes an individual’s perception of their personal competence.

O’Melia (2002) emphasizes the critical importance of perspective in the empowerment process. Each person creates a personal perception of themselves and their world based on their experience. Gergen (1999) notes that “the mind constructs reality within a systematic relationship to the external world” (p. 60). People’s interactions create a set of assumptions

about themselves and their world. These assumptions construct a personal reality. All experiences are viewed in the context of this construction.

This construction of reality shapes not only a person's thinking but also their behavior. The experience of many, particularly the oppressed, in dealing with their environment is marked by a lack of success. This lack of success is frequently perceived as a personal failure. Over the course of time, this sense of failure is internalized and undermines a person's feelings of competence. People interact with their environment in ways that reinforce their sense of failure and contribute to a sense of powerlessness. Feelings of hopelessness and helplessness often accompany this sense of powerlessness and increase the likelihood of continued oppression.

As a process, empowerment challenges those experiencing a sense of powerlessness to reassess their self perception. Change in perception is a prerequisite for change in behavior. Through a process of personal and collective critical reflection people reexamine their experience. This reexamination intentionally focuses on identifying relevant external factors that contribute to the individual's situation. The goal of the process is to reduce the sense of personal responsibility and increase awareness of the impact of other systems.

Sustaining personal empowerment requires support. Being with others who share common concerns provides needed encouragement and support. This sharing also helps to "externalize" the problem and move it from a personal issue to collective issue. Building alliances with others around shared concerns also provides the foundation for developing and implementing needed change strategies.

Structural Social Work

Structural social work emphasizes the importance of understanding the connection between individual problems and the larger social/economic context within which they occur. Through the empowerment process, the structural approach enhances peoples' awareness of their own situation and increases their capacity to act to bring about needed change.

Lundy (2004) notes that social workers “offer help to people who are experiencing a loss of control over their lives, are isolated and marginalized (p. 128). Conditions, such as these, undermine an individual’s sense of competence and compromise their ability to effectively problem solve. Given this situation, structural social work adopts an empowerment approach. The goal of this approach is to increase the individual’s sense of control over their circumstances and in so doing enhance their capacity to pursue needed change.

The empowerment process begins with structural analysis. Structural analysis challenges the disempowered to understand the ways in which their social/economic conditions are connected with their subjective/emotional reality (Lundy, 2004). This critical analysis focuses on the ways in which existing social relations and institutions serve the interests of the powerful and compromise the welfare of the less powerful. Gaining awareness of this connection allows people to see and understand their situation in a different way.

Seeing and understanding one’s situation in a different way is the result of critical reflection. Lundy (2004) describes the process of critical reflection as an “educational process that helps people recognize the connection between their personal struggles and the social context within which they live. The recognition of this connection helps reduce the individual’s self blame for his/her circumstances” (p. 134). At the same time, critical reflection heightens the individual’s awareness of the impact of the external social/economic conditions that contribute to their oppression.

Critical reflection on the personal level is necessary, but not sufficient, if change is to occur. Through the process of “collectivization” (Lundy, p. 64) individuals begin to understand that their circumstances are not unique. Dialogue with others who, confronted with similar circumstances, experience similar challenges and a similar sense of oppression helps to normalize their situation and reduce isolation. Dialogue also allows individuals to recognize the limits of their personal problem solving efforts and the need for collective action to bring about needed social change.

Examining the need for change focuses directly on concrete material needs. Through individual and collective reflection people identify the conditions in which they live and the impact of these conditions on their beliefs about themselves and the problems they experience. Throughout this process emphasis is placed on identifying strengths. The reflection process invites people to consider the ways in which they have coped with and survived these difficult circumstances. Reflecting on strengths also provides an opportunity to identify other personal and environmental strengths and resources. Having identified concrete needs and strengths, people are challenged to develop specific strategies designed to change their circumstances.

Bringing about needed structural change requires coordinated action. Social action is often necessary to bring about such change. Active participation in planning and executing social action furthers the sense of empowerment achieved through the process of critical reflection. Working together, people engage in the process of identifying specific targets for change, developing appropriate action strategies, implementing these strategies, and evaluating the outcome. Engaging in this process heightens peoples' awareness of their resources and strengths and reinforces their sense of competence and control.

Liberation Theology

Liberation theology developed in response to the reality of the injustice done to the poor. It acknowledges the social and political dimension of this injustice and lays out a strategy for addressing those dimensions. Liberation theology emphasizes the "praxis of the poor" (Brown, 1990). The praxis is committed to change based on reflection and emphasizes the role of the poor and oppressed in the process. Empowerment is a central theme in the praxis.

Liberation theology begins with a recognition that the world should not be as it is. In particular, liberation theology focuses on the reality of poverty and calls for "a preferential option for the poor". Exercising this option requires that injustice be denounced and that

mechanisms of oppression be identified and directly addressed. Particular emphasis is placed on the socio/political dimensions of oppression.

Recognition of the capacity of the poor to engage in the process of changing their circumstances is at the heart of liberation theology. As noted by Boff (1987), “the oppressed can break out of their situation by working out a strategy better able to change social conditions” (p. 5). The strategy of liberation involves the oppressed “coming together, coming to understand their situation through the process of conscientization, discovering the causes of their oppression, organizing themselves into movements, and acting in a coordinated fashion” (p. 5).

Conscientization begins with the reality that the oppressed are immobilized by socio/economic/political structures. Attempting to change these structures is a hopeless task. This hopelessness and the resultant inaction perpetuate the oppression. Oppressed people begin to perceive themselves as victims and behave in ways that reinforce their sense of powerlessness. Freire (1972) maintains that the only way out of such immobility is through a process of “conscientization.” This process involves both reflection and action. Reflection provides people the opportunity to consider their circumstances in a different way. In particular, reflection invites them to look at external factors that contribute to their situation. The goal of the reflective process is not only to increase awareness of the situation but also to consider options for changing it. Empowerment occurs as reflection leads to action to transform oppressive structures.

The process of conscientization occurs largely in the context of base communities. Base communities provide people a safe environment in which they are able to share their personal experiences and struggles. In so doing, participants recognize that others share in the same struggles. Working together, members of base communities examine social and political factors contributing to these struggles. Within these communities people also develop strategies for addressing these systemic factors.

Central Themes and Implications

Empowerment practice, structural social work, and liberation theology share a number of common themes. The first theme is that of the power of the personal narrative. Each of these approaches begins with the recognition that personal experiences shape one's perception of both themselves and their world. The narratives of the oppressed are filled with experiences of failure. These experiences undermine a person's sense of competence and compromise their ability to act on their own behalf. Given the impact of such narratives, any empowerment effort must begin with critical reflection. Change begins with an invitation to articulate one's story and examine optional meanings. The goal is to assist people in reconstructing their narrative in an alternative way that emphasizes the possibility for change. The new narrative highlights the individual's role in bringing about such change.

Constructing an alternative narrative is a collaborative process. The worker must create a safe space within which individuals feel comfortable in telling their story. The worker must respect the expertise of the individual and provide encouragement and support as they tell their story. The worker must help the individual to consider alternative ways of understanding their experience. Through out the process, particular emphasis must be placed on identifying and reinforcing strengths.

Bringing people together to share their experience is a second theme. Groups provide a context within which individuals have the opportunity to recognize that there are others who share similar experiences. This recognition reduces the sense of self blame and isolation. These collective discussions also allow people to explore their situations in a broader context and better understand the impact of external factors. The conscientization which occurs within the group context also redirects change from internal change to systemic change addressing relevant social, political, and economic factors.

Having identified shared experiences and concerns, the worker brings people together to collectively explore their circumstances. During the collective exploration, the worker helps group members identify common concerns and targets for change. Attention then focuses on developing strategies to achieve needed change.

The third theme is the need for action. Reflection and action are inseparable. The ultimate goal of empowerment is to help people to take concrete action to change their circumstances. Initially, the role of the worker is to help group members to explore possible alternative courses of action. Particular emphasis is placed on identifying courses of action that maximize the participation of group members. The worker also assists group members in evaluating the options and choosing a course of action. Once a choice is made, attention focuses on specific strategies associated with the action. The action step presents a particular challenge since acting to change is a new experience for many who have been oppressed. The worker must avoid the temptation to suggest actions and consistently insist that group members assume this responsibility. Providing ongoing support as group members implement action strategies is another critical role of the worker.

Conclusion

Empowerment practice is clearly rooted in the belief that those treated unjustly and the oppressed have the capacity to effectively act on their own behalf. Doing so requires a collaborative effort that focuses on reflection and action. Structural social work and liberation theology present models for such practice.

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