HOW I DIDN'T BECOME A PSYCHOTHERAPIST

By Harry Specht

Harry Specht, Ph.D. is Dean and Professor, School of Social Welfare, University of California Berkely.

In 1951, when I graduated at age 21 from City College in New York City (CCNY), I had had a good deal of paid experience in social work. But I wanted very much to be a "professional" social worker which meant getting a master's degree. I had met many practitioners in the centers, settlement houses, and camps where I had worked who I admired and looked up to and who had master's degrees in social work. I was excited, therefore, to be accepted at the School of Applied Social Sciences (SASS) at Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio, as a graduate student majoring in social group work.

I had grown up in the Bronx and had never travelled out of New York City except when I went to camp in upstate New York. I was under the impression that Cleveland was "out west." I was somewhat disappointed when I arrived there to find that it didn't look all that much different from New York City, except that the sign that said "SOCONY" [e.g., Standard Oil Company of New York] in the Bronx was "SOHIO" in Cleveland.

However, SASS was on campus, an idyllic place, and I lived at Roosevelt Co-op which was only a block away. That gave me a sense of being part of campus life that I hadn't had when I attended City College New York. Although downtown Cleveland had a small town quality, it wasn't any more beautiful than New York City. But the campus was beautiful and I enjoyed being in that setting. About one-third of the 20-or-so students living at the co-op were going to SASS and we developed close relationships.

Overall, I loved being at SASS. I thought that the teachers were very good. (Among my teachers were Grace Coyle, Margaret Hartford, and Ray Fischer.) We considered most of them to be very learned and we treated them with respect. As a group they tended to be much more dedicated to service than my colleagues are today. We, as students, wanted to be taken seriously and tried to emulate our teachers in demonstrating our caringness and dedication. Our papers and class discussions often had a slight confessional quality to them because it was considered a good thing to talk about your weaknesses, your desire to integrate learning, and your selflessness, all of which were to be attained by a "conscious use of self."

The curricula content for masters students encouraged this kind of introspection. All students had to take courses in human growth and development. These courses given by psychiatrists delivered undiluted psychoanalytic theory. The practice courses heavily favored psychoanalytic inter-

pretation. A required course called "Medical Information" was also psychoanalytic. There were courses also in social policy (very dry) and community organization (CO). Some psychoanalytic interpretation slipped even into the CO course. Most students, including me, ate up this psychoanalytic stuff with gusto. In our informal social exchanges we never missed an opportunity to joke about "repression," "hostility," and "transference,". In the process records we wrote in field work we were expected to demonstrate our capacity to use this material.

In both class and field there was a larger premium placed upon discussion about self and about experiences in practice than was placed on scholarship. I found classes interesting and the assignments mostly easy. I had majored in English at college so writing came fairly easily to me. Although I didn't do a great deal of reading I found that my ability to absorb the little scholarly and theoretical material covered and apply it in written assignments won me more recognition than I'd expected. I was young, working to support myself, and more interested in doing than in scholarly analysis.

I was not especially challenged by my first-year field work assignment with the Jewish Community Centers of Cleveland. By and large, I did passable work with a senior citizens' club (then known as a "Golden Age Club"), a 6th grade boys' group, and a lounge program for young adults. I found most of the work not very challenging because it was similar to work with groups I'd been doing before I went to SASS. Most of my learning that year was stylistic—getting comfortable with professional language, participating in staff meetings, writing process records, and "making use of supervision." I had to stretch and dissemble a bit to do the latter because there wasn't a great deal in my assignments for a somewhat experienced student to learn. However, I was earnest about school and tried hard to "grow" and to "integrate knowledge in practice."

I had one rather jolting experience in Grace Coyle's social group work class in the second semester. At that time Miss Coyle was in her 60's and that seemed to most of us to be old. We thought her to be a scholar/philosopher and treated her reverentially. We also thought she was pretty. Those of us living at the Co-op agreed that if Betty Boop had become an older scholar she would have looked just like Grace Coyle. In her class, students had to make oral presentations on some structural feature of one of the groups with which they were working. I chose to speak about the use of the concept of culture in my work with the senior citizens' group. I explained to the class some of the behavioral differences one finds among Litvak, Galitziana, and Sephardic Jews, how older Jews tend to respond to a young Jewish male, and a few other items. In my presentation, I told some anecdotes that I thought to be amusing and in the telling I made use of a number of Yiddish phrases. Many of my non-Jewish classmates thought I was hilarious and laughed appreciatively; I warmed to my subject and added more humor. My presentation became very jokey. Miss Coyle was not amused. When I concluded she quietly said something like: You are a bright and witty young man; you may even be sensitive; but you will have to work harder to strengthen that aspect of yourself so that it becomes more evident. I was devastated. I felt that I had to redeem myself with Miss Coyle. I decided that my work on the final assignment for the course—a group analysis—had to be one of the great documents of the age. I have never worked so hard on anything I've ever written. My analysis was long. It was stuffed with everything I'd read that year. And it was SENSITIVE, jam-packed with psychoanalytic, cultural, and sociological interpretations. There was a sociogram too. And each section had a little headnote from something I'd read as an English major at college. I even paid a professional typist to do it up for me. To my eyes, it was as splendid a piece of work as I could imagine. In retrospect, I think Miss Coyle must have been vastly amused at the extraordinary effort I had put into this work. She returned my paper with a note of lavish praise. No other review of my work has ever pleased me so much. Miss Coyle probably recognized that I'd put a lot of

work into that paper and she decided that I deserved to be taken out of the doghouse.

As a student of Miss Coyle, I wondered what she thought about the heavy dose of psychoanalytic theory we were getting. She taught none of it in her courses. She favored sociological and social psychological theories, and gave a strong emphasis to citizenship education. I noticed that she listened intently when students or other teachers used psychoanalytic theory, but I never heard her make a comment about it. I regret that I hadn't the intellectual initiative or security to question her about it.

In my second year at Western Reserve, I asked to have a field placement in a mental hospital. I was placed at Cleveland Receiving Hospital which had a department called "Therapeutic Group Work." I made this request because of my experiences prior to graduate school. In the late 1940s, Albert Deutsch, a columnist for a liberal New York City newspaper called *PM*, began writing about the terrible treatment of the mentally ill in state hospitals. (Deutsch's book, *The Shame of the States*, published in 1948, was the intellectual cornerstone of the great movement for deinstitutionalization in the 1960s and 1970s.) I was deeply affected by Deutsch's writings because I had a relative and a friend who were institutionalized and I was bothered by how they were treated. Then, in 1951 I read a book called *The Snakepit*, a story about the experiences of a mentally ill woman in a state mental hospital, and saw the 1951 film with Olivia De Havilland which was based on the book. I thought the book and the movie were chilling. I was determined, then, to do something to help the mentally ill. (Of course, I didn't have any notion of how I would help. I think that at that age, just the idea of committing myself to help someone seemed to be, in itself, a significant act.)

The mission of the staff of the Department of Therapeutic Group Work was to enable patients to make use of their social resources and other resources of the hospital to help them regain health. The group workers did not do psychotherapy with individuals or with groups. After some initial anxiety over being in intimate contact with seriously mentally ill people, I was comfortable working in that setting and found I could make excellent use of my knowledge and skills. The interaction with other professionals — nurses, doctors, psychologists — was intellectually stimulating. I felt I was doing something important and useful.

To work in that setting, it was necessary to read a lot of material on psychiatry to learn the nomenclature and aetiology of mental illness. I read a good deal of psychoanalytic material which I found interesting and compelling. Psychoanalytic theory is dramatic; psychoanalysis relies heavily on interpretations of the symbolism in personal behavior, interpersonal interactions, and dreams. I enjoyed it. I found psychoanalytic theory to be very readable and easily applicable in interpreting all kinds of personal behavior. [I think, too, that psychoanalytic theory gives one a sense of power over others. That is, in using ideas about, for example, the unconscious, psychosexual development, and mechanisms of defense, you come to believe that you are party to secrets about others of which they themselves are unaware.]

My experiences in that placement left me wanting to continue working with the mentally ill. I was thrilled, then, to be hired for a residential position at Ittleson Center in New York City. Ittleson Center served hospitalized mentally ill adolescents. It was under the direction of David Wineman who was a collaborator of the well-known Fritz Redl. (Redl and Wineman published a book called *Children Who Hate* [Free Press, 1951] which I found gripping, creative and useful.) However, when I arrived in New York City I learned that there was no job for me at Ittleson Center because David Wineman had been fired. Apparently, one of the reasons he had been fired was that he'd hired me, a social group worker, instead of a more clinically oriented professional.

Wineman's departure from Ittleson left me in New York City without a place to live (I had expected to reside at Ittleson), without a job, and little money. It was in September, so most jobs in social group work had been

filled because group work agencies follow an academic year. A position was open at Lenox Hill Neighborhood Association, a settlement house on the east side of mid-Manhattan. Lenox Hill was desperate to hire a worker who would work with youth gangs. Donors had provided funds for this program and Lenox Hill was eager to have something tangible to show them. They had been counting on Irving Spergle to take the position but he'd taken a teaching job at the University of Chicago. (Spergle became one of the nation's foremost authorities on gangs and juvenile delinquency.) I wasn't the kind of worker they'd been hoping for. Irving Spergle was certainly better suited for the position than I was. And Lenox Hill was not the situation I'd been hoping for. But neither Lenox Hill nor I had many choices, so I took the job.

There were three parts to my job. First, I became the group leader of the "Raiders," a group of teenagers and young adults who were considered to be a "gang." Second, I was responsible for a holiday program for the children of working parents. This involved organization of an all-day program for scores of these children on school holidays. And third, I was to assist in supervising the after-school program for grade school children. I was clearly unprepared for the first two assignments. I found the Raiders intimidating. They were big, tough, athletic, and, to me, threatening. I was thin, delicate, and unathletic. I knew little about the problems of working parents and the kinds of social resources they needed. However, I had the good fortune to be supervised by an outstanding professional, Victor Remer. Vic was a big, athletic, and extremely sensitive man with many years of experience working with difficult teenagers and in poor neighborhoods. He was interested in and, I think, entertained by my psychoanalytic orientation. Conversant with psychoanalytic theory, he never put it down. He seemed to know exactly how uncomfortable I was in dealing with the Raiders. With great skill he helped me discover how I could respond to their disruptive, posturing, and testing behavior. I was surprised to find that I could set limits for these young men, that they wanted me to help them grow up, and that there were many ways I could help them. I also learned a great deal from Vic about utilizing social services and community groups to help families. Within a couple of months I believed that I had been very lucky to get the job at Lenox Hill.

I continued to work in community centers and residential camps with groups and adult organizations for several years. Gradually, I developed an interest in the ideas and theories that underlay the work I was doing. This began with a problem in work with teenage groups that nagged me. It seemed to me that many social group workers tended to be excessively permissive in work with teenagers to a point that they provided insufficient guidance and structure in developing programs with group members. This resulted in the first paper I ever published called, "A Program Curriculum for Social Club Groups" (*Journal of Jewish Communal Services*, Winter, 1957). It is not a very good paper from a scholarly point of view, but it did strike upon a sensitive issue among social group workers and resulted in some discussion in professional meetings. In those years, I began to read more about theory and social policy issues. Up until then, my intellectual interests had centered around practice.

In 1960 I was accepted at Brandeis University's Florence Heller School for Advanced Studies in Social Welfare. Brandeis was a new school which took the study of social policy as its central mission, and fit my developing interests. My goals in doctoral study hadn't crystallized any further than that vague idea. Mostly, I thought it would be elevating both intellectually and professionally to have a Ph.D. Consequently, I was not a very good doctoral student because I lacked the focus that advanced studies requires. However, I did manage to complete the program. The major benefits it had for me were to increase my understanding of research methodology and to improve my writing skills.

After completing the program at Brandeis I worked for two years at Mobilization for Youth (MFY) in New York City

as director of the community organization program and then for two years in Richmond, California, in community organization. MFY was a massive project to prevent juvenile delinquency, the predecessor to the national War on Poverty in the 1960s. It constituted an intellectually challenging experience because it was a planned effort to test the theories put forward by Richard Cloward and Lloyd Ohlin in their book, *Delinquency and Opportunity*. I left MFY for the job in Richmond for two reasons. First, my wife and I wanted to move to the San Francisco Bay Area. Second, the Richmond job gave me an opportunity to test out some of my own ideas in practice.

The programs in Richmond involved a primarily African-American constituency. Between 1964 and 1966 it became difficult for a White organizer to take a leadership role in a Black community. The civil rights movement had begun to change the relationships between Whites and Blacks. There was, nationally, a rejection by African-American activists of their long-standing dependency on White leadership, and there was a militant call for "Black Power." From the point of view of Black community development, this was a good thing. But personally it was painful for many of us — both Whites and Blacks — associated with the movement.

I took a job as a teacher, for one year at the Department of Social Work at San Francisco State University, and then, in 1967, at the School of Social Welfare, University of California at Berkeley. For about 15 years I did research on and wrote about community organization, social planning, and social policy. These were not the subject matters that had brought me into social work. But there was, in that period, a burgeoning excitement about civil rights, the War on Poverty, and the Model Cities Program. My colleagues, George Brager from Mobilization for Youth and Ralph Kramer at Berkeley, both of whom had plied those scholarly furrows for many years, got me writing on the subject. Brager and Kramer two original thinkers developed a theoretical perspective on community organization that was new, enlarging the intellectual boundaries of practice. The field — especially the part concerned with grassroots organizing—was relatively new, so it was easy to publish almost anything about it. Somewhat later, another colleague, Neil Gilbert, drew me into a collaboration on social policy that lasted a decade. The study of social policy was even more far afield from my original interest because it has, relatively, little connection to practice. It is a more intellectual line of thought and draws heavily upon economics, law, political science, and organization theory. The study of social policy broadened my thinking a lot. Neil Gilbert has a sharp and creative mind and working with him forced me to be clearer and more rational in my work.

In 1977, I became dean of the School of Social Welfare at Berkeley. As a professor I had been attentive primarily to my interests in community organization, social planning, and social policy. As dean, I became interested in the whole enterprise of social work education. The vast majority of our students were studying for careers in direct practice, and I didn't know very much about their studies and their field work.

I began sitting in on courses in case work (now called "direct practice") and reading material from course outlines. The content of these courses was not based on a strictly psychoanalytic framework as it had been 25 years before when I'd gone off to take a job at Ittleson Center. There was still some of it, most representative in the work of Erik Erikson. In addition there were some elements of behavior modification techniques and social learning theory (e.g., Bandura, Gambrill, and S.D. Rose), and large elements of humanistic psychology (e.g., C. Rogers, A. Maslow, and V.S. Sexton).

I was taken aback by the great lack of substance in this material. The behavior modification material is atheoretical. These scholars deal with techniques for modifying behavior. They are superscientific and deal only with what can be measured. As a consequence, they tend to deal best with very teensy-weensy problems, for example phobias. They do not, as far as I can see, have an interest in larger social

problems — e.g., poverty, alienation, loneliness — but only in measurable problems that can be seen in the behavior of individuals.

It is the theories from humanistic psychology that are most predominant in education for direct practice. But there isn't a great deal of theory in these humanistic "theories." What there is, though, is a powerful set of attitudes about the innate goodness of human beings, and about the capacity of human beings to grow and change.

I went on to read about research on psychotherapy. The conclusion one must draw from the research is that there is little evidence to support the efficacy of this kind of intervention. There is clear evidence that most people who get psychotherapy like it; and most of them like their psychotherapists. But that is not the same thing as effectiveness in problem solving.

I examined the list of agencies in which our students did their field work. I was astounded to learn that of 200 graduate students only one was doing field work in a public social services department.

Finally, I read all available literature on the careers of professional social workers. It was distressing to learn that social work graduates were going by the droves into the private practice of psychotherapy. Between 1975 and 1985 the number of social workers in private practice had increased fivefold. By 1991, 57% of the members of the National Association of Social Workers were in for-profit practice for at least part of their work week. You do not have to be a genius to conclude from what I had discovered in my studies that something has gone terribly wrong with the profession of social work.

Midway into my explorations of current social work practice, I concluded (mistakenly, I now believe) that one important reason for social work's neglect of its true mission was the lack of useful social theories to guide intervention. I began reading in the field of social psychology and was delighted to find that the field abounds with theories that are exceedingly useful in describing and analyzing social behavior. (This is in contradistinction to psychological and psychoanalytic theories which analyze individual behavior.) I'm referring to such theories as social exchange theory, attribution theory, theories of interpersonal relationships, and social network analysis. Over the last 50 years, social psychology has developed a set of theories that are right on the button for social work practice; these theories have been almost entirely ignored by social workers.

In the course of my career I had written frequently about controversial issues in social work and social welfare. These controversies usually revolved around issues of ideology (e.g., "The Deprofessionalization of Social Work," *Social Work*, March 1972) or pedagogy (e.g., "Undergraduate Education and Professional Achievements of MSWs" (with Britt and Frost, *Social Work*, May 1984). The issue of psychotherapy was different. It was something I had to struggle with personally and intellectually. Although I had never engaged in that sort of practice, like most other people in our field—indeed, like most other Americans—I had been nurtured and socialized with the radical individualism of scholars such as Freud, Rogers, and Maslow. It was extremely difficult to shake loose from the intrapersonal orientations I had integrated since I was an older teenager. At first, I found it difficult to utilize such social psychological theories as, for example, social exchange theory, social network analysis, and attribution theory. Only gradually was I able to shift from a focus on the intrapersonal and grasp the importance of analyzing the interpersonal aspects of practice. These studies led me to write a book about social work practice, *New Directions in Social Work Practice* (Prentice-Hall, 1988). In this volume, I introduce readers to these social psychological ways of thinking. In addition, I attempt to distinguish between the functions of social workers and the functions of psychotherapists. I think it is a good book, but it has had no significant impact. I realized from this experience (rather late in life, I think) that a good idea is not necessarily a good enough reason for people to change. After all, why should practitioners and teachers change their way of thinking if they are already established in a career that has provided them

with position, status, and tangible rewards? I came to believe that the profession was not capable of reforming itself. Moreover, it appeared more and more evident to me that the profession's drift to psychotherapy was becoming a floodtide.

For these reasons I wrote the paper, "Social Work and the Popular Psychotherapies," which I submitted to *Social Work* (*SW*) in 1989. I was puzzled when the article was rejected with comments from two readers that it was filled with "polemic distortions, and bias," that my argument was "one-sided," and that I used "unsubstantiated statements." I was then at a stage in life when the publication of one more paper was not important to my career. And I knew that the paper was relevant, clear, and to the point. It occurred to me that the editors of *SW* were simply not able to countenance the idea that psychotherapy is not a proper mode of intervention for our profession. So, I sent the paper to *Social Service Review* (*SSR*) where it was published. *SSR* followed up with two "Debates With Author."

The positive responses to the *SSR* article, and the odd responses I'd gotten from the *SW* readers, made me think that the debate should be pushed further, and I decided to do a book-length treatment of the material in the *SSR* articles and debates. I intended to aim the book at a broad audience, not just social workers. The outcome of that decision is the book (written with Mark Courtney) *Unfaithful Angels: How Social Work Has Abandoned Its Mission* (Free Press, 1994).

I ought to conclude this memoir by pointing up the lessons I have learned in my journey from *SASS* to *Unfaithful Angels*, but I'm not sure what they are. I think I didn't become a psychotherapist because even before graduate school I was attracted by the idea that social interaction (as opposed to intrapersonal examination) can be healing, and that people have a great capacity to help and nurture one another. My earlier experiences in settlement houses and camps had reinforced this notion and I had many fine supervisors and teachers who helped me to think about and refine my ideas. Beyond that, there seems to have been a lot of happenstance and luck (both good and bad) in my making of life choices. As I write it here in retrospect the flow of life events appears to have more rationality and integrity than is the case in reality. The meanings, if there are any, sound like the homely virtues my mother taught: "Be true to yourself"; "Stand up for what you think is right"; "Care about people in need." Those are certainly values to live by, but how each of us perceives and realizes these values is a complex matter. □