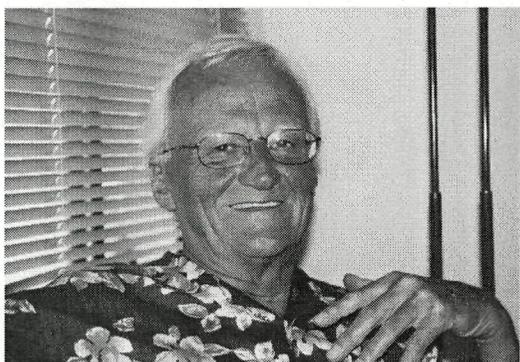


A CONVERSATION WITH DENNIS SALEEBEY

Jillian Jimenez, Ph.D.

Dennis Saleebey, DSW, is professor of Social Welfare at the School of Social Welfare, University of Kansas. One of his primary interests has been the development of a more strengths-based approach to social work practice. For the past 20 years he has been involved in a number of community building and community outreach projects in Fort Worth, Texas, Kansas City, Missouri, and Kansas City, Kansas. He has written widely and made many presentations nationally and internationally to a variety of social work and human service groups. He is the author and editor of the third edition of The Strengths Perspective in Social Work Practice (2002, Longman/Allyn & Bacon). His book, Human Behavior and Social Environments: A Biopsychosocial Approach, was published by Columbia University Press in 2001.



On August 12, 2003, I sat down with Dennis Saleebey in San Diego California to have a conversation about the path his intellectual life has taken him.

JJ Tell me about the path you've taken to come to where you are, beginning with your undergraduate education

DS I guess I probably wasn't as serious about my undergraduate education as I should have been. I think in the last year I became more serious because I was going to be eligible for the draft. Given the need to postpone the draft for a while, my senior advisor asked, "Have you thought about social work? UCLA has a new graduate program in social work." This is so embarrassing; at that point I didn't know what social work was. So he explained to me what it was. I was accepted to the program and went to UCLA. For me, it

was an amazing experience. I was still a little immature, but it was a good time, and there were a lot of interesting people. One of the most interesting was Martin Loeb. From him I learned the importance of being critical of conventional wisdom. I also was taught about human behavior and psychopathology by psychiatrists and psychoanalysts, and that was intriguing to me.

When I graduated, I was still eligible for the draft but I found out that I could apply to be a social work officer in the Air Force, so I did that.

JJ What did you do as a social worker in the Air Force?

DS I worked in the largest Air Force hospital in the psychiatric ward, inpatient and outpatient. One of the things I found out, quickly, was that some of the things I had learned about psychopathology in graduate school weren't very useful. On the other hand, I learned a lot from experienced social work technicians—they had a much more practical, contextual idea about what was going on in a person's life. I realized that practice, and human troubles were a lot more complicated than I was led to believe.

JJ So the template didn't fit everyone?

DS Right. After four years in the Air Force I was accepted to the DSW program at Cal Berkeley. It was the first year of the Free Speech movement. I was just coming out of the Air Force and this was a very different experience and sense of things. Exciting though. I remember standing at a big rally listening to speakers and this young woman standing next to me asked "What do you think about all this?" I confessed my uncertainty. She proceeded to tell me a lot about the movement, about how institutionalized power and what she called the canon had suppressed other views. It turned out to be Bettina Aptheker!

I was lucky to have a fellowship so I spent a lot of time in the library—I actually did lose myself in the stacks a couple of times—I mean I really couldn't get out!

The experience there was so rich. I remember I sneaked into a couple of Erving Goffman's courses (I wasn't enrolled). He talked about human experience in a way that I had never imagined. Interesting—he did this with the lights down low—the word was that he didn't want to be stared at. Jim Leiby was a history professor at the School of Social Welfare. He taught us so much about scholarship, and how to put things together, how to take notes, how to make an argument and how to write about it. I had the opportunity to explore a lot of things that I don't think that doctoral students have these days. Although I had a family, I had this small scholarship from NIMH (all you had to do to get that was to promise to say the words "mental health" when you graduated) and that helped a lot.

JJ What happened after Berkeley?

DS I was looking for a job, I hadn't finished my dissertation and at that point we had 3 little kids and the only place I could find work was the University of Maine. I went there. I was to replace John

Romanyshyn who was going to start another program in Portland. He died this past year. He was a miraculous teacher. I regard him as a mentor. He was a major influence on me because of the way he approached teaching. He took it seriously. He never underestimated students' intelligence and he was able to tie what he was teaching into what was happening in the world—to show its relevance. He also was critical of canonical knowledge and convention when it was oppressive. He was a terrific guy.

It was also at Maine that I learned the virtue of having to work your ass off. I ran the whole program there. And it was also at Maine that I came across Ernest Becker's *The Structure of Evil*. It is, I think, still the best integration of social science and philosophy that has ever been done. His idea was that, given the state of knowledge, we could now have a value-centered theory of human nature. He went underneath the way things were usually presented. Of course I wanted to share it with everybody and people would give the book back to me, and it was clear that they hadn't read it. It was at Berkeley where I first came across Ernest Becker's writing—*The Birth and Death of Meaning* was the first. He actually was a visiting professor there for a year. He taught one course—I think on primitive religion—but by the middle of the course there were 1000 students in the class or wanting to get into the class—the word had spread on how this course addressed basic human concerns. The students wanted to hire him and offered to pay his salary when the University said there was no money.

JJ Every teacher's dream.

DS He became my intellectual hero.

I then went to Texas, the University of Texas at Arlington primarily because I

couldn't make a living at Maine. By that time we had four little kids. It was a new school; the Dean wanted to hire people who he thought could go down the tenure path, so I was one of many brought in. I did get tenure and finished my dissertation there. But something else happened there—slowly. Some of my colleagues, who were friends, had this dedication to the scientific view of the nature of social work—I don't know why exactly, but I railed against that. It seemed to beggar the richness of human experience. So my first writing (and it was a long time coming) was to examine other ways of thinking about what it is that social workers do.

Much of the stuff I wrote first I like the best because I was just doing it out of my own concerns, predilections—it's also highly personal, because I guess everything we write is personal, even though we act like it isn't. I was reacting against something—against the way some people approached the nature of inquiry.

During this period I got a letter from Ann Weick. She was on sabbatical in Berkeley, and she wrote, "I saw an article you wrote, and that's an article I wanted to write." And so I started to correspond with her and she told me that some people were forming this group to examine the philosophy of social work and alternate ways of knowing. Roberta Imre is the one who actually brought this group together.

JJ Which article was it that she commented on?

DS *The Tension Between Research and Practice: The Experimental Paradigm.*

At one point she said this philosophical group was meeting in New York, and would I like to come? I couldn't because my wife was sick, struggling with leukemia.

But I kept up with what they were doing, what they were thinking. They were trying to move beyond structuralism and positivism and looking at other ways of knowing and other ways of doing and the possibilities for that.

Later, Ann had that group meet up at Kansas and she invited me up to join them. This was after my wife died. I went and it was just sheer fun, sitting around and talking about these things. Through a lot of luck and opportunity, I came to Kansas shortly thereafter.

It was a major professional and personal move. Had I not made that move, I don't know what I would have done. I'm sure I would not have done many of the things I have done at KU. I was very comfortable at Arlington. I'm not sure what I would have done there. I would be interested to know.

Three streams of interest developed at Kansas. One is I was introduced to the strengths model of case management. As part of my duties of a new faculty member I had to organize a conference. Charlie Rapp and Ann (who was acting dean then) suggested that I invite people from around the country to attend a seminar on the strengths perspective. So that spring we had a small seminar, with people presenting papers. Some of those papers were the beginning of the development of the strengths book.

JJ Were you the first person to bring the strengths perspective to Social Work?

DS No. There was a very strong model at the school already and as I said, that was the strengths model of case management in mental health. I think the only thing that I did, and it was not just me, was to move it out and to expand it a bit into other areas and other ways of thinking about it. I'm standing on the ideas and

practices of other people's work: Charlie Rapp for the case management model; Ann Weick helped develop a theoretical, conceptual basis for it. The one who brought it to the school was a doctoral student who had been a long time practitioner, Ronna Chamberlain. She and Charlie worked together—they got a small grant to try this at a community mental health center. That was the first strengths practice setting.

JJ This perspective is consonant with your looking at ways of knowing beyond logical positivism. Were they connected in your mind?

DS It was consonant with it, that's true. My interest didn't really start there—it was accidental. Although before I got to Kansas I had been involved for a number of years with a street minister and group that supported activities helping "street kids," called the Bridge association, and they practiced the strengths perspective although they didn't call it that. Through work with this minister, kids developed their own program to deal with their situation and eventually got a million dollar CDBG grant to develop a shelter and they did it capitalizing on their strengths. That was a very important experience, though I wouldn't have said the word strengths.

JJ Where would you say the strengths perspective is now, would you say that it is a competitor to the diagnostic perspective or do you think it is still a leitmotiv?

DS I think it is getting stronger and stronger, at least in social work it is, because it has a lot of roots in social work—group work, the functional school and other various influences. It is also rooted in the Social Gospel movement and transcendentalism and so forth. But it is getting stronger in social work.

JJ Do you think there will ever be a strengths assessment that will replace DSM?

DS There is something coming out next year called, I believe, Values Infused Assessment—psychologists are doing it—it's a list of virtues. We've talked about developing a strengths assessment—Charlie and others did it in case management. We've done it in communities a little. What we really need is a lexicon. We need to have examples of what strengths are. If you ask people to sit down and list everything that's wrong with them, it's easy. If you say I'd like you to do the same with your strengths—talents, resources, capacities you have—people are often embarrassed and don't know what to do.

JJ We don't have a way of piercing reality that allows us to distinguish the good, that's what you are saying in the strengths book. We only have a way of piercing the chaotic flow by finding negative categories, not positive categories, except for simplistic ones like "hero," or this is a "just war." Is the strengths perspective radical or conservative? From one point of view it seems radical because it implies equality rather than hierarchical, leveling the playing field between helper and client. On the other hand, one way to use the strengths perspective is to justify people's ability to survive bad situations, like poverty, and therefore reduce the need for change.

DS That's the way conservatives would use the whole notion. But that is a misunderstanding of what the strengths perspective is. The strengths perspective doesn't say you just leave people alone to their own devices, the strengths perspective suggests a lot of people have had difficulty because of oppression, circumstances

whatever. You use the capacities, the inherent wisdom that they have. You just don't easily do that and it doesn't mean that you're saying that poverty is not a real thing.

JJ But are you helping them to adjust to their situation? Is there anything in it that would help people change a situation in terms of social action?

DS Much of social praxis is strengths based—it can't be otherwise—how else could you do it?

Another thing in my Kansas experience has been involvement in community programs. We tried to be strengths based, but a lot of people in communities didn't discover their strengths until they discovered something important to them, doing something that was important in the life of the community, then they realized some of their strengths.

Kids who are abused for example, some people say, well why do they need us, they did well by themselves. That's not the point, they didn't do well just by themselves, there's always somebody who stepped in, there's always circumstances, community resources that helped and provided support.

JJ So what do they need us for?

DS They may not need us, but they could use us to help marshal some of those resources, inner and outer.

JJ Would you say that the strengths perspective is more an attitude rather than an intellectually based theory?

DS I don't think it's a theory. I am not even sure from a constructionist point of view what a theory is.

JJ Well let's say heuristically that a theory is something that's complicated, and seeks to explain something. I was thinking that strengths perspective has so much humanity, a little bit of common sense and so much resonance for our history and that actually it has more to do with our values than with a fully explicated set of theorems.

DS It's not fully explicated. But I do think besides the values, that it creates universal concepts and ideas, very strong and elaborated. The whole notion of hope, promise, and positive expectations—the strengths perspective has really expanded these ideas. As a matter of fact in psychology now there is a positive psychology movement, which they think they invented, and there is also a lot research on hope now. The strengths perspective has I think been helpful in extending these ideas. The strengths perspective has also been helpful in the whole idea of empowerment, which is hackneyed at best; it has really gotten a lift from the people who have been writing about the strengths perspective—you really have some sense now of what you mean by empowerment.

JJ It's much more contextual than just saying empowerment.

One reason I ask the question is a lot of times people in social work feel like step children and they want something that sounds like it has much more certitude, is more complex and seemingly scientific, as you know from your work with the epistemological group. So if the strengths perspective sounds like just social work values that will be a deterrent for some people accepting it.

DS But if they read it, it's clear that it isn't just that. I have been getting more involved in the post positivist, social constructionist, social critical point of view, and

understanding of what's happening there. It provides a whole different way of thinking and acting and doing. It also makes clear that any perspective is grounded in the language and standpoints of the various people promoting and practicing it. That kind of social constructionist thinking has been really important to me and people like Kenneth Gergen, Jerome Bruner, Joan Laird and Ann Hartman, Stan Witkin, and Ann Weick who talk and write about it.

JJ Part of the appeal of this approach is that it seems right and correct, although you have to double think yourself when you say that, but also that it's really like being a graduate student again to think about these things. Mostly in academia people don't have these kind of conversations. It must have been very enriching and enlivening for you to go back to the beginning with other people and talk about the fundamentals of knowing and understanding.

DS It is extremely energizing. For the past three years Stan Witkin and I have held a conference in Vermont. Actually, it's not a conference it's an unconference. There's room for 40 people. We just come for 3 days and talk about issues. There are no presentations, but we address questions like "What would academia look like if it was really based on these kind of, say, constructionist, ideas, instead of the idea of the search for ultimate truth?" We also always manage to do things together. A group of people might go leaf peeping, another group may go canoeing. It's another way to get to know each other and to talk about ideas.

JJ An intellectual camp.

DS Yes, and we try to have fun and we try to have a variety of people—Ph.D. students, practitioners as well as academics.

We have it at a retreat on Lake Champlain. Several of us are trying to put together a book about the experience. We asked people to write something about how the experience has affected them personally or how it has changed them. About 15 people are writing pieces about this.

JJ What do you think the impact of postmodernism has been on your thinking?

DS Well, I'm not actually sure what postmodernism is, because so much has been thrown in the hopper together but it has been very influential—it makes so much sense—as Max Weber said, it has *Verstehen*—it seems to have resonance to human development. And the people I read in this area speak to my mind and my heart in a way that others do not.

I haven't abandoned the idea of those other ways of knowing that would include counting and more formulaic approaches, there are some really interesting things happening there. I have been teaching a course on the brain and behavior and so-called psychopathology for years and trying to add strengths and a post modern view to that and that's been a lot of fun—it's been hard to do.

JJ There's sort of a seeming paradox in your effort to bring biology more into human behavior because sometimes biological paradigms become determinant and I know that's exactly the opposite of the way you're thinking. How do you make that tension go away: between the strong logical positivism of biology and your more fluid post modern belief in relativity?

DS There is a lot of determinism in biology but the fascinating thing to me is the brain trying to understand the brain and the brain trying to understand the mind, and to

think that all the things we thought were so true about our bodies 10–20 years turn out to be not to be as true as we thought—or more fluid that we thought. And the ultimate question is: Is the mind the same as the brain—if not, how are they related, and how do they influence each other and how does the context in which they live influence that? Those are fascinating questions.

JJ I noticed that you have talked about Ernest Becker, Erving Goffman and Thomas Szaaz today and in your work. They all have a shared insight, which is that things are not what they seem to be—many things are made up but we forget that because these things have been reified. What would you say has been the central impact of those thinkers on your work?

DS That's a good question and I'm going to make up an answer, which is all you can do—I think the central thing that has been most important to me is that whatever else human beings are, they are making meaning with machines, animals. That's what you have to do, you're not built into the world instinctually, you have to build yourself into the world in league with other people, in terms of culture, relationships, in a way that gives you some sense of being grounded and purposeful and relevant and makes your universe make some sort of sense to you. The amazing thing is if you watch young kids as they develop, what they do is try to make sense out of things. You couldn't survive as a human being, at some level, unless you did this.

JJ It's both instinctual and beyond instinctual. The need to make meaning both explains why there are so many systems and at the same time exposes their arbitrary natures. If one believed there were certain eminent truths, as in Platonic thought, that people recognized, then you wouldn't be

able to embrace the social constructivist point of view.

DS But the kicker in this is if you just say that people have to make meaning and that hopefully the meaning is relevant to them and has consequences that are humane, it's that you are saying that there isn't necessarily any singular truth and I think there is a great human aspiration for that singular truth. In human beings there's that great hope to find truth. Look at the people killing themselves in wars, including us, looking for or supporting a truth.

JJ But isn't finding truth just a subset of making meaning?

DS I think there is a different sense to the idea of finding truth because it's relatively passive. Whereas it's not on your shoulders, it's on the shoulders of others. Making meaning is also on the shoulders of others in some way, but if you take responsibility for that, then I think you are in a very different place. You have to take responsibility for the fact that someday some moment for a variety of reasons your meaning may fail you and you'll have to go down some other path.

JJ Like Ernest Becker at the end of his life [who embraced a spiritual reality].

DS Well yes, I think that's what happens. If I am in a foxhole maybe I'll grasp at a truth.

When some people say meaningless what they mean is there is no received truth and they are uncomfortable with that.

JJ There is no Platonic truth that exists outside of human experience and human creation—that's what I believe, I could be wrong, but it's been very helpful for me to think that.

DS But you could be wrong, see that's what you have to say—it could be otherwise, I could be wrong. This is what is useful; this is what has resonance.

JJ What do you think has been your greatest professional contribution so far?

DS I appreciate the fact that people associate me with the strengths perspective, but it has many different sources beyond me. I am not Mr. Strengths Perspective, other people have taught me this; other people have been at it longer than I have. What I appreciate most is having the freedom to take a look at other ways of knowing and to examine parts of the canon and to say there may be other ways of thinking about this. There may be other values or morals or even human experiences that beggars this perspective. I have liked being able to do that.

I want to continue to write—I like writing. It's hard—not as hard as fixing plumbing.

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