

The Use of Authority in the Supervision of the High Grade Feeble-minded

PHYLLIS MICKELSON*

"One who knows his lot to be the lot of all
other men
is a safe man to guide them,
one who recognizes all men as members of
his own body
is a sound man to guard them."

That summarizes in thirty-eight words what
will be said below in many more.

Working with the Feeble-minded Is Hard

Whoever has worked with the high grade
feeble-minded will understand what is meant
when we begin by stating that we like to work
with the feeble-minded because it is in one
sense of the word so "hard." By the very na-
ture of our functions, which are defined by
law, we have all had and will continue to have
some pretty hard things to do. In the first
place, we have the responsibility for request-
ing that these individuals be placed under a
guardianship which in most instances will last
for the rest of their lives. By this action we
become in effect their actual guardians, re-
sponsible for the guidance and direction of
their entire future lives. We must prevent some
of them from getting married. From some
we take their children. We send some to in-
stitutions. Later we share in the responsibility
for approving or refusing their release. We
share also in the responsibility for approving
some of them for sterilization. And finally we
help to make it possible or impossible for cer-
tain ones to be discharged from guardianship.

These are tremendous responsibilities which

rest lightly on no one's shoulders. Further-
more, these actions frequently must be taken
in spite of the opposition of the individual
most directly concerned, of his relatives and
friends, and of people of influence in the com-
munity such as attorneys, judges, doctors, min-
isters or teachers.

The Worker's Conflict

The process of applying these functions (as
outlined above) to the needs of the individual
client is, of course, what we call "case work."
When it comes to this practical problem, how-
ever, conflicts and confusions are just as apt
to arise in the worker's mind as in the minds
of other people about the "rightness" of what
has to be done. The chief difference is that
as social workers we are under professional
obligation to try to understand and to resolve
the source of our conflicts.

The basic premise of this article is that the
worker's conflict tends to center around the
acceptance and use of the authority² which is
inherent in his job. It is suggested further
that this conflict is apt to be experienced in
three main areas.

Lady Bountiful vs. True Helpfulness

In the first place, there is the lesson which
every social worker must learn, no matter
what his function. It is that social work is *not*
all-giving, never-denying. The social worker
is not Lady Bountiful. Perhaps this lesson is
felt to be especially true of work with the
feeble-minded, however, because the program,
of necessity, gives the social worker more au-
thority in response to which greater opposition
naturally arises.

All of us like to feel comfortable and se-
cure in our relations with other people and to
have them like us. If we have to oppose them
in any way, we are in danger of incurring

*Social Worker, Bureau for Feeble-minded and Epileptic,
Division of Public Institutions.

¹*The Way of Life*, According to Lao-tzu, An American Ver-
sion by Witter Bynner, pages 31-32. New York: John Day
Co., 1944.

²Webster defines "authority" as "legal or rightful power; a
right to command or to act; power exercised by a person in
virtue of his office or trust; dominion; jurisdiction; authori-
zation."

their anger and dislike. This is uncomfortable to us as persons, especially if there is any question in our own mind as to whether what we are doing is right. This disturbs us professionally as well when we remember (as we can never forget) that the most important ability of the "good" case worker is the ability to establish a satisfactory working relationship with his client. It does not take very much experience with the feeble-minded, however, to realize that the typical case situation does not consist of the client coming to the agency of his own free will, and asking for just the services the worker wants to give. The worker finds that there is more to his job than telling a less intelligent person what he must do and having him accept this advice unquestioningly. This dilemma in social work has been strikingly described as follows:

"In simple and satisfactory harmonious (first) interviews, the client wants exactly what the agency has to offer him and the agency immediately proceeds to give the client what he wants . . . Each (client and worker) accepts his own role and the role of the other with relative comfort and tolerance. There are no undercurrents or inexplicable tensions which are sensed rather than understood . . . The client glows with gratitude in finding a real friend and the social worker is convinced that here is a glorious and worthwhile calling. Would that it were always so!"²

While this might be—if it were true—a "happy" situation, it obviously would not require any of what we call "case work skills." Recognizing this fact is half the battle. It means recognizing that *true* liking and authority are not easily earned but must be based upon mutual confidence and respect which demands the courageous raising, facing, and working through of differences. To create a medium or relationship in which this can be done is, in fact, the social worker's primary reason for being. In learning how to do this

the social worker gradually comes to realize that it is in the nature of all of us to confuse being kind and tactful with making things easier for ourselves. One who has learned to make this distinction, however, has developed a "case work skill."

Is it Right to Use Authority?

In addition to this natural and human desire to be liked and to be kind, which must motivate every social worker but which he must learn to understand and to discipline, there is another source of possible conflict. It is the feeling that by using *any* authority we go counter to one of the basic principles of modern case work philosophy which is that you cannot make another person do anything that he does not want to do. "You can lead a horse to water but you can't make him drink." Many of those who have never worked with the high grade moron do not realize, however, that much time is spent (consciously or unconsciously) in "leading," that is, in exploring with the individual his capacity to develop insight into his behavior and a will to change it. (Perhaps we should pause long enough to recall that we are all said to be influenced more by our emotions than by our intelligence.) Of necessity, then, the social worker here as elsewhere, tries to understand and to cooperate with the forces within and without the individual which cause his behavior. Through supervision, exercised by the right of guardianship, the worker becomes one of these forces and tries to guide the others.

The final use of authority or force—in spite of opposition—comes, or should come only when all other measures have failed. It is well to remember in this connection that there are other forms of case work which are based upon legal authority, namely, probation and parole work. There too the community has decreed by law that certain individuals shall receive case work services whether they want them or not. There the primary motivation is protection of the community. With the feeble-minded there is generally the additional need to protect the individual. In other words, with the feeble-minded as with the delinquent the community has recognized by law that free-

²E. Van Norman Emery, M. D. *First Interviews as an Experiment in Human Relations*. From *Readings in Social Case Work*, 1920-1938. Edited by Fern Lowry.

³Principles and Manual for Probation. Edited by He

ly comes to realize all of us to conflict with making things who has learned ever, has developed

city?

ral and human kind, which makes a worker but which and to discipline possible conflict. Any authority we basic principles phy which is the person do anything. "You can lead make him drink never worked with t realize, however consciously or m that is, in exploit capacity to develop a will to change se long enough to be influenced n by our intelligence the social worker understand and within and without se his behavior ed by the right omes one of these others.

or force—in spite ould come only failed. It is well on that there are which are based y, probation and community has individuals shall hether they want any motivation. With the feeble additional need other words, with delinquent the y law that fre

ly the needed treatment can be given only the exercise of authority such as we possess. in this way can certain individuals be ided with the proper opportunities or en- ments and can they and the community be protected from the effects of excessive nsibilities and of economic and sexual itation.

How Shall We Use Authority?

We see now that the basic question is not all we use "authority," but rather *how* shall we use the authority which we possess by law.

The following example illustrates this point. Recently a letter was received in the Bureau for Feebleminded and Epileptic concerning a feebleminded mother who had moved from the county of commitment to an adjoining county. The worker in the second county wrote that she had purposely delayed her visit for several months in order to give the family an opportunity to make a "fresh start" so that they would never be able to blame their difficulties on the "interference" of the county welfare board.

Here only the negative, depriving side of authority is seen. The worker has no confidence in her ability to meet the family's expected opposition by helping them to understand their own needs and by proving to them that she can give services which will help to meet those needs. Her words and actions show that she, too, defines her function as "interference."

This then is the hard, that is, the challenging part of working with the high grade feeble-minded under the Minnesota program. The social worker *has* to prove himself and the worth of his services *in spite* of opposition. Obviously this takes more courage, more self-discipline, more thought and more technical skill than where the client from the very first seeks the service and is receptive to all that it brings with it.

¹See Principles and Methods in Dealing with the Offender: A Manual for Pennsylvania Correctional and Penal Workers. Edited by Helen Pigeon.

Accepting Our Responsibility

It has been shown that conflict in the worker's mind may be due to several factors. Its main source, in this writer's opinion, is the natural resistance which we all feel to having so much authority over the lives of other people. We all like to "pass the buck" and to "get out from under." The only way in which we can really do this is to quit our jobs. If we stay on the job, however, the only way in which we can resolve our conflict is to accept the fact that we have this authority and that we are answerable for its use. Once we have done this, we will never act, nor fail to act in any case until we have thought through and we are convinced in our own minds that what we are doing is right for our client. Furthermore, only when we are convinced ourselves of the "rightness" of our actions can we convince others. Our "conflict" will then be gone.

In closing it seems appropriate to sum up what has been said by listing some suggested principles to follow in the use of authority.¹

1. The exact area and nature of the authority should be clearly understood and explained. This applies equally to worker and client, for the worker cannot give an appropriate explanation unless he himself understands and accepts the area and nature of his authority.
2. Although the inevitable consequences of certain actions should always be explained, authority should never be exercised in the form of a threat. With the feebleminded as with other people, knowledge of consequences has a deterrent effect upon behavior.
3. Do not over-use authority by setting down petty restrictions. The application of authority must be individualized according to the needs of each case.
4. Authority must be used *fairly* to be used successfully. This is the heart of the issue as we all know. If the worker's action is fair, there is no *real* basis on which the client can resent it. He is forced instead to face the cause of his difficulty; namely the

reason *why* the authority was used. In other words, the client is forced to turn from a criticism of the worker's behavior to a criticism of his own behavior. This is one of the ways in which insight and a sense of responsibility for one's own behavior is developed.

5. Only by constant self-analysis can the over-or under-use of authority be avoided. In other words, authority must never be used because of laziness or the need to

dominate or to punish the client. Nor must its use ever be avoided because of fear of personal consequences. Its use must always fulfill the client's needs rather than one's own. And so we end as we began by saying:

"One who knows his lot to be the lot of all other men

Is a safe man to guide them,

One who recognizes all men as members of his own body

Is a sound man to guard them."

The
based
2,819
represent
Novem
previo
and sex
ing arr
the reci

One in
Recipi

Duri
of the
in ever
other th
cause s
through
ing, a
schedul
on the
carving
earnings
return f
not cons
worker r
study w
was em
budget r
during t
percent
eleven)

Many
were re
their mo
(one in
less than
women r

I. Sex an
vie
II. Place
III. Marit
IV. Physi