

# A VOLUNTEER PRACTICUM FOR UNDERGRADUATE PSYCHOLOGY STUDENTS

Hazel P. Riback, Kenneth B. Brown\*

For a long time Dr. Kenneth Brown, who has taught a senior and graduate level course in abnormal psychology for over fifteen years, has felt the need for providing students with more direct experiences with psycho-pathology than could be obtained through readings, lectures, and occasional presentation of filmed or taped case illustrations.

Accordingly, while the Mid-Missouri Mental Health Center was in the process of setting up operations during the fall 1966 semester, we began exploring the feasibility of combining student volunteer work with a "practicum" requirement for the abnormal psychology course and also for a new course to be titled "Emotional Disorders of Infancy and Childhood."

Mid-Missouri Mental Health Center, located on the University of Missouri campus, is a comprehensive mental health center providing essential psychiatric services to a 52 county area in Mid-Missouri.

Its functions include all facets of diagnostic studies; intensive and extensive therapeutic

---

\*Hazel P. Riback is Director of Volunteer Services, Mid-Missouri Mental Health Center.

\*\*Kenneth B. Brown, Ph.D., is Professor of Psychology, University of Missouri.

programs, training of professional staffs, community mental health services and comprehensive research. Short term intensive treatment is provided for a maximum of 120 inpatients, including 28 children, and day or night care services for 35 to 50 patients.

Treatment is based on modern concepts of mental or emotional illness and embraces the philosophy of the therapeutic community. The staff-patient ratio is excellent in all areas of the program, and patients receive individualized therapeutic treatment from competent, well trained staff on the wards, in recreation and activity therapy, and in the school program as well as in individual and group psychotherapy and rehabilitation.

Volunteers are considered by the staff as an important part of the total treatment program. They are recognized as the vital link between the community and the Center and can make the unique contribution to the patient's total treatment of providing the spontaneous and unsolicited show of friendship, warmth and acceptance. Volunteers also supplement the staff with special skills and talents and can be an important force in motivating patients to develop new interests and awareness.

The inclusion of psychology students in the volunteer program is not only consistent with the above goals but also with the Center's commitment to education and training and the development of an informed public. With the shortage of professional people in the mental health fields any exposure that might interest students in careers in this area is felt to be worthwhile.

Enrollment in the courses in "Abnormal

Psychology" and "Emotional Disorders of Infancy and Childhood" is restricted to advanced and undergraduate and graduate students with vocational objectives that would involve them with disturbed children or adults.

In addition to psychology majors who plan to do graduate work in clinical or counseling psychology, majors in the following fields are routinely enrolled in one or both of the courses: special education, remedial education, elementary or secondary school counseling, speech pathology, child welfare, and psychiatric social work. A few students from other majors such as journalism, sociology, and English are generally included in the classes. About three fourths of the students have had no experience with maladjusted persons or in a mental health agency prior to taking one of the courses. The others range in background from a semester course e.g., speech pathology with practice in a home for retardates or a semester of child welfare field work, up to several years experience as a school counselor, teacher, speech therapist, or similar professional work.

The practicum was planned, and is administered jointly by Dr. Brown and the Mid-Missouri Mental Health Center director of volunteer services, with the cooperation and assistance of staff members of Mid-Missouri Mental Health Center.

After an initial orientation which covers the concept and structure of the Center, treatment philosophy and information about the various programs to which volunteers are assigned, students are interviewed individually by the director of volunteer services and assigned to a service in accordance with the student's background, skills, interests, available time, and vocational objec-

tives, and the requests of the staff of Mid-Missouri Mental Health Center. Course requirements involve a minimum of two hours volunteer service a week and a written report including an evaluation of the practicum experiences.

In addition to the orientation and training session of the volunteer program and on the job training and supervision by staff, the students are invited to attend educational programs and seminars of the University of Missouri Medical Center department of psychiatry and of the Mid-Missouri Mental Health Center.

Reactions to the training and supervision was for the most part very favorable. Supervision ranged from very little on the adult wards to close supervision, frequent conferences, and a good deal of structure in the school. Most volunteers on adult wards indicated that they would have liked more information about the patients and a more structured program. The staff, however, felt this would have destroyed some of the volunteer's spontaneity and creativity out of which came some of their most valuable contributions.

Some typical responses from the students' reports follow:

"Of extreme interest and probably the most valuable experience for me were the orientation sessions at the Center. Discussions with the various professional personnel concerning their particular functions were very enlightening. The philosophy as disclosed in these sessions behind the establishment of centers such as Mid-Missouri Mental Health Center encompasses tremendous potential."

"- - - this meeting was a good question and answer opportunity for information on the general program and operational procedures for therapy on the adult ward. Of special interest to me are the techniques employed here of group psychotherapy and the emphasis on therapeutic activities for the patients outside the "doctors offices" and independent of the doctor. The latter makes a volunteer very integral to the general milieu."

"- - - at a specialized meeting I learned some of the background symptoms and treatment procedure for the children. I felt this was valuable because it gave some indication of how we were supposed to react to the children in accordance with the treatment program. I think this is valuable information, but I also believe I got along well with the children just by being interested in them and treating them as I would any other children."

"- - - a lecture by Dr. Krapfl on operant conditioning and one by Dr. Lindsley which made me aware of possibilities and greater use of operant conditioning and behavior modification - -. The lecture on prevention and treatment of mental illness in the school is more meaningful since we began studying this in class. These lectures made me aware of the part teachers play in prevention and, for special education teachers, treatment of mental illness."

"I wrote two magazine articles on the center and had a chance to talk with many staff members. They are all very willing

to answer questions and explain treatments if you take the time to ask."

"In the school I often consulted the teachers as to better ways to approach the children. The teachers were always in the classroom and gave assistance when necessary."

"Two activity aides have been my supervisors. They have directed me and encouraged me in dealing with the children and I feel I learned a great deal from them. I believe my comprehension of hyperactive and acting out children was increased by working with the children."

"At first my experience with nurses and aides on 2S was one of indifference on their parts. Later, however, as I grew to know the personnel better they seemed much more receptive. Supervision was satisfactory."

"I am generally left without direct supervision now, but do work closely with staff - - frequent consultations with the teacher. I write daily reports to the child psychiatrist whose patients I work with in study hall and also hold conferences with him on all problems concerning these patients. His help and advice is of maximum assistance and importance."

"- - - this meeting for volunteers in adult services, conducted informally with a small group, proved extremely valuable. Particularly helpful were discussions of specific patients that I had questions about."

"At first supervision seemed to be lacking. However, if enough interest is shown, the volunteer can get all the help he wants. While the head nurse is extremely busy, she will help if she can. The people whom I found most helpful were the aides; there were always a number around who were willing to assist you or answer questions."

Because of the wide range of interests and backgrounds among the students, volunteer participation covered a wide range of services. Although course requirements were only 2 hours a week, one student averaged 10 hours a week and most gave 3 to 4 hours weekly. Reports as follows are typical of how the students spent their volunteer time.

"Ten hours a week in children's service - organized and ran children's newspaper under supervision of Mrs. L. Taught in classroom for two hours and ran study hall Monday through Thursday evenings. Involves teaching, quizzing and running the controlled reader."

"Saturday mornings we take the children shopping."

"For an hour on Tuesday evenings we had a hootenanny for the children. I just helped lead the singing and kept the children participating. I also work two hours a week in the classroom helping the children with their assignments."

"I teach French on 2S (the adult ward) and in the children's school. Most often we lack people interested in French on 2S, so

I have spent my time talking and playing games with the patients. One patient and I made a crystal radio out of scrap radio parts that I brought him. We had one man from South America who didn't like to speak English. I was asked to communicate with him. We got along fine in French and Spanish."

"To one girl I suggested that she take a correspondence course to aid her in adjusting to a school situation and I now help her with the course."

"Activities I help with involve mainly adult male patients and include basketball, ping pong, pool, and volleyball. Several times I sat down with patients and talked about things that interested them. One afternoon I participated in a dance and on another we went on a downtown shopping trip. I received an orientation from a recreation therapist on a new program he is developing. I helped collect interest sheets from patients and will begin work on the project this week."

"I worked with the children in their recreational activity program. I tried to encourage the ones who weren't very good players. With all the volunteers working together at this we could see definite improvement in the skills, attitudes and confidence of the children which was satisfying for the volunteers as well as the children."

"Twice a week I work in the classroom assisting children on an individual basis with their assigned work, doing some teaching of basic subjects, especially



reading and arithmetic. I also played the accordion for several adult hootenannies.

"At the request of the teacher, I administered and scored several achievement tests. Infrequently I was asked to observe a particular child and record how many times he repeated a specific action (i.e., biting his hand.)"

Student response to the "practicum" as part of the courses was, without exception, favorable. The following quotations sum up the value of the experience to them.

"The opportunity for practical experience and observation at MMMHC is invaluable to a course of this kind. It has added to the understanding of what people are like who do have mental problems and has kept these people "real"--not just a series of dry case studies in a textbook. It supplemented the course very well. For me, it has provided valuable experience in learning to deal with more seriously disturbed children than what I have had in my own teaching experience. It has added to my knowledge of human behavior and has influenced what I will bring as a person to an elementary counseling position."

"The work I did acquainted me with the field I plan to enter. I feel that because of my experience in the school I benefit more from my education and special education courses, having seen some of the problems involved in teaching these children. I also feel working with the

children made such concepts as operant conditioning and the various disorders more meaningful through exposure to these."

"I am not a psychology major, but I have found this course extremely interesting and much of the interest was generated by the opportunity to work in a clinical setting - something I would probably never have found time for on my own. I will be unable to continue volunteer help next semester, but I will be doing a brochure for Mrs. R. on information volunteers should have."

"My working with, and not just reading about, mental disorders has helped me to better understand the part the community and interested people should, and do play in the recovery of this type of disorder. I gained much more from associating even for short periods of time with the patients than from reading a book about their problems."

"In my field of journalism I feel that this experience will be most beneficial. What you learn over there cannot be taught in a classroom. I feel that I now have a small working knowledge of a mental health hospital and because of the increasing realization of the general existence of mental health as a problem this issue will probably arise many times in my work."

"I have learned something of the utmost importance from the practicum this semester - treat the children as you

would any children. They need praise, love, understanding, guidance, acceptance. They have been lacking many of these essential aspects of life."

As a direct result of participating in this practicum, 18 students became part of the staff of MMMHC, several others sought employment in mental hospitals in other communities, many education majors have decided to go into special education or teaching the emotionally disturbed; several have decided to enter graduate school for psychiatric social work, mental health journalism, guidance and counseling.

This program has now been in effect for four semesters and has been so successful from the viewpoint of both the staff of MMMHC and the student volunteers that plans are to continue it as a permanent part of the psychology courses.