Alex Gitterman and Alice Schaeffer

The white professional and the black client

The unknownness between persons must be challenged
by demanding that their feelings, including the rage,
fear, and mistrust, be shared and squarely faced

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As we become increasingly conscious of the depth of racism in our society,[1] and as tensions between blacks and whites continue to surface, it is imperative to examine the impact of these racial pressures on the helping professions—especially upon those encounters that find the white professional trying to serve the black client. It is not an uncommon experience, for both black client and white professional, that the supposedly therapeutic contact is a frustrating and unsatisfying one during which service is neither delivered nor received. Each party may tend to "explain" this result by blaming the other, and at present there is a substantial body of Literature—professional and popular—attacking the inadequacies of both white professionals and black clients. The stereotypes are familiar: the middle-class white professional is labeled as distant, unfeeling, uncaring—if not actually racist, malicious, and punitive;[2] the lower-class black client is stigmatized as unmotivated, resistant, inaccessible, and lacking mature personality development and family organization.[3]

Because of these negative experiences, question has been raised within the professional and lay community as to whether white professionals can, indeed, provide meaningful service for black clients. This question has stimulated vigorous debate and will continue for years to come. It is not the intention of the writers to attempt to answer this question. Rather they choose to view the present situation as given—one in which because of social service manpower conditions and the needs of this country's population, white professionals *do* work with black clients and will continue to do so. Therefore, the crucial issue becomes, *How* will this work be carried out—what can white professionals *bring to* and *do in* the encounter with black clients to make their services most useful? The writers address themselves to this concern by (1) identifying the obstacles emerging from the black-white encounter that impede the development of a helping relationship; (2) offering a professional vision, a frame of reference, that lends itself to a meaningful black-white engagement and (3) presenting case material to demonstrate one worker's struggle with these obstacles.

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[1] See, for example, National Advisory commission on Civil Disorders, *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders*, (New York Bantam Books, 1968).

[2] Kenneth Clark, *Dark Ghetto* (New York: Harper &

Row, 1965), p. 77.

[3] James Farmer, Stereotypes of the Negro and Their Relationship to His Self-image, in *Urban Schooling*, ed. H. C. Redman and R. L. Featherstone (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968), pp. 135-50.

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Obstacles inherent in the black-white encounter

The problems confronted in the white professional and black client encounter may be perceived as emerging from, and being obstacles to, the joint effort rather than as flaws or faults of one party or the other. Three basic situational factors define the framework and substance of the encounter between middle- class white professional and lower-class black client: institutional racism, social distance, and mutual unknownness. These factors greatly influence what the client and professional bring to the encounter and how they perceive and deal with each other.

The encounter occurs in the context of American society—its culture, norms, and values. This context is essentially a racist one based on a history of black slavery and oppression within a culture of white dominance and supposed superiority.[4] Race is a crucial dimension in American culture and carries with it a host of rigidly institutionalized roles and connotations. Both black client and white worker have experienced this racial dimension in the course of their lives; indeed they adapted to it, reacted against it, incorporated it, rejected it, struggled with it— each in his own way—but certainly they have not been able to avoid a self-consciousness about race and its significance in America.

One direct consequence of the institutionalized racial positions of blacks and whites is social distance. This consequence is further accentuated by the differential of available opportunities through which whites are able to attain greater social mobility than blacks.[5] In many ways, the specific helping encounter represents a microcosm of these societal conditions. The white professional is of the middle class, well educated, and functioning within and according to the rules of the established system. He has a fair degree of power over his own life as well as power over his client and the service his client needs. The lower-class black client tends to be poor, is less well educated, and has fewer tools and opportunities to help him negotiate the established system on its own terms. As he perceives it, he has little power over his own destiny, including the outcome of his encounter with the white professional. Both parties perceive that the white professional has the upper hand—both in the larger society and in the specific encounter between them.

As a result of these conditions, there emerge two separate and distinct experiences, each somewhat unknown and alien to the other. It is this very quality of mutual strangeness which characterizes the initial black-white encounter. It may be camouflaged, denied, or rationalized. The void may be filled by stereotyped "knowledge" and preconceptions, but the essential unknownness remains. Not only are the two different, but, not having lived or known each other's differences, they can only speculate about them. They see each other and the world, and are in turn viewed and treated by the world, in different ways.

Thus separated by race, money, education, social position, power, and lack of real knowledge of and feeling for the other's life experience, the white professional and black client come together. They face each other and are Confronted with the necessity of doing something together. The reactions they may have to each other and to the situation in which they find themselves are the dynamics of the encounter with which they must cope in order to work together. In essence, both professionals and clients are what they are, based upon their past experiences and the society in which they live and interact. They do not know each other; they do not trust each other. Indeed, they most probably have many feelings about each other, themselves, and their respective positions which in reality impede the development of trust and con-

[4]See, for example, Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Harnilton, *Black Power* (New York: Vintage Books, 1967); Eldridge Cleaver, Soul On Ice (New York: McGraw Hill, 1968); Louis L. Knowles and Kenneth Prewitt, *Institutional Racism In America* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1969); August Meier and Elliot Rudwick, *Black Protest in the Sixties* (Chicago: Quadrangie Books, 1970); Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Grove Press, 1964); and Sidney M. Willhelm and Elwin H. Powell, Who Needs the Negro?, *Trans-Action,* I:3-6 (September-October 1964).

[5]For statistical description, see Elizabeth M. Eddy, *Walk the White Line* (New York: Vintage Books, 1964), p. 12; Clark, Dark Ghetto, pp. 3-55; Michael Harrington, *The Other America* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, pg. 65), pp. 65-82; and Arnold M. Rose, Characteristics of Socio-Economic Status Amongst White and Non Whites *in Urban Schooling,* ed. Redman and Featherstone.

comitant mutual honesty. First, there is suspiciousness and fear between them. "What is the other really thinking and feeling? What does he really want? What does he really mean? How much does he hate me, blame me, or want to con me? How can he hurt me or take advantage of me?" The phenomenon of fear and suspicion has been discussed and documented in many sources as coming from the black client.[6] It is an equally active dynamic for the white worker. It is an inevitable consequence of the three basic factors already identified. This phenomenon is in part a reaction to, and in part a precipitator of, the fear and suspiciousness of the black client. It is both a defense and an offense. Regardless of whether the white professional is aware of it, the black client usually is.

There is also anger between them. Once again, much has been written, especially in recent years, of the rage that is felt by black people.[7] The White worker also feels anger of which he may or may not be aware. He may be angry at the black client for being so troubled, or helpless, or dependent, or hard to reach. He may be angry at himself for his inability to do very much to really help his client; or he may be angry at the client for being angry at him. The anger is there on some level. It is most likely that the client perceives it even if the worker does not.

There is also pain between them. This pain is one of the most complex dynamics because it stems from so many different sources. There is pain and suffering connected with whatever presenting problems caused the client to seek service. There is, of course, the underlying pain of being black in white America. There is also the pain felt by the worker in response to his client's pains and in reaction to them. In addition, there is the pain from the guilt felt by each party—guilt by the client for having problems with which he cannot cope and in being in a subordinate and powerless position—and guilt by the worker at having the feeling that he is somehow responsible for his client's problems or that he cannot really do anything to alleviate them. Most profoundly, there is guilt caused by repressed anger and other negative feelings experienced by both.

Furthermore, there is defensiveness and guardedness between them. Keeping each other at arm's length may decrease the hurt and danger, make them less vulnerable, and somehow ease the struggle. If they blame each other, perhaps they can avoid looking at themselves. If they have ready answers for all accusations, real or imagined, perhaps they need not really listen to each other or touch each other. If they try to relate by masking their feelings. perhaps they will he safer. They may deny, avoid, project, rationalize, internalize; externalize, or just plain lie. The defensiveness and guardedness between worker and client are of the encounter and are not characteristic of either worker or client. Rather, they become a reaction and an obstacle between them, which come out of the situation and must be perceived and dealt with as such. In a real sense, both worker and client are simultaneously victims and perpetuators of these obstacles.[8]

A professional vision

Nevertheless, there is hope. Despite the obstacles between them, worker and client do express a need for each other in the very act of coming together. The client requests some kind of help, and the worker and sponsoring agency indicate a willingness to try to provide it. This force pulling them toward each other even while myriad counter-forces are pulling them apart may be seen as a potential underlying symbiotic attachment between worker and client.[9] William Schwartz has postulated a "symbiotic" relationship between the individual and society:

. . . each needing the other for its own life and growth, and each reaching out to the other with

[6]Grier and Cobbs identify the fear and suspicion as a defense for survival and refer to it as "cultural paranoia . . . in which every white man is a potential enemy and every social system is set against him unless he personally finds out differently." See William H. Grier and Price M. Cobbs, *Black Rage* (New York: Bantam Books, 1969), p. 149

[7]Grier and Cobbs, *Black Rage*, pp. 1-17, 152-67; and Charles Silberman, *Crisis in Black and White* (New York: Vintage Books, 1964), pp.58-67.

[8]For good discussions on the white professional and black client relationship, see Julia Block, The White Worker and the Negro Client in Psychotherapy, *Social Work*, 13:36-42 (April 1968); Dorcas Bowles, Making Casework Relevant to Black People: Approaches, Techniques, Theoretical Implications, *Child Welfare*, 48:468-75 (October 1969); Esther Fibush, The White Worker and the Negro Client, *Social Casework*, 46: 271-78 (May 1965); Esther Fibush and BeAlva Turnquest, A Black and White Approach to the Problem of Racism, *Social Case-*

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all the strength it can command at a given moment . . . [based on] . . . the person's urge to belong to society as a full and productive member and the society's ability to provide certain specific means for integrating its people and enriching their social contributions.[10]

This formulation suggests that a fully realized and healthy society can develop only through fully realized and healthy people and that to the extent that any segment of the population is diminished, total society suffers. It is therefore in the interest of the whole society to enable every single member to become fulfilled and productive, and it is in the interest of every individual member to have a healthy society in which he can grow. On the other hand, a counter potential also exists—one in which the relationship can become parasitic and mutually destructive. These potentials represent two extremes on a theoretical continuum, neither of which exists completely in a real society. A part of one potential, however, coexists with a part of the other in any given situation. The question to resolve is: Toward which potential do we want to strive?

In the specific encounter between the white worker and black client, occurring in an admittedly imperfect and sometimes destructive society, there is still potential for a symbiotic relationship. It is found in the fact that the worker is employed by an agency that has been charged with the responsibility of serving people who have difficulty obtaining and utilizing society's resources. Concomitantly, lower-class black people in need of assistance are encouraged to look to these agencies to provide the needed services. Thus, there is a direct societal mandate for workers and clients to attain a goal together. This goal may or may not be realized, and the forces impeding it are tremendous. However, because such a symbiotic potential exists—because the racist, master-slave, parasitic microcosm can be countered by a mutual need, mutual aid microcosm—the potential can begin to be uncovered and realized through a professional orientation.

The orientation envisions the helping process as a mutual endeavor between active participants, each trying to reach and touch each other in the giving and using of help. This emphasis on mutuality is crucial because it counters the superiority-inferiority dynamic within the relationship. It says that it takes *both* participants to do the job—that they are equally important, that they must listen to each other, that they must recognize each other's rights and responsibilities, and that they must respect each other.

The notion of active participation directed toward reaching and touching each other emphasizes the emotional engagement deemed necessary for the accomplishment of real and black client in opposition to passive or secret observation and analysis. This part of the vision attempts to counter the forces of isolation, alienation, and unknownness. It says, "Get in there and do, open up, make mistakes, express what you are feeling and thinking." It also encourages the worker actively to support the client's desire and efforts to combat the social conditions affecting his life by struggling beside him. It say's that the worker cannot be an uninvolved outsider who ignores or minimizes those societal factors that contribute to his client's problems. What is envisioned is an endeavor in which client and worker jointly tackle relevant social problems in contrast to the situation depicted in Kenneth Clark's indictment of unhelpful professionals.

The pervasive need to turn one's back on any clear evidence of man's inhumanity to man exemplified in the cool objective approach is possibly most clearly seen . . . in the detached professionalism of many social. . . . Some members of these helping fields too often define as objectivity, what to the client, feels more like insensitivity. Furthermore, in their preoccupation with the problem of the individuals and their insistence upon reducing him to a manageable system of assumptions, the disturbing and dehumanizing social realities behind his personal agonies may be avoided.[11]

work, 51:459-66 (October 1970); Jean Gochros, Recognition and Use of Anger in Negro Clients, Social Work, 2:28-34 (January 1966); Harold Rosen and Jerome Frank, Negroes in Psychotherapy, *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 119:456-80 (November 1962); and Barbara F. Shannon, Implications of White Racism for Social Work Practice, *Social Casework*, 51:270-76 (May 1970).

[9]*Webster's New International Dictionary*, 3rd ed., s.v. "symbiotic."

[10]William Schwartz, The Social Worker in the Group, in *New Perspectives on Services to Groups: Theory Organization and Practice* (New York: National Association of Social Workers, 1961), p.15.

The foundation of this professional orientation is the belief that the black client has the right and capacities to determine what he wants to do and the strength to move himself in that direction. With this perspective, the worker does not set himself up as the omniscient expert trying to direct or control his client. Carl Rogers states that "it is the client who knows what hurts, what directions to go, what problems are crucial, what experiences have been deeply buried." [12] The worker reaches for what lies within the black client—his desires, dreams, aspirations, strengths, become a source of help, a resource to be used by the client as he grows. If the worker really believes in the client, he can lend himself in the encounter without having to impose himself. Thus, the potential conflict between different value systems—between different judgments of right and wrong, sickness and health—is mitigated. Such judgments are basically irrelevant. What matters is the client's choices and the development of his ability to recognize his options and take advantage of them.

The worker can give of himself freely, offering his knowledge, opinions, and feelings. He can also offer a vision of how things might be different for the client by affirming the client's right and ability to use what he wants on his own terms. Thus, the vision emphasizes the client as his own person, making his own way. This vision contrasts with a view of the black client as powerless, submissive, inferior, or someone to be led by the expert. The worker strives to stay with the client as he offers his faith in the client himself.

Can I meet this other individual as a person who is in process of *becoming,* or will I be bound by his past and by my present? If, in my encounter with him, I am dealing with him as an immature child, an ignorant student, a neurotic personality . . . each of these concepts of mine limits what he can be in the relationship. If I accept the other person as something fixed, already diagnosed and classified, already shaped by his past, then I am doing my part to confirm this limited hypothesis. If I accept him as a process of *becoming* then I am doing what I can to confirm or make real his potentialities.[13]

Finally, the orientation is essentially a *human* one in which white worker and black client struggle to gain the freedom to reveal themselves as real human beings. It is based on the belief that growth occurs primarily through interaction between real people who have weaknesses and strengths, flaws and attributes, and who can benefit by revealing them and coming to grips with them and each other.

Crisis, shock, confrontation, resistance, struggle, rejection, defeat as well as joy, silence, the excitement of discovery, the peaceful smile, the gesture of affirmation and growth—all these enter into the process of therapy in which real persons rather than ghosts engage in the challenging struggle of wills and the ennobling pursuit of meaning and value in living.[14]

The orientation challenges the unknownness between worker and client by demanding that their feelings—including the rage, fear, and mistrust—be shared and squarely faced If the pain is avoided, the humanness is avoided; life is deadened; black client and white worker remain apart, relating to each other only through masks. The obstacles between them grow because they are not confronted; they destroy all potential for real help to be given or received. Only when the risks are taken, when the pain is felt and lived through, when there is struggle and confrontation, when black client and white worker open themselves to each other, can they be freed to experience the caring that can be between them.

The essential ingredient is the capacity of the therapist to love his patient—to say to him that . . . you have a listener and companion who wants you to make it. If you must weep, I'll wipe your tears. If you must hit someone, hit me, I can take it. I will, in fact, do *anything* to help you be what you can be—my love for you is of such an order.[15]

Case illustration

The following excerpts illustrate the struggles of one white social worker and one black client to

[11]Clark, *Dark Ghetto*, p. 77

[12]Carl Rogers, *On Becoming A Person* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970), pp.11-12.

[13]Ibid, p.55

[14]Clark Moustakas, *Existential Child Therapy* (New York: Basic Books, 1966), p.3.

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begin to establish a helping relationship based on mutual honesty and trust. The focus on the helping relationship does not imply that the development of this relationship was the primary concern of worker and client. Rather, the central focus was, and had to be, the services desired by the client and the joint-efforts of worker and client to meet the client's needs. However, aside from specific concrete assistance which could be offered somewhat impersonally, the major part of their work together involved struggling with intimate and painful problems and necessitated a sharing, honesty, and trust between worker and client. Thus, the helping relationship was the vehicle through which service could be offered. The excerpts selected trace the course of the work between client and worker, highlighting both the obstacles within the encounter and the efforts made to deal with these obstacles.

Mrs. R, a thirty-year-old black mother of seven children, called the neighborhood social service office to request help in finding summer camps for her older children. The worker receiving the call was a twenty-two-year-old, unmarried white woman. After discussing the request briefly on the telephone, the worker offered to gather information on camps and to meet with the client in her home to discuss the matter further.

The struggle for mutuality

From the beginning, the worker emphasized the need to develop a mutual definition of what was needed, ways to proceed, and expectations of each other. Her reason was to let Mrs. R know that they would have to be real partners in the endeavor in order to get anywhere and that neither one could impose a point of view upon the other. This beginning was an attempt immediately to challenge the potential obstacles of distance and power differential. These obstacles, although present in every helping relationship, are heightened in the black-white encounter because of institutionalized racial attitudes in America. The worker realized that she would have to demonstrate that she really meant her words of mutuality by listening for subtle cues, drawing out critical responses, and guarding against pushing Mrs. R into actions about which she might be hesitant.

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[15]Grier and Cobbs, *Black Rage*, p. 180.

WORKER: I brought Mrs. R information about camp for the children and talked enthusiastically about their going. She seemed pleased but began anticipating that things might be wrong with the camp. At first, I tried to explain away all her objections; then I realized she might have mixed feelings about sending them to camp or might fear I was trying to railroad her into just any camp. I tried to draw out this feeling by saying that maybe all these questions on her mind made her unsure about wanting to send the children away to camp. She said she did want them to go, but only to a good camp. I added, "And one you can see for yourself is good, not just because someone says it." She smiled and said she had to make sure. I said that I was glad she checked me before I started running away with my enthusiasm and that it certainly was up to her to get all the information and make the final decision on which camp was best.

The client responded to the worker's efforts to extend herself—illingness to work in Mrs. R's own home, promptness in gathering camp information, and responsiveness to Mrs. R's wishes—by beginning to share some of her other concerns. These concerns included Mrs. R's despair about her severe obesity and her desire to obtain a homemaker so that she could enter an inpatient weight reduction program, her difficulties with her ten-year-old son who had been expelled from school and was frequently in trouble in the community, her sense of being overwhelmed by the demands of raising seven children without a consistently available husband and father, and her struggle to survive the strain of coping with the institutions impinging on her life—welfare, schools, housing.

The worker made an offer of help with these concerns, trying to present an intensive, flexible service that Mrs. R could make use of in her own way. Although no attempt was made to deal with racial factors explicitly in the early sessions, the worker make every effort to set a tone of partnership, respect, and getting to know each other which would challenge the potential obstacles of the black-white encounter.

WORKER: After about an hour (at the third interview) I said, "Listen, I want to ask you about an idea I've been thinking about, and I hope you will be able to let me know what you really think about it." I asked her about the possibility of my using my last few months at social service to get her really started in help for herself and her family, by seeing her three times a week and being available to her for variety of services: just

talking, helping in meetings with such other agencies as housing and management, helping her with physical tasks, or figuring out problems about the children. She smiled and said no one ever had done this for her before. I said I wanted to lend a hand to her efforts and maybe things could be worked out better for her. She then began talking about past workers who had tried to help her and how little they had accomplished. I said that I heard a warning, like the one she had made once before, that we should not get our hopes up because nothing could be done.

She sighed and said no one ever really did anything for her. I said I could understand that it often seemed hopeless and maybe it seemed too much even to try again. She said that maybe this time would be different. I agreed, but hearing her express this hope worried me that she might expect the impossible of me or become angry or frustrated if changes took a long time. She laughed and said sometimes she became angry at her worker. I said she had a right to get angry and could at me, but still we could not accomplish miracles and maybe she would be disappointed again. She said, "I know, just one step at a time." I said I thought it was not much, but it was all we had. She said, "That and more nerves than brains." We both laughed.

The specific course of the work was guided by the nature of the problems being tackled by worker and client. If concrete assistance or material goods were needed, the worker lent her efforts to the client's own attempts to obtain them. If outside systems or institutions needed to be dealt with to obtain better services for the client, worker and client strategized together, with the worker accompanying the client, whenever necessary, to lend support, skills, and influence. If the client was struggling with personal and family problems, the worker offered help with these problems.

Always, the emphasis was on the task at hand and developing the best ways for worker and client to work together to deal with the tasks before them. The obstacles and tensions within the black-white encounter were viewed as potential impediments to a successful service and therefore had to be confronted and challenged in order for the work to proceed.

Empathizing through honest sharing

Having decided, however tentatively, that they wanted to try to work together, black client and white worker had to struggle to begin to close the gap of distance and unknownness that separated them. They had to risk revealing themselves, thereby becoming more vulnerable, but also more human and accessible to each other. In defining themselves for what they were and how they felt, worker and client were confronted by their real differences—not only in race, but in class, education, social position, and outlook on life. This was a painful, halting process. There was no right way to do it. In the struggle, a bond began to develop between them.

Worker: We talked a while longer and I had to leave. As I stood up she said, "That's a nice dress, you look good today. Are you gonna meet your boyfriend?" I thanked her but must have appeared embarrassed. She said, "Why do you always get embarrassed when I ask; about your boyfriend?" I was silent a few seconds, and then said that she was right in sensing that I did get embarrassed. I said I was not sure why, but thought it might be because I did not feel I should share my personal life with her since I was there to help her. She said maybe if she knew I had problems, she wouldn't think about her own so much. I said maybe that was true but it wouldn't help her work on her problems to think about mine. She said, "You have problems? Don't kid me." I asked, "Do you believe I don't have problems as you have?" She agreed. I said that I knew she thought I had a better life than she had and was more fortunate, and in many ways it was true.

I said that sometimes I guess she'd resent me for it because I was in a position to help her, and she might wish that the tables were turned. She smiled a knowing smile and said that such a situation would be nice. Then she asked, "You do have some problems, don't you?" I said that I did and I guessed all people had problems, although they might be of a different nature. She said that she sometimes felt life was hard only for her and that she wished others had their share too. I said it was natural to feel that way, especially when things were going bad for her. I said it was all right even when she wished I would find life a little difficult.

One day she asked me where she could buy inexpensive beds (two of her children needed beds). I suggested a large department store. Mrs. R howled, slapped me on the back, and said, "Girl, you are crazy." Her friend joined in the laughter. Then they informed me about the prices at that store. I admitted I had never shopped for beds and was just guessing. I felt embarrassed by my ignorance and guilty that I had never had to learn to shop with as little money as she had to do. I did not know what to say, yet it seemed all right to say nothing.

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Confronting anger and suspiciousness

If there was to be real honesty between them, worker and client had to face the painful areas of negative feelings in the relationship. Especially in a black-white encounter in which anger, tensions, and fears are almost built into the situation, an attempt to deny or avoid them would have implied that the relationship could not withstand them and that honesty had to be limited to "nice" feelings. Moreover, when it really came down to the basic issues, they still had to "play the game" with each other. Making this black-white experience different necessitated squarely acknowledging the negative feelings. This acknowledgement was a difficult task, and at times the worker's own apprehension prevented her from tackling it. Nevertheless, the necessary direction remained clear even when it was not successfully followed.

WORKER: Then she began talking about another social worker, an investigator she had known. She said she liked them mean and rough; then she could hate them and know they were enemies and that there was to be a battle. She said the nice ones were sneakier and they double-crossed one with a smile. I asked, "Do you always have the feeling that you can't trust anyone, that behind the smile they don't like you and will double-cross you?" She said the worst thing was that the smile cooled off her anger and took her off guard. I said, "That sounds as if it could mean me, at least sometimes. I know you're still afraid to trust me and I have a good idea of the reason, since you have been let down so often."

I said that I also knew that sometimes when she was angry, I cooled her off by being nice. I cited a recent incedent when I had not visited when she expected me and then I telephoned to say I was sorry, so that she didn't feel she could scold me after that. She laughed and said, "You are something, else, you even remembered that." I said I thought she did too. I asked if she had been very angry at me then. She laughed and asked, "What do you think?" I replied, "But you couldn't show it or tell me?" She said it didn't seem worth the effort, and then I had called to apologize. We both smiled at this "cooling out" piece. I said that maybe now that we have talked, it will be easier for her to tell me next time I upset her or make her angry or make her feel any kind of way. She nodded and said, "Maybe it will."

During the next half-hour, the sarcastic exchanges that seemed to mask deep feelings were very frequent. First she said, "I hear you have a maid—like a rich kid." I said I guess sometimes she thought of me as a rich person. She laughed and said she didn't, but she knew I surely was not poor and couldn't know how hard it was for poor people. I said that was true, and sometimes it would bother her, that maybe life was better for me and that was one reason I could help her. She said that I was a "do-gooder."

At this time I should have picked up her anger, but I did not. I said I just wanted to help her and her children if I could. Then she said, "I bet you'll leave here as soon as you can get something easy." I said that I guessed she thought that I wanted to leave as soon as I could. She said, "Sure you do, you're just here to get experience. Like the student teachers. I don't blame you." She went on to say that she would do the same thing in my place and go where it was easier.

I asked if it would make any difference if I said it wasn't true for me, that if I could get a job here, I would stay. What I meant was that my words would not change the feelings she had about me. However, she said, "Sure if it's true, say it; I don't think you are a liar." I said, "What I mean is that some part of you does think I'll pick up and run to a nice rich area in the suburbs as soon as I can get out of here, and just my words won't t really affect that." She laughed and said, "Well, you will go back to the suburbs, won't you?" I said I could see how angry she was about the possibility that I might leave her. She said that she wasn't angry but that she just knew how it was. I said that I presumed that all people who helped her eventually left her. She could not respond to this statement, but agiain asked if I was leaving. I said that I had told her before that I would be leaving in May—not because I wanted to, but because my job here was over. I realized that by making excuses I was cooling her out but I could not tolerate her anger and sadness coupled with my own.

Challenging racial obstacles

Although racial position and attitudes were deeply entwined in every experience and feeling between worker and client, it was important in the course of the work to confront the racial dynamic explicitly. Again this area was painful, and the temptation to avoid it and feign "color-blindness" was great. The worker had to demonstrate her own willingness to reveal her racial attitudes before Mrs. R would risk sharing hers. It was crucial that worker and client relate directly to themselves as white and black and not discuss race on a theoretical plane, denying, its impact

on themselves and their work together. Only by facing their differences and trying, to share the meaning of their own black and white experiences could they begin to bridge the gap of racial distance and unknownness.

WORKER: Mrs. R said that the only other person she had ever talked to a long time ago was Miss 0, a social worker, and she was different too. I asked if she were black or white she said she was white then stopped to think and said, "I'd never have believed I could talk like this to a white person" She said that the way white people treat colored people made her angry. She said it made her angry that she had to call white ladies "Miss" and they called her "girl" or "Frances." She said, "If you're white, you're right, if you're black, stay back."

I said that blacks did have a pretty bad deal in America and I would expect her to be angry and bitter. She said life was difficult for a black person and the whites never let them pick themselves up. She added that mixed marriages made her furious because it was "like the black needed the white to get ahead." She commented that it just infuriated her to see an interracial couple in the street. I asked her why she felt so strongly about it, as if it were a personal insult Mrs. R replied, "Listen, it is an insult. My mother looked white and I was the black child of the white mother and that was a terrible feeling."

She began talking about herself and how she had never had a break in life. Then she said, "Colored people never get much—no decent jobs, no education, nothing." I said I knew it was very rough to be black in America. She said, "It's rougher than you could know, you just can't imagine." I said, "I guess you're saying I really can't know how it is, how it feels what it's like to be black because I'm white." She said that was true and that the black people had it worse than any others; they just received a rotten deal from the whites. I said, "I'm one of the whites; does it bother you sometimes that I have more than you, that I can't even begin to know how life is for you?" She said, "No it doesn't bother me, that's life." Then she paused and said, "Yes it does bother me, it bothers me a great deal. The whites can do anything and get away with it, but let a black man or a black child make a slip and they get the works!"

She continued, "And you know the worst part is when the northern whites make like they care, and we know they don't. At least in the South they're honest; they hate us and they say it." I said, "I guess I fit in here too, I am one of the whites who acts as though she cares, and you're not sure whether I do. Maybe you are not even sure if I don't hate you." She shrugged and we were both silent. I said it was hard to get that out and now we felt uncomfortable, but it was good that we had made a start in talking about this subject—her feelings about being black and my being white did matter, and so did my feelings and we should try to share them.

Challenging the sense of worthlessness and hopelessness

The intensity of pain and hardship suffered by Mrs. R was sometimes enough to overwhelm both worker and client and caused both to experience despair, defeat, hopelessness, worthlessness, self blame, and guilt—all obstacles to productive work together. While the worker was struggling to deal with these feelings within herself, she also had to show Mrs. R her faith in her and her vision of hope and progress for her. At the same time, she had to guard against making empty declarations of concern or minimizing Mrs. R's tremendous burdens. The worker had to show sincere concern. By letting Mrs. R's pain touch her, by opening herself to the closeness between them, and by staying with Mrs. R through difficult times, the worker showed that she cared, that Mrs. R mattered to her and that she believed in what Mrs. R could accomplish.

WORKER: I did not try to talk her out of her sadness. When she seemed to have run dry and looked to me, I said, "For a while I guess you'll just feel totally hopeless and not even have the energy to try to do something but after a time this hopelessness will get less and your stronger part will come out, and then I'll ask you what you want to do." She showed a spark of anger and said, "*Do*? There's nothing that can be done." I said I didn't believe that and knew that some part of her didn't believe it either and would want at least to try. She challenged me and said, "You tell me what to do, how to make all the problems go away." I said, "Now you are challenging me to do the impossible and I can not. Let us pick one problem and try to work on that." She began discussing her obesity—the embarrassment, physical discomfort, and her resulting isolation. As she gave vent to these feelings, she started to think of ways to deal with the problem—specifically, inpatient weight reduction programs. We began to think through the steps needed to get her into one of these programs.

Mrs. R indicated the way she would like all the arrangements to be made and we began

The white professional and the black client

developing strategies for proceeding. At one point I said to her, "Listen, I've never fooled you up to now, and I'll try not to as we work together. We both know it will be very difficult for you to lose weight and begin to make things better for yourself and your children; however, something about you makes me believe in you and your ability to do it and get some of that better life you want." She was silent for a while and then said, "No one ever said that to me before."

As I stood up I must have sighed because she said, "You're gonna go crazy, taking my problems so seriously." I asked if she meant I shouldn't take her problems seriously because they weren't my own. She said social workers never really cared about their clients; they just listened and nodded and then forgot. I was silent for a few seconds and then I said, "I have to care. I know you and I have feelings for you." She was stunned and said, "You know, I think you're really telling the truth." I asked, "Did you think no one could really care about you?" She said she didn't think anyone ever really did. She kept marveling, almost talking to herself. She said, "You really did something; I just told you about that money and expected you'd forget about it and then you go and think about it and even tell your supervisor and then you come up and do something. You really did something for me." She repeated, "I think you really care." I could only nod. As I walked through the door she said, "You know, if you don't change—I mean if you somehow manage not to get hardened so that you hear so many problems that they don't mean a thing—you're going to be a good social worker."

Contact as real human beings

Through it all, Mrs. R and her worker were just two people—of different race, class, social position, background and fortune—but still just two people struggling, against tremendous obstacles, to do a job together. They accomplished no miracles, overturned no oppressive structures, proved no major point, and left no lasting mark upon the world. Although they had a great impact upon each other, they were not really changed in dramatic or visible ways. They continued to function in their own worlds, in their own ways, separated by so much, and still scarred by the racism of America. However, because of their step-by-step efforts, they began to make a dent on the terrible problem that had previously overwhelmed Mrs. R and on the feelings of helplessness and powerlessness that had

made her believe things could never be any different. They made only a beginning. They struggled and suffered and shared and fought and loved and cried. With every moment of profound and intimate sharing, they reaffirmed the potential of two human beings to reach and touch each other.

WORKER: I winced and Mrs. R noticed it. She said, "I guess you think I'm a bad mother." I said, "I know you saw me react when you yelled at Tony and I won't lie to you: I don't think you're a bad mother, but it bothered me to hear the way you talked to him. It bothers me even more because I know that's not really how you are or how you want to be. When you talk to me you come across so differently. I believe you want to be a good mother and want to give them something good. However, when you let all your anger and hurt come out on them, you're hurting them and going against what you really want." She was silent and I said, "Maybe you're thinking, 'Who is she to tell me these things; she doesn't know how miserable it is and what a poor life I've gotten stuck with.'" She replied, "That's true, you don't know, so it's easy for you to talk, but still I don't always want to yell and be mean to the kids. It's just that sometimes I get so angry that things are like this for us that I'm afraid that if I beat them I'll kill them so I try to yell and let the anger out so I won't hit them so much.

I said that I had some idea what it must feel like, although I couldn't feel it as she could—how just seeing the children reminded her of all she wanted for them and couldn't give them, and also how they prevented her from having freedom and the things she needed in her own life. She shook her head slowly and there was pain in her eyes, "That's some of it; there's so much more; I'll try to let you know how it is."

We talked about her needing help to manage all her problems and her large family. I supported her feeling that it was not her fault that she needed help and that her problems were real and very serious. She told me about the group she had been in at the mental health clinic because her social worker there believed it would be good for her to have something to do and people to talk to other than her children. Then she found it was a group for recently released hospital patients many of whom were still psychotic. They talked to themselves and sometimes lost sight of reality for moments. She said she was very frightened by them and also upset that she was placed in a group with them. She said, "Look, I know I'm nuts, but I'm not that nuts. Maybe some day I will be, but let me get there in

my own time. When I have nervous breakdown, I want it to be my very own and not taught to me by members of my therapy group!"

I literally howled at this speech. She was very pleased that I responded in this way, and we both laughed. I said I know she wasn't really kidding and had a great deal of serious feelings about this problem, especially about being crazy, but she'd said it in such a great way, seeing the comedy of the situation, that I had to laugh. She said, "Sometimes if you don't laugh at ridiculous but painful situations, you just go nuts." I said, "You know I'm glad you let me see this part of you, the part that can laugh and be warm even in the midst of pain." She said, "You know, I'm glad we can laugh together."

Conclusion

The writers have identified those critical societal conditions of institutional racism, social distance, and mutual unknownness that profoundly influence the white professional-black client encounter. In this encounter, as in society, it is the white professional who has the perceived and defined power, status, and control. This predefined, institutionalized role relationship triggers deep feelings of mistrust, anger, fear, pain, and resentment within both worker and client. These feelings represent potential obstacles to the development of a helping relationship through which desired services can be delivered. Certain kinds of social services, such as assisting in budget preparation or making referrals, may be effectively offered without the establishment of a helping relationship. However, when desired services involve more complex needs and deeply felt and intimate struggles, the helping relationship becomes a crucial vehicle. Moreover, this relationship can be effective only to the extent that it is open, trusting, and real. Thus, those obstacles that impede the development of such a helping relationship must be dealt with by worker and client in order for them to work successfully together.

The writers have attempted to define some of the specific obstacles within the white professional-black client encounter and have offered a way of approaching and dealing with them. The writers do not suggest that the basic social problems involved in institutional racism will be mitigated through the described frame of reference or social work skills. To provide an effective and needed service to the black client does not change the society in which he must continue to live. To the extent that some seg-

ment of a black client's life can change and become more satisfactory to himself, however, something significant has been accomplished. The primary proposition is that by challenging the obstacles of the white professional-black client encounter and by working in such a manner that worker and client can build a helping relationship based on trust and honesty, the client can begin to demand and receive more of those services he needs and desires.

The specific case illustration demonstrates how a deepening helping relationship—which both worker and client struggled against the obstacles keeping them apart to make themselves known, real and available to each other—freed the client to demand and make use of ever more extensive and intensive services. By developing trust in the worker, the client was able to demand a variety of services. She obtained country camp placement for her older children, secured minimum standards from the Department of Social Services, and developed a more successful working relationship with the Department of Social Services worker. She also improved communication with her housing manager, clarified the fine system and successfully challenged several situations in which fines had been incorrectly levied, gained reinstatement of her son in public school, was admitted into an inpatient weight reduction program, and obtained homemaker service for her children. In addition, she was enabled to open new avenues of understanding and exchange among family members, develop a greater emphasis on dealing with family problems without violence and recriminations, and begin to deal with deep sources of family tension.

In essence, the client's acquisition of entitled services was always the major emphasis, rather than the work on the obstacles in their relationship. However, only to the extent that the worker and client were able to "reach and touch each other as real human beings" was it possible for genuine services to be delivered. □

Thanks Sonia!