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Assessment: Discovering and Documenting the Life of a Community

The undiscovered country from whose bourne no traveler returns.
William Shakespeare, poet, playwright

By mutual confidence and mutual aid, great deeds are done, and great discoveries made.
Homer, poet

We often discover what will do, by finding out what will not do; and probably he who never made a mistake never made a discovery.
Samuel Smiles, author

The Landscape of Our Lives

Overview of Chapters 5 and 6

Unless we are hermits, we generally live in communities, large and small. It is exciting to learn what makes them tick—whether a quiet town with one stop light or a "toddlin' town" like Chicago. The learning process takes us into libraries, onto the Web, and along city sidewalks and village lanes. Fortunately, it is both challenging and enjoyable. Understanding community, whether a rural crossroad settlement, barrio, hamlet, town, city, or megalopolis, is essential for community and social work practice. Like individuals, each community is unique and offers different opportunities and challenges. This chapter discusses the philosophies of and approaches to community assessment. The succeeding chapter examines the assessment methodologies.

Assessment as a Basic Social Work Process

Assessment is essential for effective social work practice. Community factors are required in any case assessment and in an analysis of the community itself. It is a professional obligation to understand client communities. Knowing the whole picture is mandatory, regardless of our intended level of intervention. Knowing the community gives us credibility with the community. Understanding a cross-section of people and their histories gives us believability and access. To appreciate the impact of the community on the individual, or on a collective of individuals, the worker must understand the community itself. Assessment serves as a means of planning or inquiry, as a vehicle for information exchange, as part of formal problem solving, and as a way to determine which services are needed by whom. Knowing the players and systems provides us with more options. Knowing what residents want offers us direction and allows us to be accountable. Learning how to do community studies will assuredly be helpful to community practitioners and organizers who will have to do community studies and direct service practitioners who need to understand communities in understand their clients. Community analysis helps us get our bearings and avoid false starts in our practice.

Understanding the life of the community by assessing the community will require the full range of qualitative and quantitative research skills.

Assessment

We understand the life of a community through an assessment process. Assessment is the first and most important practice task. Assessment is necessary before intervention, unless intervention is done either by rote or at random. Assessment's purpose is to determine the relevant attributes of a case and to gather information about the cause of the current conditions and factors necessary for change in the case.[1] Assessment, then, involves determining what is the here and now, the assets, resources, and challenges, and how it got that way and how might best get to a desired future state. Community assessment is a necessary aspect of any case assessment to understand both the content and context of the case. Assessment also is a cognitive process used with clients, situations, or problems that pays attention to uniqueness (Meyer, 1993, p. 9). Johnson (1995), in line with this approach, views assessment broadly as including (a) social study analysis and understanding and (b) resource-oriented needs assessment. Assessment is not done in a vacuum or simply to understand a community, as fascinating as that is. Assessment is done to understand a community and to use that knowledge to facilitate change for individuals and communities.

Case Theory Building

Community assessment is done to understand a community and to build a *case theory*[2] to effect change. A case theory is a coherent explanation of the case and creates a framework that will lead to the most appropriate and satisfying intervention for the case. Johnson (1995) regards it as fitting the pieces together for particular individuals or systems. To Lauffer (1982, 1984), assessment focuses on "the examination of what is, on what is likely to be, or on what ought to be" (p. 60), or a theory of change.

Case theory construction precedes development of the intervention plan. It forms the foundation for specification of desired outcomes, definition of any problematic conditions, identification of community assets and resources, and selection of intervention strategies and approaches to achieve goals and alter problematic conditions. Case theory provides a map for intervention. Case theory is built from and makes sense of the assessment information collected. The analysis of assessment data in the case theory building helps us differentiate, comprehend, and respond to a certain population or neighborhood and determine who generally runs things in town and to grasp intangibles such as ethos, morale, and town character. Case theory constructs a framework to understand a specific community or case; it doesn't provide a general theory for classes of communities or cases (Bisman, 1994, pp. 111–121; Bisman & Hardcastle, 1999, pp. 55–61).

Individual in Society Assessment

Delineating an Individual's Ties to the Community. Until recently, social work used the label *diagnosis* to describe the investigative processes in understanding individuals, neighborhoods, and community. We prefer to denote the process as *assessment* rather than diagnosis. Assessment is a more inclusive and generic concept with greater emphasis on social and environmental factors (Gambrill, 1983). Assessment aims at understanding or knowing at a level broader than measuring and diagnosing, which are based on a medical or positivist model of linear cause-and-effect relationships. According to Rodwell (1998), the more limited approach of diagnosis "has consistently reduced to symptoms and the cause of disorders; usually in general terms that is difficult to distinguish the assessment of one situation from another" (p. 235). Classification schemes associated with assessment, such as the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (*DSM*) series, often fail to individualize people and to take into account their societal context. Assessment, whatever the unit of attention, shifts from an emphasis on a need/deficiency/problem assessment to one focusing on asset/capacity/problem solving—that is, to strength assessment (Cowger, 1994; Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993; Meyer, 1995; Rosenthal & Cairns, 1994; Sharpe, Greaney, Royce, & Lee, 2000). Social work practitioners need to think of competence and assets at a community level as well as individual traits. For example, someone concerned with economic development who walks through a dusty town populated by Amerindians—or residents of a village in India—will quickly note the lack of material goods. However, someone interested in the arts might also spot sand painting in the U.S. Southwest and painted prayer decorations made by women in the villages in India. Social workers are as capable as folklorists and art collectors of seeing strengths in villages, towns, and cities.

Public health workers, community psychologists, teachers, community police officers, and social workers are expected to know how individuals and families fit into their communities and if their communities accept them (Box 5.1). The community provides resources to its members and social workers. Discovering not only the clients' internal strengths but also their "external strengths"—networks, organizations, institutions with resources—is "central to assessment" (Cowger, 1994, p. 266). There are ways and tools to determine whether someone is isolated or attached to an area or a network.

Problems in the Interface. Assessment processes should balance and synthesize person–environment relations and avoid the trap of assuming that the problem resides solely in the individual. This is important because, as health professor Gary Kielhofner (1993) insists, "We must not only seek to make members good for the social collective, but also to make the social collective good for individuals" (p. 251). Let us explore the difference between a routine assessment of an individual that takes the environment into consideration and an assessment where individual and society are given equal weight.

Sergio is 40 years old and has worked at a local plant for 4 years. Drinking beer and eating barbecue, Sergio and his buddies gripe their way through lunch. Upon his return to the floor of the factory, Sergio lurches into some equipment and is injured. Reasonable intervention objectives are to get him medical attention, any needed rehabilitation, and then back on the job.

However, Germain and Gitterman (1995) would urge us to go slower and look for interacting personal, environmental, and cultural factors. Bisman (1999) might recommend building a case theory that explains the case and creates a framework that will lead to the most appropriate and satisfying intervention for the case. A conventional diagnosis centers on Sergio's drinking. An Employee Assistance Program (EAP) professional might ask these questions: What do his supervisors say—was this an isolated incident? Has Sergio frequently been absent or late? Is his supervisor ready to fire him? Is he having other problems such as anger or credit management? Should addictions—alcohol, drugs, gambling—be explored? Does he have a treatment history?

A clinical social worker unconnected with his work might ask questions about Sergio's personal, marital, and psychiatric history, and his ethnic background and culture. Such professionals are engaged in a practical assessment to help Sergio by seeing what he is doing to himself and what services are needed. But we also need to know Sergio's personal and social assets: his education and skills and job history, community resources such as church, buddies, and other social supports.

Kielhofner would have us pay more attention to what Sergio is up against and resources available to help him meet the challenges. This means considering variables such as worker alienation (Did Sergio want to escape his particular workplace?),

BOX 5.1. Representative Questions for Field Case Studies

- Would you show me around your [town, neighborhood, school]?
- Tell me about your typical day.
- What's the best way around here to [rent a cheap room, get a free meal, get a truck, . . .]?
- What kind of neighborhood would you say this is?
- If I needed a [passport, green card, box at the opera, . . .], what would I have to do to get one?
- Describe the sorts of things I shouldn't do at this meeting we are going to.
- What do you mean? [as a response for more elaboration]

occupational hazards (Was the machine that Sergio fell on a safe piece of equipment?), and whether the work environment is encouraging (Garson, 1994). Kielhofner thinks professionals seldom ask broad enough questions: Can the person do the work? Is the work environment a place in which any reasonable person would want to work? How do social-environmental conditions affect Sergio? According to Kielhofner (1993), "Issues of environment or workplace conditions and incentives are largely ignored. In fact, the worker who does not wish to work, or whose behavior suggests disincentive to work, is socially identified as malingering. . . . We have as much responsibility to be agents of social change and institutional transformation as we have to help persons to change" (pp. 249, 251).

Kielhofner's expertise is in functional assessment. Kielhofner (1993) believes professionals such as social workers "sit at the politically loaded juncture between the individual and surrounding institutions" (p. 248). Whether they know it or not, they exercise social control and have the power to affect rights, lives, and how the public views the "moral worth" of individuals (p. 248), in part through the assessments they write. This causes us to ask, do social workers gather information only about maladapted persons or maladaptive conditions? They should assemble information about assets and social justice. The community interface focus has us consider our angle of vision before we start an assessment. Perhaps this will result in gathering different data or connecting with different offices than usual—for example, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration as well as a consulting psychiatrist.

Two cautions are invoked in our discussion of assessments: (1) consider community context as supplying assets and opportunities and imposing constraints and (2) avoid hasty judgments. As we do our assessments, Kielhofner challenges us to transcend preconceptions and premature pigeonholing. He tells of a time when the renowned Carl Jung was asked to examine the drawings of a 50-year-old man. After making extensive negative comments, Jung concluded that the man was schizophrenic. It should give pause to all who diagnose to learn the drawings were by Picasso (Kielhofner, 1993, p. 248).

Assessment and Establishing Goals and Objectives

The first steps in community assessment involve determining the critical factors in the community, ecology, and task environment.[3]

1. What are the community's, ecology's, and task environment's boundaries? Can the boundaries be expanded if required to include more assets and resources?
2. What and where are the assets and resources available in the community? Are they adequate for objective achievement or must the community's boundaries be expanded? How can the assets and resources be accessed?
3. What factors in the community most influence behavior and opportunities? What are the communication and interaction patterns within the community?
4. What are the factors in the social environment that influence and constrain objective achievement?

Philosophies of Assessment

The act of assessment covers an astonishingly wide range of activities, from technical analyses, to preparation for massive programmatic intervention in a community, to judgments about a society itself. We must be familiar with methods and prescriptive rules. However, it would be a pity if the purposes of our profession were submerged by the practical. We must also heed the evocative in the assessment process—that is, what is indicative of what—and consider values. A listening, learning, exploring style and philosophy should guide an initial assessment interaction with an individual or a community. An assessment philosophy establishes our attitudes, organizes our approach, and directs many of our applications. It even dictates whether assessment should be a two-way process. Information gathering provides a foundation for more elaborate assessment and research.

Assessments of, in, and by the Community

Community participation as full partners is the ideal model of assessment. Community involvement in the assessment stage is critical in empowering the community and reducing any sense of social exclusion. It is a first step in helping the community take ownership of its welfare. An assessment's case theory will reflect the community's reality construction and build commitment to any subsequent realities (Butcher, Banks, Henderson, with Robertson, 2006). The bottom-up approach has been found to be effective from disadvantaged areas in London, UK (Turner, 2009), to Missoula, MT (Jacobson, 2007). In Eagle Pass, Texas, program staff ran seven focus groups to learn about grassroots health concerns. Five of the groups involved members of the community and two were with "prominent figures" who could influence the community (Amezcua, McAlister, Ramirez, & Espinoza, 1990, p. 259). The political dynamics of communities often surface during assessment and are more easily integrated into the process when local people are central to the assessment. Involvement is empowering to both communities and individual participants (Foster-Fishman, Cantillon, Pierce, & Van Egeren, 2007; Steves & Blevins, 2005).

Attitude of the Professional and Belief Bonding

The practitioner's philosophy of assessment matters because assessment is a first step in establishing a relationship with a community. The stance taken at the beginning affects all of the operations that come later. Underpinning these efforts must be the belief by the practitioner that he or she has the capacity to assist individuals and groups and the individuals and groups, in turn, have the same belief in their capacity and the practitioner's capacity. This is called *belief bonding*. Belief bonding is a shared belief by a worker and client, client system, and action system that "the worker is competent, can practice social work, and has knowledge about the problems presented by the client" (Bisman, 1994, p. 79). Belief bonding appears essential, though not sufficient, to effective social work and community practice for psychological and social interventions requiring active client, client system, and action system participation in the intervention process. Belief bonding builds on the fundamentals of the relationship component of social work practice (Patterson, 1985; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1997). As Schilling (1990) aptly observes, most people prefer to be helped by someone who believes in the efficacy of his or her intervention than someone who does not. The study of leadership generally reveals that confidence in a leader and a leader's methods and program is a critical component in successful leadership (Morrell & Capparell, 2001).

While research on belief bonding and the related therapeutic alliance is not extensive and the results are somewhat mixed, researchers generally believe that a joining between worker and client on goal and task is essential to success (Coleman, 2000; Loneck & Way, 1997; Mitchell, C. G., 1998; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1997). Without belief in the capacity of the community and clients as a living system to grow and change, there is little point—besides ritual—in doing assessments at any level.

Analyzing Community Needs and Resilience

We must avoid the self-fulfilling prophecy of "you often find what you look for." By focusing only on weaknesses, social work and other professions may inadvertently create a dependency neighborhood. Human services, urban studies, and community development too often have had deficiency-oriented policies and programs responses. Consequently:

> many lower income urban neighborhoods are now environments of service where behaviors are affected because residents come to believe that their well-being depends upon being a client. They begin to see themselves as people with special needs that can only be met by outsiders. . . . Consumers of services focus vast amounts of creativity and intelligence on the survival-motivated challenge of outwitting the "system," or on finding ways—in the informal or even illegal economy—to bypass the system entirely. (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993, p. 2)

This presents a "one-sided" story of the community (O'Looney, 1996, p. 232). Meyer (1993) asks why assessment is limited to "what is the matter," in an individual or community situation, when it should also include how people are doing with what is the matter (p. 36).

Practitioners are urged to identify the capacities of local individuals, citizen associations, and institutions and to build connections and strong ties with and among them. This method of assessment looks for problem solvers, not just problems. We will return to this need in the discussion of community assets mapping.

Agency/Community Value Differences

Assessment involves points of view (e.g., a strengths perspective), how we see and construct things, and ideology and values that shape perceptions. As we discussed in chapters 2 and 3, agencies, communities, and practitioners may not share the same construction of reality because of differences in ideologies, values, and pragmatic interests. Constructed reality or social constructionism is a postmodernist theory of understanding the world obtained from interaction with the world (Payne, 2006, p. 58). Practitioners, agencies, and communities have had different interactions with the world, differences in worldviews, and different constructions.

Assessment involves mutually building with the community a shared case theory. This will require the practitioner to develop a critical practice perspective rooted in a critical consciousness. A critical practice perspective and a critical consciousness go beyond competency in technical skill to recognizing and sharing with the community value commitments and social goals. They are grounded on the premises of symbolic interactionism and social constructionism that societies and social institutions are socially constructed with the socially accepted constructions resting on social power. Social justice and community self-determination, however, requires these constructions to be arrived at through community democratic participation. Critical consciousness is necessary for critical community practice. Critical consciousness is other and community directed, reflective, and reflexive (Butcher, Banks, Henderson, with Robertson, 2007). The critical practitioner strives to become aware of philosophical and construction differences that can hamper mutual assessment. The critical community practitioner works to understand the community, oneself, and how perceptions contour the assessment.

The hardest situations are those in which professional values are in conflict with those of most community residents. Such situations require decisions about if, when, and where to substitute professional values for the values of the community, when to adhere to the community's values, and when to strive for compromise or consensus. A part of the community or the whole may feel imposed on or affronted by a program, whether it distributes condoms in schools or clean needles on the streets, arranges for birth control implants, or houses released mental patients. The critically conscious practitioner recognizes these conflicts and shares them with the community groups. This is necessary for meaningful community self-determination.

Respect and Responsiveness

We follow this principle: Respect community residents enough to seek and listen to their views (Julian, 1999). This is required for community empowerment and the imperatives of informed consent and self-determination (Butcher, Banks, Henderson, with Robertson, 2007). These are no less imperative for community assessment and practice as with social casework. In the previous chapters, we grounded ourselves in social science approaches as a means of understanding community. Here we highlight tapping current and potential service users and others in the community network as sources of information and insight into a particular community. Respect requires that we ask key informants from the community. Along with doing or reading formal studies, we must integrate intelligence gathered from the community into the assessment and case theory. We will discuss the methodologies for doing this in the following chapter.

Listening to Feedback

Feedback feeds heavily into the assessment process. Feedback can be by anonymous satisfaction-with-services evaluations, on-premise suggestion boxes, a newsletter written and controlled by clients to be read by practitioners, formal evaluation by users of services through an outside evaluator, and serious analysis of any complaints received. *Services* is used here in a broad sense, because feedback can be given on training, group therapy, oversight of homemaker services, psychodrama, and many other activities. People working in organizations of all types—businesses, government agencies, nonprofits—should "use every listening post [they] can find" (Peters, 1987, p. 152). We will discuss this more fully in the marketing chapter (Chapter 11).

Collaborative Assessments

Rothman (1984) reminds us that whatever the assessment's form, purpose, and methodology, one of the first decisions to make is who will do the assessment, how it will be done, and where it will be done:

> Assessment can be a fairly technical and solitary professional activity carried out in an office surrounded by computer printouts and area maps. On the other hand, it can be conducted on a collaborative basis in neighborhood clubs, and meeting halls, with the professional and the constituency taking joint responsibility as partners. (p. 8)

Since the citizenry rarely initiates systematic assessment, such an assessment may begin with a professional, social agency, civic leader, or elected official. Unfortunately, outsiders seldom get it right, without input from residents is needed and solicited. Many residents want their preferences taken into consideration but may lack patience with the tedious, often unfathomable, time-consuming assessment exercises. When the process is meaningful, the community can be appreciative, even to celebrating the end of the experience (Elliot, Quinles, & Parietti, 2000).

Typically, community co-inquiry is modest and experimental; for example, 15 young people in Baltimore worked closely with an assessment team to help define youth health issues using photographs (Strack, Magill, & Klein, 2000). This Photovoice approach encourages people to assess their own situations and communities. Cameras are passed out to young, homeless, or mentally ill people—or to illiterate villagers—who take photographs, talk about them, look for themes, and make assessments and recommendations as a group. Program creator Caroline Wang (Wang & Burris, 1997, Wang, 2003) says, "Photovoice is a method that enables people to define for themselves and others, including policy makers, what is worth remembering and what needs to be changed" (p. 3, paragraph 2). Such a mutual learning experience can advance sound decision making and trust before action steps are taken (Abatena, 1997; Colby, 1997).

Apart from professionals, citizens must learn to deliberate with each other and express their disagreements about problems and priorities: "People who cannot choose together cannot act together" (Mathews, 1994, p. 401).

Forms of Community Assessment

Community assessments come in many forms (http://www.iapad.org/). Before launching one, we should consider such elements as collaboration, scope, focus, and purpose. We discuss the primary forms here, with the methodologies following in Chapter 6.

The Range and Flavor of Community Assessments

Social workers ought to be able to conduct full-blown community assessments and more topical status reports on such community dynamics as health status and neighborhood crime status. Community practitioners should welcome targeted questions from journalists and public officials such as, "Who will use public toilets if they are installed along sidewalks in our city, and what is the prediction for nontraditional use?" "What is the capacity of our community and its service network to absorb more refugees?" These questions provide the opportunity to interpret the community and its challenges to decision makers and opinion leaders.

Assessing the coping capacities of an individual client and of a community have much in common (see Box 5.1). For both it is a matter of aggregating assets. A group set up to assess the portable potty issue could comprise those providing direct services to the homeless; a Travelers Aid type of organization; a Women, Infants, and Children program representative; someone from a methadone clinic; and officials from the city's tourist bureau and police and sanitation departments. The refugee question could be addressed to church sponsors, job placement and housing location groups, public welfare staff, civic leaders, and representatives of (and translators for) the refugee/immigrant community already in the area.

We must organize our knowledge in a form that can be pulled together and used by others. Journalists and politicians come to the front-line worker neither for statistics nor diatribes, but rather for cases and insights that make sense of statistics. They also want easily remembered points on both sides of the question. To illustrate: If refugee wives and parents can join men already here, there might be less crime and alcoholism, but because housing in the community for large families is in short supply and there is a waiting list, tensions could be heightened if refugees are given preference. While this may seem mere common sense, it is our role to inject common sense, facts, and ethics into political decision making. We will discuss the interpretative responsibilities with our exploration of staging.

Getting Started: Familiarization Assessment

Getting started, based on available data with some firsthand data added, entails a more cursory examination of the entire community, with the goal of achieving a general understanding and becoming familiar with a community. Another example could flow from acquainting oneself with community and client concerns, such as by inviting those with similar problems to come together for a speak-out session. For instance, those from rural areas who must travel to receive radiation therapy or dialysis might share their needs and frustrations about their care or transportation. These patients could provide a more complete picture of the adequacy of their hometown supports. Follow-up assessments of rural towns could be of this type.

Comprehensive Assessment

Assessments can be comprehensive in the sense of encompassing the entire community and methodologically looking at all the components specified in chapter 4, and generating original data. To Martinez-Brawley (1990), assessment starts with abstract questions of a high order such as "How does the community rate in terms of cohesiveness, engagement and interdependence among its members?" (p. 23). Such questions require in-depth examination. Typically, a comprehensive assessment or audit launches planning or development projects (Guterman & Cameron, 1997; Murtagh, 1999). Many communities utilize the "civic index" to systematically identify strengths and take ownership of weaknesses. Designed by the National Civic League, it facilitates self-assessment of civic infrastructure—for example, how well does the community share information? How willing is it to cross regional lines to find a solution? To illustrate results, officials in Lee's Summit, Missouri pulled together bickering interest groups to work on growth issues. Afterwards, the community stopped defeating tax initiatives and, feeling part of the agenda, voted for a dozen straight ballot initiatives (National Civic League, 1999).

What reason would we have to assess something as large as a community? Think of someone who organizes migrant farm workers—someone who has many locations from which to choose to begin work, since the workers need help wherever they live. An assessment would help the organizer to select a community where townspeople and media outlets are somewhat sympathetic, other occupations have a history of collective bargaining, unemployment is relatively low, interaction among minority groups is positive, and numerous residents speak the migrants' language.

But most assessments are more focused and examine either neighborhoods of the community or functional components.

Subsystem Assessment

Subsystem assessment examines a single facet of community life, similar to assessing a functional community or a functional component of a community, such as the business sector, religious organizations, service agencies, non-English-speaking populations, or the school system (Spradley, 1990, p. 388). A subsystem has a structure that must be demarcated and should be diagrammed. To illustrate, board and care homes are one of many subsystems on which clients rely. These care facilities are part of a multilevel provider–regulator subsystem (which is part of the long-term care system, which, in turn, is part of the health care system). The interests and concerns of immigrant communities can be assessed through analysis of print and electronic media outlets geared to ethnic groups, another subsystem. Frederick Wiseman (1968, 1994), the acclaimed documentary filmmaker, has captured internal dynamics in portrayals of multiple subsystems. Twice he has filmed high schools as a way of learning about communities. He is famous for examining without judging.

We too must initially set aside preconceived ideas to become attuned to those affiliated with whatever slice of the community we are examining (Bloom & Habel, 1998; Weiner, 1996). This often requires wide reading. We want to be able to show the operations of a subsystem, such as the world of deaf Americans, from both the participants' and our viewpoints (Box 5.2). Eventually, if appropriate, we can make judgments (e.g., for advocacy purposes).

Service Providers and Users

Assessments often involve direct service practitioners and clients and service users. A *services/programs study* is one that looks at provision and utilization of services (affordability, suitability, effectiveness). We can examine services by observing problems and the responses to them (a) from a flowchart perspective, tracing those entities involved after the fact to those involved before the fact or vice versa, and (b) from an overview of the "quality and comprehensiveness of local services" for a problem (Koss & Harvey, 1991, p. 115). In one city, for example, a huge public housing complex was to be entirely rebuilt; therefore, residents had to relocate to other sites in town for 2 to 3 years. Part of the overall analysis of residents' needs included questionnaires and planning sessions with social workers and housing officials to identify services and programs wanted by residents in their temporary location and in their remodeled housing complex. The degree of importance of each option—from mentoring programs to general equivalency diploma (GED) classes—was examined. An assessment of relevant service providers and other civic entities was also made to identify programs already in place at the new sites, services that could be transferred with the residents, and gaps that existed. All of this involved an elaborate assessment of organizations serving low-income people.

Box 5.3 illustrates resources a community may or may not have to use in responding to rape. This simple resource inventory can be used to assess local services, to give guidance on a range of community actions that can be taken, and to look for gaps or problems. It provides a sample assessment form that could be adapted to the reader's own subject area. (However, each community problem will require a different list.)

Assessment helps with more than research, planning, and evaluation; it gives us a quick look at areas of difficulty within the system.

In this section, we wish to focus on the realm of service resources. To *grasp a human service system,* Netting, Kettner, and McMurtry (1993) would have us inspect three types of "service-delivery units"—informal, mediating, and formal—and identify the sponsoring organizations or auspices for each. (Self- or mutual help groups and associations are examples of mediating delivery units.) Netting, Kettner, and McMurtry (1993) believe that an "astute practitioner will carefully assess all avenues of service delivery to the target population" (p. 102).

BOX 5.2. Walking in Their Shoes: A Community Case Study Foray

Choose a population (teenage parents, dually diagnosed adults in group homes, immigrants) in an underserved area. Spend a day with a key informant of the group, accompanying the informant on his or her daily routine in the community. Someone who has work that takes him or her through the residential or place community of this population (if one exists), such as a pizza deliverer, meter reader, pest control employee, local transit worker, or activities director, would be a good choice. If this is a scattered or nonplace community, ferret out members of this population whose work takes them on rounds involving this group, such as public health workers, job coaches, English-as-a-second-language tutors, and Head Start outreach workers. It is useful for a better understanding of the community and life in the community. Avoid being intrusive, be humble, and make clear your desire to understand.

BOX 5.3. Tramping About: A Community Walk, Drive, Jaunt

The goals are to know people, places, and rituals; to build relationships with informants; and to talk with persons often avoided. Explore alleys and byways on foot or bicycle. Take your time. Main thoroughfares can be covered in several hours. By strolling through an area again and again, you become part of the community. Learn by speaking with, sitting with, and accompanying those encountered: mail carriers, shopkeepers, delivery drivers, individuals sitting on stoops. Ask them about their communities; listen to their tales. What generalizations do residents make about themselves? Learn their names. Traffic court, public benefit office waiting rooms, and blood banks can be used for resting and observing. Riding the subway in new directions makes sense; riding a bus provides an opportunity to ask passengers natural questions. Someone in a wheelchair might take an excursion through a barrier-free retirement community, spending time with many residents. Write-ups of such outings (field notes) include particulars, observations, and inferences. One might start as follows:

I live in a popular neighborhood. I walk past Rafael's Cuban restaurant—supposedly owned by militant exiles (scuttlebutt says its neon sign was used years ago to signal clandestine meetings), the grocery store, the apartment building with the circular drive, and the park. When I walk home at 6, I try to notice which parents and children are at the playground. In the mornings, I've noticed three men in the opposite corner of the park. Maybe I am seeing in new ways, because recently I observed them washing in the fountain, I realized that the park is their home.

We want to be aware of informal resources within particular communities that can be helpful. Melvin Delgado (1996) explains that *bodegas* (grocery stores) do more than sell native food in their neighborhoods. They also provide seven services:

1. Credit
2. Banking—cashing of checks
3. Community-related news and information
4. Counseling customers in distress
5. Assistance in filling out or interpreting government forms
6. Information and referral to social service agencies
7. Cultural connectedness to homeland (Delgado, 1996, p. 63)

Narrower resource assessments can be undertaken before or at the time of need. We can conduct such assessments ourselves or stay aware of others who make them and learn to interpret their conclusions. At any time, we may face a situation that requires knowledge of previously unexplored facets of the community.

Independent Assessments from Service Users

Clients and users can differ in perceptions from service providers. A separate survey of residents revealed worries not just about the continuity and predictability of services but also about the transition itself—how they would be accepted in the receiving neighborhoods. This meant that (a) the overall assessment needs to encompass residents as well as agencies, and (b) neighborhood civic associations also need to be contacted as part of the assessment.

We encourage formal consumer and community critiques of services (Stoesz, 2002) to legitimize the consumer's voice (Thompson, 1999), even if the critique is sometimes unrestrained or irritatingly insistent. Social agencies should have either consumers on the policy boards or consumer advisory boards, democratically selected, whose advice is carefully heeded during strategic planning and at other times. We must welcome the presence of advocates who often have different viewpoints and others who question actions of professional groups. This questioning may be verbal or written. Worries about accreditation, funding sources, and staying out of trouble with bureaucracies should not prevent the collection of potentially negative information and opinions, as it will provide a chance to address them before they get out of control. The trend toward independent service user evaluations such as state occupational licensing boards of practitioners such as physicians and social workers and the instant media of the Internet require service providers to be proactive. We should actively seek the information and listen.

Consumer Advocacy Recommendations

Our assessment philosophy embraces openness and willingness to integrate input from many sources because it is critical to learn what people want from service providers and their communities.

- We can encourage individuals and advocacy groups to explain, face to face, how the environment can become more responsive to their needs.
- We can use oral histories to solicit views of a service, an association, or an organization.
- We can seek out state and national publications with relevant recommendations about our area of work. Advocacy publications may be either sophisticated guides to citizen involvement or one-page flyers.

Consumer-oriented assessments of problems and their discussions of appropriate responses deserve our attention. Such discussions may focus on (a) how community life affects particular sectors or groups, (b) practical tips that might be implemented within a reasonable length of time, and (c) citizen participation or rights. For instance, older people and their advocates have suggested that communities assess their livability and make traveling easier. They argue for traffic lights to be set so that pedestrians have enough time to cross the street. They point out that bells or other sounds permit those with visual impairments to know when it is safe to cross. They also suggest the creation of large, separate paths to accommodate pedestrians and those using conventional two-wheeled bicycles and three-wheeled electric vehicles (Parker, Edmonds, & Robinson, 1989, p. 8). This illustrates how community assessments by citizen advocates may differ in emphasis from those prepared by professionals.

Ensuring Good Referral Matches

In the future, the public may be able to reach a central telephone number, 211, or an Internet site to get information and assistance regarding social, medical, housing, and other services. To date, few states provide a unified or seamless system of assistance through 211. Instead, there are dozens of unrelated service directories that lead unsophisticated people from one number to the next until they fall through the cracks.

The practitioner's job in assessing resources for a particular problem or referral starts with information sources: directories, references, and tools available in a community to locate a potential resource. It then becomes one of understanding the nature, effectiveness, and quality of its match to the needs at hand. This information is necessary for good-quality referrals and networking. For a college student in crisis, a where-and-when pamphlet listing the Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) meetings in the area is probably available from AA's local center. In most areas, the list is surprisingly long, and the meetings differ greatly in their format. Would this person benefit most from a small discussion meeting giving a strong sense of personal support, or from a less personal, lecture type of meeting that might not intimidate a shy newcomer?

Most practitioners engage in brokerage or linkage activities. When the focus is on the individual, tasks include "locating appropriate community resources; connecting the consumer to the resource; and evaluating the effectiveness of the resource in relation to the consumer's needs" (Anderson, 1981, p. 42). Kettner, Moroney, and Martin (1990, pp. 61–64) suggest developing resource inventories for a particular clientele or subpopulation. Social workers survey other providers to obtain an understanding of "what actual services are available, which services are most often utilized and why (location, quality, staff attitudes?, and different uses of key terminology" (p. 63). However, if the focus is less on "a clear statement of the consumer's need" and more on "an investigation of the nature, operations, and quality of available resources" (pp. 42–43), then we are engaged in community assessment. Netting, Kettner, and McMurtry (1993) would say that we must know not only what agencies are available but also how well they work together and if they make the linkages they should: "whether these interacting units truly comprise a system that is responsive to multiple needs" (p. 110).

Field Studies in Assessment

Community field case studies generally are studies with a holistic perspective that use methods such as informal interviewing and observation to describe from firsthand acquaintance a particular community. The community under study needs to be definable and must have boundaries that can distinguish it from other communities or units of analysis (Yin, 1984). The field investigator typically interacts face to face with the community over time in order to understand life from the community members' perspective. Eventually, the field worker should be able to write up "lived moments" that help to convey the reality of the unit to the outside world.

Such studies are closely linked with an interest in being where the action is and a willingness to meet people where they are in both the geographic and cultural senses. Field case studies have a long history of presenting and interpreting the unit as it is. They have ranged from journalist Jacob Riis' study of the underclass, *How the Other Half Lives* (1890), to the ethnographic studies of the modern corporation (Cefkin, 2009). Field-study trailblazer Robert Park's broad background familiarized him with many aspects of city life. He believed his "tramping about" helped him gain "a conception of the city, the community and the region, not as a geographical phenomenon merely but as a kind of social organism" (as cited in Bulmer, 1984, p. 90).

The field study gives us a chance to meet face to face and under better circumstances. A way social workers employ field studies today is to explain subgroups and their environments to outsiders. Once collected, the information needs to be organized to use in constructing a case theory for change. Analytical techniques for building the case theory are discussed in the subsequent chapters. These techniques organize and assess the information that is collected and also may guide the collection of information. Few of us can move into a neighborhood or retirement community or spend years hanging around a service center, but faster ways exist to enhance our understanding of neighbors, fellow citizens, and service users. We can seek out anyone who has conducted such studies in our area and ask for a briefing. We can borrow from field methods, such as observation, listening, and ethnographic interviewing, and we can embrace accepting attitudes. When we develop a deep understanding of communities, we bring fresh insights to community organizing, counseling, case management, and other interactions. More important, engaging in such studies makes us want to keep working, and in fact to do more, because the rich pastiche we discover is so intriguing, as are the individuals we meet.

Community Power Structure Studies

A community power structure study is defined by its subject—the power holders in the community—rather than by methodology. Power structure studies look at geographic or functional communities using field study and survey methodologies and available data to explore the configuration and dynamics of the system of influence and the characteristics of dominant individuals (Box 5.4). It results in a list of names and rankings of persons who are perceived to exercise power in the locality where they live or work. As discussed in Chapter 4, community

BOX 5.4. Representative Questions for Power Studies

- Who runs this city? Who are the most economically powerful persons?
- Who controls the resources?
- Who determines local taxes such as real estate taxes? Who benefits?
- Tell me about the power brokers in this county that everyone knows about. Is there anyone operating behind the scenes?
- Does anyone with connections at the county or state level live in your subdivision, neighborhood, or town?
- Who is influential due to the high regard people have for him or her, or because of his or her clout with politicians?
- Do you know any family that sends their children to an excellent boarding school?

power can be exercised by a small circle or by different and sometimes competing blocs or interest groups. Power studies help us identify those who exert influence, "can produce intended effects," and affect community decision making in the political, economic, or communications sphere (Dye, 1993, p. 4).

The concepts of power and social class tend to intermingle. The very poor, poor, and working classes have no power except in numbers; they have been called everything from the *underclass* to the *silent majority*, depending on their income level. Nevertheless, others in society are very interested in the leaders of these groups. When the numbers are wisely used in social action, the disenfranchised and marginalized can have power. For instance, in 1955 Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Rosa Parks led a 385-day bus boycott to end the unfair seating of passengers by race (aka skin color) on the Montgomery, Alabama, bus system. Black people were seated in the rear of the bus and had to give up their seats to whites on overcrowded buses. The boycott and its related court action for equal protection resulted in fair seating on the buses on a first come–first seated basis (in any seat) and in national recognition for the civil rights movement for social justice. The marginalized had exercised power, the ability to get what they wanted despite opposition, by the use of collective economic social action and publicity, even though they were not part of the power elite (Willie, 2008).

Most individuals and families who are in power positions or who can exert power are currently upper-middle, upper, or ruling class, regardless of their original background and social standing. Power studies try to locate *the powerful*, *dominants*, *influentials*, and *elites,* labels used fairly interchangeably to describe individuals who exercise power or who are widely regarded by perceptive people as having that option (Ostrander, 1995). Admittedly, such questions as those in Box 5.3 may not elicit information about the power elite in the community; the upper class is not necessarily the ruling class, nor does the ruling class always want to be known.

Different approaches for studying the powerful include reputational, positional, and decisional (sometimes called *issue analysis* or *event analysis*) studies. These studies ask: Is this person perceived to be powerful, occupying a position that confers authority and power, or is he or she actually involved in specific decision making? As discussed in Chapter 4, the methodology of a power study often is determined by the theory of social power adopted in the study.

Applications to Our Own Work

The types of decision makers and decision making dominant in a community have obvious implications for practice. If there is a power equilibrium among competing groups, social workers need to become part of the field of exchange and to influence local policy through bargaining. If there is centralization of power and local government responds to a set of elites with a shared set of interests, workers need to bargain with elites, get elites to propose policy alternatives, and keep elites from controlling the public, which, after all, has distinct and dissimilar interests from the elites. Finally, workers can look for common interests in the community and try to link groups to expand their influence (Box 5.5).

A remote circle of people unknown to workers presents less of an opportunity than known influentials who workers have direct or indirect means of contacting. Either way, specific names are helpful. If key decision makers turn out to be generally hostile to social services, we can still find out which influential has a personal situation that may open a door or where social action may be more successful. It is imperative to know who is on the board of directors of the agency with which we are associated, as well as any parent organization, what each person's background is, and why he or she was chosen. Those working in a government agency should be similarly aware of citizen advisory boards or other influentials that might be swayed by staff concerns. We will return to these concerns in our discussion of networking in Chapter 10.

Fund-Raiser Studies. Power studies can be used to further an organization's self-interest. Knowing who the powerful persons and influentials are behind the scenes at the city and neighborhood levels can be useful for an agency's board of directors selection and recruitment process and for resource development (Useem, 1995). If power

BOX 5.5. Fund-Raisers Had Better Know About Elite Power Structures: A Reputational Study Methodology

Emenhiser's (1991) reputational method is simpler than that of most authors. He used the following steps in Indianapolis to identify and rank influentials:

1. Put together a base list of potential influentials (from research on the corporate 5% club, banks, etc.).
2. Ask seven or eight respected members of the community to review the list, to rank order the 30 most influential names on the base list, and to add names (these experts must be well connected or positioned to know).
3. Compile a new list, weight the names according to the ranks given, and reorder them.
4. Interview the 30 to 40 on the final list, asking these questions:
   a. If a project were before the community that required decisions by a group of leaders, which 10 leaders could obtain its approval?
   b. Place in rank order, 1 through 10 with 1 being the most influential, those individuals who in your opinion are the most influential in the city—influential from the point of view of their ability to lead others.
5. Weight and compile the rankings by interviewees to get the names of the 7 to 12 persons at the top.

Source: Based on Emenhiser (1991), pp. 9–14. Copyright 1991. *NSFRE Journal*. Used with permission; all rights reserved.

studies are being undertaken for direct, obvious agency purposes such as fundraising, they probably should be contracted out and conducted by a consulting group or university—not directly by the agency—to put some distance between the requests for information and the later use of that information. Advocacy groups could do the studies themselves.

Problem-Oriented Assessment

A social problem can be a starting point to learn more about community responsiveness and how different systems interrelate. Social problems and services/programs can be studied separately or in combination. We will call a *problems study* the study needed to determine the extent and severity of specific problems or to give an overall diagnosis of the range of problems.

Social problem-oriented assessments can involve the entire community, centering on one problem, or can look functionally across communities, such as the uninsured or child abuse. Here are examples. The town of Conne River in Canada decided to assess family violence in its community (Durst, MacDonald, & Parsons, 1999). The entire community looked at one social problem. In a functional community assessment done in upstate New York, professionals assessed poverty and social pathology in rural mobile home parks; this was an across communities social problem assessment (Fitchen, 1998). Kettner, Moroney, and Martin (1990) astutely observe that problem analysis includes "analysis of the political environment, an assessment of a community's readiness to deal with the problem, and a measure of the resources the community is willing to commit to its solution" (p. 41).

According to Siegel, Attkisson, and Carson (1987), anyone living or working in a community forms impressions about human service needs; thus, we want to obtain community residents' perspectives on the accessibility, availability, acceptability, and organization of services because their reactions give us "indispensable clues about the human service needs of the community as a whole" (pp. 86–87). In many community-oriented versions of problems and services studies, such as general population or target population surveys, the perspectives of potential and current participants in the service delivery system must be solicited and valued equally with the advice of peers, funders, professionals, and service providers (Meenaghan, Washington, & Ryan, 1982). Potential and actual service users have opinions on the types of services they want and can suggest priorities for skills they desire.

Sociologists are more likely to take a problem slant—what is breaking down society? And social workers usually take a services slant—what can reintegrate society? Some of the earliest social work endeavors involved this type of community study or social survey, obtaining necessary facts for planning and for documenting the numbers of child laborers and other social conditions or problems (Garvin & Cox, 1995).

The most common approach used by helping professions when they undertake a community problem inquiry is to spotlight a target population, a population at risk, or targets for change. The responsiveness of the community to the target or at-risk population and the community's capacity to respond often are the focus (Menolascino & Potter, 1989). These studies help bridge the gap between community and agency analysis. Such investigations may be utilized when an organization has to prove to others that a problem exists, believes some problems are unaddressed, or resolves to move toward community-based services.

Staging often is more important in the public's acceptance of social constructions than are valid data and scientifically technical theory. The sociologist Herbert Blumer (1969) indicated that social definitions and not the objective makeup of a given social condition determine the way a condition exists as presumed social reality. This has certainly been true in the national health care and global warming debates. Themba (1999) states it more emphatically:

> There is only so much that information can do to improve social conditions because, contrary to conventional wisdom, information is not power. Power is having the resources to make changes and promote choices; to be heard; and to define, control, defend and promote one's interests. Many of the problems facing communities stem from the lack of power—not the lack of information. (p. 21)
>
> … Therefore, it is not giving people information that's the key to motivating them to act, but validating their perceptions and conveying as sense that the change they dare to imagine in their private spaces is achievable and desired by a great many others. (p. 24)

Community Assets Inventory and Mapping

Assessing community resources is at the core of most community assessments (Whitworth, Lanier, & Haase, 1988, p. 574), and community assets mapping is a strength-based community development approach to appraise community resources. Asset mapping starts with the positives available from within the community to address community issues rather than starting with a list of community deficits and problems. It focuses on community capacities rather than on problems/needs; it requires community participation; it seeks to enhance community competencies; it equalizes power between resident and professional; and it is proactive rather than reactive to community needs.

The process of asset mapping is one of discovering with a community its capacities and assets (Allen, 2005; Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993; Ridings, Powell, Johnson, Pullie, Jones, Jones, &Terrell, 2008). Assets include tangible physical resources, the people, the instrumental institutions, and the social, the symbolic, and the cultural. As Delgado (forthcoming) notes, community assets mapping requires suspension of conventional views of the limits on assets. It applies social work's strength perspective to discovering and documenting the life of the community. In asset mapping, community residents are asked to identify, inventory, and locate their community's tangible and social internal assets and resources and their relationships. Maps deal with relationships.

Although it is done before any intervention, community asset mapping can alter and ideally strengthen a community (Allen, 2005; Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993; Robinson, Vineyard, & Reagor, 2004; Yoon, 2009). It is community development because the community creates the assets inventory and guides the mapping. Through this exercise the community-mapping participants, now key informants, may look at their community in new and more positive ways by becoming familiar with their community's physical and social assets, history, and capacities. The outcomes of the process are an assets inventory, a map of asset locations and relationships, and among participants and the community a stronger sense of community, community pride and ownership, social networks, and greater social capital. Community asset mapping is about identifying and locating strengths within communities and connecting people to resources and to each other (Office of Learning Technologies, 2003).

Asset inventory and mapping is a prerequisite for the asset-focused interventions of asset building, asset claiming, and asset mobilization discussed in Chapter 13, "Using Organizing."

Participatory Rural Appraisal

Rapid rural appraisal and participatory rural appraisal (PRA) are techniques used globally to solicit views and to elicit local knowledge about cultural, social, and ecological resources. They are viewed by some authors as collaborative assessments and by others as research tools, project development methodologies, or implementation strategies. PRA is increasingly used in urban and rural social development (Bar-on & Prinsen, 1999; Berardi, 1998) because of its emphasis on community ownership of both data and the project. Reporting on efforts to involve people in remote areas of Australia who require rehabilitation and disability services, Kuipers, Kendall, and Hancock (2001) say that PRA was adopted because it had "been reported to foster the participation and decision making of community members in community projects" (p. 22). PRA epitomizes an assessment that is of, in, and by the community. However, as a process and program, it will fail if those adopting it just walk away when the communal assessment is over. For such projects to be successful, the problems identified and ranked as most important by townspeople must be those that can actually be changed at a community level (to avoid frustration and feelings of powerlessness). In addition, the PRA team must get back to community participants not only to provide the results but also to engage in active follow-through with them on their stated priorities.

Besides dialogue, PRA practitioners utilize interesting task-based methods. Community residents and an outside team (ideally multidisciplinary and gender-balanced) hold group discussions and work together on tasks. In one small village, a team worked with everyone and, in four days, inventoried social services, conducted a household census and wealth ranking, formulated a seasonal calendar, charted how men and women spent their time, and completed a territory map and a transect (Gallardo, Encena, & Bayona, 1995, p. 263). A village transect records what falls along a diagonal line drawn through the community and highlights natural resources or human activities, needs, and problems. Meitzner (2000) describes it as a quick sketch, sometimes made during a "transect walk" in which the terrain is drawn by villagers as they take outsiders on a guided tour (pp. 3–4). Other activities also encourage illiterate people to participate; for instance, a map can be drawn in the dirt with each household represented and flowers used to depict the living or the dead, or both.

PRA has found a home in applied anthropology and sociology; in the natural resource and agriculture disciplines; and in education, health, and other fields. Social workers will want to make more use of this assessment approach and program. Multiple tools can be viewed at Participatory Avenues, an electronic resource (http://www.iapad.org/).

Community Assessment Applications to Our Own Work

Agencies and organizations need the information contained in a community analysis. At a minimum, they must know community indicators in their own specialization (Mitchell, A., 1998). If we cannot conduct one, we should ask librarians and newspaper editors if they know of a community profile that has been published recently; an economic development office might also be a place to check. By doing it ourselves, we will learn more, target it more precisely to our concerns, and become known to significant people in the process. We will be on top of things and in a position to make better judgments about social service and social justice interventions.

Once we have conducted a community analysis, we will be ready for the day the mayor calls to ask our advice or the day we need a detailed understanding of several elements in our town, city, or county. This type of study also generates many ideas that allow us to do our jobs better and more easily (Cruz, 1997).

At a more mundane level, we are wise to keep abreast of even simple community developments—if only to avoid embarrassment. Can we give accurate and easy directions to clients on how to reach the office and where to park? Will we be aware when clients may be late due to a parade, baseball traffic, or a political demonstration (not to therapy resistance)? Would we realize if the buses or subways aren't operating because of a labor strike? Do we know when the school holidays occur? Do we know where clients with modest incomes can purchase cheaper medicine? The more specific we can be about resources and the more knowledgeable we are about how systems work, the easier we can make life for the users of our services—and consider their values.

An Allegorical Aside

How do we include self-reflection in community-based research (Murphy & Pilotta, 1983)? We will benefit from imaginative exploration, a willingness to face complexity, an ability to contemplate that which is not seen or heard yet still applies, and an awareness of our own mental processes. A task so nuanced, yet so audacious, is hard to describe. Therefore, we draw on the imagery of Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward* (1960), and on Ursula K. Le Guin's short story "The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas," with its description of an imaginary place (1975).

Bellamy and Le Guin provide us with societal extremes to consider. Bellamy, writing a novel in 1888 about the year 2000, made no pretense about neutral observation. He wrote about his vision of the perfect society of the future, contrasting it with the war and poverty of his era. In a famous comparison, Bellamy likened our society to a "prodigious coach which the masses of humanity were harnessed to," with hunger as the driver, while the rich had the seats up on top, where they could "critically describe the merits of the straining team." He continued: "Naturally such places were in great demand and the competition for them was keen, every one seeking as the first end in life to secure a seat on the coach for himself and to leave it to his child after him. . . . For all that they were so easy, the seats were very insecure, and at every sudden jolt of the coach persons were slipping out of them and falling to the ground, where they were instantly compelled to take hold of the rope. . . . Commiseration was frequently expressed by those who rode for those who had to pull the coach. . . . It was a pity but it could not be helped" (pp. 27–28). Various explanations were developed to explain why society had to operate the way it did (the innate abilities of the pullers and the pulled, etc.).

Most notions of better societies are built on the idea that we know what is right and must take the next steps to do it. Bellamy's assessment was that inhumanity grew out of failure to even comprehend what could be. Le Guin helps us look at the constant trade-offs. In her story, Le Guin paints a picture that is related to Bellamy's, but is prettier: no class of people in the fictional town of Omelas struggles in the dust and mud, pulling the rich up on a coach.

Sometimes when the macro level and the collective good are stressed, practitioners worry that the individual will get lost. Le Guin's story is one reason that social work must never lose sight of the good of the individual. Bellamy's coach metaphor reminds us, though, that if we look only at individuals pulling the coach or at those inside it or those on top of it, we may miss the big picture, the connections. We hope social workers can believe in happiness and festivals and not look compulsively for what is in the closet or cellar, but that they will do something when misery is found. Our ethics tell us that the happiness of the many must never come at the expense of even one, but if we blithely condemn the people of Omelas for their Faustian bargain, we condemn ourselves. Finally, it is to our benefit that the "narratives of humanists discuss a variety of communal, social, and psychological dilemmas" (Martinez-Brawley, 1990, p. xxiv).

We not only assess at the individual and communal levels, but we also care about the states of existence of persons and classes of persons. Despite this concern, we seldom take a planetary perspective when we assess dire human needs.

Community Reengagement: Hitting the Bricks

Certain trends are appearing, such as a requirement for community service or service-learning at public and private high schools. Bloomfield College in New Jersey requires students to take "a course called Social Responsibility and another called Society and Culture, as well as complete at least 30 hours of community service" (Sanchez, 1995). Nationwide, professors and students are being urged to become more engaged in the community around the campus, whether through work in empowerment zones, outreach, or new partnerships (Intercom, 2002; Ruffolo &

Miller, 1994). Political and community pressures drives some administrators in that direction, and a sense of obligation to assist and interact with the have-nots motivates some professors. This hitting-the-bricks philosophy tries to ensure that real listening and responsiveness, which can be byproducts of concrete experience, will inform future assessments made by sensitized citizens as well as present assessments made by professionals.

Fields from library science to engineering are taking a second look at their relationship with the communities they serve and at new modes of assessment. As one facet of an aging-in-place community support program in California, Cullinane (1993) notes that "a social worker walks a 'beat' in an inner city neighborhood. Through her contacts with merchants, bankers, pharmacists, and barbers, the social worker and the resources she represents become known to the community. In turn, she gains the confidence of the merchants, who refer their customers who need her assistance in maintaining independence" (p. 135).

In the approach known as community policing, officers who usually react to individual incidents and complaints are encouraged to become "proactive in resolving community problems," to use a problem-and-prevention approach, and to work more closely with community residents (Greene & Mastrofski, 1988, p. xii). The idea is to get out from behind a desk, even if on a part-time basis, and interact with citizens, update one's sense of the place, and experience the area's problems and struggles but also its strong points and vitality. In community or public health nursing, the focus is on the needs of populations rather than on individual psyches or ailments.

Since social work has already had community programs, this trend may not seem relevant, except that we, like the police, have begun spending more and more time indoors, in relative calm and safety, avoiding "bad weather" on the "beat." Now we need to join hands with those in social ministry and other fields that care about community.

Professions such as dentistry and psychology add a community component to the individual component in order to further the goal of promoting the common welfare or to express their fundamental concern for the collective good. Current providers of community-based services and community care are already out on the front lines, as is now being advocated for others. However, some are struggling to make a niche for themselves, so they are working more closely with community associations.

Domestic and international programs can provide models for our engagement and service delivery efforts in this direction. England had community-based programs that make legal and counseling help and review more readily available through the use of volunteers. Social benefit tribunals, dominated by lay people, are one example; Citizens Advice Bureaus, which are lay advisory agencies, are another. Rural and isolated areas are less well served by these mechanisms (Levine, 1990), but England's programs pointed a way to "tune in" to the community.

Warren and Warren (1984) put it extremely simply: "When you first arrive in a community, it's a good idea to spend a short time getting a feel for the city *as a whole*" [italics added] (p. 27). Since we want to root ourselves in the social fabric, we must go beyond the Welcome Wagon information for ourselves and those we serve

Conclusion: Unpretentious but Necessary Outings

Many federal agencies collect data on social problems and service use, and even on the quality of services. Most such studies are quantitative. We social workers must be familiar with the ongoing studies conducted in our field of interest. We also have an obligation to stay informed about events at the local level, consulting with planners and interagency task forces that prepare relevant reports. If we are unable to do studies of our own, we can seek them from hospitals, the United Way, government planning departments, urban or rural centers that specialize in social demography, and universities or colleges that do social-problem or program-evaluation studies. Our special role is our commitment to involving clients, service users, and the general public. We seek input less for magnanimous reasons and more because of our growing awareness that research alone is insufficient and that we need input from consumers, other providers, demographers, and other experts. As we shift our emphasis from broad study to focused assessment, the problems and services theme will continue to be addressed in the next chapter.

We conclude this overview of how to study and size up communities and learn more about the day-to-day realities of residents and members with these summarizing points:

- To be aware of local mores and clients' assumptions about reality, we must involve ourselves as much as possible in their worlds, with the aim of gaining putative community knowledge and the community members' construction of their reality.
- There are many ways to recognize and analyze communities; therefore, we must decide on appropriate variables (you can't find it if you don't look for it) and methodologies (how to find it) guided by the study's purposes. Our purpose ultimately is intervention for community change to promote social justice.

Notes

1. "Case" will be used to refer to the range of potential clients and the change sought. It can range from individuals through communities.
2. "Case," as with footnote 1, is the client change situation.
3. These concepts are similar and connote the social environment that influences or can influence life opportunities in positive or negative ways. We will use "community" as the referent when appropriate.

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