

Subprofessionals in Extension?

SAUL A. SILVERMAN

"Use of aides will be a necessity if Cooperative Extension is to make the most of social and economic development and quality of living programs," according to the Joint USDA/NASULGC Extension Study Committee.¹ A ratio of from 3 to 4.5 subprofessionals (aides) to one professional worker (a total of 52,460 by 1975) is recommended in programs where subprofessionals would be used (social and economic development, quality of living, and low-income agriculture). These are recommended for work mostly with the disadvantaged and alienated, with the aides coming primarily from the target population. According to the report, "effective work will require a specific orientation, empathy, and effort." What will these special requirements entail? What is the role of the professional who works with subprofessionals? Do the demands on the professional change substantively and substantially when he has subprofessionals working with him? Experiences in recent years with pilot projects, special contract projects, and work of other agencies provide some clues. The author of this article sorts out and discusses some of the considerations that should receive attention as Extension moves to add a subprofessional category to its classification of employees. If the author's observations are correct, such a move will not simply extend the energies of the professional, it will have a considerable impact on the content of his role.—The editor.

WE ARE BEGINNING to see an enormous need for more personnel if we are to reverse the horrors of poverty and that the concept of the subprofessional is a brilliant prospect for providing many

¹ *A People and a Spirit*, A Report of the Joint USDA/NASULGC Extension Study Committee (Fort Collins, Colorado: Printing and Publications Service, Colorado State University, November, 1968). See Lowell H. Watts, "Extension's Future—A National Report," *Journal of Cooperative Extension*, VI (Winter, 1968), 199-206, for an outline of the major thrusts of the recommendations of this report.

SAUL A. SILVERMAN is Associate Professor, Child Development and Family Relations and Consultant to the South Providence Project, University of Rhode Island, and a marriage and family counselor in private practice.

such needed personnel. There are two potential outcomes from employing a subprofessional: (1) The contribution he can make in helping clientele and (2) the enormous help that comes to the subprofessional in the process of his working in a particular program.

In South Providence, Rhode Island, this has been especially true in dealing with people in a low-income group urban ghetto, using the techniques of counselling, home economics programming, and 4-H. What an enormous thrust we got in terms of self actualization when members of some of these families could get into the position of subprofessional—whether through our pilot project, Headstart, the community school, or in some other effort. It seems that one of the critical areas of salvation for the human community and for American society in particular is a new creative approach to the utilization of the subprofessional in the vast array of helping services.

It will be my purpose here to discuss the relationship between the professional and the subprofessional (the aide, paraprofessional, nonprofessional, or whatever you choose to call such a position)—to demonstrate something of what is in store for the professional who, by choice or otherwise, becomes involved with this innovation in the helping enterprise. Working with and through the subprofessional introduces a whole new dimension in relationships. Before I get into the relationship specifically, let me illustrate briefly how the effective subprofessional can be identified.

Identifying the Subprofessional

One of the most critical qualities to look for in the subprofessional in the helping services, particularly in Extension, I call "relationship-ability." That is, how well does this person do at opening a relationship? In the South Providence project we discovered that the role-playing situation provided a way for identifying and developing the relationship-ability. For example, in one role-playing situation we took the case of a mother with six children—of low level overt intelligence, a high level of resistance, a great deal of passive aggression, a father who was living with another young girl, and so on. One member of our staff played that mother; another member of the staff played her sister; others played the other members of the family. We asked a lady who wanted to be an aide to role play what she would do in such a situation. It was amazing how quickly we were able to detect in the actual role play that this potential aide had relationship-ability. It was apparent to all of us. She became one of our most outstanding workers. Role play can be extremely helpful in locating subprofessionals, as well as in training.

One thing we're discovering, of course, is that human relationship-ability is not altogether something inborn; it's also a skill that one has to learn and develop. The role-play situation is an excellent way of developing that skill.

Another way of breaking in the subprofessional, found to be helpful in mental health work, is setting him out to do a legitimate survey. Suppose there is some program that your agency is considering and yet you need to know something about the needs of the population, the level of resistance that might exist, the kind of structuring that might be wise, etc. This can all be worked out in some form of simple questionnaire. The subprofessional aide can do 10, 20, or 30 interviews and be supervised in the interviewing procedure. What you can detect very quickly is a capacity to open a relationship, to develop rapport, and to begin to accumulate knowledge in some sort of systematic way.

Relationship Between Professional and Subprofessional

The great problem in the utilization of the subprofessional is just as much in the professional as it is in the subprofessional. It doesn't make any difference if we're talking about the professional county agent or home economist, professional social worker, a professional teacher of English, a nurse, or a director of mental health. There are certain problems that all professionals are facing: a certain level of threat-ability (i.e., that the professional will be out-competed and replaced; that many of the skills he possesses and identifies with professional pride are not that difficult to learn). We are in such a drastic social change that professionals in all helping services have to change—the professional has to learn to move over, to redefine his role. And he must give up his need for role identity in the part of the role that can be transmitted to the subprofessional.

What is the new role model between the professional and subprofessional? I call it the maximum "creative blend" of both the professional and the subprofessional. For example we had one Negro lady on our staff who was in her 60's. She had been a maid all her life but was one of the most articulate, strong, dynamic, aggressive, masculine women I have ever met. Working with us she did a lot in the area of theatricals, fashion shows, and other community actions. She was very effective in the community action type project, while the subprofessional referred to in the role-play situation was effective in working intensively with the hard-core family. Each was equally effective, but effective when performing quite different roles. With these kinds of skills in the subprofessionals, our

professional staff moved their programming more into community action and to more of a reaching-out type of case work.

Very frequently a person who is professional, in a sense of having a highly technical body of skills and knowledge, may not be so good in relationship-ability. Therefore, it makes an excellent arrangement for that person to work with a subprofessional who has this high-level relationship-ability. This is another example of the manifestation of the creative blend idea.

As we professionals begin to work with the subprofessional, to tell him what to do, and to train him in the maze of "professionalities," we can fall into a terrible trap. I find different names for it from time to time. Basically it's the "authoritarian trap"—that is to say, "I have the knowledge and it behooves me to teach you." It's an over/under authoritative, undemocratic kind of relationship. That's very much in contrast to this collaborated democratic type of relationship where I say I have a certain kind of knowledge, you have another kind of knowledge, how can we come together in a creative way. So, one of the pitfalls which the professional must avoid is the trap of being the one with the inside route to knowledge.

The contrasting democratic relationship is that of seeing the key to education as the ability to make oneself available to change. (Being able to change is especially critical to the professional in his relationship to the subprofessional.) It represents an extraordinarily wise approach to coping with the issues of our changing society—for me to allow the subprofessional to help me check and change my values. My kids, brought up in a nice middle-class family, do fairly well in school, in attendance at Sunday School, in bathing regularly, and so forth. But the youngster who is brought up in a slum and under the enormous pressures of the slum culture may have an extraordinary high level of "cope-ability." He also may know a lot more about the dynamic cutting pressure points of our society and our time. So the marvel of interaction between the professional and subprofessional is that the professional treats himself as a student and as a learner, as well as a resource person and an authority.

One difference between a middle- and lower-class style of life is that we middle class have been trained and disciplined to maintain a stiff upper lip to so many of our emotions. We don't cry in public; we don't laugh too loud; we don't get too angry; we are examples of disciplined emotionality. In lower class styles of life you find a lot more openness in terms of sexuality, expressions of affection, expressions of anger—in spontaneity in general. The creative blend could and should be a new approach to the expression of emotions.

Values

One of the critical aspects of change, of course, is our values. We like to think that our values are known and pronounced and good and wise and should prevail to all generations to come. The truth is that much of what we consider moral values are really mores and customs that stem from inadequate knowledge and ignorance. The intermingling and the creative relationship of persons from different cultural backgrounds can be the critical stimulus for our growth.

To say it another way, contrast the middle class value of postponement (you know, I think I want to be a doctor so I go to school, then to college, then to graduate school, then an internship, and then I'll be a doctor and enjoy myself) to the orientation sometimes called impulsivity or spontaneity (I feel like doing it, I'll do it, I'll do my thing—you know how the hippies say, everybody onto their thing now). There's a truth somewhere between. And I suspect the places we have the lines drawn now are not quite adequate or accurate. What I'm trying to say is that a subprofessional can learn much from a professional in terms of technical competencies, in terms of the mature values of postponement; the professional can learn much about spontaneity and openness from the subprofessional.

One study of subprofessionals working in social service agencies revealed the very different subcultures that the professional and the subprofessional belong to and the problem of the cultural identity of the subprofessional. The subprofessional begins, identified with his own subculture. Then he gets into the professional collaboration and begins to swing toward the professional's subculture. This brings on conflict. One has to have a deep respect for these subcultural systems, and for what is involved when people change subcultures. It is not an easy venture—which is to say that when my subcultural values come in contact with the different kind of subcultural values, producing a sense of conflict in me (intellectual and personal), anxiety and personal insecurity develop. When I'm in that kind of throw and you're the person on the other side, I'm going to develop certain kinds of ambivalences toward you. One day I'll think you're the greatest thing that ever came down the pike and the other day I'll think you're some kind of nut trying to exploit me and corrupt me. This is particularly true in the area of race relations. Too many of us in the white subculture are not aware of the terribly irrational assumptions on which so many of our thoughts are based, and of how subtly we pass them off without knowing it. But dealing genuinely with the subprofessional can collapse the brit-

tleness and obsolescence in our value assumptions and purify the issues of humanization.

Despair Syndrome

It seems to me that nobody can work with people—particularly when the people who are in trouble are underprivileged, impoverished, or whatever—without heeding what I call the despair syndrome. Despair is part of the game. There's no way out of it, except that as a professional person you have more background for dealing with it. You have extensive training, professional groups, conferences, professional literature—in short, a professional identity. You have something to lock yourself in—that will hold you firm and consistent in the face of your despair and his despair. This is something the subprofessional doesn't have; consequently, his despair tends to surface more if you have good relationships with him. Hence part of the critical task of working with the subprofessional is to accept the responsibility of dealing effectively, humanly, and compassionately with his sadness and yours and the sadness of the human condition.

But its hard, you see, to deal with another person's despair. If you're not careful they're going to open up locks to your own despair. I can't let you cry too hard, I can't let you get too frightened, I can't let you get too scared because then you might scare the hell out of me. A psychiatrist I worked with had a way of putting it. He asked one day if a fellow that I cared about were drowning in a river, screaming for help, and I was standing on the bank, would I jump in after him. I said "you bet your bird I would." That's why you're mixed up, he retorted. And I said, what are you talking about. He said that if I jump in the river I might drown with him and that isn't going to do him any good. He said it's much better to get your feet on some real solid ground and then reach out as hard as you can and try to pull him in. What he was saying was that there is a critical difference between over-identification (getting lost in the other fellow's problem) and empathy (sitting in his shoes and communicating to him in a manner to demonstrate that you can look at the world from his point of view). Every day of my life I try to ask, "Well, was I on the bank today or did I fall in the river?"

So the subprofessional tends to bring his personal problems more into his business relationships than the professional. He needs more help. Professionals must deal more with the emotional problems of the subprofessional than they would with those of other professionals. On the other side, it's a very enriching experience for the profes-

sional. We need the transmission of tenderness and we need the merger of tenderness with the issues in the discipline of professional knowledge, etc. Yet if we can't be tender with our aide, how can we be tender with people who are in even deeper despair?

You also find there are times when the subprofessional can help you a little bit with your despair. A relationship is in trouble when despair hits on both sides at the same time. I'm putting it as despair but very frequently we find that it doesn't come out as despair; on the surface it looks like anger, jealousy, or any number of other things which underneath are despair.

Collaboration

One of the fears of the professional, of course, is that he will be "out-competed." You know, if the professional really lets this other fellow know how to do it and trains him well this other fellow may do better than the professional (with all his credentials) does. It sometimes happens, but it is rare. It is far more likely that as I train the subprofessional to the limit of my knowledge, as I give him the benefit of all the creative interchange I can, he will do many things that I am doing, that I shouldn't be doing, that I don't have to do. I will have more freedom to reach for the creative side of my role. The professional who's going to survive and be successful is the one who can change in his role and can continuously reach and realize some aspect of the creative edges. As the subprofessional takes over more of his old role the professional becomes freer to become innovative, to experiment, and to develop more vital programs and relationships.

Therefore, one of the ways of approaching this collaboration is for the professional to identify all the routine, methodical, mechanical things he's doing that really don't require a professional. It's amazing how many there are. If you're an executive and you're doing what other people can do, that's being a lousy executive. The creative executive is not doing things that others can do, but is helping to train and organize and systematize so that others can take over.

On the other side, just taking the methodical, mechanical, maintenance functions of my role and putting them on the subprofessional is, by itself, not enough. It is a beginning, but not enough. I must begin to look at those aspects of my role that are not mechanical and that have to do with issues of judgment, of education, of service to people, of dealing with the public, etc., and begin to help the subprofessional pick these up gradually.

You have to look at the structure of the subprofessional's role to understand part of his problem. If you were given a role that is only temporary, that is strictly menial and mechanical—with no way of training, of growing, of systematic economic and status increment, and no increments in responsibility—you'd have a hard time being a good girl in such a role. It is not only a question of bringing in the subprofessional but of seeing his slot as a career.

Part of the subprofessional's problem up to this time is that we haven't looked hard enough at the whole structural issue of building career slots. In South Providence we began a seminar for professionals and subprofessionals in the problems of urban change. Into the group walked a brilliant, mixed up member of the radical left. And one of the things he said was, "Trouble with you, Dr. Silverman, is that you don't know how badly you have been programmed." Gee that burned me. But as I studied my own behavior I discovered that I was highly "programmed." And nobody's going to change the programming in me but me, and it's hard.

How do I reprogram myself and my conception of my role? I get to it by this central question: What are the priorities that I am going to establish on this issue? In a problem of professional and subprofessional collaboration one has to establish priorities of time for the collaboration. And if you approach the problem with the sensitivity it warrants, you can begin to see that it calls for a time priority. Make it realistic for the task. Fifty per cent "learning" for the subprofessional and 50 per cent "doing" would be a good place to start, but obviously that is too idealistic. As much time as you can give to the issue should be time that involves not just your relationship—not the relationship of office procedure, of technical competencies, of sharing of the despair syndromes—but also the vast array of services in our society to which you and your office may be a part. I would strongly argue for the maximum possible learning-time priority for the subprofessional.

Conclusion

The old way of security is gone. The business of clinging to the traditional role is all over. The new kind of security is the security to change—to take risk, to expose oneself to one's despair, to grow through conflict—a new level of powers; a capacity to have values changed and, above all, the security to risk oneself in a new kind of helping relationship and in a new kind of love.

The helping relationship does not belong to the professional; it belongs to caring people.