

## 7-1 Introduction

If you have chosen an internship providing direct service, it is natural that many of your thoughts and much of your excitement and anxiety are directed toward the population with whom you are working whom we collectively refer to in this chapter as *clients* and who may also be referred to as students, consumers, or patients. Whether you are working in a government office, a human service agency, some other service or non-profit organization, or on a campus, it is easy to become preoccupied with paperwork, policies and procedures, and office politics. As an intern, you will have all these concerns to deal with plus the additional concern of being evaluated by at least two supervisors. However, as J. Robert Russo reminds us in his book *Serving and Surviving as a Human Service Worker* (1993), the people your organization serves are the reason for your job.

Establishing and nurturing productive helping relationships with your clients is an essential skill and a key component of a High Quality Internship. That is easier said than done, of course, and it is natural to have concerns as you begin. We have found that concerns about those who are served generally fall into two categories: the nature of the population served (which involves your assumptions) and your relationship with them. This chapter focuses on those concerns and then ends with another area of emerging concern for interns and those who work with them: the personal safety of the helping professional.

### Stories in the Field

#### **Wanting to Make a Difference: Meet Kerry**

Kerry is interning at a youth shelter in the city. She grew up in a rural environment and had a stormy adolescence. She fought with her parents and was sent to live with relatives more than once. A youth minister reached out and made a connection with Kerry and with his help, Kerry learned to survive and thrive. Kerry is excited to offer other youth the kind of guidance she had. The kids at the shelter, though, largely ignore her; they spend most of their time joking in a manner she does not understand (or find funny) and listening to loud, unfamiliar music. Their energy seems to go into looking for ways to break the rules and not get caught.

## What Would You Do If You Were Kerry?

Kerry believes she can see their futures if they do not make different choices, but she is beginning to doubt her ability to make a difference.

## What Are Kerry's Next Steps?

Before answering that question, think in terms of the four guiding questions: *What? So What? Now What? Then What?*

Keep Kerry and your initial responses in mind as we continue the discussion by focusing on the traps of assumptions and stereotypes that challenge those in the helping and service professions.

## -2 Recognizing the Traps: Assumptions and Stereotypes

### LO 7.1

*Since I started my internship, I can honestly say that my impressions have changed. When I first started, I did have stereotypes. I was wrong, and I am not ashamed to admit it. When I was exposed to the clients and what their situations were like, I started to change.*

*I'm embarrassed to say so, but the media taught me all my impressions of the clients.*

—Student Reflections

As you begin your work, you no doubt have some expectations and assumptions about the people you will meet. You probably have some knowledge of the population as a group from the placement process and your first couple of days at the site. You know in general terms who the site does and does not serve and some of the needs the organization can and cannot meet. Beyond this factual information, though, it is important to be aware of the image you have of your prospective clients. You are bound to have one, and it is not entirely based on facts.

### THINK About It...

#### Checking Out Your Assumptions

Imagine for a moment the people you will be helping or serving. Each one will be somewhat different; however, you can describe them within certain parameters. Think about their backgrounds, reasons for coming to the agency, personalities, life histories, and typical behaviors.

In our experience, interns often either imagine that the clients will be very similar to one another or go to the other extreme and see each one as totally different, missing some of the important commonalities among them.

Think about how similar and/or different clients are from you. What do you have in common with them? What aspects of their lives and experiences are totally unfamiliar? Here, we often find that interns imagine they have almost nothing in common with their clients. That is, of course, not entirely true but it is easy to feel that way. On the other hand, interns who have struggled with the same problem that brings people to the agency (such as alcoholism or other addictions) may assume that they know just how it is for them. A little thought and some reflection on classes you have taken, will tell you that is not true either, but it is another tempting assumption.

Think also about the source of that image. Probably very few of you have had extensive and varied experience with the people you will be working with. If you've not worked with this population before, what might be generating those images for you?

In spite (or perhaps because) of their inexperience, many interns make unconscious generalizations; they form stereotypes. The word **stereotype** has some pretty negative connotations, and you may be reluctant to consider that you have some. However, whenever you make a judgment about someone based on little or no factual information, you engage in stereotyping. And that is a major trap in being effective in the helping and service professions and in being a civic professional. Remember Kerry? Might she be falling into this trap?

## **FOCUS on Skills**

### **Recognizing Your Stereotypes**

Try imagining two people. One is a slim, slightly pale man in a tweed jacket wearing wire-rimmed glasses and carrying a beat-up briefcase. The other is a tall, heavy man with a large belly, long hair, and a big beard, dressed in a T-shirt, sunglasses, dirty jeans, black boots, and a black leather vest with a Harley

Davidson insignia on it. In spite of yourself, are you making assumptions about what each of them does for a living? About how educated they are? Their personalities? Which one is more likely to have read existential philosophy? To have been in a barroom brawl? It seems to be a human tendency to generalize, and the fewer people in any group we actually know, the more we are likely to generalize from the few that we do know or have read about.

This example is based on physical appearance, and this is one way people make assumptions. Another way of getting trapped by your assumptions is by becoming too focused on a client's behavior. Some clients served by human service agencies display fairly unusual or even bizarre behavior. It is easy to jump from the behavior you see to all kinds of conclusions, especially if this is your first time working with these behaviors. Until you are more informed about the nature of the behavior, it's best to reserve judgment about what you are actually seeing. However, you may find that in spite of yourself, the reality of what some clients have done, especially those who have committed violent acts, makes it hard to see past their behavior to the unique features of each person. What's important here is that you are aware that you are making assumptions and that you engage and think critically about those assumptions.

## 7-2a Uncovering the Roots

*Given all the media attention to crime, in all the genres, it would be difficult not to form an impression of the criminal population.*

*—Student Reflection*

Your assumptions and stereotypes can come from several places. Perhaps you have met a person with the same needs as those faced by clients at your site or you have heard one speak. Perhaps you have been such a client yourself or know someone who has. The media are another powerful source of stereotypical images and assumptions. There are scholarly books and documentaries on various client groups, but a more powerful source of images is the mainstream media, especially social media apps, radio, or television. Think, for example, about how many mentally challenged adults you have seen depicted in the media. Were any of them leading anything like normal lives? How many of them had committed a crime? Couple the images of this population portrayed in the media with your own lack of direct experience, and you can begin to see where your image and stereotypes may originate.

## 7-2b Engaging Your Stereotypes: Getting beyond the Traps

The first step in getting beyond stereotypes and assumptions is to admit you have them. Everyone has stereotypes, including us, including you. Check with other interns; they have them too. Theirs may not be the same as yours, but they have them. The next step is to gather as much factual information as you can and hold your assumptions up to the light of objectivity. At the beginning of this section, we asked you several questions about your clients and what you were assuming about them. Now may be a good time to go back and try to find factual answers to those questions. Don't be discouraged if the answers don't come easily; you have held onto some of your assumptions for a long time.

## 7-2c Rethinking Client Success

When you think about being successful in your work with clients, what does that actually mean? Be as specific as you can. Think about the kinds of goals that make sense for the population you serve. Think about the attitudes, skills, values, and knowledge that you need to achieve those goals. This may be a good time to talk with your coworkers and site supervisor about this idea of being successful in your role as helper. Their experiences will serve you well in understanding your assumptions. In the sections that follow, we consider many aspects of the relationship interns develop with those they serve.

## 7-3 Acceptance: The First Step

*I want clients to respect me. It would be nice if they liked me, but it's not necessary. Most important is that they trust me to know that I will do whatever is in my power to help make their lives easier.*

*—Student Reflection*

As interns think about the kind of relationships they want to have with those they serve, several concerns often arise. One of the most common, especially for those in the helping professions, is how clients will react to them (Baird, 2013). In talking with undergraduate students who were going to perform community service with homeless individuals, Ostrow (1995) reported that one of their major anxieties was how the homeless population would perceive them as relatively affluent and fortunate young people. You may be wondering, *What kind of reception am I going to get from these people? Will they respect me? Will they listen to me? Will they dis me? Or, will they just write me off?* The theme in these concerns is acceptance, which is a crucial part of the foundation for any relationship. You have probably read about how important it is for you to *accept* those you serve, but they need to accept you, too. You need to find ways to help them accept you, and that's not always easy.

## 7-3a Being Accepted by Clients

Acceptance can mean different things with different client populations. Some clients show their acceptance simply by being willing to talk with you; until they accept you, they simply ignore you. Other client groups may show their acceptance by including you in their conversations, confiding in you, considering your suggestions, following your directions, or accepting the limits you set. How do you imagine you will know whether your clients have accepted you? Be as concrete and specific as you can.

### THINK About It...

#### What Does Acceptance Mean to You?

Think for a moment about the word *acceptance*. Don't try to think of a definition for it; instead, think what the word *means* to you personally. Ask a peer to do the

same, and you quickly realize that you aren't necessarily in agreement. Most people, though, know what it feels like when they are accepted and what it feels like when they are not. Think about how acceptance *feels* to you as well as what it means to you. Being aware of how you think—and feel—about acceptance allows you to better understand your reactions to acceptance issues.

## 7-3b Tuning into the Clients' World

*I couldn't survive a minute in their world, and they know it. I didn't grow up in the city or in the street culture. I haven't been in a fight since grade school. And I'm going to give these guys advice?*

—Student Reflection

Getting those you serve to accept you can be a real challenge. You will have an easier time with it if you think about the situation from their perspective. The main challenge is to enter their world, but not become lost in it. Schmidt (2002) writes of the power of perception in shaping our day-to-day experience and the importance of entering the perceptual world of your clients—another dimension of the human context of your work that is so important to a civic professional. Entering that world means going beyond facts and figures, reports, testing profiles, and school grades found in client files, even beyond catalogues of experiences that clients may tell you about. It means trying to understand how their experiences have shaped the way clients see the world. In the book *Crossing the Waters*, Daniel Robb writes about his experience working in a residential setting with troubled adolescent males (Robb, 2001). Here, he recounts an insight gained while working with one of the boys to fix a car: *I saw as we went that Louis had never had a man show him how to do anything. So, he expected to do it wrong, expected to be shamed for it, because unknown territory is not filled with angels*" (p. 173).

Here is another example from a student journal:

*Most of these kids build a stone wall as a façade because it is the only way they have learned to survive. Behind that wall is an individual with feelings and emotions.*



## STAY on Top

### Social App Language

Much work with clients, especially when they are children, adolescents, and young adults, involves how they relate to others and express themselves. You might be quite savvy in the ways of the tech world of communications, and that's an important set of skills and knowledge to have. As a helping professional, you need know the ways that your clients communicate. Why? Because apps such as the ones listed below can amplify typical dangers of social connections (Rheinhardt, 2016, p. 10). Age groups have their own apps; new apps cycle into the age groups quickly while others fade out. So, if you are working with a range of clients between childhood and college age, you need to be on top of those shifts in usage. The baseline list of apps below is already outdated—it was when this book went to press! To stay on top of the trends for these age groups, visit <https://www.commonsemmedia.org>.

Blab	Periscope	Tumblr
Instagram	Skout	Twitter
Facebook	Snapchat	WhatsApp
Pinterest	Tinder	Yik Yak

## 7-3c Meeting with Resistance

Your clients have probably had many frustrating and stressful experiences. In addition, for the first time they may be in a position where they cannot meet their own needs, where they have to let strangers into their personal business, and where their welfare is not in their hands (Royse, Dhooper, & Rompf, 2018). They may be expecting a miracle or a quick solution to their problems, and they are not usually going to find one. Or maybe they have just figured that out. If they are clients with a long history of services that did not help them, they may be expecting more of the same (Royse et al., 2018).

In some cases, clients may be particularly wary of interns. Some respond better to volunteers, reasoning that they are there because they want to be, as opposed to interns, who are fulfilling a requirement for school (Royse et al., 2018). In addition, interns generally do not stay very long. Some may be



there for one academic year. Some may even be hired, but many are gone after one semester. Many clients have had unfortunate experiences with people leaving them or letting them down, and they are reluctant to invest in a relationship that will end soon. One of our students who was working at a group home for adolescents reported that one of the residents was quite hostile and rebuffed all attempts at contact. On further inquiry, the intern learned that this resident had gotten very close emotionally to an intern the prior semester and, although she knew the intern would leave, was heartbroken when it happened.

## 7-3d **Considering Cultural Profiles**

Part of your clients' perceptual world, of course, is shaped by their cultural profiles. These profiles must, to a large extent, be understood one client at a time, just as your own profile, explored in [Chapter 5](#), is different from almost anyone else's. Try to find out, then, not just what subgroups your clients may belong to but how that has shaped their behavior and perceptions. And try to avoid the trap of only looking for the weaknesses or liabilities in a client's cultural background; see the strengths as well. For example, clients whose ethnic background encourages them to seek help from family and friends, but never from strangers, may be reluctant to let you in. But remember that these same clients have a wonderful resource in family and community—one that can be used to help. Many of you have probably studied this topic already, and this book is not the place for a lengthy discussion of multicultural issues.

## 7-3e **Putting Client Behavior in Context**

Another advantage to understanding the perceptual world of your clients is that you can try to view their behavior in that

context (Baird, 2013). This will help you not to be overly flattered by early compliments or expressions of trust and not to be flattened by clients who turn away from you and your attempts to connect. Remember that clients often have an agenda they are not going to tell you about but one that you can understand once you come to know them. A client who approaches an intern and says *You are the only decent person in this place—I can trust you* is either trying to gain an advantage, rushing into closeness on very little data, or both. Similarly, a client who gives you a hard time may be doing it precisely because you are new; they want to see whether you will back away as so many others have done.

### **CONSIDER This**

#### **Transference and Overidentification**

In counseling and psychotherapy, the client's behavior just described is referred to as **transference**. Clients transfer feelings and reactions to you that are rooted in their past experiences. Marianne and Gerald Corey (2016) emphasize that transference can take many forms, including wanting you to be the parent, husband, friend, or partner they never had; making you into some sort of super-helper who can fix anything; refusing to accept boundaries that you set; and easily displacing anger or love onto you.

While you are working to enter the world of your clients, take care not to get caught in it. If their experience is similar to yours, your old feelings may easily be evoked, and you will react to them. It is also easy to become so absorbed in the experience of the clients that you take on their feelings and reactions. This is called **overidentification**. Once that happens, it is very easy to cross the line from *wanting* your clients to do well to *needing* them to do well. Maintaining distance, even while developing rapport with clients, will let you navigate the overidentification trap. It will also help you in confronting clients when necessary and helping them see how their perspectives may be creating problems for them.

## **7-3f Seeking Common Ground**

Part of developing acceptance with clients is finding some common ground. During the Anticipation Stage, doing so is

especially important to creating the foundation for the helping relationship. A frequent concern for interns is their belief that they have nothing in common with their clients. A young woman interning in a shelter for single women and their children said:

*I don't have any kids. I have no idea what it's like to be a single parent, or to grow up with one parent. I have no idea how to survive on the streets or what it's like to be abused by a husband. What do I have to offer these women? Why should they listen to me?*

These are real concerns. Remember, though, that even having the exact same experience as the clients is not always a guarantee of success. Remember, too, that your goal is not telling clients what to do. This may be of special importance to an intern who has a career or job history with clients with whom they share some common life experiences. Such experiences can be helpful in establishing acceptance, but they can also be a hindrance. You may have had some of the same things happen to you as have happened to your clients, but assuming or saying you know how your clients feel can be alienating for a client whose experience was quite different from yours.

If you don't have much common experience, what can you do? You can't manufacture experiences you haven't had, and pretending will only make things worse. However, *common ground* does not always mean *common experience*. Even if you have not had the particular experience, you may be able to think of something in your background that gives you a hint of what your clients may be feeling. Again, we turn to the words of Daniel Robb (2001), who recalls being cut from a baseball team despite having superior skills:

*I turned and walked away from him, my good, dusty glove tucked under my arm, cursing the whole corrupt system. ... It was clear to me at that moment that there was no trusting the men in charge. And I felt different ... the kid who wasn't part of the team, the kid without a father. I had been cut. ... Which all sounds maudlin and sappy until you remember the leverage of those days, the ferocity of your little peers, their cruelties and name callings. ... The dangers of trust, the betrayals, the sweetness of being accepted and the tangles of rejection. These boys out here on the*

*island, they were given no acceptance in the deeply psychological sense. ... They're here because they were cut. (p. 56)*

## 7-3g Learning to Accept Clients

Your ability to accept your clients is just as important to the relationship as their ability to accept you. In fact, it is more important. If you cannot accept your clients, they will know in some way and on some level and will be far less likely to accept or trust you. Really, we are talking about a process of mutual acceptance here. Much of the work you did to get your clients to accept you will help you to accept them as well, especially the work you did to understand their perceptual world.

### Working with Challenging Behaviors

As we mentioned earlier, one important part of acceptance is to be able to see clients as more than their behaviors. Listed next are some concerns drawn from our experience and that of interns and beginning helpers (Corey & Corey, 2016; Russo, 1993). As you review these behaviors, think about how you might react to clients who:

- Lie to you
- Manipulate you to get something they want but cannot have
- Are never satisfied with what you have to give and always seem to need more
- Become verbally abusive and physically threatening
- Blame everyone else for their problems
- Are sullen and give, at most, one-word answers or responses
- Ask again and again for suggestions and then reject every one

- Refuse to see their behavior as a problem
- Make it clear they don't like you
- Refuse to work with you

Can you see these behaviors as understandable, although not helpful or praiseworthy, given what you know about your clients? Can you stay open to clients who do these things and see their behavior as only one part of who they are? If not, take some time to consider why.

## Understanding Your Reactions

The most important thing you can do is to try and understand your reactions. Remember, just as clients bring their past experiences and emotional tendencies to the relationship, so do you. **Countertransference** is the term counselors and therapists in the helping professions use to describe situations in which your perceptions of and reactions to clients are distorted by your own past experiences and hurts (Corey & Corey, 2016). Look back to the chapter on getting to know yourself ([Chapter 5](#)) and reconsider some of the things you discovered or affirmed. Do any of those things help explain your responses? For example, think about response patterns you may have. If you have trouble opposing or disputing others, then clients who challenge you overtly will be especially difficult for you. Knowing this will help you avoid assigning all the blame to the client.

## 7-3h Cultural Competence: Knowing Your Identities

*Some clients evoked feelings of mistrust and prejudice as well as feelings of sorrow. I am most shameful of the feelings of prejudice.*

Your cultural identities may help explain some of the reactions you are having as well. Consider the preceding quote from a student's journal. This quote shows an intern who is willing to look to herself, as well as to the client, to discover the source of her reaction. The willingness to admit prejudice is especially impressive. In time, this intern may well move past feelings of shame and be able to work on ways to overcome the prejudice and mistrust she lives with. Admitting these feelings, instead of pretending not to have them, is an engaged first step.

## 7-3i Dealing with Self-Disclosure

Another important issue in developing relationships, and a frequent concern for interns, is **self-disclosure**. How much about yourself should you reveal? There are actually two kinds of self-disclosure at issue: personal information and personal reactions.

### Disclosure of Personal Information

It is natural for clients to want to get to know you, and they may ask you questions about your life and relationships. Some of these questions will seem quite comfortable and easy to answer; others may not. You may feel that the questions are too personal or that they concern matters you would rather keep private. You may feel that certain information is inappropriate for certain clients.

### A Word to the Wise...

These are issues you should think about but not decide on your own. Your agency may have strict policies, and very good reasons for them, about how much you can disclose, and they may not always be obvious to you. In some placements, interns are told not to have personal photos on display or divulge their last names. Matters of personal safety (which we will consider later) and

client boundaries sometimes dictate limits such as these. Be sure to discuss these issues with your supervisor.

## Disclosures and 3DQs

The second kind of self-disclosure is more immediate. You no doubt will have opinions about and emotional reactions to things your clients say or events at the site and wonder whether it is appropriate to share your thoughts with clients. The question *What should I share with clients?* is not possible to answer and, in fact, is not a helpful question. It fails to consider the wide variety of clients, situations, and goals that form the context of your work. It is better to ask a **three-dimensional question** (Hunt & Sullivan, 1974), such as *What sort of self-disclosure is appropriate with which clients and for what purpose?* If you are working with battered women, for example, it may be appropriate to share some of your relationship struggles as a way of establishing an empathic connection; clients sometimes think their counselors have no problems of their own. However, if you are working with a heterosexual teen of the opposite sex, such disclosure is probably inappropriate, as it can blur an important boundary and create confusion about your intentions. Asking three-dimensional questions (3DQs) will help you, in collaboration with your supervisor, to find answers that work for you and your clients.

## -3j Managing Value Differences

In [Chapter 5](#), we stressed the importance of being aware of your values. In their book *Issues and Ethics in the Helping Professions*, Corey, Corey, Corey, and Callanan (2016) stress the



importance of values awareness in relationships with clients. There will be times when you are dealing with a client whose values are very different from yours, and that can be perplexing and stressful for both of you. Let's suppose that honesty and straightforwardness are strong values for you. Of course, you are dishonest occasionally; you might even know it is wrong when you do it, but it makes sense to you under the circumstances. Let's also suppose that you are dealing with a client whose values differ from yours. In your client's experience, being honest, especially with human service workers and others in authority, means being taken advantage of by a service delivery system client perceives as unfair. For example, in some states, a woman on welfare will have her benefits reduced if she is married, even if her husband is not employed. So, she lies to you as a way of solving an anticipated problem.

One of the challenging aspects of situations in which it is obvious that there are differences between you and your client is deciding how to respond. And, important to deciding on how to respond is understanding the options that you have. Corey, Corey, and Callanan(2016) make a distinction between *exposing* your values to clients and *imposing* your values on them. One choice you do have is exposing differences by informing clients about them. Another choice you have is imposing your values by attempting to influence clients to change theirs. And a third choice is to do neither, but to work with your differences.

## **What to DO!**

### **How Will You Respond to Value Differences?**

Let's take the example of sexuality and family values—hardly light topics, but certainly ones you will encounter in your work with clients. You certainly may encounter clients whose values are at odds with yours in these areas. Think about how you might respond to each of the following case situations and why you would respond in that way.

- You are working with an adolescent client who is sexually promiscuous and thinks it is just fine. Furthermore, he uses no birth control and says a pregnancy would not be his responsibility.

- You are working with another client who thinks that a marriage must stay together at all costs. You are in favor of divorce in some cases.
- You are working with a client who thinks that unmarried couples should not have children.

## • 7-3k Specific Client Issues

### • LO 7.3

- As you negotiate acceptance with your clients, there are a number of issues that seem to arise frequently as you launch your relationships with them. These issues tend to permeate the helping relationship and thus can be formidable companions in the helping relationship. Being aware of them will help you prepare and not be surprised when they appear.

### • Authority Issues

- One particularly challenging issue concerns authority. You have certainly been in a position where you were subject to authority and so have those you serve. Authority is often an important factor in forming a relationship with them. Shulman (2015) has pointed out that clients tend to perceive you as an authority figure. This is especially true if you or your organization has some kind of legal authority over clients, such as the authority a benefits worker has to deny benefits or a probation officer has to surrender a defendant to the court. However, even when the authority is not explicit, you should be prepared for clients who have **authority issues** and see and react to you as an authority figure (Shulman, 2015).
- In some settings, clients are in a “one-down” position. They need something they cannot get for themselves. It could be something tangible, such as food or shelter, or something less concrete, such as control over a substance abuse problem or help in understanding some bureaucratic procedure. You and your agency have what they need; you are holding the cards. Think about when you have been in a similar

situation. How did it feel? Your clients will bring their fears about past experiences with authority to their relationship with you, and those factors will shape how they respond.

- **Finding Equalizers**

- One way clients try to reduce their one-down feelings is to assess your background and experience, often with a goal of finding a flaw or an equalizer. This phenomenon is referred to as **credentialing**; it takes place in nearly every internship. Sometimes, clients will literally ask about your credentials, as when they ask about your education and training or experience with clients. Other times, the credentialing is more subtle, such as, “Do you have children?” or “Have you ever been arrested?” It may be as simple as asking about your age. Sometimes, clients are just trying to get to know you, but you may be surprised at the persistence with which these questions are asked; sometimes they consider the information key to whether they can trust you. You may also be surprised by their reaction when they find the information they are looking for, and you may feel dismissed. Knowing that these assessments are a normal part of building a relationship will help you decide how to respond.

- **Testing the Limits!**

- Clients often engage in **testing limits** with their workers. They want to see where your personal boundaries are and whether and how you enforce agency rules. Because you are an intern, they may be genuinely unsure of your role and what you can offer them (Shulman, 2015). Some clients have experienced many workers, not to mention other people in authority, and have been treated in many different ways. They need to know what to expect from you, and although they may not like it when you set a limit, when you do so with firmness, compassion, fairness, and consistency, it ultimately helps them trust you.

Other reasons for testing you may include a need for recognition and attention or an attempt to gain status with their peers (Shulman, 2015).

- You may think of this phenomenon as occurring more with children, as they try repeatedly to pick up something they have been told to leave alone or try to poke or bite you. You may also associate testing with people who are in an involuntary situation, such as juveniles in a detention center or runaway shelter who refuse to do chores or curse in front of you to see what you are going to do. And, in fact, it is a very real issue in some criminal justice internships, where interns are often referred to as “officers in training” precisely so they are not seen as easy targets for limit testing. However, other kinds of clients can test you, too. An elderly client can press you to stay longer than you are able, a client at a soup kitchen may try to go through the line twice, a parent may ask you to stay late and watch the children until they can be picked up.
- Interns are sometimes tested even more because they are initially seen as “not real staff” (McBride, 2016). These behaviors can be exasperating, especially if you are not expecting them. Try not to imagine that really effective workers never have these challenges; of course they do. They may have learned to handle them a bit more smoothly and quickly—and you will too, someday. Taking these challenges personally only makes it harder to meet them effectively. Remember that you once did this kind of testing, and you may still do it occasionally (Russo, 1993). Think back for a moment on your behavior with substitute teachers, extended family members, or babysitters. Perhaps you have even tested some of your college faculty in this way.

## 7-4 Personal Safety and the Helping Professional

### LO 7.4

*Safety is definitely a concern, since I work in a courthouse with metal detectors and my office is locked at all times. I know my level of risk is higher, but then again, I sometimes feel safer knowing that there are detectors, guards, locked doors, etc. I guess how safe I feel really depends on how I choose to look at things.*

—Student Reflection

There are a number of people interested in your personal safety during the internship. Your safety is foremost in the minds of your campus and site supervisors. It is the concern of your coworkers and campus administrators. Increasingly, we hear interns themselves express concerns about their personal safety, and we are not alone. Birkenmaier and Berg-Weger (2007, p. 57) cite several studies of real and perceived risk to social work interns and note that such concern is warranted. Among other reasons,

- (1)  
social workers are second to police officers in the risk of work-related violence directed at them, and
- (2)  
the “number and lethality of safety risk incidents on the job has increased for social workers.”

Certainly, the potential for risk in the helping professions can be high. The helping professions comprise such a broad field of services, though, that it is impossible to make general statements about risk. Here, however, are some examples, drawn from our experience of internships with various levels of risk.

### Stories in the Field

**When Fear Is Ever Present: Harry, Carlos, Yura, and Kavita**

- **Harry** interns at a men's shelter in the city. It is the only shelter in the city that allows men who are actively abusing substances, and many men come in under the influence. Others congregate outside, seeking services only in a medical emergency. Furthermore, Harry is asked to ride along with an outreach worker, who travels to abandoned buildings to try and help addicts be safer in their behavior and to come for treatment.
- **Carlos** interns for an agency that monitors adjudicated youth in the community. He travels with a staff member all over the city—to schools, playgrounds, and apartments—to check on these adolescents and talk with them.
- **Yura** interns at a Student Assistance Center at a huge urban high school. The school has students of every race and from dozens of ethnic backgrounds. Intergroup tensions can run high, and confrontations and fistfights are not uncommon. The center offers peer mediation, among other services, but these sessions sometimes erupt in violence.
- **Kavita** interns at a women's shelter. She helps a staff member facilitate a support group for victims of domestic violence. One night, one of the clients tells the group that she is scared. Her abuser found out she was coming to the group and got very angry. He found her journal, and in it were names of clients and staff members. Kavita's client snuck out to group that night but is frightened about what he will do when he gets home and finds her gone.

## What Are the Next Steps for These Interns?

Before answering that question, think in terms of the four guiding questions: *What? So What? Now What? Then What?* Keep these interns "And your initial responses" in mind as we continue our discussion of safety issues.

## -4a Assessing and Minimizing Levels of Risk

*The personal safety chapter couldn't have come at a better time. A social worker in my office was attacked this week by one of her clients. She was hit on the head and has permanent damage to her eyesight. I hadn't thought much about my personal safety until this point.*

—Student Reflection

Your **risk level** depends on several variables, some of which are evident in the preceding examples. Although you should be made aware of any and all potential **risk factors** to your safety before you start working with clients, safety issues do arise that cannot be anticipated. What is important here is that you are as fully informed as possible about your safety.

### **Assessing Client Risk Levels**

Before beginning your internship, you should have a good sense of the likelihood of being exposed to violence. If you are interning in a residential setting, a locked facility, or in the field of criminal justice, the likelihood is higher than if you are interning in the maternity wing of a hospital. And you certainly should have been informed of that by the office that placed you with your agency. It's worth repeating that when it comes to clients, three factors should be assessed: the client's developmental stage, motivations, and immediate situational factors and conditions (Baird, 2013, pp. 138, 139). Those factors include access to weapons, mental status, medication/controlled substances, stress level and precipitators, and history of violence (pp. 140, 141). It's important to keep in mind that some clients are habitually violent, whereas other clients may become violent only under certain circumstances, such as the influence of drugs or the lack thereof. And unfortunately, some clients are in terribly frustrating and even desperate circumstances (Garthwait, 2016) and are not necessarily predictable when it comes to their behaviors. For example, if one of the adjudicated males that Carlos is monitoring has gotten into more trouble and believes that he will be turned in, he may go to great lengths to stop that from happening. Nonclients are sometimes a risk as well. Parents whose children have been removed from the home,



partners of victims of domestic violence, and friends of an adjudicated youth are all examples. If your internship site has not educated you about these issues, it is especially important that you be proactive and find out about them.

### **Minimizing Client Risk Levels**

As we emphasized in [Chapter 3](#), if you suspect the possibility of violence by clients or their family/friends, it is critical that you take an engaged approach and consult with others immediately, starting with the placement coordinator who arranged your internship, all of your supervisors, and your coworkers as to the history of violence at the field site. You may have ignored this suggestion the first time you heard it; if so, we remind you that history remains the most dependable predictor of future behaviors. If there is a history of violence, it is time to meet with your supervisors and develop a safety plan. Because it is a safety factor, it needs to be noted on the Learning Contract with specific safeguards described.

## **A Matter of Law**

### **Campus Liability for Internships**

Student safety is the issue getting the most publicity when it comes to off-campus programs. Why? Because students are injured or killed while enrolled in such off-site programs as internships and study abroad. If an internship is required of a student for completion of a degree requirement, as it often is in the academic programs of the helping professions, then the college may face liability if the student is injured or killed while involved in the internship.

**Case in point:** A 2000 ruling by the Florida Supreme Court has implications for all campuses with such a requirement [*Nova Southeastern University Inc. v. Gross*, 758 SO. 2d 86 (Fla. 2000)]. NSU offers a doctoral program in psychology, and the internship sites for that program are identified by the college. The doctoral student was assaulted on-site and in turn sued the NSU for negligence. The court

ruled in the student's favor, noting "the student-institution relationship created a special duty on the part of the university to use ordinary care in assigning students to internship sites. There was evidence that there had been earlier assaults at the internship site and that the university had been aware of the fact but had not warned the student" (Connell, Franke, & Lee, 2001, pp. 2, 3).

## **Assessing Site and Community Risk Levels**

There are organizational variables as well that can pose safety risks, and they vary considerably in assessing risk to interns and workers as well as implementing appropriate procedures. For example, the high school where Yura interns gave her and all the staff careful instructions about what to do in case of a violent incident, when to respond, and how to get backup when needed. Agencies have the responsibility to be thorough in their assessment of risk factors and corresponding risk levels and to respond accordingly with policies and procedures for staying safe. Your responsibility is to determine how well your site meets these criteria for safety.

Location and hours of operation are another set of variables. Some human service agencies—and schools—are located in neighborhoods at risk for violence or crime, especially for someone who does not live in that community. The neighborhoods that Harry travels to are more dangerous after dark. If your work takes you into the community, as Carlos's and Harry's do, you may find yourself in such neighborhoods as well.

## **Minimizing Site and Community Risk Levels**

If you in any way feel unsafe or otherwise not comfortable traveling to and from your site due to location, hours of operation, or security measures in or near the building, take an

engaged approach and consult with the site supervisor and coworkers immediately to determine how they ensure their personal safety working at the site. Be sure to inquire about the history of safety as it relates to your concerns, requesting specific data about crime in the area at night and past crimes committed in the parking area or on the premises of the site. Of course, you can always contact the local police department and request such information if the staff is too new to the site to have it. If your concerns prove to be a safety factor, they need to be noted on the Learning Contract with specific safeguards described.

## 7-4b Facing the Fears

In order for you to embrace your the internship as the learning experience that it is, you will need to face your fears and assess the level of risk at your internship in an engaged way—even if your agency has not done that or not discussed it with you. It becomes your responsibility by default because it is *your* internship. And we know that may not be easy to do. Many interns are reluctant to discuss their concerns about safety for fear of being seen as overly timid, not ready, or not committed to the field (Birkenmaier & Berg-Weger, 2010).

Fear is a powerful emotion. In this instance, it can keep you from confronting your prejudices, if you have or are aware of them, and from making realistic assessments of your safety. It may well be that some of your fears are unfounded, or exaggerated, because of prejudices and stereotypes. For example, some persons with mental illness or developmental delays exhibit some very unusual behaviors, but that does not necessarily make them dangerous (Baird, 2013). A Caucasian intern in a predominantly Hispanic high school is not necessarily at greater risk for violence, but the intern may *feel* like it. The only way to deal with these stereotypes is to acknowledge and confront them. If you are not comfortable discussing these issues with your site supervisor, you may want

to talk with your campus/program supervisor instead or with your classmates. What's important is that you do discuss them in supervision.

The likelihood is that once you have thought through your fears and gathered the factual information you need, you will feel ready to face what challenges there may be. If that is not true, if you feel like you are in over your head, you must discuss that with your campus/program supervisor as soon as possible.

## Russo's Patterns of Adjustment

Over the course of many years in the field, there are adjustments to be made. There are several ways to cope with the ongoing demands—both physical and emotional—of the work and the day-to-day strains and frustrations that are as much a part of the work as the joys and satisfactions. Russo has described several patterns of adjustment that are found in experienced (1993) workers: those who identify with the clients, with their coworkers, and with the organization. Russo emphasizes that these are not static categories; people often move from one to another and back over the course of their careers. It is probably far too early in your own career to determine which category fits you, but knowledge of them may help you make sense of what you are seeing at your placement.

## Identifying with Clients

Workers who identify primarily with clients can be further divided into four subcategories. *Reformers* tend to be impatient with anything that they believe interferes with their ability to serve the clients. They often neglect paperwork and will try to change the organization's policies and procedures to better meet the needs of the client (i.e., people before paper). In our experience, this is a very common stance for interns, although they do not actively try to change the placement site. *Innovators* still promote change, but are more patient with and understanding of the change process. They listen, they ask questions, and they work with others to try to find the best way to achieve change. *Victims*, on the other hand, are frustrated by systems they see as inadequate and even harmful. They see themselves as the protectors of the clients and are likely to battle the administration openly, sometimes enlisting clients (or interns) in their struggle. Finally, *plodders* identify with the clients and may have some of the same concerns and frustrations as some of the other types described, but they seem to have given up on change. They work quietly with their clients, doing the best job they can. They often have their own way of doing things, and they work without

making waves, and do not try to influence others or the organization itself to change.

## **Identifying with Coworkers**

Workers who identify primarily with their coworkers also care about clients; however, in addition, they feel a strong allegiance to their profession as a whole. They may be active in unions and/or professional organizations and look to these groups, as opposed to their particular workplace, as their primary guides. Some relatively new workers are attracted to this stance because they are unsure of their own skills and knowledge. They follow the rules of the professional organization rigidly. Other workers in this category are more sure of themselves and regularly consult their union or professional organization for guidance but consider these groups as one of several sources of wisdom.

## **Identifying with the Organization**

Workers who identify with the organization look to the organization and its policies and procedures as their primary source of guidance. Even though those rules may sometimes work against the needs of a particular client or be in violation of standards or ethical codes issued by professional organizations, these workers believe that following the rules will do the most good for the most people in the long run. Some may be hiding behind the rules so they do not have to think hard or take risks. Others have adopted this stance after careful thought and reflection on their experience. Russo also points out that some of them are conflict avoiders. They realize that the needs of clients, the organization, and the profession can sometimes conflict, but they want to resolve those conflicts quickly, and adherence to the rules is one way to accomplish that.

## **7-5a Conclusion**

This section on clients may have raised more questions than answers for you. If so, we accomplished our goal. Learning to work with clients is a process; there is always something new to learn, from books, from supervisors, and (if you listen) from the clients themselves. A High Quality Internship, then, helps you get started on the journey to expertise and gives you some tools to do so. Remember that you are now more aware of and prepared for some of the challenges in the early stages of working with clients. You have materials for reflection and for discussion with peers and have unanswered questions to

explore. The exact shape and pace of your experiences with clients we cannot know, but you can.

## 7-5b What Does This Mean to Me?

Select your most meaningful entries for reflection.

### **Checking in**

The following two inquiries may appear simple on the surface, but they are not. First, give thought to how you and your clients differ. Then think about the ways in which you and your clients are the same. What if anything about your responses surprise you?

### **Personal Ponderings**

1. Now that you have gotten to know better those you serve, in what ways have your initial impressions of your clients as a group changed? Do any of your initial impressions bother you now as you look back on them? If so, why?
2. In what ways have your credentials been challenged already? When you think about the ways you reacted—noticeably and privately—what did you learn about yourself? How will you

handle such a situation differently in the future given how you handled it up to this point?

3. What is it that challenges you in setting the limits that your clients need? How much of that difficulty is because of what you know about the people you serve? How much is because of what you know about yourself?
4. How compatible is your own position on personal disclosures to clients and their families with the policy of your internship site? Compare how you've responded to requests for disclosure up to this point with how you will respond in the future.
5. Think about the challenges you face beyond the ones identified in these questions. Why do you think they are challenges to you and may not be challenges to your peers? What engaged approaches can you use to move them from being challenges to being manageable issues?



## **Experience Matters (*For the Experienced Intern*)**

If you have had other internships, a career or a job with longevity in the helping professions, compare your reactions and experiences to working with the current group of clients with your reactions and experiences working with populations in the past. What's different? How are those differences affecting you and your work? What lessons from the past do you take onto your internship today?

## **Civically Speaking**

Harry, Carlos, and Kavita all intern in human services agencies. Yura is interning in a public, urban high school. The social contract and the public relevance of the work of the helping profession are evident in what each of these interns is doing. However, what the public expects of the way the intern goes about that work and presents oneself in public may differ. What are your thoughts about the level of scrutiny Yura is held to by the public because Yura is interning in a public place? Compare that to your thoughts about the levels of scrutiny by the public that Harry, Carlos, and Kavita are

held to interning in private, non-profit agencies.

### **Seminar Springboard**

It's important to talk about safety issues, especially if you have the opportunity to do so in a group. Frame your thinking by focusing on the risk factors, risk levels, and safeguards that need to be in place. Remember, all risk levels that warrant safeguards need to be brought to the attention of your instructor if they are not already recognized by your program. An important piece of this reflection is acknowledging the feelings that the risk levels evoke and how you will manage them so you thrive instead of survive each day in your internship.