



**PREFERENTIAL OPTION FOR THE POOR: FOUNDATION FOR  
SOCIAL WORK IDENTITY**

**By: Helen Deines**

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Helen Deines, EdD, MSSW  
Professor of Social Work Emerita  
Spalding University  
Louisville, Kentucky

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Human beings are so made that the ones who do the crushing feel nothing; it is the person crushed who feels what is happening. Unless one has placed oneself on the side of the oppressed, to feel with them, one cannot understand.

[Simone Weil](#)

These words of Simone Weil capture the essence of both liberation theology and its central theme, the preferential option for the poor. At the same time, it offers an understanding to revisit social work practice with the poor in the United States—listening first to those who are crushed.

This article explores the preferential option for the poor as a concept, practice, and call to action that may strengthen social work's capacity for staying faithful to its mission to the poor. Ideas drawn from liberation theologians are applied to social work practice, with emphasis on the scriptural basis for the option and the role of the marginalized as evangelizers. Practice and education applications highlight engaging both the poor and not-so-poor in social work's activities (both reflection and social action) to recognize and challenge the realities of structural sin (evil masquerading as good) in all our lives.

#### PROFESSIONAL SOCIAL WORK AND THE POOR

Why might social work benefit from considering the preferential option for the poor? The preamble to the National Association of Social Workers' Code of Ethics (2008) begins, "The primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty."

In spite of this lofty mission, there is a significant body of evidence that the profession has throughout its history been diverted from attention to basic needs or focus on the poor. Reisch and Andrews (2002) trace the repeated tension between social workers committed to changing systems that produced and/or maintained poverty and those struggling to develop social work's professional legitimacy. Social workers were discounted as socialists, communists, pacifists, and all forms of persons unacceptable in polite society. Methods of marginalization included blacklisting during the McCarthy era and later silencing through accusations of "deprofessionalization" (p. 169).

At many times, social work as a profession has chosen deliberately to remove itself from the poor. Lowe and Reid (1999) compile historical studies focused on social work's relationship with the poor. Sometimes the actions described were likely barely noticeable, just part of historical context, for example, during the Depression issuing lower relief benefits to African American families than to white families in similar circumstances (Stadum). Other episodes reveal rarely discussed moments in the profession's history that expose its priorities: Lowe and Reid (pp. 93-94) recount the head of the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (a social worker), immediately after the passage of the Social Security Act, writing the director of the American

Association of Schools of Social Work (precursor to the Council on Social Work Education), seeking aid and assistance to train social workers as staff and leaders for the new national public welfare system<sup>1</sup>. The letter mentioned the possibility of new courses and field work opportunities set up for this purpose. The authors cite a memo in reply, "The Advisory Committee Appointed by the AASSW...Regarding Training of Personnel for Federal Relief Service" recommended that "the establishment of new schools...or new training courses on Federal Relief funds should be avoided if possible" (p. 93). This decision is consistent with one made by AASSW in 1932, the worst year of the Depression, when unemployment was 25% nationally, veterans were camped in Washington, DC parks protesting for bonuses promised but never paid after World War I, and farmers were protesting because of massive foreclosures; in the face of this massive dislocation, social work education decided to restrict professional preparation to graduate studies only (p. 94).

Discussing the intersection of poverty and racism, Wenocur and Reisch (2001) describe the ways in which social welfare policies denied jobs, property and access to career ladders through union membership to African Americans in the Depression and New Deal years. This made black families disproportionality dependent on public relief programs. Forrester Washington, Director of Negro Social Work for the Federal Relief Administration and future Dean of the Atlanta School of Social Work expressed fear that blacks would in fact become dependent on public assistance and, in addition, majority communities would become resentful at the presence of so many blacks on relief rolls (p. 257). Rather than responding to these racial inequities, social work maintained a colorblind approach and focused almost exclusively on developing its commodity as a professional service.

Stoez, Karger, and Carillo (2010) note that schools of social work were also disengaged in the policy development process for the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA). They comment that, as in the 1930s, almost no schools of social work participated, abdicating responsibility to private organizations (p. 7).

Of course, U.S. social work exists in a cultural context that affirms the accumulation of wealth as an end in itself, consumerism, and a reckless free market economy. Poverty narratives toss about phrases like "welfare queens," "deadbeat dads," requiring intentional strategies to affirm the dignity of persons in poverty (Cassiman). Theologian Paul Knitter (2004) observes that structures based on greed (institutions, policies, and practices) take on a life of their own. Knitter's conclusion is that individual conversion is insufficient to alter those structures; other strategies—social change strategies—are required to challenge structures that perpetuate such greed. Perhaps this duality helps to explain the content analysis of MSW syllabi from Catholic schools of social work, only one of which evidenced content specifically related to the poor (Pryce, Kelly, Reiland, & Wilk, 2010).

The question for this article is whether incorporating the concepts and practices developed by liberation theologians in their work struggling with the preferential option for the poor would

help social work in being faithful to its mission? We begin with a brief consideration of liberation theology.

#### LIBERATION THEOLOGIES: CONTEXT FOR THE PREFERENTIAL OPTION FOR THE POOR

Jesuit Dean Brackley (2008) calls liberation theology a matter of perspective, a complement and the corrective to the European perspective that dominates Christian religious scholarship. For liberation theology, he comments, "...trampled human dignity is the place from which to understand both the human condition and the word of God" (p. 5).

**Scriptural.** The preferential option for the poor is a concept usually identified with Latin American liberation theology (Groody). Yet, liberation theologians consistently highlight the presence of its themes drawn widely from both Hebrew and Christian scripture (see, for example, Index of Scriptural References, Groody, 312-315; Gutiérrez, 2003, 173-176.) All liberation theology is scriptural.

**Emergent.** It is similarly important to note that theme of preferential option recurs in liberation theologies beyond those developed in Latin America. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century it is more accurate to describe a web of liberation theologies, emerging and interacting with each other over time (Thistlethwaite, & Engel; West). For example, James Cone (2013), father of black liberation theology, writes in the introduction to the book's 1986 edition, that he has revised the book's language in response to his learning about sexism, and adds content about exploitation of the global South, classism, and the consequences of his prior overreliance on European theologians. In parallel, Gustavo Gutiérrez (2011, p. xxx), in his introduction to the revised introduction, comments

Black, Hispanic, and Amerindian theologies in the United States, theologies arising in the contexts of Africa, Asia, and the South Pacific, and the especially fruitful thinking of those who have adopted the feminist perspective—all these have meant that for the first time in many centuries theology is being done outside the customary European and North American centers.

**Gospel from the underside.** This comment suggests another of the common characteristics of the liberation theologies: they emerged from the experiences of groups peoples in situations of drastic situations, finding meaning and guidance for action as well in the gospel of Jesus. These "drastic situations" share the common thread of being imposed by others as in the Babylonian captivity or exile in Egypt. The i

Thistlewaite and Engel (1998) enumerate other threads common among liberation theologies:

**Contextual.** Each manifestation of liberation theology has developed its own focus in terms of human agency, liberation, sometimes with blindness to the oppression

experienced by others. Cone, for example, has been eloquent about the silence of all but a few white theologians in addressing white privilege.

**Praxis as method.** Praxis separates liberation theology from more mainstream theological thought. Thistlewaite and Engel (p. 7) comment that "...*praxis* means that the historical process in one's *social location* is critical to the theological task. Social location is not particular to the individual or even to the individual's Christian community; it is a perspective shared by others of one's group or class." Praxis is a "we" process with those experiencing the suffering being the active subjects of concern, reflecting on their life situations in the light of scripture, with theologians as partners. Praxis leads to action. Theory is an infrequent facet of liberation theology, probably because it is so identified with Eurocentric academic theology. The praxis process usually leads to hypothesis about action which is then tested and revised. Particular schools of liberation theology vary with their praxis methods based on social location and the particular group's traditions.

Gutiérrez (2003) equates praxis spirituality with the concept of liberation, as do most Latin American liberation theologians. This school is an oral tradition, a process of people "at the bottom of the heap (economically and sociologically)" (Sobrinho, 2001) reflecting together on their own life circumstances in light of the scriptures they also knew orally. This leads to a final common thread.

**Communal and concrete.** These are "God-walk" rather than "God-talk: theologies, committed to specific struggles for liberation. Hence, they are not about writing or an academic career. People who are being slaughtered in El Salvador, lynched in Mississippi, or driven to support their children through prostitution in New Jersey, their approach to scripture is often a desperate search for answers and a path to find support in gaining freedom in this life as well as salvation in the next.

**Structural sin.** The root of liberation theology's idea of structural sin lies in John's idea of the world that is unable to grasp the truth (John 17:25). As described by Faus (1993) structural sins are social arrangements, usually economic, that advantage some groups while disadvantaging others. These arrangements seem so normal that most people are blind to the inequities they produce. In his examples, Faus cites both capitalism (human beings have no inherent worth) and socialism (human beings are the enemy).

Moe-Lobeda (2012) calls structural sins evil hiding as good, and suggests eight dynamics that construct moral oblivion leading people to accept the status quo, with all the inequities the involves. How to disengage this moral oblivion is the greater challenge.

These are only highlights of liberation theology, aspects selected as they form an essential context for the preferential option for the poor. Sister Amata Miller, IHM, at a meeting on social work and social justice, referred to words she attributed to Presbyterian theologian Robert McAfee Brown, "What you see depends on where you stand. What

you hear depends on who you listen to. Who you are depends on what you do” (2007). These words capture the essence of liberation theology.

## PREFERENTIAL OPTIONS FOR THE POOR

Much like the term liberation theology, the phrase “preferential option for the poor” is often used but often not clearly defined. Many theologians (Curnow, 2012; Dorr, 2005; Groody, 2007) devote entire books to exploring its meaning. Social work scholars have applied the option to diverse fields and populations, from aging (Ryle, 1991) to criminal justice (Reamer, 2004) to supervision (Greene, 2002), to name a few. Others wrote about the concept’s overarching implications for social work education (Brenden, 2007).

When considering the preferential option for the poor, one must remember its context as a central and controversial theme in liberation theology. The Vatican’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) silenced some theologians who wrote about it, warned others about deviations from orthodoxy while in the same document, commenting that “the preoccupation of the Author for the plight of the poor is admirable” (Pope, p. 255).

Curnow (2012) traces this bifurcation in Catholic theology during the 1980s, with the Congregation for the Doctrine for the Faith criticizing liberation theologians while at the same time papal documents were appropriating these same teachings without citing their sources. In this “bifurcation” of teaching about the preferential option for the poor, differing emphases emerged. Curran (2008, p. 201) lists just a few of the meanings used commonly within the Catholic tradition: (1) the Latin American bishops described the option for the poor as a pastoral guideline, calling the entire church to solidarity *with* the poor; (2) Pope John Paul II described it as a moral principle governing all Christian’s use of goods, and directing all Christians to solidarity with the *materially* poor; and (3) the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops suggests the option requires that public policies be considered in light of their impact on the poor. In addition, Curran notes that some simply present the preferential option for the poor as the underlying foundation of all Catholic social teaching.

In light of all these competing interpretations, this article defines the option for the poor directly from works of liberation theologians<sup>2</sup> rather than Catholic social teaching<sup>3</sup>.

### Definition

In 1993 Orbis Books published a single volume edited by Ignacio Ellacuria, S.J. and Jon Sobrino, S.J., consolidating basic ideas of liberation theology for study, critique, and education, and further development— *Mysterium liberationis: Fundamental concepts of liberation theology*. In 1996 the published offered an abridged version for the North American reader known as

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<sup>2</sup> Comparable to Singletary (2012)

<sup>3</sup> In contrast with most social work scholarly works discussing this topic, e.g., Brenden, 2007; Donaldson & Belanger, 2013; Ryle, 1985.

*Systematic theology: Perspectives from liberation theology.* In both volumes Gustavo Gutiérrez succinctly defines the preferential option for the poor:

- “The very term *preference* obviously precludes any exclusivity; it simply points to who ought to be the first—not the only—objects of our solidarity. From the very first the theology of liberation has insisted on the importance of maintaining the universality of God’s love and the divine predilection for “history’s last” (p 26).

Christians are called to prefer the poor because God so clearly prefers them.

- Gutiérrez (p. 26) clarifies the word *option* by emphasizing it “... is the free commitment of a decision. This option for the poor is not optional in the sense that a Christian need not necessarily make it, any more than the love we owe every human being, without exception, is optional. It is a matter of a deep, ongoing solidarity, a voluntary, daily involvement with the world of the poor.”
- Neither Gutiérrez, Sobino, nor Leonardo Boff speaks often about being *for* the poor. They most often talk about being *with* the poor or *of* the poor. Boff, (1988, p. 88) suggests that the church simply be poor. Language is important in liberation theology as in this case it suggests at least distance, in not power.
- Gutiérrez discusses extensively the meaning of the poor, grounding the entire exploration in the theme of antithesis—how scripture places those who will be included in God’s reign in contrast with those who will be excluded (pp. 27-30). He begins with the generous landlord (Matt 20: 1-16), who shows his bounteous love, saying, “I am free to do what I please with my money, am I not? Or are you envious because I am generous?” “Thus the last shall be first and the first shall be last” (v. 16)—noting how often listeners forget the last phrase. Gutiérrez points out that these two statements shed light on one another, and should not be separated. This principle should be applied throughout the scripture study pertaining to the poor.

He then moves to Luke’s Beatitudes (Luke 6: 20-26), that are followed by the Woes, highlighting the ways in which those are presently satiated are placed in contrast to those who suffer intensely. Gutiérrez then moves onto the gospels, showing how God uses various ways to show how society’s despised are the one’s with access to the Reign, while the honored the ones for whom it will be more difficult than “for a camel to go through a needle’s eye” (Luke 18: 25). Some examples of the despised or insignificant include children (Matt 19:14) in contrast to the learned and the clever (Matt 11: 25). Gutiérrez also considers the parable of the wedding feast, which he calls the parable of the uninvited (Matt 22: 2-10) and (Luke 14: 14-24)., concluding with the mission to the sick, the lepers, and the tax collectors.

This discussion describes “the poor” in expansive terms, including the marginalized of Jesus’ times as well as the economically strapped. James Cone’s black liberation theology makes



sense within this understanding of scripture, as do the many other schools that have emerged from the world's ditches.

However the poor are defined, attentiveness to the process Gutiérrez uses in working with scripture is essential to capturing the essence of liberation theology. The poor are not the only important actors in this story. God loves us all, and calls all to conversion and to the Kingdom. Standing *with* the poor opens all to the function of the poor as evangelizers. The antithesis cannot be broken.

Gutiérrez ends this chapter from a different perspective, that of the theologian looking at the devastated peoples of Central and Latin America, Martyrs Bishop Oscar Romero, the six Jesuits of the University of Central America in El Salvador, their housekeeper and her family, the four holy women missionaries of El Salvador, and thousands of unnamed people murdered and disappeared. He then presents the Christological vision characteristic of liberation theology—that the Church “...recognizes in the poor and suffering the image of its poor and patient founder...and seeks to serve Christ in them” (p. 36). This vision of Christ alive in today's most discarded, resonant with Matthew

25

#### APPLICATION TO SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE AND EDUCATION

Tamez (2007) reminds that if all the pages in the Bible that refer to poverty were cut out, very little would remain. Interrelated historical poverty, oppression, and violence are biblical themes in the same way as are covenant, creation, salvation, and grace. Nonetheless, social workers like all disciples, struggle and stumble to live up to these biblical exhortations.

For workers of faith, centering self or organization in the preferential option for the poor may be one way of making a renewed commitment to discipleship (Gutiérrez, 2007). This commitment calls for a new approach to encounters with those the profession usually labels “clients”:

- Becoming learner to the poor and vulnerable;
- Looking for history's presence in today's world in the structural violence that advantages some while it disadvantages others; and
- Acting prophetically *with* the poor for the common good.

These are long-haul commitments best supported by a community, whether it be a faith community or a community-of-interest (Austin, 2014; Gutiérrez, 2012). Community psychologist Nathan Todd (2011) concludes that liberation theologies can influence only the why and where of profession practice, not the how; professional standards of practice must prevail. Social workers considering the journey into the preferential option for the poor should do so with eyes and hearts open to the challenges that may arise.

**Doing praxis about social work with the poor.** Liberation theology's praxis requires incorporation of understanding of social location in spiritual reflection. This makes sense as the subjects doing the reflection are “at the bottom of the heap” (Sobrino), working “from the underside” (Thistlethwaite & Engel), reading the Bible “with third world eyes” (Brown), or are in some other similarly disadvantaged position.

Gutiérrez (2011) reflecting on the social development of Latin American countries concluded that rhetoric about “underdevelopment” was just that. In fact, the persistent poverty of the Global South met perfectly the profit needs of Global North. Briefly, the North took at very low cost the South’s natural resources, used the South for almost no-cost labor, and destroyed the South’s agricultural economy, explaining all these dynamics as “natural.” Simultaneously, numerous Northern policies increased violence in the South and eroded family structures, contributing to a steady flow of cheap, easily exploitable labor into the North.

What might social workers in the United States consider about the social location of the poor?

Issues such as the minimum and living wage, affordable housing, and homelessness are well-publicized, with information accessible if social workers seek it. The complex relationship between poverty and racial inequity in the child welfare and juvenile justice systems should be part of every social worker’s working knowledge base. Similarly, the impact of the justice gap on black income gap and black wealth should be common knowledge. All of these bear some relationship with the availability of a labor force available for the lowest wages and minimal benefits.

Stoesz (2014) describes the unbanking of poor neighborhoods, and the concurrent development of a secondary financial services market serving/profiteering from the poor: payday lenders, pawnshops, international money orders, check cashing stores, refund advance loans, and such. These institutions are located in strip malls in low income areas and near military bases, accessible to the poor who are less likely to have private cars. Most are open long hours to accommodate the working poor. Even though increasingly regulated by state governments, their profits are based on customers never being able to pay off loans, thereby rolling them over so that initial rates of 36 percent become annual rates of approximately 499 percent.

Huckstep (2007) analyzes these secondary financial services, explaining they are themselves financed by major institutions such as Bank of America and Wells Fargo. Many customers in fact qualify for regular banking services but stay with the secondary markets because of their accessible hours and location, required because of employment demands.

As with Gutierrez’s analysis of the global north and south, one sees that the poor and not-so-poor are inexorably intertwined. In the United States, the poor have become a wealth generator for the secondary financial markets and the big banks. Without the poor, wealth would be lost. We are not “makers” and “takers” as Senator Paul Ryan alleged. We are one, in a sorrowful way.

The conversion occurs when we all face this together. As social workers and agency administrators, there is a lesson to be learned from the payday lenders who keep their business even when customers could go to less expensive banks. Accessibility in terms of location, hours, and (one suspects) customer service wins the day.

**Communal praxis with the poor and not-so-poor.** This is a good point to recall some characteristics of liberation theology of the option for the poor: communal, keeping the poor

and the not-so-poor together, and praxis as method. Social workers may automatically jump to the assumption that “poor” equals “clients,” and assume that reflecting together on social issues might violate the National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics (2008). However, NASW’S 2007 position statement on institutional racism, developed with community organizers such as the People’s Institute for Survival and Beyond, suggests there may be room for discussion of difficult topics with those who have sought professional guidance. Alternatively, professional staff may well find collaboration partners with poor people’s rights groups, tenants unions, legal aid consumer groups, anti-racism coalitions, or even academic groups organized around their poverty backgrounds (Cutri, Manning, & Chun, 2011).

One also wants to engage not-so-poor participants in praxis. Agency board members or major donors may be willing to do so, with orientation to the philosophy underlying the effort essential to maintaining investment. Perhaps a banker or pawnshop owner might be willing to come.

One may also want to think beyond the materially poor to those otherwise marginalized, particularly as one thinks about the faith tradition of a specific agency or community. A locality just seeing increasing immigrant populations might reach out to the two U.S. solidarity groups established during the Central American wars—Witness for Peace (Griffin-Nolan, 1991) and Christian Peacemaker Teams (Brown, 2003). The purpose, again, is to ensure that praxis involves persons who are suffering with those who are part of maintaining systems causing the suffering, remembering that social workers are likely part of that latter group.

**Spiritual reflection with the poor and not-so-poor.** Spiritual reflection may be personal or communal. An individual practitioner may want to dip their toe into the waters of liberation theology, just to see how it feels. Liberation theology has no “spiritual exercises,” yet there are some easily accessible ways to experience praxis focused on scripture. Ernesto Cardenal’s *Gospel of Solentiname* (2012) is the published diary of Nicaraguan peasants’ reflections on gospels during what we call the Iran-Contra Wars. James Cone’s *God of the Oppressed* (1995) recounts the father of black liberation theology’s struggle to make sense of a life he did not make. Gary David Comstock’s *Gay Theology without Apology* (2009) is understandable to the general reader while expressing reflections not commonly heard in mainstream congregations. All three books, and many more, would be suitable for group book studies.

Contacting Latin American solidarity groups would be a way to identify congregations or spirituality groups committed to liberation theology. Catholic women’s religious communities, especially Maryknoll, have missions consistent with the preferential option to the poor; most have frequent public religious education/formation programs. Their contact information and websites are available from each local diocese or archdiocese (usually on their website).

**Unmasking evil that parades as good.** Moral oblivion is what keeps people blind to the largely invisible structural violence (structural sin) that perpetually advantages some while disadvantaging others in the United States. Moe-Lobeda (2012, pp. 83-111) presents an eight-step study guide for shattering that moral oblivion that would be easily applied as a faith-based agency workforce development guide. The following highlights the eight steps:

1. *Privatized morality and the blinders of charity* (hiding the reality that groups of people are systematically made poor or suffering; giving charity blinds us to systematic evil)
2. *.Blessings veiling stolen goods*
3. *Denial, guilt, grief* (not encountering victims is an open door to denial)
4. *Despair or hopelessness and...perceived powerlessness*
5. *Unconscious conformity* (many different reasons, including generational)
6. *Corporate investment in maintaining moral oblivion*
7. *Uncritical belief in "growth as good"* (includes evidence for why this is faulty reasoning)
8. *Moral oblivion embedded in practice* (multiple examples of how these values are reinforced daily)

Doing this study with a poor people's rights group or a group of people of color might be instructive. Their experiences are likely to have been quite different from those of an assembly of professional social workers.

**"Where there is no vision...."** Moe-Lobeda (2012, p. 239) begins a chapter on non-violent action with these two quotations: "Where there is no vision, the people perish." (Proverbs 20: 18), and "While it is true that without vision the people perish, it is doubly true that without action the people and their vision perish as well" (Johnetta Cole). Without doubt, if one begins listening to people who are poor and marginalized, one will be asked to act. And action is what Jesus asks of us—to build his reign. Accomplishing social work's mission also requires actions rather than words, which we are more likely to carry out if we are working *with* a diverse group in which we are not the leaders. The action phase following reflection on inequity keeps the praxis cycle moving, producing energy to keep reflecting on our place in the ongoing story of discipleship.

The preferential option for the poor is not a magic panacea for social work's struggle to be faithful to its mission to the poor. However, the option is a discipline of placing the poor first, listening, reflecting together, and acting rather than just talking, which seems suited to social work at its best. "What you see depends on where you stand. What you hear depends on who you listen to. Who you are depends on what you do."

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