

LAURA EPSTEIN

Interviewed by Carol Coohy on February 2, 1995**

Epstein started work at the School of Social Service Administration (SSA, University of Chicago) in the sixties as a faculty field instructor. In 1970 two major changes occurred. She became an assistant professor, tenure track, and she and William Reid began the Task Centered Casework Project, a combined methods, fieldwork, research sequence that continued for over a decade, and resulted in two books with Reid (Task Centered Casework and Task Centered Practice), numerous articles and research reports, and hundreds of presentations in the USA and other countries. By 1980 Epstein was a full professor and had written her own book on the task centered practice, called Helping People. Since the first edition it had gone through three major revisions, and is now a book about brief treatment in general, Task Centered Model. For two years during the 1980's Epstein taught at Wilfred Laurier University. Returning to Chicago, Epstein began to work in new directions. The therapeutic idea and a Foucaultian analysis of the history of social work are two major themes of her present work which she continues as a Professor Emerita at the University of Chicago. (L.B).¹

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LE: All right, listen. First of all, my career path is an extremely unusual one, and it took some very sharp turns. And I think those sharp turns are to a large extent historical accidents. I just happened to be a person at the right place at the right time. But the thing was, that I used to take advantage of historical accidents. When something would happen that seemed unusual or interesting I would follow it. I don't think it's unusual for people of my age. I think it's unusual today, because people are brought up with an idea that there's such a thing as golden plan. But when I was coming up, the furthest you

could plan for was tomorrow morning, it just didn't seem as if it was worthwhile to plan any further than that.

I went to a high school which in those days was like an extension of the Lab School. (University of Chicago) It was a place where all the poor smart Hyde Park (Chicago) kids went. The Lab School was where all the rich Hyde Park smart kids went. I lived in an atmosphere where education was extremely highly valued, and the road out of the rut that my parents lived in, was education.

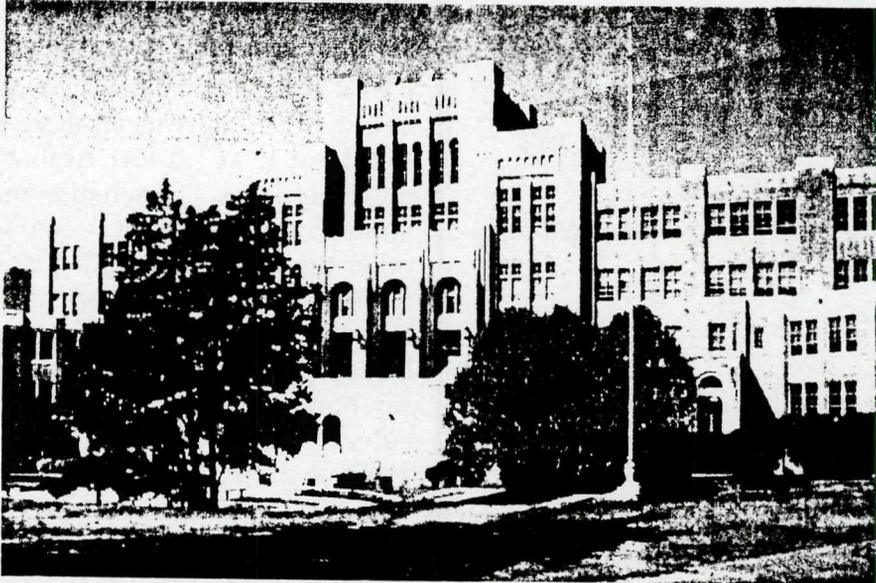
I was hardly aware that I was a girl. I didn't realize at that

¹ The anecdotes contained in this oral history article are typical of those I have heard during the nearly three decades of my friendship with Laura Epstein. Her life struggle has been that of a woman intellectual. Rarely has any accomplishment not involved the struggle for equality and access that so often has been typical of the women of accomplishment in this and other countries. Sometimes Laura's abilities were recognized and opportunities were made available to her, e.g. Dean Harold Richmond's support of the Task Centered Project. In general Laura made her own opportunities and has made a significant contribution, not only to social work but to all of us. The events I witnessed and/or heard about provided me with an inside view of how to negotiate the obstacles that would occur during my career; just as the events captured by Laura and her interviewer Carol, may help others as they make their ways in the world where access and opportunities are not always readily available. I consider myself fortunate to be able to call Laura "my friend." (Lester Brown Ph.D. (L.B) is Professor, Department of Social Work, California State University, Long Beach CA)

stage of the game that being a girl was going to make a difference in the way my career went. It just never occurred to me. I mean, I just assumed that boys and girls had similar box seats in the world. I don't know where I got that crazy idea from. I knew an education was my road out and The University of Chicago (UC) struck me as being a kind of a promised land. I was young and healthy and I didn't see any reason why I couldn't go. I was going to do it! That was my attitude, so I went there.

Then came graduation. It was 1934, and I was getting my bachelor's degree, and it seemed like overnight I came up against this "What am I going to do now?" I'd had spent summers looking for jobs, and nobody would hire me. I didn't have any experience. I was fat, and sort of a smart ass. I didn't come across like a girl was supposed to. Another thing, I came from the UC, and this is really a very big deal. I kept getting turned down for jobs, because I was a student at the UC which was supposed to be a hotbed of communism. That's what they said, I had an employment interviewer tell me that. But pretty soon the WPA (Works Progress Administration) came along with a summer student program. So I got a job doing WPA work. It was absolutely hor-

rible. It was in the days before they had xerox machines. The University was producing boxes of mimeographed materials. They would have rooms filled with huge tables with piles of papers. Page one, page two, page three, page four ... page fifty, all around



the table. There would be this crew of about fifty kids just walking from pile to pile, putting one on top of two, on top of three ... underneath, underneath, underneath. Then we would get pages mixed up and all get hysterical. I earned my living by putting one page on top of another page.

Somehow toward the end of my college days, I envisioned an occupation that I would like to be in. I wanted to be, what we would today call, a clinical psychologist. I had run into some women, one named Irene Kaman, and liked the way they looked, and the way they conducted themselves. I liked their attitude, which was sort of kindly and compassionate and I thought the whole idea of doing good was simply wonderful. From my lim-

ited knowledge of the world, it seemed to me that the ones who did the most good were clinical psychologists, and I wanted to be one of them. I went to my advisor, Alva Kinsbury, he was a big shot in the department of psychology. He was in this real old build-

ing, and I told this guy, whom I trusted, that I wanted to get a Ph.D. in psychology. He turned me down. He said, "It wasn't a field for women." This was when I first came flat up against this wall. I had seen this Irene who was a psychologist at Juvenile

Court. She had given a speech to a class. He said it wasn't a field for women. I said "What about this Irene Kaman?" He said, "Well, you know, there are exceptions. You are not an exception. It is not a field for women. You can't do it, and that's that." He says, "Why don't you go across the street and enroll in the School of Social Service Administration (SSA)" and I said, "What's there?" He said, "Well, they train social workers." I said, "I didn't know." He filled out some kind of papers ... the upshot of that conversation was that I wanted to go to the bathroom, and I cried for about four hours straight. I knew that

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something absolutely catastrophic had happened to me in that room. And actually something did. I was "raped" by this old guy who told me I was a no good female, a worthless female. I cried for about four hours. I went to the bookstore, and I bought ... a huge Hershey bar and I ate it all, about one pound. I just sat in the bathroom and cried and ate this Hershey bar. A girl, Ann, came in and caught me doing all this. She was very sympathetic and real scared of what was going on in there with all this crying and me eating a Hershey bar. It went on four hours. I mean I'm saying four hours, I don't know, maybe eight, maybe it was two. It was a long time, and I mean I

LE: Well, it could have, I didn't think of it at the time. It wouldn't surprise me. Those things never occurred to me at that stage of the game.

CC: Did Helen Perlman* ever tell you what happened to her at the University of Minnesota? She had the identical experience. She went in to talk to two women who were professors in English, and made a proclamation: I'm going to be like you. I'm going to get a Ph.D. I'm going to be a professor in English. They discouraged her because she was a woman. She said, but what about the two of you. How is it that you are here and able to do this but I can't? And they said we're exceptions, and it's really hard, and you'll never

had no idea what had hit me. I could not understand this thing at all, why he said, because I was a girl, I couldn't go, couldn't be a student in psychology. I absolutely could not understand it at all! There was something or other that was missing in the way I was brought up in my home, the subject never came up any way at all.

CC: It had nothing to do with being Jewish?

get a position. The next day one of the women called her up and said, I can't sleep. I've been thinking about this, and the fact is ... the reason is, you are a Jewish woman.

LE: Oh! I wouldn't be surprised if that played a part or maybe decisive in my case. The woman, sort of like my model Irene Kaman, was Jewish, but again, she was the only one. She was all there was at the Juvenile Court. At that period of time discrimination against Jews was very overt, but somehow I always thought that it didn't affect me. But then all that stuff was happening out there. I mean discrimination against women, discrimination against Jews. I knew what was going on about the Jews. I didn't know about the women. Somehow I didn't make the connection, anything to do with me. I never had any evidence from Kingsbury that it was a Jewish business, but he was straight-forward about the woman business. The upshot was that I was suffering from extreme depression the whole summer. Then I got this letter from the UC saying I had a scholarship to the SSA, so I figured, well, talk about ignorant youth, I can handle this.

Meanwhile, I made some effort to find out was a social worker. I found it was somebody who went into poor neighborhoods and talked to unpleasant people and gave them relief — what today they call welfare. I didn't want anything to do with that. The farthest thing from my mind, it made no sense to me whatsoever.

At the beginning of the quarter I went. SSA was lo-

cated in Cobb Hall, and it was the first time I met Edith Abbott.* I said, well, here I got this letter. I got a scholarship. I said, "thank you very much. I don't want to go into social work. I want to go into psychology." Well, I knew that I did something wrong. I was really a great kid, I would walk in a lion's den and say boo! to the lions, that's what I did to Abbott, I said "boo" to her. I just was 19 and I wasn't going to take this off of anybody, including Alva Kingsbury. She looked just like that, [pointing to Abbott's portrait on the wall] except she wore a big black big hat. She had a kind of a half way sensible conversation with me. When she found out my age, she just went, "tsk, tsk, tsk, tsk." I could see that she was con-

templating what to do with me. Of course, I wasn't too aware of that, because I was only there to tell her what I was going to do about me. I didn't pay any attention to her, and I was not going to any school of social work. But she made it crystal clear, as far as the bureaucracy (UC) was concerned that the money that would pay for my tuition was coming from SSA. It wasn't coming from anywhere else. If I didn't go to SSA, I wasn't going anywhere, so I went to SSA.

CC: 1934?

LE: Yeah, the fall of 1934, and Hitler was moving around Europe at that time...

CC: It was the height of the depression; was there a huge number of students?

LE: Right, huge. It became a

way of life, and it was the thing to do. There was a big court yard where all these people stood around. I began to get a little educated about what public assistance was, and how it started. It started to interest me. Then it began to get interesting. I had some women teachers who were certainly the weight of Kaman. There's one woman, she was a big shot. She was the number one lady at the University of Chicago settlement house.

CC: That was Mary McDowell.

LE: Yeah, right. She taught some class, that's the kind of woman that's okay, she's as good as they came. I said I wanted to be like her, I think I ended up exactly like her. I mean she was a



doer. Relatively big mouth activist doer. I thought, well if there are people like her around, I thought they were a respectable bunch of women.

CC: What was the curriculum like?

LE: We had a case book of some kind. I bet there are copies still around. It had cases of social workers taking nits out of kids heads, and I did not know what a nit was. I had enough sense not to ask in class. I asked my mother, and my mother went into shock when I said the word, because nits apparently are little bugs which get into dirty kids' heads, and you have to take it out by washing their heads in gasoline. When I said nit to my mother, it was like I said sex. I told her the circumstances, she came through, she explained what a nit was. But then I'm not ever going to go and take any nits out of kids heads, I mean that's not my idea of anything I want to do, I was going to ignore that business. They taught us... it wasn't bad what they taught us, it wasn't bad at all, those case books were a sort of modernized version of Mary Richmond. I have recently read Mary Richmond cases in her book *Social Diagnosis*. I wonder where they got them (cases)? Bernece Simon* once told me that the case book was Sophonisba Breckinridge's* cases, and when Bernece said it to me, Breckinridge's cases, like you know, some holy person's writing

CC: Breckinridge must have gotten her case descriptions from her summer work at Hull House.

LE: She taught case work in 1920's. This system of teaching cases survived at this school until

people like me changed it. I was one of the pioneers who changed the way the stuff was taught, because I started using tapes. I used to ostentatiously carry a tape recorder with me even when I didn't need it because it was like a symbol of my ...

CC: Modernness.

LE: Modernness. We gave all our students tape recorders with the grant money, and it was like the men had undid their zippers and were running around the school... that's how they felt.

CC: Was it a symbol of science?

LE: No, it was a symbol of lack of confidentiality. That's what it was. You were making public, you unzipped your pants...you...

CC: You were exposing people?

LE: Exposing. You weren't exposing anything...they were just on a tape recorder, like everywhere else in the world, no different. When I went into field work I kept asking myself, "are those people like the ones in the case books?" They weren't, the people in fieldwork were not anything like those people in the casebook.

The worker would visit a house, generations of social workers wrote up their case records to sound like these case books. I actually even wrote stuff like this. "The worker opened the door and walked down the hallway..." They would say things like that. What they depicted in these cases



were working class women (there were hardly ever any men in the cases) who were bitterly complaining that their husbands didn't bring the money home. They were drinking or gambling away the money, they didn't bring the money home so the rent was behind. The women had...the complaint of the physical labor of floor scrubbing, washing clothes without any machinery, and a lot of cooking, and without adequate money to buy food, a lot of unruly children that they had, and, monkeying around with, and sickness... the so called casework was very much like the Mary Richmond days, but the casework that we were taught to do was to listen compassionately, and...We

were supposed to run around and see if we could find the husbands and ask them politely to sort of help out in the house with chores like washing the clothes and stuff; but they never did. That's about it.

CC: What about resources? Trying to fix them up with resources or negotiating with agencies?

LE: I think we did that.

CC: So the goal was to listen compassionately...

LE: Well, there wasn't Gordon Hamilton, yet, there wasn't any Perlman, there wasn't any Laura Epstein. There was just Mary Richmond.

LE: The rest of the curriculum was more interesting actually, we had courses on sociology, on juvenile delinquency. We had a course on law and social work, we were run through all the current social legislation, the different social security laws. We were taught a lot about the laws that govern public assistance.

CC: The emphasis really did seem like it was more on social administration and policy than on case work practice.

LE: Right, there really wasn't any such thing.

CC: But there was a case work sequence.

LE: I know but it was to listen compassionately, and then go to field work and that was an entirely different world, no connection between that, and what was going on here [at SSA], no connection that was very real. Out there in the field there were real people weeping their buckets out, sicker than dogs, broke, fighting, fighting, fighting, with landlords, with husbands, with wives, with chil-

dren, getting pregnant, getting horrible sicknesses and going crazy ... everything was going ... the real damn world was going on out there.

CC: Did you feel a sense of incompetence?

LE: No, no, I was just curious. There was nothing we could offer that would make any real difference, I mean a few bucks here and there. We were really hooked on getting a few bucks to these people ... if we could worm it out of the agency. But other than that, a few bucks of cash. It was perfectly obvious that there was nothing we could do at all. Here was this bunch of lower middle class kids who were in school and had all come out of depression families, and we were just trying to find out what the world was like; so we were learning, it was our university out there teaching us about the world. And we felt very democratic with the clients, we didn't feel any social distance with the clients, they were sort of our peers... it was a relatively easy arrangement because we were behind the eight ball, and our families were behind the eight ball, and they were behind the eight ball, we were just all behind the eight ball.

CC: SSA was there any sort of belief about which clients were good and which were bad?

LE: No. Oh, it was...I think Charlotte Towle* who conceptualized that for us. Her view made an impression on me. It was a decent view ... that for the most part the clients that we were seeing, she called victims of circumstance. They were victims of circumstance and that they were entitled to respect, they were very,

very, very definite about that, that they were entitled to respect, to politeness, I think they called it acceptance, they made a technical word for that, acceptance ... and they were not to be put down or anything like that, and as far as morality was concerned about things like drinking, drug taking was sort of unknown but occasionally came up, drinking, drug taking, extramarital sex.

CC: Prostitution?

LE: All those things were considered, sorrowful things that happened to people because they were struggling. They were not to be put down or belittled or made small because of those things it was like a phrase that people used to use, "nothing human offends me." That was the moral posture of people like Charlotte Towle, and all the rest of them. I think I've told you the story about the little old woman Sophonisba Breckinridge. Supposedly, she was mugged on the midway and she was on the ground and this mugger was standing over her with her purse and she looked up and said, "my good man, what can I do to help you?" That was what they were like [at SSA]. Students told that story about Breckinridge and made fun of it. But at the same time they made fun of it, it was an extreme version of what they considered and believed.

I've got that quote up there, and I appreciate (her office); I still believe all that. You know, I can't believe that a woman like her coming from Kentucky was not loaded with some Victorian morals. They tried very hard not to act out ... they didn't have that phrase then, leave

people alone, live and let live. And I thought that was okay with me. I don't know if I was like that before they got hold of me. I don't know what I was like, actually I think they formed my social views so strongly that I don't know what kind of views I had before them. I haven't changed.

CC: Some of the women I have talked to that were here during that period felt that there was a sense of having pride of being a social worker and feeling empowered, the new word.

LE: I'd say very much so. When I ran up against being treated as second fiddle out there in the real world, they had a hard time making second fiddle out me. They never truly succeeded. It would slide right off of me, because I knew I wasn't. This place [SSA] did do that to you, and to a large extent it still does. I think that attitude is still inherent, it is still here. But it was infinitely more so then. Look, when you sat in a classroom, we had huge classes because there were so many students sitting in the basement in some kind of huge amphitheater where that one [pointing to the portrait of Edith Abbott] is sitting up in front of the room with this big black hat on in hot weather, and the room is full of these people, mostly women. But we didn't pay much attention to that. It wasn't that it was mostly women, it was that it was mostly important, active people who were going to do something, be something. We had a whole room full of these vigorous people, and from the back a messenger arrives, races down the center aisle, runs up to Edith Abbott who is on the dias, lifts up this piece of pa-

per and gives it to her. She stopped everything, reads it, and says, I got to go, Washington is on the phone. She races out of the room down that aisle and we know that our leader is running across the street to talk to Washington. It was Harry Hopkins. We all knew who Harry Hopkins was because we read about him in the newspaper all the time. Don't think that didn't send you a message.

CC: You're connected. There is a pipeline. And Grace Abbott* was there at the time.

LE: After all those years of practice, I tried to come back and get my Ph.D. and right at the close of World War II, when the world was changing so much. The Ph.D. program in those days was extremely small. They had about four or five students. I didn't know, that at that time they were only taking men, and they were men with a long career already in administration. They were only taking real high up bureaucrats, men. At that point it just seemed to me, that was the next step. I was a supervisor at Traveler's Aid by that time, a supervisor and a field instructor. I thought I was an upstanding person in social work. The Dean of Students threw cold water all over me. She depreciated my record, and indicated I didn't really have the qualifications for admission. I wasn't a male; I wasn't a CEO-type. But, she would be glad to give me an application, but it was useless for me to fill it out. I took it and threw it in the garbage. I realized later that if I had pursued it, I could have won. But I didn't, by the time I did that, I had much experience in being depreciated

and diminished. I wasn't looking for another miserable experience, so I just threw it away. That was the end of my trying to get a Ph.D. I really didn't realize it, until much later, that I could have come back a couple years later and been admitted. But I didn't know that. She just went on my hate list. I refused to give any money. During that time, I became a highly regarded as a field instructor. As a result of that GI bill, the university just got bigger with all these men coming back to university, and the universities were drowning in students. I got a letter from the person in the field work department, Marian Tillotson.* She wrote that SSA was really up against it because we were becoming inundated with students. They were trying to locate faculty that would be able to deal with this new type of student and she thought I might be one of those. They were looking for a new type of faculty member, the idea never occurred to me in my wildest imaginations. They hired me as a faculty field instructor.

When Harold Richman became the dean, the decision was made to get rid of the line of field work faculty. He laid down a challenge to us at a faculty meeting. That those of us who were on the field work line, we could if we wanted to, move ourselves over to the regular academic line. Or we would probably find ourselves without a job in a short period of time. I decided to do that. There were two of us who chose.

You know, I see that this is a historical accident and I sort of try to run with it. That decision

though, cost me, because it cut me off from all my peers. Like overnight, my friends on the field work faculty quit talking to me. Or talked behind my back, and said terrible things like I had "sold out" to Harold. They used that phrase "sold out." Traitor, et cetera.

CC: That was pretty nasty. What was the issue ... they thought that they weren't given the opportunity that you were given?

LE: No. They had the same opportunity that I had. They thought that I was a traitor. I had changed sides.

CC: You entered the ivory tower, did you abandon practice?

LE: No, I'd abandoned case work, is what that was. I didn't enter any ivory tower. I had abandoned case work, which by this time had become a religion. And what was called social administration, that administration stuff was considered...not an enemy, but...

CC: Peripheral?

LE: No. Well, we'll call it an enemy...something like an enemy. I just went over to the enemy for the purpose of personal advancement. To get academic status. I had sold out my girlfriends in the convent of casework.

CC: You were teaching case work though.

LE: I was teaching case work but they could see I was moving away from ... strict psychodynamics and embracing interests in other things like behavior modification and working with Bill Reid* and developing research, going around with tape recorders.

CC: Was the religion...the problem solving process?

LE: No, the true religion SSA's version of psychodynamics. That was the true religion. They...and I had belonged to their religion. I was a full time member of their religion. I had two psychoanalyses myself. I was a true member of the religious order. I practiced their form of psychoanalytically oriented case work and I was beginning to teach, write and talk differently. In Chicago, I was in the process of moving out of the true religion. I hadn't truly left it. Eventually, I left Freud. People literally stopped talking to me like I was ... a Nazi or something.

CC: [referring to L.E. vitae] I was looking at the presentations you did on task-centered in 1970's, and there's kind of a proliferation and it becomes less local and more national in terms of the people you are presenting to...

LE: That's right.

CC: And it builds and it builds into the late 70's.

CC: Tell me about the origins.

LE: It goes like this...I had come here from the Traveler's Aid Society where I had been for nine years, where their specialty was, what they called short term treatment. There were one or two intellectuals who were top of it, and they had made some sort of an effort to conceptualize this short term treatment they were doing. But they were kind of ashamed of it. It was regarded as kind of a low class type of treatment. But I'd had a lot of experience with it by that time, and also, right before I came here, there had been a new thing that had shown up on the scene...namely crisis intervention, which had some relatively good academic credentials. Short term treatment did not have good

academic credentials but crisis intervention did. So I rapidly attached myself to this crisis intervention idea as being sort of a legitimation of what we were doing at Traveler's Aid. And then, it was from that I came here and I was already full of all that crisis intervention stuff, and I'd written an article about crisis intervention, which people had regarded very highly.

Bill Reid had also just come (to SSA) and had recently finished this book that was called *Brief and Extended Treatment*. It was the report of this research that he and Ann Shyne had done in New York, and he had been talking with the publisher at Columbia University Press about a sequel to this book.

As typical of Bill, I think he needed a woman collaborator. [chuckles] And he appealed to Bernece Simon who was a big shot on treatment. He approached her for a name of somebody to collaborate with in developing some work about short term treatment that might end up in a book. She suggested me. And he approached me to sort of inquire about my background. We didn't know each other at all. So, I told him, short term treatment, but at the time, I did not know he was interested in short term treatment. I had never heard of his book. It was not yet published. It was still in manuscript. It was around October or November, this conversation took place. He gave me the manuscript, and I didn't think much of it because I thought, "Well, who's he?" He doesn't know anything about short term treatment. I'm the only one who knows about short term treatment

— why is he writing a book on short term treatment? He doesn't know anything about it. I put the manuscript in my drawer. And then...I was busy, and when Christmas time came, I said, "I've got to really read that manuscript because it really isn't fair, you know. It's very impolite. This man gave me his manuscript and it's in my drawer all these months." So I took the book home with me over Christmas holiday and I never quit reading it. I started the first page. I went ... I don't know, what is it? 48 hours or something, I suppose. And I went and saw him. I said, "This is the greatest thing in the world!" I was so excited I could almost die! So the next thing you know, he arrives in my office one day, just walked in, with this editor, this John Moore from Columbia University Press. And he had a proposition. Would I write a book? It's going to be a sequel to *Brief Treatment*. By this time the book was out, this was probably in the spring, the book was out and was making a big splash. I think Bill and I had begun talking. So he came to me with this proposition that we write a book to try and explain why brief treatment was a success. So, you know me. I said, "Sure." Then I got cold feet. I said, "How we going to write this book?" We don't know why it worked! So, we made a chart on the board. I thought that was pretty clever. I have done this ever since with every book I'd done. Made a chart on the board. We made a list of chapters and we put a bunch of dates after the chapters. He figured it out mathematically how many pages we would have to write. We had a

year — how many pages we would have to write a day. It seemed like about three or something. It became very reasonable. So, we did it. And then it began to emerge.

CC: How did you divvy it up?

LE: It was a mess! A stark raving mess. I haven't wanted to think about it in years. It was horrible! We didn't really divvy it up. We were working on the book and about exactly the same time we had decided that we were going to teach this course together. We talked a lot and we didn't write anything down. We just talked a lot. Then we began.... I don't know about what he did. I began reading a lot of books. I began reading everything, I started becoming very, very well acquainted with the literature on this subject. As I read I would change my mind and we would talk everything over. And then, ... decided to teach this course, we originally called it Task Structured and then we decided to call it Task Centered(T.C.) because one day in a faculty meeting, Harold [Richman]* made an announcement that we were going to do something about task — and he couldn't remember what it was called. And John Schuerman* yelled out from the back of the room, "Centered! Task Centered!" And Bill and I, all of a sudden we looked at each other. That's the name of it! Task Centered. That's how the name was born.

Then in the meanwhile, the School was in a revolution of stuff going on. And, we were going to do this team taught course in which we were going to combine research and practice... That

became our religion, to combine research and practice. And, of course, the first year I severed all of my relationships with my former field work pals because, according to them, you couldn't combine these two things. It was like mixing...Freud and Pavlov.

CC: Research diminished practice. It could never capture practice? What was that?

LE: It was the enemy of practice, the way they reacted.

CC: It was cold and uncaring?

LE: The way they acted it was wrong. They didn't bother to explain it intellectually like you just did. It was just not explained. It was immoral to even do it.

CC: When did the T.C. project end?

LE: I had been doing a series of workshops on T.C. at the Department of Child Welfare in Madison. I was scheduled for a very big workshop on Task Centered with Ron Rooney who was at that time on faculty at Madison(University of Wisconsin) and who had been a doctoral student in our program. Ron called me up and told me that they had cancelled the workshop because they had some problem with the funding. And that the funding had been pushed over to a project on child abuse. From then on it seemed to me that a lot of the avenues that had been open for workshops on task centered had rather rapidly moved over to, somehow or other, in one form or another, dealing with child abuse as a problem. At this time, there was also a... it was slow process of alteration going on in our field, in academe. In the part of the field that deals with conceptualization. There was a related development

taking place in the curriculum which all had to do with why I took a two year's leave and went to Canada at this point. What was happening in the curriculum was also a switch over to much more attention to problem areas. And a sort of like a putting in the background, of a kind of a general methodology. See, the curriculum at SSA was remarkably affected by this in that the curriculum for a decade or so had been organized around methods, sort of like specializations. Generalists. What they called FIGs.

CC: Families, Individuals and Groups?

LE: And Task Centered. And I don't know, behavior modification. There might have been something else. All these things were going on at the same time. And it was...it was unclear as to how you divided up the time and the curriculum between the problem focus and methods. And the Task Centered curriculum piece was clearly method focused. And the in-service training which Bill and I were doing all over were absolutely method focused. At that time, intellectual interest in the field of practice was around how can we make our methods efficient and not wasteful? And you could take the Task Centered Model, make adaptations to particular settings or particular problems. But then, the money began flowing very heavily into specific problem areas having to do with extreme types of deviance, the underclass, the problems that were supposedly associated with the underclass.

We were entering into the period where the judicial system was changing to you know, longer

sentences and less judicial judgment. People began to go crazy about so-called drug addiction problems. The whole notion of abuse, ...abusive everything. Child abuse! Wife abuse! Drug abuse! Everything abuse. The social fixing system began to be focused... and the money went too, and the money determined where you all went.

CC: Right. There was a big Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention Act during that time.

LE: Yes. Permanency planning, and all that sort of stuff wiped out the money for the general methodological approach.

CC: And therefore, it wiped out the incentive structure, the commitment to developing methods.

LE: Right, that same particular experience with the money almost completely dried up for research in social work methods. It vanished. We operated on money for social work practice, clinical research, was what kept us going.

CC: Where did the money come from?

LE: Our particular money came from HEW. (Department of Health Education and Welfare) Our big money came from HEW by accident. Nixon time. And we got our grant for the purpose of devising a scheme that was usable in public assistance agencies throughout the nation that would get people off welfare. And the task centered approach attracted the grant givers as having the potential for getting people off welfare fast. So, we took the money for that. And when we wrote up our report, of course, we did put in a paragraph about that subject, but we used the money for every-

thing else. We used it to fund the whole development of the task centered approach. That's what we got the grant for, the development. Our grant money was sent, and this woman who was the grant monitor went nuts with us because it was perfectly obvious to her that we weren't going to get any people off welfare with this stuff. But we knew that before we started! You know. We were just very calm while she was having fits. And she lost her job because she couldn't get along with people they gave money to. She was on the wrong political side of everything. But, so the money dried up. At the end of the seventies, all these strands came together that basically the bottom line was the money dried up for in-service training for stuff like task centered. Meanwhile the school curriculum was in the process of changing away from this heavy emphasis on method to a sort of a mixture of emphasis on problem areas and the beginning of the "Core"

CC: And they included a research sequence. They included some methods. They included some policy class. You know what? This is very interesting. I'm looking at the evolution, if you want to call it that, of the curriculum here. And the "Core" is exactly what they had at the very origin of the school in '24 when Abbott became Dean. It was called the Generic Approach.

LE: That's right.

CC: And the classes are the same ones. So we've come full circle.

LE: Right. "The Core" came on. At the same time that was happening, Bill's wife Audrey did

not get tenure. That was really sad. She did not get tenure. She was Black, and she was a woman. She didn't get tenure.

That was one thing that was going on. The other thing that was going on is that the school had to go the route of instituting the "Core" because it was going on all over social work education and we could not stand still. And the thing of it was they made me the chairman (sic) of the committee. Actually, I was the chairman (sic) of that committee that brought the "Core" into existence, and Bill was very upset about this. And here I was once before, ten years before I had sold out case work by going into Task Centered with Bill and into research and now I sold out Bill and Task Centered by going into the "Core," by making the "Core." I was the one who brought in the report, the first report, to the faculty meeting about how the "Core" should be organized. I moved its adoption and I hoped it would be defeated. And I sold that to people. I'm going to make the motion and I want you to vote against it. But they voted for it. Weakly. Harold used to tell me, "Now, what the Core is going to do," he said, "is make the Task Centered curriculum that you guys worked out, make it across the board for everybody." But Bill knew and I knew that we would sink. We knew and I knew that the Task Centered curriculum, by itself, was not enough to run the whole clinical program. We also didn't know how to get away from the avalanche which was drowning our fiefdom as it were. Partly, we approved of it. At that particular moment in time, I don't know about Bill, but I



know, I approved of the idea of the "Core," I just didn't like the way it was being put into effect. And the committee, that curriculum committee that was in charge of drawing up the plan was a mess. It was internally striven with extreme conflict...

CC: The generalist experiment was still in place.

LE: Right.

CC: And FIGs was still in place?

LE: Right.

CC: How is it that Harold Richmond could suggest to you that your approach could usurp their approaches?

LE: He didn't think they would go along with it. As chairman (sic) of the curriculum committee, I was supposed to bring this in. He thought I had two things that he was counting on. One was that I was brave and a risk taker, personally. It didn't make any difference whether I won or lost because even though I was a full professor, I wasn't a real academic because I didn't have a Ph.D. And everybody always knew that This was that, that weird woman who made it to full professorship in this day and age without a Ph.D. But at the same time, that was my extreme vulnerability. They wanted to end the generalist. They

wanted to end FIGs. What else was there?

CC: There was a behavioral sequence.

LE: Yeah, that was the final conflict that was to end the power of the old guard psychodynamists, although they continued a life in the school, weaker and weaker as time went on so that the ground was laid for what eventually happened, those old religious wars were over. Harold was going to end the religious wars.

CC: Who were the intellectual leaders?

LE: Bernece. The one you mentioned. Mary Louise Somers, Paul Gitlin.*

CC: Were you and Bill considered one of the powerful people?

LE: Yes.

CC: John Schuerman?*

LE: John Schuerman was very much in this mix and got stuck in the corner. So there was a mini-paradigm shift. That whole shift plus the evaporation of the money to hire in-service training plus career ambitions.

There was that group of doctoral students that came out of our program that all wanted to stick together. And all wanted to move with the times. Here we are, we have research and development and everything. Bill only wanted to be their consultant.

CC: Did Bill minimize your involvement or contribution to Task Centered at any point?

LE: No he didn't... So anyway, I was fed up. And I began looking for another job. I was, going to conferences all the time so I started pitching people for jobs. But amongst the other things that were unbelievable. I mean there was an ad in the "Journal of Social Case Work" and I can't remember what it said. I took it to Lester Brown. I said, "Doesn't that sound like me?" And I had never answered an ad for a job in my entire life. So, I answered it. I wrote them a letter. It was in Canada. I wrote them a letter and Lester laughed his head off. He said, "You'll never go there."

And then this telephone call came. I didn't know who it was because I couldn't remember having written the letter. It was these people in Canada. So they offered me a job and I went. I stayed there two years and had a very good time. When I came back the whole world had changed.

CC: You took a leave?

LE: Two years. The students played a very interesting and heavy role in all of this. The Task Centered Project lasted ten years, and for about the first six I would say, before the Core, we had interested students. They were sort of self-selected. Vigorous and bright. A lot of men. They weren't really run of the mill. They quickly got in to the groove that they were doing something special, that they liked doing. So they dragged off with their tape recorders all over this place. And they started fights with people. They were sort of like our mis-

sionaries. We actually developed the Task Centered Model in the classroom with the students. And so would discuss with them in class: do this, do that, do something else. They would then come back and argue with us. They would go out with real clients and would come back to classroom. Because we didn't separate classroom research from field. So they would come back and we would listen to the interviews. Bill listened more than I did because I couldn't stand it. But he enjoyed it. He liked listening to the tapes. I didn't. Then we would discuss what actually happened. And, you know, we didn't have to monkey around with what anybody said. We had the tapes. And we would invent with them right in the classroom, you know, responses and analyze possible explanations for what had happened. We would bring in various theories that were around about to explain what had happened or what had caused or what the possible results would be of this, that and the other thing.

CC: Behavioral and social theories? Or other practice theories?

LE: All of them.

CC: Anything

LE: Anything. It was a gargantuan intellectual piece. People who participated in it look back on it as being one of the highest points of their lives. I run into people — I don't even recognize them — and they start telling me stories about that classroom and their eyes begin to dance. We all felt the same way, that it was an experience, of incredible richness in productivity. And everybody left, sort of rode on it, riding on it

for the rest of their lives.

CC: Were other students discontented about what they were learning?

LE: Uh, some were and some weren't.

CC: Was there a faction of students who were interested in social change and weren't satisfied with what they were getting out of SSA because it was oriented toward individual intervention? I'm thinking what impact did the sixties and seventies have on it?

LE: Well, the students who felt that way were in the macro side. The clinical students were not dissatisfied. If they were dissatisfied, they went to the other side. They went to the macro side. I call 'em macros because they've had so many names. I don't even know what their present name is. What do they call 'em now?

CC: Social Administration.

LE: All right.

CC: I thought they didn't have those kind of splits back then.

LE: Yes, we did. Very strongly.

CC: Well, there was the generalist approach and it bridged individual, group and community work. Do you consider that a micro approach?

LE: Micro.

CC: Oh, I see. Okay.

LE: It's pretentious — and the students knew that.

LE: I'm looking. [Referring to task-centered book]. Oh, here it is! This has got itself all over the United States and Europe. This is a list of how you do task centered. It is all structured. You know where the source of all that is? It was the way I used to teach in field work. That's where all that came from. That came out of my field work, my notes about

how to teach people what to do in field work. It was considered to be exceedingly marvelous and teachable because it was neat, plain, made an immediate connection with what people felt they were experiencing, what they were actually seeing in clients. It didn't require a whole lot of convoluted learning about invisible things that were perhaps going on in the mind. That was also considered by some people to be its major defect — that it was oversimplified. That it ignored whole areas of human experience that were not visible. That was considered to be both its major drawback and its major advantage.

CC: Or relative advantage and relative disadvantage. Did it usurp problem solving process?

LE: Usurp it? Probably ... yes. You mean the book, Helen Perlman's book?

CC: Did it have some advantage over problem solving?

LE: Yeah. The advantage was that it, its rhetoric was contemporary. The major advantage was we used contemporary rhetoric.

CC: It was old fashioned? (problem solving)

LE: Old fashioned and sentimental and lacking in specification. So that ours was ... I'm not saying that ours was new fashioned, sophisticated and ... I'm just saying that it appeared that way because of the change in the way the English language was being used and the changes in the way that certain rhetoric was up front and fashionable. I mean, we were in style. Our rhetoric was in style.

CC: Probably, the same description could have been made about the problem solving ap-

proach in the late 50's.

LE: Exactly and it was. Exactly. Let me see. That remark I made is not to be considered to be a serious criticism or anything. It's just the way it was perceived in general.

CC: Well, it has to do with the next point, compatibility, I think, as well.

LE: Yeah! Sure. Because T.C. went along with this whole idea of no hidden agendas. That was, be up front. Be honest. Let it all hang out. All that fashionable rhetoric. No hidden agendas. Concentrate on the problem as perceived by the client, that's what the client wants and ... we're not elitists. We're not above the client. We're not saying, "We know best and you have to think the way we think." We think your thoughts are legitimate. Legitimate the problem as perceived by the client. That keeps being said in the T.C. stuff.

LE: Now, this business about where did T.C. fit into the existing practice framework? You see, that's also an issue where it was both its advantage and its disadvantage. Task centered can be set on sort of a template on top of absolutely anything else. You can stick it in and ... you can give it a psychodynamic version, and it has been done. Of course, and you can give it a behaviorist version and that has been done. You can give it any kind of version you want.

CC: You moved into group work at one point.

LE: That's right. You can do that too. In fact, people have even written articles about the task centered approach to field instruction, and in community organiza-

tion.

CC: Yeah, I was very curious about that. You know, because in the generalist experience here, problem solving process was used as the "template" for individual, group and community work so there's some commonality between the two approaches in that it could be made applicable to those three different methods as well.

LE: At one point I had a project that was going to do that but nobody would fund it.

CC: Is the problem we've run out of new ideas? Has anything new happened in the field in the last ten or twenty years in terms of major approaches?

LE: No.

CC: Is that part of the dilemma?

LE: The reason we've run out of new ideas is because the old ideas are coming apart at the seams. Because they have been intellectually mined. They've been worn out and found very much wanting. And the whole idea of clinical intervention is now come upon a very bad time because, first of all, very serious academics have thoroughly discredited the whole machinery of psychological manipulation that is what this whole clinical enterprise is about. It's hocus-pocus! You know, like the TV in tapes of the O.J. case where the prosecution wants to put on this guy who is going to say that O.J. told him that he had dreamed about killing his wife. So the commentators get on and this woman from CNN says, "You can't bring that kind of hocus pocus" ... I'm quoting. "You can't bring that kind of hocus pocus into a court of law! Courts

of law deal with events! With facts. Not with hocus pocus!" This whole business of psychological intervention is regarded nowadays in almost all intellectual and political circles as hocus pocus. I mean, after all, there are a lot of careers invested in this hocus pocus. So they're...you know, trying to rescue it! And make it look ... look respectable in academic eyes. But they're failing. And they're also failing out there in the world of practice because of the Gingriches and even the Clintonites who have really thoroughly given up on the whole idea that you can ...

CC: talk someone ...

LE: talk, counsel people into a new type of lifestyle. And basically, I agree with them that I think the whole thing's washed up myself. But...

CC: Do you think clinical practice is washed up?

LE: Done for. It may survive for another hundred years because it has a very important political value. It's important politically, so it may survive for a hundred years and it will undergo alterations. But the enterprise itself, in terms of how it was originally envisioned, is finished

CC: Well, we talked about what its advantages were and what its perceived disadvantages were. We talked about how compatible it was to existing ideas, societal values, and that in fact it was very contemporary. We talked about how it fit into existing practice frameworks and that it was very flexible. It could be adapted to work with individuals, groups, community and we may have talked about, it was appropriate for a variety of differ-

ent problems in living — I guess that's the Perlman phrase. But maybe you want to talk a little bit about its applicability to different problems. In the first book you mention things like conflicts in living, inadequate resources and so forth.

LE: Yeah. That's a very common subject. I'd like to append that one for a time when I'm fresher.

CC: Okay. T.C. was very easy to understand, not complex at all. It was taught to high school students. Okay?

LE: Could be tried out on a limited basis.

LE: Could and was. Was. Right. Communicability. Very easy. People would understand it right away. The only thing that people couldn't understand about it was when we said concentrate ... when we dealt with this underlying problem business. That was the thing that people couldn't, couldn't understand, although the political wind that has blown and providence has more or less dampened that problem by pushing it under the rug. But people in this culture are equally committed to a belief in underlying problems as being governing in terms of causality. Okay? Now, I generally attributed that, strength of that belief to the strength of psychoanalytic thought in our culture. But I think it goes much further than that but I don't know how further back. But people in our culture are deeply committed to the belief that there are some hidden underlying causes to apparent problems. Then, the thing that was and is very difficult to get across to practitioners is that they can deal with the pragmatic prob-

lem as it is currently perceived by both the client and oneself. In fact, I do not believe in this underlying problem. I don't know what the underlying problem is.

CC: I don't understand what the practitioner's goals are. Why they're so heavily motivated and interested in changing underlying problems.

LE: I don't know what they think exactly. Well, I think they value it so much because that's what they've been taught. They're taught that in schools of social work and than those who haven't been to a school of social work are taught that by their supervisors who have been to a school of social work. There's probably more to it than that ... but in current society, that value is produced by an adherence to the psychoanalytic model of behavior theory which has historically in our time been viewed as the highest the most used, the most sophisticated, the most valued, way of explaining human behavior. And so, naturally, you want to attach yourself to the best! And the best, it has been sold as the best is that actions and thoughts are derived from some hidden sort of secret unconscious that can be read by very high class specially trained professionals whose uniqueness rests on their ability to read your mind, your unconscious. And that has been widely disseminated and widely bought. That theory has political power and stems from ... well, Foucault is the master at figuring this stuff out, although I don't think he's got the last word either but anyway, it stems from the fact that in a capitalist society, it is very important to have large numbers

of people who are relatively docile, who are relatively submissive, who are relatively good guys who play by the rules as Clinton calls them, the guys who get up every morning and work hard and come home with nothing. It's very important to produce these kinds of people in a capitalist society, and, the teachings of the psychoanalytic religion have made it possible.

CC: Even though there's not a clear demand for it? To me, if you look at what, people need, most people aren't clamoring for talking therapies when they have needs. Yet we develop an immense industry, profession around it.

LE: No, but the ... but the rulers, the congressmen/people of the world are looking for devices which control behaviors of the working class and at the same time appear to be democratic, appear to be non-coercive. And the theory of underlying problems motivating present misbehaviors which need to be dealt with, changed by a large cadre of human service workers, clinicians of all various types, that will, manipulate the thoughts is something very appealing.

CC: So the origin of the problem has to do with the psyche and not the society.

LE: Right.

CC: And it gets them off the hook by giving us legitimacy to produce and reproduce ourselves despite the clear...

LE: Sometimes these working class people will come up with requests for therapy because they have been indoctrinated with it... You hear them on TV asking for therapy. You hear some Con-

gressmen from New York — who rant and rave about the need for therapy for drug addicts. Now, and you do find ... There are long waiting lists for people to get drug treatment. But this is, you know, this is an act of desperation. They don't want to get AIDS. They'd like a place to live and everything. And sold this as a bill of goods, that drug therapy will do this for them — which it won't. But, but ... this is the extraordinarily complex intellectual ... This is what I'm trying to unravel some of this in my work I'm doing now. Listen, I'm so old that ... I mean I had to be this old before I could understand it, you understand? And I don't have enough time to work this all out. So ... But, anyway, let me put it to you this way. . There's a big industry of, of sociological types who are all working on this problem. And, you know, we all owe our origins to Foucault . He started this whole thing in the seventies. And there are lot of intellectual types who are working, trying to understand these questions that we're talking about. A lot of people trying to understand. Nobody in social work is trying to understand this, which absolutely appalls me.

CC: In practice, you don't have time to stop and think. You're ... You don't get a perspective on things. You become mired down in ...

LE: Universities should be giving a perspective and they're not — not enough. Anyway, some do, some don't. ...

CC: What's going on right now in the U.S. with T. C. ?

LE: What happened to task centered is it became part of the common lore of the deal.

CC: Right. I was trained in '80 and when I looked at your book, it sounded exactly like how I was trained. And it was never called task centered. It was called problem solving.

LE: Right.

CC: But it doesn't look like Helen Perlman's book. It looks much more like this book.

LE: Well, that's what ... that's what you find all over. I mean, task centered has really ... how should I put it? It lost all the battles and won the war [chuckles]. I have become absorbed into the practice wisdom in the field. And I'm also getting ... my brain is wearing out. [laughs]. □

The editors had permission from Carl Coohy and Laura Epstein to edit the interview.

* All starred names are, or were faculty members and Professor Emeriti of The University of Chicago, School of Social Administration, Chicago Ill.

Gordon Hamilton was a leading expressionist of the "Diagnostic School of Thought." She was on the faculty of The Columbia University School of Social Work (1987) *Encyclopedia of Social Work*. 18th edition. 926-927.

** The SSA History Project was initiated in 1993 by Jeanne Marsh, Dean of SSA, to document the development of School during Edith Abbot's deanship (1924-1942). In addition to interviews with alumni, memoirs, curriculum material, correspondence, telegrams, unpublished manuscripts, audio/videotapes, diaries, and other artifacts were collected. The Project was later expanded to include in depth interviews with faculty emeriti of SSA. Laura Epstein was one of these individuals; Helen Harris Perlman, Mary Louise Somers, Alton Linford, and Bernece Simon are some of the others. The transcripts of the interviews, along with the other materials stated above, have been transferred to the Joseph Regenstein Library at the University of Chicago. Some interview transcripts will not be available until the year 2002.

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