

Practice Approaches in AOP
Curry-Stevens & Nissen, September 2009

1. Overall intervention process

"We continue to practice as if clients' issues are only about individual and family dysfunction." (adapted from Baines, 2007)

What needs to be added to this?

- *Understand social dimensions of individual experience, such as poverty and racism*
- *Understand how social issues such as crime and addictions have been framed with morality overtones, resulting in mainstream people being perceived as superior (rather than understanding these issues as public health, human rights, or circumvented choices issues)*
- *Understand how poverty and racism result in deep class stratification resulting in little hope and promise for the future of many poor youth of color*
- *Understand how more privileged people can survive some drug use/abuse and criminal charges without getting deep into addictions or juvenile justice*
- *Understand how drug use and criminal activity makes sense to your clients*
- *Understand the purpose of the justice system and its employees*
- *Understand the ideological dimensions of this issue – how the system serves as a moral arbiter whereby more privileged people hold judgments over those not able to delay gratification and withstand their desires for escaping their realities with drugs*
- *Know that real healing requires white people (and other privileged people) to understand their investments in keeping the status quo*
- *When power is ignored, the status quo is upheld*

2. Therapy (drawing mostly from Mullaly, 2002)

a. Understanding clients

- *Tune into experiences of oppression (prepare, seek understanding, build empathy capacity)*
- *Listen to real experiences of life (uniqueness of each client)*
- *Understand impacts of oppression – loss, self-esteem, fear, powerlessness, suppression of anger, anger at being deceived, constraints on hope*
- *Main practice goals – to counteract damages, building strengths in clients, building connections to others with same identity and to community. And build agency to create social change, self-help, and community power*

b. Understanding worker

- *Worker's identity as raced, classed and gendered (among others)*
- *Understand own investments in the status quo*
- *Know how you were socialized to find oppression and privilege "normal and natural"*
- *Interrogate biases & assumptions, especially how you "fill in the gaps" about clients' lives*
- *Understand the power of your status over lives of clients, and how this connects to your privilege*
- *Unlearn your own racism, sexism, classism etc.*

- c. Understanding engagement between clients and workers
 - *Roles are infused with inequality, non-reciprocity and elitism*
 - *When power ignored, status quo is upheld*
 - *Spot inequality as it happens, and commit to naming it, owning and undoing it*

 - d. Core practice methods
 - *Personal is political – refuse to understand distress solely at the personal level. Keep placing distress in its social context*
 - *Normalize – distress is the logical outcome of oppression*
 - *Reframing – personal troubles as political issues... and engage clients/community to understand and act on their “contextual environment”*
 - *Communication – to validate oppression and unveil oppressive realities... break the silence, end the shame and share concerns*
 - *Group work emphasis – consciousness raising and self-help orientation*
 - *Counteract damages, build strengths, build connections to others in the same community, and build agency to create change, participate in self-help and build community power*
3. **Organizational context:** An AOP lens will also be targeted on your own organizational practices – its influence cannot be limited to how clients are treated. Workers, clients and the community will expect the organization to be more transparent, equitable, accountable and effective. These groups will attain a belief that they are entitled to expect this from the organization. In addition, the organization needs to develop practice accountability structures to ensure AOP practices are implemented. We also perceive that when workers are marginalized and exploited, they are more likely to treat their clients in the same manner
- *360 degree evaluation practices, including client and former client input*
 - *Develop an action plan for building internal equity (and know this work will be incremental over many years)*
 - *Systems of mutual accountability – if managers are as accountable to their workers as workers are accountable up the ladder, then workers are much more likely to be accountable to their clients. Practice accountability up and down the ladder.*
 - *Production of data to show client success is considered a priority not only to report to funders but to the client, family and community*
 - *Supervision and hiring systems that recognize AOP as a core skill in all areas of practice*
 - *Implement AOP as a core skill for everyone and build it into job requirements*
 - *The organization must press for policy changes (in the macro context) that improve the quality of life for their clients and communities (including reduction of poverty, access to quality health care, access to safe housing, access to education, etc.)*
4. **Professional context:** The heart of AOP is its focus on power. Know that there is never an “innocent” space that is free of power hierarchies, including social services
- *Begin to adopt a critical stance in all that you do that emphasizes an analysis of power, and how it is at work in every unique context*
 - *Join the emerging cadre of AOP practitioners in all professions. They will be around the edges of most professions and professional gatherings*

- Expect professional associations and related Codes of Ethics to adhere to AOP values and practices
- Know that no educational or social service system is apolitical. Do your part in making power relationships visible.
- Participate in rigorous and courageous self-examination of self and other professionals
- Be brave. Become braver.

5. **Community context:** Two key dimensions exist – the community’s ability to sustain the lives of its residents and the interactions between the service organizations and the community.

The core community issues in the AOP context are:

- *How able is the community to meet its members needs for material and non-material resources?*
- *What is impeding this delivery? What interests promote social exclusion and uneven access to resources?*
- *What changes can improve the quality of life for residents? How can social inclusion and access/claim to society’s resources be promoted?*

The core community-organization issues in the AOP context are:

- *How is the organization accountable to the community? What are the mechanisms for this accountability?*
- *What power does the community hold in the organization?*
- *What does the organization do to enable community empowerment in its operations?*

6. **Policy context:** In the AOP lens, all policies are understood as choices with power relationships influencing every perception and practice. This practice is primarily to take individual issues and make them social ones, and to implement practices that allocates benefits and establishes financing of them.

The core policy issues in the AOP context are:

- *Who benefits?*
- *How do they benefit?*
- *Who pays?*
- *How do they pay?*

In addition, the identity and accountability practices of policy makers are important dimensions of AOP analysis and practice.

Supplemental policy issues are:

- *Who are policy makers?*
- *Who is at the decision-making table?*
- *Who is not present?*
- *What external influences affect policy making?*

Organizations need to expand their policy advocacy practices. This can include:

- Participate actively in coalitions designed to advance your community’s needs (including increasing quantity and quality of appropriate treatment services for young people, and a robust set of options for improving quality of life at the local level)
- Make policy advocacy a priority for both staff and participants. Build funding to support these activities (including regular education and relationship

building with local, state, tribal and federal officials connected to clients' issues)

- Routinely engage with the community on policy issues
- Build your advocacy voice as an organization
- Be bolder... “we have a duty to be impolite when politeness keeps misery in place” (Hardcastle et al)

7. **Dominant discourse context** (ideological arena): At every turn, the organization and all members unveil power, oppression and privilege wherever it exists... the coffee room, pictures hanging on the wall, their witness of injustice and speaking out, and even into their personal lives as they parent, greet neighbors and live out loud.

- Build resistive discourses in places such as mission statements, organizational policies and policy briefs
- Support clients and community members who act to create change.
- Expect the same from staff and administrators and the organization itself.
- Celebrate resistance.
- Stretch yourself to increasingly “walk your talk” about issues of power, privilege and oppression.
- Aim to live more congruently with your values.