Bringing Advocacy Counseling to Life: The History, Issues, and Human Dramas of Social Justice Work in Counseling

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This article accentuates the human experiences at the heart of social justice work in counseling. The history, counselor attributes, skills, costs, pitfalls, rewards, and ethical issues associated with advocacy counseling are highlighted. This article concludes with a discussion of the personal moral imperatives that inspire social activism and the challenge of discovering a personal advocacy style.

During her term as president of the American Counseling Association for 1999, Loretta Bradley selected the topic "Advocacy: A Voice for Our Clients and Communities" as her presidential theme. Explaining her choice of this theme, Bradley and Lewis (2000) stated that advocacy is an important aspect of every counselor's role:

Regardless of the particular setting in which he or she works, each counselor is confronted again and again with issues that cannot be resolved simply through change within the individual. All too often, negative aspects of the environment impinge on a client's well-being, intensifying personal problems or creating obstacles to growth. When such situations arise, effective counselors speak up! We think of advocacy as the act of speaking up or taking action to make environmental changes on behalf of our clients. (p. 3)

Bradley's presidential theme reflects a growing movement to expand the practice of counseling from its traditional focus on the intrapsychic concerns of clients to a broader focus on the many extrapsychic forces that adversely affect the emotional and physical well-being of people. This movement is commonly known as the "advocacy counseling," "social action," and "social justice" approaches to counseling and psychotherapy.

According to Lee (1998a), counselors work as advocates when they plead on behalf of a client or some social cause. Advocacy work is considered a form of social action for two reasons. First, counselor advocates do their work in the social contexts in which client problems occur. Second, counselor advocates take action to eliminate or reduce social problems such as poverty, unequal access to opportunity, and various forms of prejudice, which adversely affect clients (Lee, 1998a). Similarly, a social justice approach to counseling and psychotherapy refers to using all of the methods of counseling and psychology to confront injustice and inequality in society (Jackson, 2000; Mays, 2000; Strickland, 2000).

Collectively, advocacy counseling, social action, and social justice work involve 'helping clients challenge institutional and social barriers that impede academic, career, or personal-social development' (Lee, 1998a, pp. 8–9). In all three approaches, it is understood that mental health professionals will leave the comfort of their offices and complete their work in other settings such as a client's home or school, recreational and community centers, churches, local agencies, and even the offices and meeting places of policy makers such as school board members, legislators, and government administrators. The provision of direct services to clients is complemented by indirect forms of helping that involve influencing the people and institutions that affect clients' lives (Kiselica, 1995, 1999c, 2000).

The purposes of advocacy counseling, social action, and social justice interventions are to increase a client's sense of personal power and to foster sociopolitical changes that reflect greater responsiveness to the client's personal needs (Lewis, Lewis, Daniels, & D’Andrea, 1998; Toporek, 2000).

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Because advocacy counseling, social action, and social justice approaches to counseling have the same purposes, we use the expression “advocacy counseling” throughout the remainder of this article to refer to all three approaches.

Advocacy counseling has taken many forms, has a long history, and cuts across the disciplines of counseling, psychology, social work, sociology, and religion. Advocacy counseling has targeted domestic issues, such as the sociopolitical hardships experienced by African American (see Sander, 2000) and Native American (see Herring, 2000) populations in the United States, and international problems, such as abusive child labor throughout the world (see Lee, 1998b).

Because advocacy work is so crucial to promoting the well-being of people in the U.S. and abroad, Earl Ginter, the editor of the Journal of Counseling & Development, invited us to write an article highlighting and illustrating the history, principles, and human experiences that are at the heart of advocacy counseling. Most of all, Ginter asked us to bring the process of advocacy counseling to life so that counselors will have a realistic understanding of what social justice work in counseling entails. Accordingly, we have accentuated the human experience of advocacy counseling throughout this article. This article begins with an overview of the history of advocacy counseling. Next, the counselor attributes, skills, costs, pitfalls, rewards, and ethical issues associated with advocacy counseling are highlighted. The article concludes with a discussion of the personal moral imperatives that inspire social activism and the challenge of developing a personal advocacy style.

THE HISTORY OF ADVOCACY COUNSELING

Although advocacy counseling has a long history that cuts across several centuries and numerous national borders, we have limited our review to key historical events and leaders from the U.S. during the twentieth century. To illustrate the significant human aspects of advocacy counseling, we begin this historical overview with profiles of two of the most influential advocacy counselors of this century: Clifford Beers, who began his advocacy work for the mentally ill during the early part of the 1900s, and Lawrence Gerstein, who has advocated for the oppressed people of Tibet since 1991. Then, we highlight the contributions of other advocacy counselors from the 1900s to illustrate the range of activities that constitute advocacy counseling.

Clifford Beers: Advocate for Those With Mental Illness

In 1908, Clifford Beers (1908/1956) published the first edition of his now classic book A Mind That Found Itself: An Autobiography, which was a gripping account of his horrific experiences as an individual with mental illness who was committed to psychiatric hospitals shortly after the turn of the twentieth century. This book has been reprinted numerous times over many decades as it has taken its place among the most influential publications on mental illness that have ever been produced. Beers’s highly acclaimed publication became the springboard from which he would launch a crusade known as the Mental Hygiene Movement, whose purpose was to raise awareness about mental illness and to promote new and humane treatments of individuals with mental illness (Tenety & Kiselica, 2000). The details of his life and work presented here are drawn from a biography of Beers written by the historian Norman Dain (1980).

Beers’s experiences as a psychiatric patient. Prior to the onset of his illness, Beers had lived a very comfortable and well-adjusted life. He attended Yale University where he was cited for his brilliant recitations in English. While a student at Yale, he also wrote and published many jokes, which appeared in The Yale Record, and later in Life Magazine. He was an attractive, admired young man who nevertheless found himself slipping deeper and deeper into a very serious depression. After graduating from Yale in 1897, he managed to obtain a series of well-paying jobs in New York City, and he seemed to have a very bright future. But his depression grew worse and worse until one day in June 1900, in a state of complete hopelessness, he went to his second story window, climbed out, hung from the sill and let go, an instant later crashing onto the concrete sidewalk below. The bones in both feet and both legs were shattered. After receiving medical treatment for these serious injuries at Grace Hospital in New Haven, Connecticut, he was transferred to Stamford Hall, a state hospital located in Stamford, Connecticut, whose mission was to treat nervous and mental diseases and opium and alcohol addiction.

For the next several years, Beers would endure a living nightmare as he was committed and confined to several state hospitals for people with mental illness. He struggled with delusions of persecution and wild mood swings. When he became difficult to manage, the hospital orderlies frequently beat him to the ground, choked him until he became unconscious, strapped him into a straitjacket, and tossed him into a seclusion room where we would be left for days at a time. During many of these periods of brutal confinement, he would rant and rave about how he would one day reform the psychiatric hospitals of the world. The orderlies and several of the physicians who treated him ridiculed him and discounted his threats as the irrational mutterings of a lunatic. Little did they know that he would go on to become the most influential advocate for people with mental illness in our nation’s history.

Beers’s advocacy counseling for people with mental illness. Within a few years of his eventual discharge from the hospital, Beers (1908/1956) published an account of his ordeal in a book titled, A Mind That Found Itself: An Autobiography. The book captured the horrified attention of the nation. Beers used his newfound celebrity stemming from the popularity of his book to win audiences with some of the most powerful people in the corporate world and in the professional circles of psychology and psychiatry. For example, he was invited to teas and other socials with millionaires—such as the Fords, the owners of the Ford automobile empire—to whom he would give personal addresses regarding his experiences as a mental patient. The Rockefellers, other wealthy families, and the charitable
foundations they sponsored donated hundreds of thousands of dollars to Beers for his Mental Hygiene Movement. In addition to these fund-raising achievements, Beers had a way of making friends with world-renowned psychologists and psychiatrists, whose support added professional credibility to his organization. For example, Beers once enjoyed a personal visit and a subsequent lifetime of correspondence with William James, the author of several classic works of psychology during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Bolstered by these varied forms of support, Beers’s campaign gathered momentum and eventually aroused the national conscience to act on behalf of people with mental illness.

Although he died in a psychiatric facility in a state of chronic depression at the age of 67, Beers’s legacy of advocacy lives on, for his Mental Hygiene Movement was the forerunner of some of the most influential mental health advocacy groups that exist today, including the National Mental Health Association and the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill. His condition at the time of his death and his positive legacy indicate that he was truly a tragic hero.

Lawrence Gerstein: Advocate for the Oppressed People of Tibet

Lawrence Gerstein is a professor of counseling psychology at Ball State University and a recipient of the Kitty Cole Human Rights Award, which “honors an ACA [American Counseling Association] member who has made significant contributions in one or more areas of the broad spectrum of human rights” (ACA, 1998, p. 5). Gerstein was honored by ACA at its 1999 national convention for his tireless advocacy work on behalf of the Tibetan people throughout the world.

Human rights violations in Tibet. Since the 1950s, the Peoples Republic of China (PRC) has controlled the nation of Tibet and committed cultural genocide, imprisonment, torture, and murder against the Tibetan people. Amnesty International has documented that countless Tibetans have either disappeared or been forced to work in slavery while producing goods sold for the economic benefit of the PRC.

As a result of these forms of inhumane treatment, The Dalai Lama, the spiritual and religious leader of Tibet, and thousands of his followers fled their native land in the late 1950s and early 1960s. (Reader’s note: Because Tibetan Buddhists consider The Dalai Lama and The Panchen Lama to be divine beings, Lawrence Gerstein requested that we capitalize the first letters of all nouns and pronouns referring to these individuals. Out of respect for the Tibetan Buddhists, we have honored this request.) Many others have continued to trickle out of Tibet over the past three decades, although the ability to leave Tibet has been greatly hampered by the PRC in recent years. The Dalai Lama and most of the refugees have been living in exile in India, although thousands of Tibetan refugees are scattered throughout the world.

Among the many atrocities committed against the Tibetan people was the abduction in 1995 of The Panchen Lama, who is considered the second most important spiritual leader of the Tibetan people. The Panchen Lama was a young boy at the time of his disappearance. His whereabouts are unknown and the PRC refuses to comment about his status.

Gerstein’s campaign to help the Tibetans. Since 1991, Gerstein has devoted himself to improving the condition of the Tibetan people through a multifaceted, international consciousness-raising campaign, which was originally named the Indiana Tibet Committee and is now known as the International Tibet Independence Movement (ITIM). A central focus of this campaign has been the promotion of independence for Tibet through a variety of nonviolent means.

The ITIM originally consisted of a small group of individuals, including Gerstein and Thubten Jigme Norbu, Professor Emeritus of Eurasian studies at Indiana University and the brother of The Dalai Lama. Initially, this organization focused its efforts in Indiana. In 1995, at the suggestion of Professor Norbu, the group decided to transform their successful local efforts into an international campaign. Gerstein has been the president of ITIM ever since and has been chiefly responsible for its many accomplishments.

During the 1995–1996 academic year, Gerstein took a sabbatical leave from Ball State University and traveled to India several times to meet with exiled Tibetan leaders to discuss their plight and to develop educational and counseling services for the refugees living in India. During these trips to India, Gerstein realized that ITIM must develop a massive campaign to inform the world about what had been seen and learned about the Tibetans. Consequently, over the past 6 years, Gerstein has organized several peaceful protest walks as a method of cultivating awareness about the intolerable conditions suffered by the Tibetan people. For example, in 1996 he engineered the March for Tibet’s Independence. This event was initiated in Washington, District of Columbia, and culminated several weeks later at The United Nations in New York City. During this march, Gerstein and a handful of Tibetans and their supporters visited numerous colleges and universities to conduct educational forums about the Tibetan situation. The event was covered by major television networks and newspapers in the northeastern United States as well as the campus newspapers of the educational institutions the marchers visited. Gerstein organized similar marches from Bloomington, Indiana, to Indianapolis in 1995; from Toronto to New York in 1997; and from Portland, Oregon, to Vancouver in 1998; each of which generated significant media coverage and educational forums about the plight of the Tibetans. In 2000 he organized two simultaneous walks with one starting in San Francisco, the other in San Diego, and both culminating at the Consulate of the PRC in Los Angeles, where the marchers and their supporters held a peaceful protest against the oppressive policies of the PRC toward the Tibetans.

In 1996, Gerstein took his human rights campaign to the Internet by establishing a Web site for ITIM at the site www.rangzen.com. This site provides worldwide access to information about the hardships of the Tibetan people and the activities of the ITIM. This Web site receives more than
130,000 hits a month from all over the world and generates hundreds of e-mail letters about the Tibetan situation to Gerstein each day. Gerstein has supervised the updating of the Web site, which includes daily reports about the status of walks that are in process, and he personally answers each e-mail letter sent to the ITIM site.

In related endeavors, Gerstein headed two major letter-writing campaigns through which he first, encouraged a boycott of goods sold by the PRC, and second, lobbied the U.S. government to take political action on behalf of the Tibetans, especially relating to the cause of locating and freeing the Panchen Lama. Through the Voice of America, Radio Free Asia, and the Voice of Tibet radio stations, Gerstein’s organization has also sponsored broadcasts of hope and encouragement to the Tibetans, who are under the iron rule of the PRC. Finally, Gerstein has been a key player in forging a coalition among representatives of Tibet, Eastern Turkistan, Southern Mongolia, and Taiwan, all of whom seek independence from the PRC. In support of this coalition, the ITIM cosponsored a walk in Taiwan to raise awareness about the mutual struggles and goals of these four nations.

The influence of the ITIM has spread to college campuses throughout the world. Hundreds of schools have formed chapters of Students for a Free Tibet, and their members have supported the initiatives of the ITIM by sponsoring consciousness-raising activities on their campuses and in their local communities. Gerstein has been an ever-available mentor to the leaders of these student organizations, providing them with advice, information, and encouragement regarding their activities.

Perhaps the most impressive aspect of Gerstein’s devotion to improving the status of the Tibetan people has been the selflessness permeating all of his efforts. He has spent thousands of dollars from his modest personal finances to support the human rights of a nation on the other side of the globe. He has marched through rain and snow across thousands of miles, often sick and with little food, motivated only by the hope that others might suffer less as a result of his efforts. Clearly, Gerstein sincerely believes that he is a member of the worldwide human family, and as such, that he has a responsibility to fight for the human rights of his persecuted and neglected brothers and sisters of Tibet. In short, he embodies the most noble values and practices espoused by the counseling profession: respecting and promoting the dignity of others, deeply appreciating the culturally different, empathically experiencing the pain of fellow human beings, and working as an activist for positive social change.

Other Examples of Advocacy Counseling

The impact of the social justice work of Clifford Beers and Lawrence Gerstein has been far-reaching and lasting. Clearly, their accomplishments represent unusual examples of what counselors can do to advocate on behalf of misunderstood, maltreated, and neglected populations. However, understandably not all counselors will have the time or energy to effect the type of massive movements achieved by Clifford Beers or Lawrence Gerstein. Yet, all counselors are capable of performing some type of social action work. To demonstrate the range of activities that fall within the domains of advocacy counseling, we decided to highlight other examples of advocacy counseling that occurred during the twentieth century. The examples listed here represent both greatly ambitious and more modest advocacy initiatives. An illustrative, rather than an exhaustive, list of key people and events is provided. This list, which was gleaned from Baker (1981, 2000), Kiselica (1995, 2000), Kiselica and Ramsey (2001), and Lee (1998a), includes contributions by sociologists and members of the clergy in addition to many counselors and psychologists:

1905: Du Bois, a sociologist, and a group of pioneering African American scholars and leaders met to discuss the issue of civil rights. This group, known as the Niagara Movement, eventually led to the formation of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1910. Until his death in 1963, Du Bois would challenge racism and champion civil rights. DuBois’s work continues to have a major impact on the scholarship of both counselors and psychologists.

1908: Parsons founded Boston’s Vocational Bureau whose purpose was to provide vocational guidance to out-of-school youth in the immigrant neighborhoods of the greater Boston area. Parsons was a tireless advocate for immigrant families. The model of vocational counseling he developed became the foundation on which modern career counseling is based.

1932: Sanchez challenged the validity of using culturally biased standardized intelligence tests with African Americans and Hispanics.

1930s: Horney challenged the psychoanalytic establishment to recognize the effects of a male-dominated society on the psychological well-being of women.

1940s: (and continuing throughout his life): Carl Rogers argued that the principles of psychology should be used to address the world’s social problems.

1963: Massimo and Shore attacked the problem of juvenile delinquency by making themselves available to disaffected youth at any time or in any place.

1966: Vontress used various social change strategies, such as talking to newspaper reporters, making television appearances, and meeting civic leaders, to widen the range of possibilities for students in a large urban school.
1971: “Counseling and Social Revolution,” a special issue of *The Personnel and Guidance Journal*, was published and featured articles recruiting counselors to join in the fight against social problems such as racism and sexism.

1976: In his book *Even the Rat Was White*, Guthrie confronted the White European bias permeating nearly all of the theories and research defining the discipline of psychology in the U.S. Menacker developed a theory of activist counseling emphasizing direct counseling and strategies for environmental and institutional change.

1977: Krumboltz and Peltier urged counselors to get out of their offices and conduct their services in the actual settings where client problems occur.

1978: Gunnings endorsed risk-oriented counseling that involves targeting policy makers whose decisions affect the well-being of others.

1987: The American Association for Counseling and Development published a position paper on human rights, which urged counselors to advocate for social change through personal, professional, and political activities.

1999: Special issues of the *Journal of Counseling & Development* (Robinson and Ginter, Editors) and *The Counseling Psychologist* (Heppner, Editor) were dedicated to racism and strategies for healing its harmful effects.

A coalition of professional organizations, including ACA and the American Psychological Association, published a booklet, *Just the Facts About Sexual Orientation & Youth*, advocating for an accurate understanding and supportive treatment of lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth.

Counselors for Social Justice, a division of ACA, was formed. This organization promotes individual and collective social responsibility and the eradication of oppressive systems of power and privilege through the development and implementation of social action strategies.

2000: The March issue of the *American Psychologist* featured an article by the Reverend Jesse Jackson, who urged mental health professionals to be instruments of social change.

These examples indicate that social action work is an established tradition in counseling. The influence and popularity of recent publications, such as *Social Action: A Mandate for Counselors* (Lee & Walz, 1998) and *Advocacy in Counseling: Counselors, Clients, & Community* (Lewis & Bradley, 2000), and the advocacy theme initiatives of 1999 ACA President Loretta Bradley, indicate that advocacy counseling will remain an important movement in the profession during the twenty-first century. In light of this trend, a consideration of the counselor attributes, skills, costs, pitfalls, rewards, and ethical issues associated with advocacy counseling is timely.

**Counselor Attributes and Skills Required for Advocacy Counseling**

Taking on the urgent social issues of our time is demanding work that requires certain counselor attributes and a multitude of skills including the following: the capacity for commitment and an appreciation for human suffering; nonverbal and verbal communications skills; the ability to maintain a multisystems perspective and to use individual, group, and organizational change strategies; knowledge and use of the media, technology, and the Internet; and assessment and research skills.

**The Capacity for Commitment and an Appreciation for Human Suffering**

Raising awareness about the needs of neglected populations and fighting for the civil rights of exploited people are profound human experiences that require counselors to be committed humanitarians. According to Gerstein (personal interview, March 17, 2000),

> Advocacy counselors must have an appreciation for suffering and a desire to alleviate that suffering. They must have compassion, sensitivity, and empathy for their clients, and they must be committed to improving the circumstances and enhancing the growth of their clients.

Counselors who have these qualities will be well suited to using other helping skills required for social justice work.

**Nonverbal and Verbal Communication Skills**

Because training in nonverbal and verbal microskills of counseling is standard throughout the profession, most counselors have excellent communication skills that can be applied in advocacy counseling in two ways. First, counselors can use their communication skills to listen, understand, and respond empathically to clients who are the victims of serious social problems. Second, when counselors act as advocates for their clients, they must communicate effectively with the power brokers who have the authority and resources to improve the life circumstances of clients (Kiselica, 1995, 2000; Kiselica & Pfaller, 1993).

**Maintaining a Multisystems Perspective**

Complicated social problems, such as teen parenthood, homophobia, and domestic violence, are the result of a complex interaction of forces originating from the many
different systems influencing a client’s life. Consequently, to be an effective change agent, the counselor must consider these different systems and their respective contributions to a client’s problems. For example, the transition to parenthood for an adolescent father tends to be influenced by the young man’s personality (the intrapsychic system), his immediate and extended family (the family system), his socioeconomic status and job prospects (the economic system), his educational opportunities (the educational system), and the social community in which he resides (the cultural system). Counselors who hope to intervene effectively with adolescent fathers must understand how each of these systems affects a teen father’s route to parenthood and develop interventions that target each of these systems (Kiselica, 1995, 1999b).

**Individual, Group, and Organizational Interventions**

Because advocacy counseling involves intervening with individuals, groups, and many systems, counselors must be adept at using individual, group, and organizational interventions to maximize the effectiveness of their counseling.

*Individual interventions.* Individual counseling skills are necessary to engage, understand, and support the client throughout the process of negotiating with the various systems influencing the client’s life (Kiselica, 1995). Although groups and organizations will be targeted, personal issues of the client must be addressed through individual interventions. For example, although counselors assisting gay and lesbian clients are urged to confront homophobia through the provision of educational forums about gay and lesbian populations in the community (Barret, 1998), counselors must be prepared to help their clients in individual counseling with the “coming out process,” which involves revealing one’s homosexuality to family, friends, and others (Gluth & Kiselica, 1994).

*Group interventions.* Advocacy counselors often have to reach out to groups who have the power to effect positive changes in a client’s life. Therefore, advocacy counselors must understand group change processes, group psychoeducational strategies, and group counseling interventions and apply them in social action initiatives. For example, in an effort to expand the opportunities of inner-city children, Vontress (1966) realized that the long-term educational and career adjustment of the children hinged on decisions made by the children’s families, their school system, the local employment sector, and the media. So, Vontress devised a multifaceted intervention that included not only individual work with students but special outreach strategies targeting several groups, including the students’ families, the local school board, business and community leaders, and various types of reporters. His activities with these groups resulted in a strong school–community partnership dedicated to helping youth in the community.

*Organizational interventions.* Counselors sometimes must strive to change organizations whose practices and policies impede the development of clients. In support of this view, Dinsmore, Chapman, and McCollum (2000) suggested that counselors use the following organizational interventions:

1. **Facilitate client access to information provided by institutions.** When an institution does a poor job of disseminating information that is critical to a client’s well-being, counselors must challenge the institution to provide the clients with easier access to this information.
2. **Serve as a mediator between clients and institutions.** When a client reaches an impasse with an institution over some issue, the counselor should act as a mediator between the client and the institution in an effort to resolve the impasse.
3. **Negotiate with outside agencies and institutions to provide better services for clients.** Counselors must attempt to convince agencies and institutions about the services that their clients need.
4. **Influence policy makers through educational lobbying efforts.** When it is clear that sweeping policy changes are needed, counselors must lobby to effect those changes.
5. **Direct complaints about inadequate services or oppressive policies to funding agencies.** Funding agencies should be informed when institutions serve clients poorly or perform practices that harm clients.

**Knowledge and Use of the Media, Technology, and the Internet**

Advocacy work is often associated with social causes, the success of which depend on the ability of activists to publicize their activities and reach out to a broad spectrum of people. To achieve a wide impact, many activists have used the media, technology, and the Internet to spread the word about important social issues. For example, Gerstein and the ITIM have used desktop publishing to produce relatively inexpensive cards, letters, bumper stickers, and posters bearing the logo of the ITIM to advertise and communicate with others about the activities of the ITIM. The Web site of ITIM contains information about Tibet, historical archives of the ITIM, and announcements regarding current ITIM-sponsored events. Combined with the letter-writing campaigns of the ITIM, these forms of communication have captured the attention of many curious print and electronic reporters who have produced paper and electronic newspaper and magazine articles and radio and television news features regarding the ITIM’s quest to help the Tibetans. The Internet has been an especially powerful tool of the ITIM; their Web site will receive over a million visits from people around the world this year.

Gerstein’s skillful use of the World Wide Web illustrates the many benefits of Internet use for advocacy counselors. According to Sampson (1998), counselors can use the Internet to do the following:

1. Market counseling services
2. Access on-line audio- and video-based help
3. Deliver multimedia-based assessment and information resources that match the ethnicity, age, and sex of the user
4. Reach clients who have transportation difficulties or live in geographically remote areas
5. Improve client access to self-help groups
6. Supplement traditional face-to-face counselor supervision with long-distance, electronic supervision
7. Expand opportunities for communication among counselors.

**Assessment and Research Skills**

Counselors can use their assessment and research skills to evaluate their advocacy initiatives. For example, Vacc (1998) pointed out that part of the task of addressing social problems is to conduct continuous assessment of progress within the context of the client's social environment. Ongoing evaluation will help to determine if advocacy strategies are actually helping an individual client or not. According to Sexton and Whiston (1998), examining the clinical utility of advocacy counseling interventions through large-scale empirical research investigations will provide the profession with knowledge about what forms of activism are effective, in which specific settings, and with which particular populations. For example, research evaluating the effectiveness of prejudice prevention and diversity appreciation training has suggested that both forms of education seem to reduce prejudice with students enrolled in counselor education programs (see Kiselica, Maben, & Locke, 1999).

Counseling research findings and strategies can be used to advance social causes in other ways. Sedlacek (1998) recommended that advocacy counselors use case studies to provide clients with ideas for handling their problems. For example, counselors can use case examples to teach welfare recipients how to handle prejudice that is directed toward them. Sedlacek also recommended that counselors develop research agendas that raise awareness about important social issues (e.g., investigating psychosocial issues pertaining to AIDS) and produce findings that can become the basis for social policy. Similarly, Sexton and Whiston (1998) stated,

As agents of social action, professional counselors can use their research findings to advocate credibly for counseling services with third-party payers, school administrators, local civic groups, both federal and state governments, and other potential clients. As social activists, professional counselors need to inform insurance organizations of the effectiveness of counseling. Furthermore, we need to educate the public about the substantial research base that supports counseling so that people will demand that these services be included in their benefit packages. (p. 245)

**THE COSTS AND PITFALLS OF ADVOCACY COUNSELING**

Serving as an advocate for others can be costly to the counselor, especially if the counselor does not avoid some dangerous pitfalls. There is often a high price to pay for being an activist, including feeling emotionally drained, being viewed as a troublemaker, placing your job in jeopardy, and becoming the target of backlash from colleagues at work or of harassment from intolerant individuals (Dinsmore et al., 2000). Here is a real-life example of the burdens associated with advocacy work.

As I became more involved in our organization to help the Tibetans, I found it increasingly difficult to relax. I don't allow myself too much time off from my advocacy work because the plight of the Tibetans is ever present on my mind. Often when I am having a good time, I think about the thousands of Tibetan Buddhists who have been imprisoned or have disappeared and I then wonder, "What else could I be doing to help them?" I've also found that, as the work of our organization has gained international attention, I am constantly asked by people outside of our organization to write them, talk with them, and visit them. So, I am always asked to do more. . . . I've also sacrificed my private life. Officials of the PRC have photographed me and are probably recording my movements and activities, which has me somewhat uneasy. I've received hate mail and threatening phone messages from people who are not sympathetic to the Tibetan cause. It's scary sometimes, but I don't let it deter me from my work. (L. Gerstein, personal communication, March 17, 2000)

The pitfalls that can contribute to backlash and cause other types of trouble for counselors include vehemently attacking a system as an outsider of that system, lacking patience, and eschewing diplomacy (Baker, 1981). For example, during the 1967–1968 school year, a counselor by the name of Zander Ponzo attempted to initiate some drastic changes at a public school named Lincoln High School. During his first year of employment at Lincoln, Ponzo conducted some unorthodox counseling practices (e.g., he thought that it was appropriate to comfort a distraught female student by holding her in his arms while she cried) and he pushed the school administration to support a student proposal for a "Negro History Week." The rapid pace and the inflexible manner with which he introduced new ideas got him labeled a "troublemaker" and his job was in jeopardy. Although he was eventually offered a contract for the next year, Ponzo was disturbed by what had happened at Lincoln and he opted to take a job elsewhere (Ponzo, 1974).

Several years later, Ponzo (1974) shared the following reflections about the mistakes he made in his radical attempts to shake up the system at Lincoln:

For a host of reasons, systems . . . tend to resist change. The strength of this resistance is dependent on the system's awareness of its need to change, its confidence in its ability to change, and its perception of the entity that proposes to bring the change about. It is prudent as well as necessary for a change agent to consider these factors as part of the change process. In Lincoln I attempted to bring about change without considering these factors I barged in as if I were asked, wanted, and trusted. I failed to recognize that my 'client' was very security conscious and had its borders well guarded. I failed to recognize that I was an outsider looking in. I failed to recognize that much of my behavior created additional barriers to change rather than removing existing ones. (pp. 29-30)

Ponzo (1974) stated that he would change his strategies if he had the opportunity to relive his experiences at Lin-
coln. "I left [Lincoln] because my naive romanticism had scorched too many, and I am left knowing that, though it might have been less exciting, with greater wisdom more change could have come about in Lincoln" (p. 32). Ponzo recommended the following strategies for all advocacy counselors who hope to avoid the pitfalls of overzealousness and blind idealism:

1. Be flexible and compromise: To persuade others to change, counselors must demonstrate openness and flexibility and model their own willingness to change and compromise.

2. Understand oneself: Although a counselor's personality can be a powerful tool for initiating social action, it can be administered in ways that are too strong. Counselors should be aware of the impact of their personality on others and adjust their style so that they can be effective change agents.

3. Understand others: Develop a facilitative relationship with the system. Help the people in the system to trust you by demonstrating empathy, warmth, concreteness, and understanding.

4. Let the system teach you: Learn how the established system operates and use this knowledge to bring about lasting change.

5. Set realistic goals: Groups intent on social change often accomplish little by being fanatical and setting unachievable goals. Plan short- and long-term goals that are attainable.

(1974, pp. 29–32)

LEGAL AND ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Sometimes state and federal laws compel counselors to work as advocates. For example, from a legal perspective, any professional who learns that a child is being physically or sexually abused must serve as an advocate for the child by reporting the abuser to the appropriate child protection agency of the state (Collison et al., 1998). Moreover, the counselor should provide the child with support and guidance during the frightening period when child protection authorities investigate the charges, because such investigations may prompt the alleged abuser to retaliate against the child in some way or could result in the child’s removal from the home or the arrest of family members (Baker, 2000). The duty of the counselor in these difficult situations is to do as much as possible to assure that the process is handled in a manner least harmful to the child.

In other circumstances, ethical standards demand that counselors take on an advocacy role for clients. For example, if a counselor witnesses another professional exploiting or harming a client in some way, then the counselor has an ethical obligation to act on the client’s behalf to confront the offending professional and, if necessary, to report the offending professional’s behavior to the ethical review boards of professional associations and state licensing authorities (Collison et al., 1998).

An implication of other ethical standards is that advocacy counselors must refrain from getting carried away during activist activities. Sometimes in the heat of drawn-out and intense battles over social issues, professionals may be tempted to exaggerate claims about some problem in an overzealous effort to raise awareness about the problem. Doing so is a form of unethical behavior because counselors have a professional obligation to provide accurate information (ACA, 1997). Therefore, advocacy counselors must always strive to provide accurate information about the people and causes they represent (L. Gerstein, personal communication, March 17, 2000). Also, because counselors are required by ethical considerations to know their professional limitations (ACA, 1997), it is crucial that advocacy counselors avoid promises that they cannot keep (L. Gerstein, personal communication, March 17, 2000).

THE REWARDS OF ADVOCACY COUNSELING

Although social activism can be taxing work, it also can be a source of invaluable rewards. Counselors who are successful advocates report a high degree of personal satisfaction knowing that they have helped their fellow human beings (Kiselica, 1991, 1998, 1999a). In addition, advocacy counselors experience personal growth by working with and learning important lessons from, their clients (Kiselica, 1991, 1999a, 1999d), as is illustrated by the following reflection:

I’ve learned some valuable lessons from the Tibetan Buddhists about living a simpler, kinder, and more compassionate life. Through the joy of singing with the Tibetans, sharing their food, dancing with them, and walking with them during our many campaigns, I’ve discovered a people who are pure in their motivations and are not trapped in the materialistic, self-centered, and competitive norms of the United States. I’ve witnessed how the Tibetans have devoted themselves to assisting all suffering people—not just Tibetans. As a result, I’ve learned not to be so self-absorbed. And through my work with and for the Tibetans, I’ve been allowed to apply my spiritual beliefs and my academic training in real life contexts while addressing important human rights issues. Consequently, my personal and professional lives have become intertwined in a very meaningful way.

(L. Gerstein, personal communication, March 17, 2000)

Clearly, the rewards of being a humanitarian can make the more painful aspects of social justice work tolerable.

REEXAMINING PROFESSIONAL CONSTRAINTS

Social justice work calls for unconventional approaches to counseling. For example, Kiselica (1995, 1999b) recommends that counselors working with teen fathers consider meeting clients in recreational centers or the streets where young men hang out and conducting counseling sessions in situations where young men are comfortable talking, such as in a restaurant, the young man’s home, or a public park. Engaging in these forms of counseling goes against the grain of standard conceptions about boundaries in the client-counselor relationship. As Lazarus (1990, 1995) has pointed out, most mental health practitioners are trained to main-
tain a high degree of professional distance from their clients in order to maintain their objectivity about their client's problems. Furthermore, the ethical standards used in counseling, psychology, psychiatry, and social work discourage practitioners from developing dual relationships with clients, that is, from having a personal and a professional relationship with a client at the same time. Although these conventions of clinical practice certainly have many merits, such as preventing the exploitation of clients, Lazarus and other prominent leaders of the mental health professions, such as Boyd-Franklin (1989) and Sue (1997), and organizers of highly acclaimed, successful community-based, service programs for adolescents, such as Carrera (1992), have questioned the strict interpretations of, and adherence to, these conventions. For example, Lazarus (1990, 1995) has argued that rigid boundaries between the counselor and the client sometimes have the effect of shackling the humanity of the counselor, and consequently, impair the client-counselor relationship. Similarly, Boyd-Franklin and Sue have noted that the standard way of conducting psychotherapy creates such a distance between the client and the practitioner that some populations, such as impoverished African Americans in inner cities, consider counseling and psychotherapy to be a strange and foreign endeavor that should be avoided. Carrera urged that traditional service programs, which are viewed by many impoverished clients as lacking heart, must be replaced by programs in which the counselors are highly involved in, and responsive to, the lives of clients. In light of these considerations, counselors are urged to reexamine how rigidly they interpret concepts such as client-counselor boundaries and dual relationships.

Although it is appropriate to question strict and outdated conceptions of client-counselor boundaries, it is also prudent to recognize that counselors must carefully define the boundaries of their relationships with clients, even when counselors may take on a more involved role than is traditionally the case. Furthermore, advocacy counselors must adjust relationship boundaries with clients according to clinical considerations pertaining to the client. For example, Lazarus and Lazarus (1998) warned professionals to refrain from placing themselves in potentially inappropriate, if not dangerous, situations with clients who have difficulty maintaining healthy boundaries with others, which is typically the case with clients who, for example, have borderline and antisocial personality disorders. So, with each client, the counselor must determine the appropriate boundaries to establish in order to create a therapeutic relationship.

**Finding a Personal Moral Imperative and a Personal Advocacy Style**

This article has highlighted the great variety of social action work that is done by counselors and the difficulties, dilemmas, and joys that are a part of that work. Choosing some social problem to address and identifying one's own style of social action are matters of the heart and mind that each professional must entertain before he or she becomes an agent for change. Perhaps the most important step we all must take in advocacy work is to look deep within ourselves and try to discover what forms of human suffering really move us to the point that we want to get up and fight—each of us in our own unique way—for other human beings. A further glimpse into the lives and the work of Clifford Beers and Lawrence Gerstein illustrates how the desire to champion the plight of oppressed, misunderstood, and neglected people is born.

Clifford Beers knew all too well from his own living nightmare the misery that psychiatric patients experience. He recognized that nothing could justify the brutality he had suffered, and he resolved to reform the psychiatric institutions of the United States to prevent others from suffering in the same way. During the last days of his confinement, Beers stated, "I have decided to devote the next few years of my life to correcting abuses now in existence in every asylum in the country" (Beers, 1908/1956, pp. 198–199). After he was finally discharged from the hospital, Beers remained determined to help those who were committed to the horrible asylums for the insane:

After becoming a free man, my mind would not abandon the miserable ones whom I had left behind. . . . Without malice toward those who had had me in their charge, I yet looked with abhorrence upon the system by which I had been treated. . . . But I knew that . . . after securing a position in the business world, I could hope to persuade others to join me in prosecuting the reforms I had at heart. (p. 212)

Beers saw to it that his hopes became a reality with the publication of his book *A Mind That Found Itself*, which he used as the launching pad for a massive campaign to help people with mental illness throughout the world:

This book was neither conceived nor written as an entertaining story; it was intended to serve as the opening gun in a permanent campaign for improvement in the care and treatment of mental sufferers, and the prevention, whenever possible, of mental illness itself. It was not conceived as an end in itself, but rather as the beginning—the first step . . . of the Mental Hygiene Movement. (p. 255)

In summary, Beers used his own, painful experiences as a motivating force to spend the rest of his life advocating for people with mental illness and changed the attitudes of a nation in the process.

Whereas Clifford Beers's advocacy strivings were motivated by his own nightmare, Lawrence Gerstein was moved to work so extensively for the Tibetans by his empathy for their plight, an empathy that was born in a sociocultural context that fostered a broad concern for exploited and oppressed people. Gerstein explained the origins of this empathy:

I was raised in a family that was always concerned about the difficult life circumstances of oppressed people. Throughout the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, many of my immediate and extended family members were union organizers representing laborers who were exploited by businesses and industry in the New York City area. My aunt was an activist for the women's rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s. At family gatherings, we often discussed the plight of African American, Cuban American, Puerto
Rican American, and Eastern European immigrants to the U.S., as well as the persecution of Jews in the Soviet Union and Europe. I relished these passionate family discussions about social issues, and they sparked my awareness about social justice and activism and my interest in other cultures. The culturally diverse community in Brooklyn where I was raised and the social reformist spirit of the 1960s raised my consciousness about fighting inequality and injustice even further. All of these forces created a strong desire in me to help others, which is one of the major reasons I decided to become a counselor. (L. Gerstein, personal interview, March 17, 2000)

Throughout college and graduate school, Gerstein became interested in Eastern cultures and the relationship among counseling, psychology, and Zen Buddhism. Because the nation of Tibet was a famed center for Buddhism, Gerstein learned about the history of Tibet, including the 1950 invasion and subsequent suppression of Tibet by the PRC, through his studies of Buddhism:

When I learned what the PRC did to the Tibetans I was appalled! Prior to 1950, Tibet was ruled by a peaceful theocracy encompassed by Tibetan Buddhism and the Tibetan language. But in 1950 the communist Chinese occupied Tibet and forcibly attempted to remake Tibetan society. They confiscated the property of the nobility and the Buddhist church, collectivized the agrarian economy of the country, and completely suppressed the public practice of Buddhism. In 1959, the religious and political leader of the Tibetan people, The Dalai Lama, fled to India where He was granted political asylum and remains in exile. Although many of His followers also fled to India, thousands of others remained in Tibet under the iron rule of the PRC. Countless numbers of those who remained in Tibet disappeared, were murdered, or were imprisoned. Today, the PRC continues to practice cultural genocide and inhumane treatment of Tibetan natives. When I realized that the Tibetan culture was on the verge of being wiped out by the PRC, I decided that I had to do something to try and assist the Tibetans. (Lawrence Gerstein, personal interview, March 17, 2000)

In summary, Gerstein was so touched and inspired by the tormented yet peace-loving existence of the Tibetan people that he launched an international campaign to champion their cause.

The overarching point of these anecdotes about Clifford Beers and Lawrence Gerstein is to urge counselors to identify some human condition that moves them so deeply that it inspires a personal moral imperative to make this world a better place by advocating for others in a manner that suits their personality. We are convinced that it is not possible for us as counselors to engage in genuine social action unless we discover such a personal moral imperative to serve as the driving force behind our work. In the absence of that force, our efforts will be superficial, we will not be willing to stick our necks out time and time again, we will not have the emotional fortitude to persistently confront the establishment, and the clients we attempt to serve and the power brokers we attempt to influence will sense our half-hearted efforts and call our bluff. By comparison, a moral imperative provides the inspiration enabling those of us in the counseling profession to "move mountains" and to experience all of the accompanying joys and rewards. For some of us, the reward may be seeing just one person live a more fulfilling and happy life. For others, the reward may be realizing that we have worked to free an entire nation. At both extremes, and for all of the advocacy efforts that fall between the two, perhaps we can be guided in our work by the words of Francis de Sales (LaFort, 1909), who stated,

We shall steer safely through every storm, so long as our heart is right, our intention fervent, our courage steadfast, and our trust fixed on God. If at times we are somewhat stunned by the tempest, never, never fear. Let us take breath, and go on afresh. (p. 527)

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