

Bookworm's Corner

Book Review

Poulin, J. (2000). *Collaborative social work: Strengths-based generalist practice*. Itasca, IL: F.E. Peacock Publishers, Inc.

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The term *strengths perspective* seems to now be as popular in the social work field as *solution-focused* once was in the profession. However, according to Saleeby (1996), many practitioners that purport to conduct strengths-based practice, in fact, do not. In addition, although a focus on clients' strengths is a value of the profession, Saleeby adds that the strengths perspective is "a dramatic departure from conventional social work practice (p.3)." Therefore, social work texts that clearly and extensively discuss the use of practice models that emerge from the strengths perspective are warranted.

John Poulin and other contributors provide an engaging and dynamic review of a strengths based collaborative model. Although there are several authors, in general, the writing is clear, direct, and coherent. With the exception of one chapter, each chapter contains diagrams and tables to demonstrate the information covered, which will likely be valuable to visual learners.

All chapters maintain a consistent structure and begin with a relevant picture, a brief vignette, and a synopsis of the concepts and propositions that will be examined. Chapters end with a summary, a more detailed case example, and discussion questions. Additional case examples are presented throughout various sections of chapters and references are listed at the end of each chapter. This consistency in structure is easy to follow.

In part one of this book, Poulin presents the strengths-based collaborative model with an emphasis on the helping relationship. This book is valuable because it contains a thorough review of the specific phases of assessment, planning, and action for the collaborative model. It also includes numerous assessment tools that may be used in practice, such as the strengths-based assessment worksheet, bio-psychosocial assessment form, and mental status evaluation. Application of the model's interventions is demonstrated on micro, mezzo, and macro levels.

In part two of his book, Poulin invited eight of his colleagues whom he considers experts to author the remaining eight chapters on practice with special populations. These populations include persons with serious and persistent mental illness, older people, people of color, abused and neglected children and their families, gay and lesbian clients, people with HIV and AIDS, and survivors of natural disasters. In these chapters, the authors provide a comprehensive review that includes background information on each population, pertinent policy issues, micro, mezzo, and/or macro practice issues, and other salient issues. However, only a few authors distinctly demonstrate application of the collaborative model with the identified population. This text would be enhanced if the model was applied to each population, even if only briefly. Consistently applying the model to various populations would assist the learner to understand how the model can be useful in their practice with diverse clients and communities.

This book has numerous strengths, and two are noteworthy. One of the criticisms of the strengths perspective is the lack of clarity regarding practitioner tasks. Unlike many strengths

perspective texts, this book provides a clear and comprehensive review of the application of this model to multiple diverse populations. Typically, authors formulate abstract generalizations that the strengths perspective can be applied to any population because it is client driven. Few discuss practice with diverse populations as thoroughly as these authors.

Another strength is the inclusion of assessment tools. My colleagues have expressed uncertainty concerning how to conduct strengths based practice. The detailed assessment tools and the accompanied instructions should be appreciated by students and new practitioners using this model.

As with any material, there are limitations to this text. Poulin begins this book by discussing the role of the ecosystems perspective in generalist social work practice and the strengths perspective in strengths-based generalist social work practice. However, Poulin does not review these perspectives under the *theoretical and conceptual frameworks* heading, instead, they stand-alone. In addition, he does not connect these perspectives directly to the model. Instead, the reader is left with the burden of thinking critically about how these perspectives are associated with the practice model.

Poulin asserts that this model uses the scientific method for logical positivism and constructivism for postmodernism during the worker-client relationship. In this text, Poulin primarily uses a postmodernist perspective to guide practice; however, he uses logical positivism to evaluate the client's progress. Given that logical positivism and postmodernism are on opposite sides of the subjective-objective continuum, it would be helpful if Poulin clearly distinguished how the two work together. Poulin's position seems to be that there should be a partnering relationship between worker and client, but that a more traditional method for evaluating progress should be employed.

Another drawback is that although Poulin asserts that this book is suitable for use in senior BSW and foundation MSW courses, it is written slightly higher than the BSW level. He presumes that the reader will know certain terms (e.g. empiricism) and therefore they are not defined.

Further, this book ends abruptly without a conclusion or discussion section. It leaves the reader, the learner, craving for implications for social work practice, education, and research. Further, while Poulin states in the preface of this book that it was written because of an inability to find a textbook consistent with his approach to teaching, he never discloses his approach. Implications for teaching this model would significantly add to the quality of this text. Should instructors use the strengths perspective to teach their students? Which approach (e.g. active learning strategies, client centered vs. content centered) is most effective when teaching this model?

From my understanding, this text is widely used in undergraduate and graduate social work courses. I agree that this would be a great required or supplemental book to use in a social work practice course. I recommend that this book be used, but only after the strengths perspective, its concepts, and propositions are clearly understood. The student, practitioner, educator, and researcher will consider this a valuable resource, primarily because unlike many strengths perspective texts, it demonstrates application of the model to diverse populations.

References

- Poulin, J. (2000). *Collaborative social work: Strengths-based generalist practice*. Itasca, IL: F.E. Peacock Publishers, Inc.
- Saleeby, D. (1996). The strengths perspective in social work practice: Extensions and cautions. *Social Work, 41*, 296-305.

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