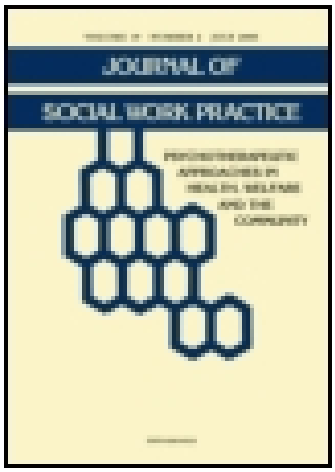

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FEMINIST AND EMPOWERMENT THEORY AND SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

Feminist and empowerment theories are especially important to the understanding of individual and sociopolitical levels of social work assessment and intervention. Incorporating feminist and empowerment approaches in practice will provide social workers with the knowledge, values and skills most likely to promote human rights and social justice. In this paper, we present an overview of both theories and illustrate them with a case example.

Keywords feminism; empowerment; social work; human rights

Introduction

Development of professional identity and identification with the social work profession as a whole has much in common with feminist and empowerment theory. Both emphasize individual and collective identity development in the context of social and gender inequality and discrimination (Lee, 2001; Mullaly, 2010).

Feminist social work theory and practice also has much in common with empowerment, particularly in their focus on domination and subordination. However, each has its own history and the ideas and concepts that inform each of them are frequently taught separately. Feminist theories, according to Poorman (2003, p. 220) 'specifically examine role expectations and status and power differences related to gender while empowerment theory looks more specifically at the role of race/ethnicity/culture and, to some extent, class status in shaping individuals and problems'. In addition, feminist social workers were among the first to recognize that empowerment must be anchored within women's own experiences (Carr, 2003; Grosz, 2010).

Feminism emphasizes the importance of the social, political and economic structures that shape human societies and stresses that gender must be considered when examining the effects of oppression and domination and power and powerlessness in our society (DeBeauvoir, 1957; Steinem, 1983; Lorde, 1984; Collins, 1991; Crenshaw, 1991; Ehrenreich, 2001; Carr, 2003; Kabeer, 2009; Grosz, 2010; Kemp & Brandwein, 2010; Abromovitz, 2012). Throughout history, women have been and continue to be oppressed and discriminated against in ways that are different than men.

Central to feminist theory is the belief that the inferior status delegated to women is due to societal inequality, that the personal status of women is shaped by political, economic and social power relations and that women should have equal access to all forms of power. Like the concept of empowerment, feminist analysis helps women to understand how they are oppressed and dominated and often inspires them to engage in efforts to bring about broader social change. Feminist scholars, educators and social workers encourage women to reclaim power to the extent possible in our society, express anger and build self-confidence and self-efficacy. Recently, Abromovitz (2012) argues that the politically conservative attack on social programmes has a disproportionate effect on women.

Beyond this, what characterizes feminist social work is its strong emphasis on connection and the power of a mutual relationship (Jordan *et al.*, 1992, Jordan, 2010). As envisioned by Genero *et al.* (1992) a mutual relationship is one in which there is a sense of respect, interest, empathy and responsiveness on the part of both people in the relationship (mother/daughter, father/daughter, practitioner/client, teacher/student, etc.). The concept of mutuality expands the concept of resilience from a 'one-directional perspective (where an individual gets support from another person) into a two-way relational dynamic in which the relationship itself becomes the vehicle to engender resilience' (Turner, 2001, p. 442).

Empowerment has become an essential part of feminist theory and, as such, seeks to increase the personal, interpersonal and political power of oppressed and marginalized populations for individual and collective transformation (Lee, 2001). Both stress the need to increase the personal, interpersonal and political power of oppressed and marginalized people so that they can band together as communities and take action to improve their situations (Freire, 1973; Gutierrez, 1990). Within social work, there has been some debate as to whether to consider empowerment a theory or a process (Carr, 2003; Carroll, 2004). Most believe it is a process, one that begins by recognizing the nature of the oppression one is experiencing followed by an increase in awareness and consciousness—and for some, personal and/or familial/community transformation (Gutierrez, 1990; Gutierrez & Lewis, 1999). Lee (2001, p. 32) believes it is neither a theory nor a model of practice but a 'variety of conceptually coherent social work approaches and frameworks for practice'. Empowerment is best viewed as a theoretical framework which helps people take more control over their lives (AlMaseb & Julia, 2007).

Feminism: history and relevance

In Europe and the United States, first wave feminism emerged in the late 19th century and was primarily a white middle class movement concerned with women's right to vote (Kemp & Brandwein, 2010). However, it was not only white women who were fighting for the right to vote. Soujourner Truth, who had been born a slave, electrified the Women's Convention meeting in Akron, Ohio in 1851 with her 'Ain't I A Woman' speech. After the Nineteenth Amendment was adopted, however, with the exception of a few years during WWII when women took on more active roles in the war effort, feminists more or less retreated from public life. They surfaced again in the late 1950s and 1960s, in the United States with the publication of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), and in France with the publication of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second*

Sex (1957), both of which captured the frustrations of women who were still essentially marginal to public life. These second wave feminists began to look at the patriarchal structure of society and saw domination and subordination in terms of gender and emphasized that everyone has the right to be free from discrimination and oppression (Reichert, 2006).

Feminists fighting for sexual and reproductive rights, access to affordable childcare and equal pay for equal work were collectively addressing powerlessness and domination and demanding their rights as human beings. Women who joined consciousness-raising groups in the 1960s and 1970s began to connect with other women, and in sharing their experiences, they learned to see the political nature of their personal problems (Carr, 2003). The empowerment approach that many feminist social work theorists and practitioners adopted is seen by some as the 'restoration of individuals to a sense of their own value and strength and their own capacity to handle life's problems' (Handy & Kassam, 2006).

This second wave of feminism drew on work from many fields, and spawned a wide range of theoretical understandings and perspectives, ranging from mainstream or liberal to radical or socialist. It was enriched by black feminist ideas and experience of power and domination (Walker, 1980; Lorde, 1984; Collins, 1991). Mainstream or liberal feminists were less interested in political and societal transformation, but rather sought ways that women could gain more individual power to be equal to men, while radical or socialist feminists proclaimed that the 'personal is political' and that the oppression and discrimination that women have experienced and regarded as personal are actually political issues, caused by inequality of access to power and resources (Firestone, 1970). Radical and socialist feminists saw all societal systems as built on the oppression of women and called for fundamental change in all our systems, such as education, legal and social welfare (Saulnier, 2008). Some influential second-wave black feminists, such as Audre Lorde and Alice Walker, speaking for women who felt racially oppressed by the women's movement, embraced the concept of 'womanism' (Lorde, 1984; Collins, 1991; Walker, 2003). Walker (1980) coined the term 'womanism' which advocated for social justice and an end to oppression for all women.

The women who founded the welfare rights movement valued the work that mothers did at home and demanded society do the same. These women, many of whom had long worked outside the home, usually in unpleasant and physically taxing jobs, understood that work was as much, if not more often, a source of oppression as a means of empowerment (Abromovitz, 1992; Nadesen, 2002).

By the late 1980s, U.S. feminist theory was also influenced by the thinking of non-U.S. feminists, particularly in South Asia and Africa, where feminism emerged in the context of anti-colonial movements, and in Latin America, where it took shape as an integral part of democratization. In South Asia for example, what began as a reaction to subordination by foreign rule by the 1980s had become an 'organized and articulated stand against women's subordination' (Bhasin & Khan, 1986), while in Latin America feminists argued that democracy was impossible if half of the society were oppressed. The experience and understanding of these feminists was often articulated in the framework of post-colonial theory, which became an important influence on U.S. feminist thought (Kabeer, 2009). What all of these feminist currents shared was an effort to explicate the nature of unequal power relations between men and women and the forces that perpetuate these over time.

By this time, the U.S. feminist movement was also experiencing a third wave, one influenced primarily by the perception that the debates over hierarchy and leadership that had been so essential to women struggling to articulate their own identity, within the larger struggle, were no longer relevant in the world they knew and were ultimately impeding women's ability to influence mainstream culture and media (Kabeer, 2009). This paralleled a new feminist approach to human development that looked at role expectations, status and power as it related to the differential development of girls and boys. Gilligan (1982) was particularly interested in how girls lost their power (their voices) as they matured into adolescents, and Miller (1976) articulated how women develop differently than men, stressing that women's sex role socialization has led to subordination and powerlessness. Miller (1976) and Gilligan (1982), and later colleagues at the Stone Center such as Judith Jordan and Janet Surrey (Jordan *et al.*, 1991) developed the self-in-relation feminist perspective that challenged the traditional theories of human development particularly the stage of separation and individuation that traditional psychologists felt was so important. They proposed that women value and are sustained by connections with other people and that in fact women's survival is based on their ability to maintain connections (Poorman, 2003; Jordan, 2010).

Despite its diversity, feminism is often criticized for reflecting the perspective and responding to the concerns of middle class white women, which is the way it is most often portrayed in the media, and some have argued that a feminist and empowerment focus inevitably tends to concentrate on individual change to the neglect of social activist work (Brown, 1998). However, the feminist perspective is potentially all encompassing in terms of addressing race, class, gender, sexual orientation, age, immigration status and physical and mental abilities (Walker, 2003; Kabeer, 2009). While Miller (1976) and Gilligan (1982) initially focused on middle class white women, when more women of colour became involved in the development of self-in-relation theory it became more inclusive of all women (Collins, 1991; Brown, 1998). Feminist theory increasingly addresses the intersectionality of gender, race, ethnicity, religion and class in shaping health and well-being (Crenshaw, 1991; Kabeer, 2009; Maschi *et al.*, 2011).

Social work education has been criticized for being slow to recognize some of the contributions of postmodernism, in particular the sexist biases of behavioural and psychological theories of human development (Sands & Nuccio, 1992; Carr, 2003; Grosz, 2010). Feminist social work theorists, educators and practitioners have become aware of the need to be more conscious of their own social location or positionality so that they do not re-enact power imbalances. Some theorists believe that there are more important differences than those between men and women, while others believe that race, class, religious and sexual relations are always 'lived, experienced and structured according to whether one is a man or a woman' (Grosz, 2010, p. 104). Rose and Hanssen (2010, p. 4) point out that a feminist perspective has many things in common with the strengths perspective such as 'empowerment, advocacy, collaboration, connectedness, and mutuality' and that many have argued that the non-gendered strengths perspective is more 'palatable' for a wide social work arena. However, as Grosz (2010) states, women and men experience life differently and that a non-gendered approach would not necessarily benefit women. Poorman (2003, p. 239) best sums up the strengths of feminist social work theory and practice:

> Despite its limitations, no other theory of helping addresses as extensive an explanation of cultural influences, power dynamics, and gender differences and the

effects these have on both the dominant and the subordinate individually or in relationship to one another.

While the primary focus for many feminists is on gender and the limitations of patriarchal society, central to all feminist belief is that everyone has the right to access basic human rights and to be free from domination and subordination. The focus on human connection and relationship building is particularly relevant for social workers. Feminist social workers view the work as a partnership in which each person has an obligation to be honest, responsible, authentic and caring (Genero *et al.*, 1992). They also engage in the struggle to eliminate some of the 'false dichotomies that emerge from American capitalistic, patriarchal, hierarchical society' (Sands & Nuccio, 1992), which relegate women to the personal or private realm and men to the political realm. One of the false dichotomies that had emerged in social work practice is that between micro practice and macro practice or between clinical and community or policy practice. Those who work from a feminist perspective envision all forms of practice from a human rights and social justice perspective as equally valid and useful. Feminist and empowerment social workers practice at 'the intersection of private troubles and public issues' (Miley & DuBois, 2007).

Feminist social work is based upon the desire to change societal structures so that women will no longer be oppressed and will further develop a sense of self-efficacy, self-esteem and self-confidence as a path of claiming power (Grosz, 2010). Their goal is to move away from focusing on individual change as the path to achieving an enhanced sense of well-being and move toward systemic change in our social, political and economic system with the goal of achieving a more equal distribution of resources and power (Jordan, 2010).

Case example

The use of feminist theories and practices to understand and address the power differential between men and women and how women are oppressed will lead to more effective assessment and intervention strategies when working with women, minorities and other oppressed people. The following composite case study will be used as an example.

Claudia is a 33-year-old Latina who had just completed a 30-day inpatient substance abuse programme where she had disclosed for the first time that she had been sexually abused as a child by her uncle, who was a physician. The abuse occurred between the ages of 8 and 13. Claudia had anal lesions severe enough that they needed to be operated on, caused by her uncle's use of medical instruments on her.

As a teenager and young adult she had several abusive relationships with men. Having internalized the sexual abuse as being her fault, she felt that she did not deserve to be treated well. Her uncle had always told her that she was too sexy looking for her own good. In high school, she joined a mentoring programme and had a very positive relationship with another Latina who was in college. Her mentor became a close friend and role model for Claudia and this positive relationship helped her to develop a more positive bi-cultural identity and to focus on school work, and she did well. She got into college, but had difficulty during her freshman year. She did not stay in touch with her mentor and began drinking heavily as a way of medicating the extreme anxiety she felt in any social gathering. She became friends with a group of young women who also

drank heavily at times, but at least they provided a social support group for Claudia. She did manage to graduate from college and went on to work sporadically as she continued to drink heavily. During the next couple of years, she was able to achieve periodic sobriety with the support of attendance at A.A. meetings and the friendships she was beginning to make at meetings. However, when she lost her third job, she finally admitted herself to an inpatient facility for 30 days. After discharge, she was referred to an outpatient facility that also specialized in trauma treatment. In outpatient treatment, she agreed to join an all-women's group with other survivors of sexual abuse and this became her primary treatment. She was also encouraged to return to A.A., which she did and soon had a sponsor.

Claudia did not have a mutual relationship with her mother, who did love her, but depended on her to negotiate for her outside the family as she did not speak English. She was also not able to protect Claudia from her abusive uncle. Claudia grew up feeling that she had to take care of her mother. Claudia's group leader was a feminist social work practitioner who was able to form a strong mutual relationship with her. From an empowerment perspective, she was able to allow herself to feel the victimization and oppression Claudia had suffered and soon understood how traumatized, devalued and unprotected she had been growing up. She and the other group members helped Claudia see how the abuse was not her fault and that she was a survivor of criminal acts committed against her. In one of the beginning group sessions, when asked to imagine herself as a child, she pictured a little girl in a pretty blue dress, but she was very far down a hall and in a cage. There were marks all over her, and she was staring off as if she were dead inside. The leader encouraged her to visualize an internal safe space and she chose many acres of green hills.

A first reaction of a social worker might be dismay that Claudia continued to enter into abusive relationships with men despite being strong in many ways, such as her ability to achieve academic success and gain a scholarship to college. Claudia's group leader was able to join with her and helped her to verbalize how much power men have had over her and how vulnerable she has been, especially as a young girl. She had been very close to her uncle as a child and had not only internalized the abuse as her fault, but also had developed a very confused sense of the relationship between abuse and affection.

In working with Claudia from a feminist empowerment approach, it is important to assess her sense of self-efficacy, which is the degree to which people feel they have control over their environment which enables them to adopt new positive behaviours (Handy & Kassam, 2006; Jordan, 2010). Claudia did not have a well-developed sense of self-efficacy which could be one factor that led to her alcoholic drinking and negative self-image. Claudia's group leader, working with her and the other group members from both an empowerment and feminist perspective showed her that she understood her oppression and vulnerability. She also helped her and the other group members get in touch with their long forgotten dreams and goals. Claudia's sense of self-efficacy and self-esteem increased and she was soon able to envision herself as a strong survivor rather than a victim.

From a macro practice perspective, helping Claudia to connect with activist groups working to pass legislation to recognize that the sexual abuse and sexual trafficking of women and girls is a child welfare issue, as well as a criminal justice issue, might help hasten her awareness that what happened to her was not her fault. She was not protected as a child and she was the victim of a crime (Lloyd, 2011).

Intervention strategies and phases of practice

Some of the goals of social work from a feminist perspective are to help women recognize that often feelings of inadequacy or failure are rooted in political and economic structures. For example, a traditional psychotherapeutic view of depression is that it is anger turned inward or, particularly for women, 'learned helplessness'. This view can put the onus on the woman to find out the source of her anger and just take charge of her own life. A relational and mutual approach encourages women (and men) who are depressed to help each other and validate the source of their helplessness and oppression as being a result of inequality and of being devalued in society (Jordan, 2010). Group work is valuable for many people who feel disempowered and alone in their struggles, but it is particularly effective for women who have been abused. Sexual abuse is not only frightening, it is also deeply humiliating. Women who have been told that they were abused because they were too sexy or too provocative or did not take proper care of themselves, internalize that belief and feel alone in their pain. Both feminist and empowerment approaches that encourage establishing a group process that affirms their experiences and encourages all in the group (including leaders) to enter into the oppression and suffering they experienced, and then to discover and affirm strengths, are the first steps in the healing process (Wolin & Wolin, 1993; Saulnier, 2008). The group process that 'fosters mutuality and creates solidarity and a sense of connection can be the vehicle to transform casualties and deficit into victories and resilience' (Turner, 2001).

Feminist social work theorists and practitioners advocate working with individuals, groups and communities, and simultaneously working for social change, social justice and human rights, so as to avoid the pitfalls of polarization in practice methods and theory (Sands & Nuccio, 1992; Abromovitz, 2012). They also work on all levels of practice. Social workers engaged in macro practice advocate for homeless alcoholic clients to have rapid access to welfare rights and benefits so that they can find safe housing, or as happened in 2008–2009, feminist advocates might work with women who have been sexually trafficked and held hostage in this country to join together and travel to Albany, the capital of New York State to speak out against a law that essentially criminalized them. The Safe Harbor Act, finally passed in 2009, recognizes that victims of sexual trafficking need safe houses and services in order to leave the sex trade; stigmatizing them as criminals serves rather to close off other options (Lloyd, 2011). Feminist practitioners, working in an individual or group modality may help an abused woman leave her husband or pimp and find a safe house, and in group, help a suicidal woman find her voice and sense of worth and self-efficacy.

Empowerment: history and relevance

Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1973, 1998) can be credited with articulating the concept of empowerment as he developed his theory and philosophy of education. He focused on the humanity of oppressed people and believed it was necessary to enter into their world and empathize and identify with them in order to understand their needs (Hipilito-Delgado & Lee, 2007). Freire believed that most of the curriculum taught in schools was irrelevant to marginalized people as it did not address the social and cultural barriers of discrimination that they faced, which are the reality of their

lives. He argued for situating education in the lived experience of the students (Freire, 1973). Freire's concept of conscientization or critical consciousness is especially important to the process of personal empowerment because it signifies an awareness of oppression in our society and all the social and political implications of oppression and discrimination (Gutierrez, 1990; Freire, 1998; Hipilito-Dlegado & Lee, 2007).

Drawing on this understanding, Gutierrez (1990) conceptualized empowerment as the process of increasing personal, interpersonal or political power to improve the lives of marginalized people. The ultimate goal of empowerment is the 'sociopolitical liberation of marginalized communities' (Carr, 2003). It is both a clinical and community-oriented approach in that it advocates work with individual, families, groups, communities and political systems.

Freire (1998) came to believe that hope was central to empowerment work, since without hope, neither individuals nor communities can begin the struggle to change. So did Jane Addams, who reflecting on her efforts towards world peace, asked:

What after all has maintained the human race on this old globe, despite all the calamities of nature and all the tragic failings of mankind, if not the faith in new possibilities and the courage to advocate for them. (Addams, 1917)

In her writing about human rights principles, Reichert (2006) urged social work as a profession to challenge the societal structural inequalities that create and maintain oppression. Powerlessness is more complicated than just not having power in the outside world (Mulally, 2010). Those who are powerless have a lack of material and personal resources, such as self-esteem and self-efficacy (Gutierrez & Lewis, 1999). Those who work from a feminist empowerment perspective focus on structural injustices and lack of resources and how they affect the lives of clients and communities and society as a whole. From a personal perspective, empowerment and feminist practitioners and educators believe that a person who has repeatedly experienced oppression can incorporate a negative self-image and low self-esteem, and this is just what the oppressor intends (Reichert, 2006).

Both feminist and empowerment practitioners feel that the mission of social work is to work towards social and economic justice (Swenson, 1998). Poverty, racism, oppression and discrimination are just as relevant today as when Freire (1973) first began writing about the importance of empowerment to change individual and collective lives. The ongoing economic crisis in the U.S. has resulted in increased homelessness, unemployment and more of a concentration of wealth in the hands of a small minority of people, while vast numbers of the middle class are losing their homes and their jobs. The effects of recession fall disproportionately on minorities—especially young black women and men, immigrants, single mothers who lack resources and the elderly who have seen whatever savings they had disappear. One aspect of empowerment theory that makes it particularly relevant for social workers is that it is both a clinical and community-oriented approach (Lee, 2001). Feminist and empowerment social workers operate within a human rights and social justice framework with the goal of building a more compassionate world. Empowerment social work is both personal and political (Miley & DuBois, 2007). If the roots of the problems that individuals experience are the result of discrimination, oppression, violence and poverty, then clinical intervention from this perspective is helpful. Lee describes the community-oriented approach as 'the unleashing of human potentialities toward the end of building the beloved community' (Lee, 2001, p. 30).

In addition, the primary assumption of the empowerment (and social work) approach is that the client knows best what the problem or issue is and has strengths which can be built on. It is important to advocate and mobilize resources when working with individuals, families or communities (Gutierrez, 1990) and in so doing it is the task of social workers to understand their experience of oppression and to work to promote social and economic justice and empower themselves (Swenson, 1998). Those working from an empowerment perspective assume that racism, sexism, heterosexism and classism are responsible for many of the ills in our society and in our clients' lives (Lee, 2001).

Some theorists have pointed out that the empowerment process can be problematic, in that self-determination can be at odds with the goal of distributive justice, which is a critical aspect of racial, social and gender equality (Carroll, 2004). People who enjoy advantages in our society may have a moral obligation to help disadvantaged and vulnerable people, but can choose not to as they exercise their right of self-determination. Carroll (2004) points out that it is difficult to regulate the social and political structure of a community to want to empower vulnerable people.

Intervention strategies and phases of practice

Group work is a very effective way of developing critical consciousness and increasing a sense of self-efficacy as members become involved and begin to identify with others who have been in similar situations; they can help each other catalyse to lead to a sense of empowerment (Gutierrez & Lewis, 1999; Carr, 2003). For example, women who have been sexually abused often feel isolated. Meeting together in a group they begin to talk about the abuse, and 'Each time women speak to each other about their experiences, they put more distance between themselves and their pain. The more they continue to talk, the less victimized they feel' (Kammer *et al.*, 2011). A group leader who is able to enter into the sense of victimization, isolation and oppression that so many sexually abused women feel can help the group members increase their sense of self-esteem and self-efficacy because they no longer feel so alone.

Today, many feminists believe that a fundamental change in consciousness is necessary to achieve social as well as psychological change (Gutierrez, 1990; Carr, 2003; Jordan, 2010). Community building and organizing are essential strategies to bring about this change in consciousness. For social workers especially, calling the director of a welfare centre to persuade her to change her policy regarding access to welfare entitlements or working with the residents in a housing project to change their living conditions for the safety and support of their children, are actions that show they feel empowered themselves to act on behalf of their clients and also to work in concert with communities. Everett *et al.* (2007) discuss the steps in building empowerment in a community: recruitment, engagement, involvement, retention and partnership. Involvement is the process of developing relationships, doing outreach, going door to door and having street fairs. Engagement and involvement begin to happen when a core group of people meet regularly and become involved in the development of needed activities and services. Partnerships are formed as tasks are delegated and advisory councils are created. Carr (2003) conceptualizes three stages which are necessary to build and support empowerment: increasing self-efficacy, developing critical

consciousness and skills or reflection and actions and finally becoming involved with others who have similar goals. This does not necessarily happen in a linear way.

Conclusion

Feminist and empowerment theories are important perspectives for social work micro and macro practice. Both advance human rights and social justice and add to critical awareness of individual and sociopolitical contexts. These theories add a distinct dimension to practice as they guide holistic assessment and intervention, especially with the marginalized and disenfranchised populations that social workers are charged to serve. The core concepts in both theories—mutuality, critical self-awareness, collective action, conscientization and collaboration—are important tools in working with individuals, families, groups and communities. Both feminist and empowerment concepts serve a role in redressing unequal access to power and resources.

Claudia's case demonstrates how working with women from a feminist empowerment approach, helps them to gain control over their environment, develop self-esteem and self-efficacy and adopt new, positive behaviours. Connecting with the other women in her group as well as joining activist groups helped Claudia recognize that she was not alone and that she was no longer a victim. Feminist and empowerment theories and practice teach us that our clients can claim power, build self-confidence and engage in mutual relationships. Those skills help empower all of us to realize our passion as we strive for a humane and just world.

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