

Episode 4 - Dr. Alex Gitterman: The Life Model: A 30-year Reflection

[00:00:08] Welcome to living proof the podcast series of the University at Buffalo School of Social Work at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu. Celebrating 75 years of excellence in social work education. We're glad you could join us today. The series Living Proof examines social work research and practice that makes a difference in people's lives. I'm your host Adjoa Robinson say PIE or person in environment to any social worker or student of social work. And it is immediately recognized as the organizing theme that guides our practice and distinguishes us from other service professions. But where did this idea originate. Today's podcast features an interview with Dr. Alex Gitterman Dr. Gitterman is a Zak's professor and director of the Ph.D. program at the University of Connecticut School of Social Work. He is also a recipient of the Council on Social Work education's Lifetime Achievement Award for 2008. Dr. Gitterman's expertise includes health mental health social work practice and group supervision. However he is perhaps best known for being one of the progenitors of the Life Model Dr. Gitterman along with his co-author Carol Jermain were the first to apply the ecological approach to social work practice in their classic text The Life model of social work practice. Now in its third edition titled the Life Model advances in theory and practice the approach has shaped the education and practice of social work. For three decades Nancy Smyth a professor and dean of the School of Social Work at the University at Buffalo is our interviewer because the interview is by telephone.

[00:02:08] Listeners may find the audio quality varies at times but the opportunity to speak with one of the icons of the field was just too good to pass up. Alex could tell us more about how you came up with this model the Life Model in the first place. This would have been in the 70s when you were in the process of writing the first book right now. Cal and I came onto the teaching faculty the same year 1972 and she came in at that time the school was divided by the methods. And she came into the case for faculty and I came into the group of faculty were interesting phenomenon developing. Every year there was an increasing percentage of casework a group or students that find themselves double majors. So not only that take for casework courses but they also took a group or course that they thought were saying to us you're leaving it for us to integrate why don't you integrate. And I was very I found that position very compelling that we were taking what should have been our responsibility and passing out to them at the same time the dean was looking at the economics of having to have eight courses taught by practice by faculty rather than just for courses. So there were these two influences that got the Dean to say we really have to start integrating case work and group work. And then he decided going to form a task force to work on it and he picked the people he thought were the most reasonable from each method they picked me and Carol and another colleague who really had majored in both. Mary finagles and asked us to develop the first year integrated method course at Columbia which really was the forerunner of foundations.

[00:03:47] And if you look at the curriculum would be very close to what the current Foundation is and out of the working on the court count. I thought exchanging ideas then we really discovered we were socialized to two different professions what felt like two different professions that we had to go thought listening to each other and our vocabulary. So for example I empathize offering a service and contracting and she emphasized exploring as part of initial activities and we got curious and we realized that most of our experience in that time the casework experience with people who voluntarily were asking for help rarely did you have a group asking for help. So you wound up having to offer a service try to promote a service. So out of this kind of discussions we got very curious intellectually curious and we decided why don't we write try to write an article about some of our initial ideas. Implying that systems ecological ideas to some beginning notions of a new way of practice. Would one of the things of integrating the methods we submitted it to social work and it got rejected would be too abstract. We submitted a social service review and they felt that was just

the right level of extracts. I love it. Yeah and that would that start off our collaboration. And then we started. The ideas are a little abstract in fact. We've got to now move to operationalizing them and this led us to struggle for a good number of years to try to put meat on the bones and we came up with the first effort of night.

[00:05:16] In 1980 we had a few goals and aim one aim was to integrate group work. The aim was to provide alternative to the diagnostic approach to practice that resembled much more natural life process. And that's what we came up with the name of life model trying to get as close as possible to natural life prophecy rather than artificial for of them. And then another aim was to start focusing on little more people read. And finally we want to start making some connections between the clinical traditions and the Social Reform tradition. And the best that we could do at that time as far as our own development or our own knowledge base was moving from the case to try to influence your employing organization. How did you stumble upon ecological approach as the one that was going to be your organizing approach. Carroll thought already in a doctoral work looking at the ecological metaphor going to biology how can I was a sociology undergraduate major and doctoral Major as I was and much more. The current systems theory and I started looking that I've felt that the ecological ideas were in fact more accessible than some of the more abstract systems. The idea which came from the World Vision. And that raises an interesting question. Do you see those two as being the same ecological systems theory or in other words what do you see as the important difference between the two. Because that's of course one of those debates we hear a lot about in the field of social work.

[00:06:51] I think the major difference is that I think the view of the reality is very similar but coming out of the work the world the physics systems there is little bit more mechanistic or ecological coming from biology is a war from a natural science or organismic but some of the language of ecology is also a little dense. Yes certainly not compared to systems theory it's not. It's more physical. I went back and looked at the original edition of the book and I recalled reading at my own program and one of the things that struck me is how much of social practice since that time has really gone back to that home framework that you laid out some really kind of curious about what you attribute the longevity of this approach to. Because I'd say that there's a lot more of recent perspectives on social work which you really can trace directly back to this thing. I think the strengths perspective and empowerment really do come out of a similar tradition. Yeah and you know I think the tremendous evolutions that you know take a deep and deep and it further I get the longevity is you know the very idea that one is the longevity of ideas. The other issue longevity of the marketplace. I don't have a sense that it's one the book came out initially it became one of Columbia University bestsellers. I'm sure I don't think Well the analysts now know that I think there are a lot of BFW tax now yeah and they're easy to read and the simpler explanation. So I think longevity is maybe more in the graduate school and yet it's clearly selling enough that a third edition is being asked for. And I'm wondering from that perspective Alex as you're writing a third edition. What's changed.

[00:08:45] What are you bringing in at this point that wasn't there in earlier editions. Well let me just if I can go back a little bit to the second edition. OK. We thought that limitation on the first edition was limiting our connections of clinical social reform just to organisational influence. The second edition we tried. We included new chapters on community influence and policy influence. So that was the major evolution in the second edition. How can I being objective. I still think that the model that's still the weakest part good. That is not what count I majored in. Yes. Not in our blood. The knowledge that we got from reading other people is knowledge that we got from some practice experience. But the Maika stuff was in our blood. And also when we do seminars and workshops and teach this is what we're teaching the organizational a little easier because at one point we influence the Columbia curriculum. All the students in the last semester took a course on how to influence the organization. That was the graduating course. So the more I taught the court

the more materials came into my bones. So that was a major evolution in the second edition the time between 1990. Well you I don't listen. The major difference between 96 and now is two away. It's like a new world. Yes totally a new world. So one of the things I did is I put in a history chapter that traces how Houser's Charity Organization Society up to contemporary times that looks at the impact of new legislation and immigration meaning increasing poverty and technological and cultural revolution.

[00:10:42] And then look at the byproduct of Social Work managed care the use of technology in practice things like that. So I think a new chapter that has Daco chapters are tremendous. Sure. Another new chapter is on track with monitoring practice evaluation and practice. OK. Well that is a significant change which also raises some issues some threats though the evidence a great practice. But some of the concerns and limitations about it. Yes that that it's taken on too much of a bandwagon. Yeah I think that potential chapter should be an interesting chapter I'm making a distinction between proactive monitoring the practice evaluation of a good instrument and so on. And then I divided the chapter which focused more on preparatory issues practice the more elaboration of the patients but those are the only new chapters in the book. And this is the addition that you're reading on your own this is that it just came out. Yes and so can you talk a little bit more about what it was like to write this edition without Carol. The most difficult part was getting started. Yeah. It's like a piece of me was missing because we were not collaborators we were close friends. I loved the woman after death. So and we got the style of collaboration where one of us to write a chapter is that going to reboot. Then go back. And by the time we finished rewriting it you didn't recognize the original author was so it was a much lonelier journey. Yeah. Once I got into it I could do it by just making the decision to do it and getting started on what a difficult challenge.

[00:12:27] I would imagine and yet I also would imagine just from my own experience with people that have been that close to me when I'm doing an activity that I would be and would have done with them it was almost like I could hear their voice with me. I didn't hear the voice because I was on medication. But I did get the faith throughout it. I see your face throughout the book is to what that gave to her how underflow. That was also a motivation factor that I could give a gift for. This isn't an easy question Alex but do you think that if care were a life that she would have been able to add something to this book that she felt she weren't just able to do. I did but I know certain areas would've been much better for example in the chapter on ecology I looked at new developments. Then go feminism yes. And then deep ecology there's no doubt in my mind that you'd have done better and I did it. I'm proud that I did it. But I know she would've done it better. And so that chapter is really a tribute to her influence on you as well. Absolutely. Yeah absolutely. Absolutely. Well it's wonderful to know that the third editions and because as I said before in reviewing the book I was just really struck by I think how much it's defined what's currently being taught in social practice. It may not be the text that showing up everywhere anymore. But I would hope that that's because people have taken the ideas as their own and may be tweaked in a bit.

[00:13:57] But I think you're right. Yeah I think they're right. And listen up. Well it's flattering. It is flattering yes. I think the two of you really defined what social work practice is at least for my generation. I both got my degree and have been teaching within that context. It's a bit of like Judy Lee's empowerment approach totally. As a student of Carroll that I was a mentor at Columbia. OK. So that felt just terrific to see that evolve. We could actually create a genie Graham to show the approaches that have been spawned from here. I feel old. Well I understand it you have a workshop to attend. I think at this moment you have caffeine withdrawals. Act a lot we're being interested. I really appreciate it. Oh thank you for speaking to me. I'm really really pleased. I'm going to be now I'm going to have the press to send you a book. But that would be nice. Thing. Yes. Because I have to say when I went back to my old copy you wouldn't believe the number of underlines and highlights in there. It would be nice to have a copy of the new one to sort of balance it out. Doctors don't want love on the line copy and he didn't know I was looking through it. I agree on the

development of this word. What is that. I'm so pleased you read it.. Yes. So thank you Nancy. Well you take care of yourself. Don't work too hard. Thank you too Alex for that.

[00:15:34] You've been listening to a podcast featuring an interview with Alex Gitterman on the evolution of a life model of social work practice. We hope you have enjoyed this presentation. Visit our website to hear more lectures and conversations about social work practice and research. Hi I'm Nancy Smyth professor and dean at the University at Buffalo School of Social Work. Thanks for listening to our podcast. Our school is celebrating 75 years of research teaching and service to the community. More information about who we are through our programs and what we do. We invite you to visit our website at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu. At UB we are living proof that social work makes the difference in people's lives.