

# CHAPTER 1

## Learning About Service Users and Their Communities

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### ABOUT ACTIVITY 1: *PERMISSION TO LEARN*

*Permission to Learn* emphasizes the educational function of practice learning by allowing students to focus on the potential learning opportunities available from their respective placement settings.

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### NOTES FOR INSTRUCTORS<sup>1</sup>

#### PURPOSE

Your role as field instructor is highly significant in the educational and professional development of students, and we hope that, through the activities in this book, there can be an improved relationship between the learning in the classroom and that in the agency setting. As a field instructor with a responsibility to help a student's learning, *Permission to Learn* helps you to focus on the student as a learner and not as an employee.

A social work student might state a preferred agency or population he or she wishes to work with. How do you harness the student's commitment while broadening his or her ambitions? Moreover, the department or school of social work may not be able to place the student in the student's setting of first choice and—more significantly—can the student know at this early stage what the most appropriate fit is, when he or she has not yet worked in a setting in a professional capacity? What is more significant at this juncture is the fit between

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<sup>1</sup>See the Introduction to the book for suggestions about how instructors and students can, separately and together, use the activities in this book.

the student and the field instructor—a field instructor who can support and, indeed, challenge the student’s learning needs and styles.

Asking students to consider what they think they can *learn* from these situations (rather than what they can *do* or what their role is) puts the focus squarely on learning rather than practice. There will be plenty of time for that later.

#### METHOD

- Give the student a copy of the activity perhaps a week before the supervision session.
- Ask the student to follow the guidance that comes with the activity, answering the questions as and when indicated and making a written note of his or her deliberations.

### NOTES FOR STUDENTS AND INSTRUCTORS

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#### VARIATIONS

Most of the exercises in this book benefit from group activity. However, it is the interplay of individual and group that usually works best. Groups are not always as challenging as we hope or imagine them to be; group consensus can subdue real debate and allow individuals to be intellectually lazy. For this reason, it is often better to have a student complete an activity individually before any group discussion is arranged, so that individuals come to the group with their own views, some of which they should be prepared to change and others to defend.

*Permission to Learn* is better completed singly and discussed with the field instructor/supervisor. However, it is also an excellent exercise for the students to use in their respective fieldwork seminars or practice classes. At some later stage, a group of students could meet, to be exposed to the different approaches they have each taken to what is a very open-ended exercise.

#### USE BY OTHER PROFESSIONS

*Permission to Learn* lends itself to completion by a range of different professions. Students from health visiting, housing work, community psychiatric nursing, environmental health, rehabilitation work, education welfare, community work, town planning, policing, medicine, architecture, and others can learn from some or all of these situations. You could consider returning to the

exercise later with a multiprofessional group of students to see how they would interpret the notion of interprofessional learning in this neighborhood.

The final question in the activity—*How do you think people might be helped by social work in these situations?*—would need to reflect the professional group in question: *How do you think people might be helped by policing in these situations?*

### EDUCATIONAL POLICY ACCREDITATION STANDARDS

The topics in this chapter relate to the following *Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS)* 2008 Primary Core Competencies (Council on Social Work Education, 2008):

1. Identify as a professional social worker and conduct oneself accordingly.
2. Apply critical thinking to inform and communicate professional judgments.
3. Engage diversity and difference in practice.
4. Apply knowledge of human behavior and the social environment.
5. Engage in policy practice to advance social and economic well-being and to deliver effective social work services.

### FOR STUDENTS AND INSTRUCTORS

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#### ACTIVITY 1: PERMISSION TO LEARN

Green Hill apartments were built as public housing in the 1960s to provide decent housing for people then living in slums. However, many of these “streets in the sky” acquired a bad reputation, partly because of the subsequent housing policies of the local housing authority, which used to concentrate people with problems in certain blocks. Even so, many of the Green Hill residents are loyal to the estate and have lived there for two and even three generations. It has an active tenants association. It has a community room. Security doors, CCTV, and intercoms have all been put in place, and the housing authority has had a policy for some time of mixed habitation, so that families, young couples, and older people live side by side.

Derby Street is one of the ground floor streets in Green Hill apartments. It consists of nine apartments:

At Number 1 is **Zoë Benner**, a single parent who was in public care for much of her childhood but is now reconciled with her mother, who lives on another

street in Green Hill apartments. Zoë has a 14-year-old son (Jackson), a 12-year-old daughter (Kylie), and a baby daughter (Kara) age 11 months. Jackson was cautioned for shoplifting earlier in the year and has just been arrested on a charge of criminal damage. Kylie has not been to school for several weeks. She has few friends and is reluctant to leave the family's apartment. Kylie has been referred for help with her bedwetting problem. Kara is Zoë's daughter by another man who is attempting to gain custody of her. Kara has asthma and seems to suffer from unspecified allergies. Zoë has another child, Tilly, a 7-year-old girl currently living with foster parents on the other side of the city.

At Number 2 live **Jason Dean** and his partner **Sam Weiner**. Jason, a 28-year-old, has a previous drug-related charge and has just completed a rehabilitation program. Jason is unemployed but volunteers at a local drop-in center for homeless people. Sam is 46 years old and is on long-term disability, experiencing occasional periods of depression. He relies on Jason for much of his care. Sam is a leading light in the tenants association for the block of apartments.

**Avis Jenkins** lives at Number 3. She is 84 years old, and her only son lives in another part of the country. Jason Dean gives her quite a bit of support, calling in and checking in on her several times a week. Mrs. Jenkins has home care twice a week. Charging policies for home care services have changed recently, and Mrs. Jenkins is finding it difficult to cope financially. Her memory is deteriorating, and she is a regular member of a group called Memory Joggers at the local day center. Avis has lived in the area all her life and worked on the local newspaper until she retired.

Number 4 houses a young couple, **Loretta and Luke Carter**. They both work in low-paid jobs but put enough aside to run an old secondhand van. Luke also plays in a band, which sometimes comes to Number 4 to practice. The band play gigs most weeks and about once a month at a local bar.

**Jim Rafferty** lives at Number 5. He used to work in the steel industry in quite a well-paid job until he retired. He is now 72 years old and was widowed 3 years ago. Over the past 5 years, he has been losing his sight gradually through macular degeneration. His daughter lives a short bus ride away. Jim has written to the housing authority to complain about the noise from Number 4.

In Number 6, two Kurdish brothers, **Gregor and Stefan Kiyani** from Iraq, have recently been housed after successfully seeking political asylum. They are both trained as engineers. They are currently unemployed but are actively seeking work and are in regular touch with a local Kurdish support group. Gregor has good English, although Stefan's is more faltering. They get on well with the others on the street and have gone out of their way to say hello and invite people round to their apartment. However, they have recently been very distressed by an incident in which dog feces was posted through their mailbox.

**Shama and Gary Homes** live at Number 7. Shama works part-time in the kitchens of one of the local schools. Gary is a full-time homemaker. Shama and Gary provide respite care for children with learning disabilities. They have an adult daughter with learning disabilities who now lives independently in a program run by United Cerebral Palsy (UCP).

**Ernie and Catherine Minkie** live at Number 8. Ernie is a former Navy veteran and served in the Navy for 20 years from 1967 until 1987. During the time he was in the Navy, he visited many parts of the world. Catherine has chronic emphysema. Ernie works as the maintenance man at United Cerebral Palsy, where Shama and Gary's daughter lives. He enjoys working at the group home and gets along well with all of the staff and the 15 residents who reside at the group home. Ernie also likes going to the American Legion club, although recently due to Catherine's poor health, he has not been able to go as frequently. He enjoys "hanging out" with the guys and reminiscing about old times in the Navy.

Number 9 used to be a small corner store, but it closed 4 months ago and is currently boarded up. The nearest shop is a supermarket, which opened 6 months ago but lies across a busy highway.

Derby Street and a number of other streets on the north side of Green Hill apartments have a recurring infestation of ants. There are also difficulties with mildew from excessive damp. Green Hill apartments were owned by the local housing authority but were recently transferred for redevelopment to a not-for-profit housing association. Tenants will be involved in decisions about the coming changes, which will result in some tenants moving from the block while extensive refurbishments are made.

1. What do you think you might learn from working in the situations described above?

Avoid stating obvious generalisms, such as "I would learn how to work with someone losing their sight" and aim for learning that is more specific, such as "I could learn how an older person copes with the practical difficulties of losing their sight and how it affects them emotionally."

2. Prioritize a list of 10 possible learning points and make a written note of these.

When you have considered what you might learn from these situations, consider the next question (Q3).

3. How do you think people might be helped by social work in these situations?

Again, make a written note of your thoughts.

## NOTES FOR INSTRUCTORS

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### TEACHING ABOUT SERVICE USERS AND THEIR COMMUNITIES

#### Opportunities

One of the major functions of practice learning in an agency setting is the opportunities it provides students to work with the people who use social work services. However, just because these opportunities are readily available does not mean that they will automatically result in a good learning experience for the student. *Permission to Learn* is designed to help both you and the student focus on the learning potential.

To make the best use of *Permission to Learn*, we suggest you first complete the activity yourself. Resist answering the question by reference to what you know of the social work role, agency procedures, eligibility criteria, and so on in your own agency—you may find this surprisingly difficult to do. Answering the three *Permission to Learn* questions for yourself will help you to understand the difference between you and the student.

As the authors, we cannot presume exactly who you, the field instructor, is. However, if you have responsibility for helping a student learn about social work, it is safe to assume that you are probably an experienced practitioner, manager, service user, or provider of services. The location of your work may be a social services department (or its equivalent); a voluntary, nonprofit organization; a private agency; a user-led agency; or, indeed, a location in which social work is not a prime activity. Even so, what is important to remember and too easy to forget is that your task is to help the student learn about social work, *not* to train him or her to do your job. In other words, the specific work in which you are engaged is but one *example* of social work in practice.

Helping students to move from the specific of your location to the general of social work practice, as well as back to different specifics (not just yours), is a demanding skill and is going to be a learning experience for you, too, no matter how experienced you are.

The Green Hill situation in *Permission to Learn* is designed to help you give the student permission to focus first and foremost on *his or her own learning*. There will be time enough for the student to learn about your agency's policies and mission statements, the limits to your role, and the procedures that govern what can and cannot be undertaken. These policies, procedures, and roles may or may not have been formalized with Zoë Benner, Jason Dean, Avis Jenkins, and the other residents of Derby Street in mind. The people living on Derby Street do not spend their time reorganizing their problems and aspirations to fit neatly into the mission statements of the agencies that may or may not help

them. It is right that the student has the opportunity to consider the whole picture of a community's life before the lines are drawn. After all, it is this whole picture that more accurately reflects the lives of real people.

This holistic, generalist person-in-the-environment approach is not a utopian whim. The person-in-the-environment approach is embedded in the EPAS of the Council on Social Work Education (2008). Where better to begin, then, than our community in Derby Street in the Green Hill apartments?

## NOTES FOR STUDENTS

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### LEARNING ABOUT SERVICE USERS AND THEIR COMMUNITIES

#### Who Is the “Client”?

One of the learning points to note from *Permission to Learn* is that it is not clear-cut how and with whom you might work. This is a longstanding issue and has been characterized in the social work literature by the question, “Who is the ‘client’?” (see, e.g., Davies, 1994; Hepworth, Rooney, Dewberry Rooney, & Larsen, 2006).

*Client* is a term whose usage has been changing. For a while, there was a flirtation with *customer*, but it was clear even to the most ardent supporters of market forces that people who use social work services do not have the economic freedom of choice that the term *customer* implies. Many do not want to purchase social work services and are forced to receive them as an unwelcome gift. *Citizen* is a worthy term but is now considered to exclude some people who are not yet citizens, such as political asylum seekers, who should nevertheless have access to services. *People* is the most inclusive term, but sometimes we need a term that is specific to people who are using social work services. The authors would propose that a more appropriate term is *service user*. There is also increasing recognition of the significant role that providers play and the importance of involving providers, the people who are involved in the care of service users, in the work.

We pose the question “Who is the ‘client’?” in a very particular way. It was put some time ago by Pincus and Minahan (1975) as part of an attempt to help social workers think more widely about the various systems with which they worked. Rather than seeing the social work “client” as necessarily an individual person (or even family), Pincus and Minahan’s work suggested there were client systems whose boundaries depended on different circumstances. Doel and Marsh (1992) suggested that the “client” is the conceptualization of the problem. In Green Hill apartments, for example, one client could be *the problem of the damp*. Dent and Tourville (2002) describe how a multiracial inner-city

community became the students' client in an innovative project in which students worked alongside medical students and community development students in partnership with the local community. "The students also learned to develop and provide one-on-one services with residents" (p. 28). These social work students were working with physical, economic, and social issues simultaneously, and their client was much broader than any one individual.

### Individuality of Service Users and Providers

As well as emphasizing your learning, *Permission to Learn* has helped you to understand the way in which people and their difficulties are interconnected. Social policy at central and local levels affects individual lives; structural racism and sexism limit individuals' potential and oppress them; neighbors have an impact on each other's lives. The people on Derby Street can be seen as members of larger social groups, women and men, African American people, Kurdish people, White people, gays, lesbians, straights, children, teenagers, adults, providers and cared-for, older people, blind people, able-bodied and disabled people, and so on. People are discriminated against and have dog feces put through their mailboxes because of these social labels. They also find strength in meeting together as groups, such as the support group that the Kiyani brothers attend, the Green Hill Tenants Association, and the Memory Joggers group for people with memory problems.

To what extent does it help to know Mr. Jenkins as a "visually impaired person" as opposed to someone who was a steel worker, someone with gray hair and brown eyes, or someone with a kind manner and soft speech? You might be able to use your previous knowledge of someone with a visual impairment to begin to understand how "people" respond to sight loss. However, you must also understand that each person's response is unique. The capacity to move between the general and the particular is an important part of becoming a social worker. This is the ability to comprehend the racism that the Kiyani brothers face at a personal and institutional level while understanding their individual circumstances of loss and likely trauma.

### Strengths Perspective

A visit to the doctor usually occurs because something is wrong, although more and more insurance health plans are encouraging individuals to be more proactive and promoting wellness plans for regular and annual checkups. It is not surprising, then, that the doctor fails to comment on how well your legs are working when it is your broken arm that you are consulting the doctor about. Nevertheless, it was your legs (and various other working parts) that successfully took you to the doctor!



The strengths perspective means recognizing the strengths that are inherent in individuals, groups, and communities and using these strengths as building blocks for change. According to Saleebey (1992),

A strengths perspective assumes that when people's positive capacities are supported, they are more likely to act on their strengths. Thus, a belief in people's inherent capacity for growth and well-being requires an intense attention to people's own resources: their talents, experiences, and aspirations. Through this active attention, the probability for positive growth is significantly enhanced. (p. 25)

It is understandable if your first knowledge of the service user is in reference to what is wrong, since it is these problems and difficulties that bring you into contact. However, there is a process in which the practitioner can dwell on these deficits to such an extent that the person is seen only as the sum of his or her inadequacies. This is sometimes referred to as pathologizing the person. At its very worst, users find themselves in a Catch-22 situation, in which their opposition to the attempts to pathologize them is taken as a sign that they are in denial, thus providing further "evidence" of their neediness.

Knowing the service user means knowing about his or her abilities and aptitudes, too—the two "A"s, if you like. This is often referred to in the social work literature as the strengths perspective (Graybeal, 2001). Looking back at your work on the *Permission to Learn* activity, to what extent did you focus on the deficits and on the strengths? "What strengths?" you may protest! Well, return to the activity and you will see that there are many indications of strengths, both in the lives of individuals and in the community at large. Moreover, most situations that become defined by the language of deficits (*single parent* Zoë Benner with a son who is *in trouble* with the police, a daughter who is *refusing* to go to school, and a *sick* baby) might be reframed as a *survivor* of public welfare, keeping a family *together* in dire circumstances. Usually the situation is a complex mix of both possibilities, but it is important not to lose sight of the strengths in people's lives. It is these strengths that will enable you to work together to make improvements.

You will also be developing theoretical perspectives that help in explaining some of the events or phenomenon that can influence your work with service users and providers (Deweese, 2006; see Part IV, this volume).

### Relationship Between Social Workers, Service Users, and Providers

How do changes in the tasks and requirements of social workers affect the relationship with service users and providers? Some current commentators are

concerned that a focus on the whole person is increasingly being replaced by a focus on his or her various needs. Lymbery (2000) argues that services are organized around specialized aspects of need (e.g., a person's mental health needs) rather than the person as a whole; it is important to understand how people's lives are joined, how individuals' lives are connected to others, and their problems are but one facet of their overall experience.

Lymbery (2000) describes three paradigms for the relationship between social worker and user:

- The traditional view: A relationship exists between a professional and a “client,” in which there are differentials in power and knowledge and social distance between the two.
- The market view: The social worker is a purchaser (occasionally a provider), and the service user is a consumer, with a relationship that is supposedly commercial.
- The partnership view: This is a modified view of professionalism, in which social workers engage service users in an active participation, recognizing the expertise that the service user brings to the relationship.

The current rhetoric emphasizes the last of these, but you should observe which of these paradigms is the most characteristic of the relationships between practitioners and users of services in the agency where you are learning your practice. Sometimes there is a gap between the rhetoric and the reality; indeed, the rhetoric can be a barrier to recognizing and appreciating this gap. The increasing involvement of service users and providers in the education and training of social work students means that you will probably have the opportunity to meet people who use social work services in the class setting as well as the practice learning site. Participation by service users and providers in the full range of social work education—planning, delivery, and evaluation—is meant to ensure that the partnership view described above is transparent throughout your experience as a student.

### Service User and Provider Control

Much of the discussion has moved on from notions of participation to ones of empowerment. In research and policy making, in particular, social work has been exploring how service users and providers can move from participating to initiating. This is a philosophy that moves beyond the satisfaction survey (“how did you find that service?”) to more control of the nature of the service itself. There are some interesting examples of this in practice, including research projects in which service users and providers hold the budget.

We have discussed the importance of knowing the service user as an individual, as a member of a social group, and understanding him or her as a whole person in the context of his or her community. Turning this on its head, how might the service user know you and how, as individuals or in collaboration with others, can he or she acquire more control over the kinds of service that are available?

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### ASSESSING YOUR LEARNING

It will be important for you to demonstrate an understanding of the whole person, that is, the service users in their wider context and not just in their relationship to the agency where you are studying. This understanding needs to include an appreciation of people's strengths as well as their problems and an ability to engage with them, even when their circumstances and their biographies are very different from your own. Your ability to identify and work with people's strengths will be part of your assessment as a social work student.

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### FURTHER READING

- Deweese, M. (2006). *Contemporary social work practice*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.
- Graybeal, C. (2001). Strengths-based social work assessment: Transforming the dominant paradigm. *Families in Society*, 82(3), 233–242.
- Hepworth, D. H., Rooney, R. H., Dewberry Rooney, G., & Larsen, J. (2006). *Direct social work practice, theory and skills*. Belmont, CA: Brooks/Cole/Thompson.
- Saleebey, D. (1992). *The strengths perspective in social work*. New York, NY: Longman.

