

An Invitation to Debunk: Posing Sociological Questions to Understand Social Work Cases

J Forbes Farmer¹

Abstract

Problem solving and decision-making skills can be developed by involving students in the synthesizing, evaluating and analyzing of real world cases of the disenfranchised. In this article, the author provides three very different and original social work cases he wrote that can be studied, debated and understood through the discipline of sociology. The questions after each case require the students to apply sociological theorizing to explore relationships between individuals and groups and social institutions. Finding answers to these questions, students are led to realize that things are not always as they seem.

Keywords: Sociological imagination, Generalist social work practice, Case method, Social work ethics, Policy development

1. Introduction

Years ago, Berger (1963) made it clear that sociology is not social work. He wrote that sociology is *not* a practice, but a systematic attempt to understand social life, and social work, whatever its theoretical rationalization, *is* a practice in society. The social worker, however, needs to use the theoretical lens and disciplined research methods that sociology offers. Sociology focuses on “the relationship between personal lives and the social forces that structure society” (Callero 2013: 8). In this endeavor, whether it be at the micro level like Mead and often Weber or the macro level like Durkheim or Marx, the academic sociologist/social work practitioner is often misunderstood.

¹PhD, Department of Sociology and Social Work, Franklin Pierce University, Petrocelli Hall, 40 University Drive, Rindge, NH 03461, United States. E-mail: Farmerjf@Franklinpierce.edu, Office Phone: 603-899-4261

In their search for the “truth,” the sociologists’ curiosity, inquiry and analysis often leads to social activism and solutions that ruffle feathers and threaten the status quo. Consequently, the theoretical interests and pursuits of the sociologists often get them in trouble. But this is the chance they take as they try to understand, and see how they are affected by issues like injustice, prejudice, child abuse, racism, sexism, bullying and greed; all focal points for the social worker. After all, “The sociologist, in his quest for understanding, moves through the world of men without respect for the usual lines of demarcation” (Berger 1963: 18).

Consequently, the purpose of this article is to encourage the use of cases in fostering the skill to read and analyze situations sociologically. It is, as Hachen (2001: xii) put it, “to *take* action to understand sociology *in* action.” The decision cases presented here are short written narratives of real-life situations in which people or organizations face a problem or dilemma. The final outcomes are unknown and they are open to multiple interpretations. The case study method has not been used much in sociology, but the method is a great tool to foster the sociological perspective.

1.2 The Use of Sociology

Berger (1963) also wrote that sociologists are spies and Peeping Toms who see through and look behind the facades, the scenes and the tricks of social structure. They know that behind closed doors there are voices to be heard, and they want to hear and understand them. They are aware that different cases and events have different levels of meaning of which the actors are often not conscious. And sociologists can see the general patterns in the behavior of particular people (Macionis 2011). Mills (2000), one of sociology’s most reknown activists, promoted the “sociological imagination” as a special way to come to understand that personal issues and troubles are often related to social issues and that when people feel trapped in their private lives they are not alone.

Sociologists want to understand how lives and interpersonal situations are shaped by social forces, structural changes (Callero 2013) and institutions, and how people can actively shape those forces. Some of these sociologists see their pursuits as purely ivory-tower theoretical and research for its own sake, while others view their activities as passionate engagement with the community. The latter sociologists clearly have seen the humanistic implications of their scientific discipline.

This was the case with Karl Marx who focused on class conflict and economic systems, Max Weber who looked at economic and political power, Emile Durkheim who broke down society into several interdependent parts, George Mead who was interested in how the human self is developed through symbolic communication with others, and Jane Addams who was a social reformer and social worker. They all looked at the roots of inequality in society and developed theories as to how society worked. This perspective and frequent demystifying and debunking of the social system often leads to a certain disenchantment with humanity and people asking if they are really masters of their own fate (Ruane & Cerulo 2013).

1.3 Generalist Social Work

Generalist social work practice focuses on both the individual and society. This idea has its roots in the work of two social work pioneers, Jane Addams and Mary Richmond. Addams was an applied sociologist and social/political activist, leader in woman suffrage and co-founder of the Hull House in Chicago which was the first settlement house in the United States. It offered a wide range of social services, including adult education, kindergarten classes, cultural events, recreation, job training and public health. She was also the first American woman to be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. Richmond was trained as a “friendly visitor,” an historic term for caseworkers who visited the homes of the needy to assist them in improving their situation. Using social theory as her grounding principle, she focused her social work efforts around the idea that people can best be understood by studying them in their social environment. This allowed her to help people by starting with their strengths, rather than by blaming them for their situation. Her primary interest was children, medical social work and families.

Over the years, generalist social work emerged as the basis for social work education. The training includes looking at the presenting issue from some combination of individual, familial, small group, neighborhood, community, agency or organizational focus. Thus, there is education towards the competencies in direct and indirect practice and micro, mezzo and macro analysis (including techniques of counseling, social systems theory, conflict theory and social policy). This allows the social worker in training to come to appreciate the need for the dual emphasis of individual (psychology) and structural environment (sociology).

This interface moves the social worker to make appropriate interventions that create opportunities and eliminate obstacles for personal growth and social justice.

1.4. The Case Study Method

The case method of teaching is generally believed to have begun with the faculty at the Harvard Business School (Jensen 2014). From there, its use spread to other disciplines like, medicine, political science, business, law and social work (Lynn 1999; Packard & Austin 2009; Rivas & Hull 2004). With this classroom pedagogy, students develop their inductive skills and learn to work individually or in teams to find solutions to complex and often ambiguous personal and/or social problems that involve major issues and conflicts of interest. This method, that deals with human stories, fosters higher-order thinking (Room & Mahler 1986) and, because cases often evoke emotions, they pique student interest and motivation (Hoover 1980). Additionally, it has been found that students who participate in case studies often have a resultant empathy towards the subjects (Boehrer & Linsky 1990; Fisher 1978) and a change in their attitude (Bonwell & Eison 1991).

1.5 NASW Code of Ethics

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW), the social workers' professional organization, has developed a Code of Ethics that should be used to guide social workers in their efforts towards this dualistic generalist focus. In brief, this code directs the social worker to keep several values, principles and standards in mind as they work to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic needs of all people. These include: (1) being committed to putting the needs of the client above the social worker's personal needs, (2) seeking social justice by challenging the inequalities (e.g., abuse, poverty, unemployment, discrimination) found in the individual (micro), family (mezzo) and community, state or country (macro) realm, (3) valuing the dignity and worth of people of all cultural or religious backgrounds, (4) being willing to advocate on behalf of those needing empowerment or support (e.g., minorities, elderly, children, the sick and disabled), (5) maintaining a high standard of personal and professional behavior and educational competence.

1.6 The Charge

The following three cases and discussion questions, for which there are no "right" or "wrong" answers, are meant to provide the student with a wide variety of exposure to the issues and dilemmas faced by social workers. The cases all come from one voice, that of the author. It is an authentic voice and the strategy of its use is that it allows others to disagree (Gibbs 2013). It also, Lewis (2011) has argued, gives voice to the voiceless.

Used in conjunction with the sociological lens, the social work code of ethics, the class lectures and discussions, the student should develop many of the skills, insights and competencies required to enter the human services field, go on to MSW graduate work and to advance into management positions.

The cases were written to elicit rational and orderly steps in the problem-solving process that encourage engagement, data collection, assessment, goal-setting, evaluation and action. Problem solving, however, is rarely a completely linear process (Rivas & Hull 2004), so time for theoretical sociological reflection should be encouraged along with careful consideration of the values of the social work profession and the ethical principles outlined in the *NASW Code of Ethics* that is summarized above. A special effort was made to present micro, mezzo and macro cases where students have to consider client self-determination, confidentiality, social justice and advocacy.

2. The Cases

Case 1: Winston Abell's Investigation

The following case contains many elements. There are issues of race, management, policy, inter-agency cooperation, abuse, social worker burnout, poverty, housing and culture. When reading about Winston Abell's investigation, ask yourself how cases, environments and situations like this can happen and what could be done to avoid them. Pseudonyms are used.

Winston Abell found the stairwell to the third-floor at Hasbrook Apartments on the corner of Decon and Rennod streets covered with broken glass and empty Kentucky Fried Chicken boxes and smelling of urine, mold and marijuana. He was there in his capacity as senior social work investigator for the Division of Children Services (DCS) because DCS had received a call from a Mrs. Emily Robinson, the mother of Janet Stevens (24) who lived there with her eight-year old daughter, Laura. Mrs. Robinson had been called by Laura's school principal because he had tried unsuccessfully to contact Mrs. Stevens about Laura's four-day absence from school. Mrs. Robinson had said that she loved her granddaughter and suspected her daughter, Janet, wasn't being a responsible parent.

Case investigator Abell already had a case load he could barely keep up with, but he loved his work. Over the 14 years he had worked for DCS after receiving his MSW he had taken many children out of bad family situations as a last resort, but he didn't like to do it.

He knew this new case shouldn't have been given to him because he was so overloaded, but he also knew that many of his coworkers had long ago burnt out and had found ways to be "sick," be "unavailable," "too busy," or to take vacation comp time they hadn't really earned because they had cheated on their time cards. They were all city employees, covered by the union and essentially invulnerable to discipline. His supervisor, Paul Lardy, who didn't have his MSW and had never been a caseworker, let all this happen because he didn't like confrontation and it was easier to look the other way. Despite all this, Abell loved doing what he could to protect kids from abuse. It got a little dicey, however, when, being white, he had to enter rough African American neighborhoods like this where gang activity was prevalent.

Just as he approached the front door to the apartments on the right, he heard his name called. He turned around to see Cliff Long, an old friend he hadn't seen since high school graduation. Abell had learned that Long had become a policeman, no small feat for an African American in a police force that was predominately white; but today he wasn't in uniform. They both wanted to know what the other was doing there. Long said he was working undercover on a homicide investigation, and Abell said he was following up on a call.

"Are you packing?" asked Long. "No, why? Is the deceased Janet Stevens?" Abell wondered. "No, someone else, but you better be careful in this building, you being white and all. Do you want me to go with you?" "No, thanks," said Abell. "OK, but I'll be close by should you need me." Long left and Abell knocked on the door.

Abell identified himself to Janet Stevens, and explained that her mother was worried about them. Mrs. Stevens, distrustful at first, finally let him in.

"We're OK," said Mrs. Stevens, "my mother worries too much." As Abell looked around, he saw clothes piled on the furniture, Domino pizza boxes stacked in the corner and empty beer cans on the empty book shelves. "Yup, we're OK," said a young girl's voice. Abell looked around the corner into the kitchen. There he saw dirty dishes piled high in the sink and a very disheveled and skinny young girl sitting at the kitchen table.

"Hello, you must be Laura," said Abell. "Lorie," the girl replied. "Hi, Lorie, I'm Mr. Abell. Your grandmother is worried about you and wonders why you have missed school." "We can't go out," Lorie and Mrs. Stevens replied at the same time. "Why not?" asked Abell. "The devil will get us," said Lori. "What do you mean?" asked Abell as he looked at both Lorie and Mrs. Stevens for an answer.

“That’s why we have the curtains pulled. So the devil can’t see us,” said Mrs. Stevens. “When was the last time you went outside,” Abell asked Lorie. Mrs. Stevens answered for her, “About a week, Lorie has been sick.” “Lorie, when was the last time?” Abell repeated. “When I could get up,” said Lorie. Just then, Abell realized that Lorie hadn’t moved since he saw her in the chair. He walked around the chair and saw that Lorie’s arms and legs were roped to the chair.

As he was carrying Lorie out of the apartment building, detective Long came up beside him. “What are you doing?” he asked Abell. “I’m taking this girl to DCS.” “Do you have permission?” asked Long. “Don’t need any. It’s my job to protect her,” responded Abell. “You better hurry up because if anyone in this neighborhood sees you we’re in for big trouble.” “My car is two blocks away, where’s your car?” asked Abell. “Over there, come on, I’ll escort you, but let’s make it quick.”

Just as they were approaching Long’s unmarked car, four African-American men came towards them amid a blizzard of profanity and posturing. All of them were layered up with jackets and smoking cigarettes. “Sup wi’ this shit?” the obvious leader asked. Abell showed his ID, explained who he and Long were and said they were taking the girl into their protection. The leader nodded and the four men followed him down the sidewalk, the leader yelling. “Yo, fuck.”

Two hours later, after Abell had placed Lorie in a temporary shelter, called in a nurse and got Lorie something to eat, he checked the DSC records on the case.

The Division of Children Services (DCS) Intake Record

- Operator received an incoming call at 8:30 a.m. on Friday, January 15th from a Mrs. Emily Robinson who was worried about her granddaughter who had been absent from school for four days.
- Paul Lardy, Chief Supervisor, referred the call to Helen Jacoby, Senior Investigator, on Monday, January 18th.
- Mrs. Emily Robinson called again on January 25th.
- Supervisor Paul Lardy referred the case to Winston Abell, Senior Investigator on January 26th.

Discussion Questions

1. Why do Janet Stevens and Lorie live in Hasbrook Apartments? Whose “fault” is it? (A) a diminishing Federal tax base, (B) a corporate Federal income tax that is too high, (C) Mrs. Stevens, (D) Mrs. Robinson, (E) capitalism, (F) other. Why?
2. Who holds the most responsibility for the deplorable conditions at Hasbrook Apartments? Why? (A) the residents, (B) the landlord, (C) the city building inspectors, (D) local elected officials, (E) the US Government, (F) other
3. What macro and mezzo policy implications were raised for you in this case?
4. What were social worker Abell’s thoughts in the case? What feelings did the case circumstances evoke in Abell?
5. Which social work roles were demonstrated? Which roles seemed most important?
6. What skills did Abell use in the case? How well did he do? What mistakes did he make? What would you have done differently?
7. What NASW ethical issues were addressed or avoided in the case?
8. Comment on the roles that Long, Jacoby and Lardy played.
9. If you supervised Paul Lardy, what would you do now? Why?
10. What other interventions should be made now at different system levels?
11. What thoughts and feelings did this case evoke in you?
12. What cultural differences were evident?
13. What is the responsibility of the city employee union here?

Case 2: Lucita Alvarez Gets Bullied

In the following case, Lucita Alvarez is clearly a victim of bullying. The first discussion question asks who is most responsible. Over 40 years ago, William Ryan coined the phrase, “blaming the victim”(1971). He wrote that this was an ideology of finding defects in victims to justify racism and social injustice. By doing so, he claimed, people fail to hold social structural factors responsible for individual situations like poverty, poor health or victimization. The structural influences include things like rules, institutional policies or social class inequality. This case was written to make students think about these macro issues. Pseudonyms are used.

Lucita Alvarez, age 15, lived with her 50-year-old grandparents, Fernandez and Zurine Rivera, on the third floor of a small, but clean and tidy, Section 8 apartment in Harvard, Connecticut. Both Lucita’s young parents had been killed in Reuters, Mexico when a gang of drug hitmen shot up houses and terrorized the residents in their remote farming community on the U.S. border.

Lucita's aunts and uncles, fearing for her future, asked the Riveras to look after her, and they readily agreed. This was eight months ago, and Lucita, still learning English from her grandparents, was attending Harvard High School.

The first month of school went without incident. Because her past school records from Mexico had indicated that Lucita was "susceptible" to bullying and had both been bullied and participated in bullying, she had been assigned to Pam Burke, MSW, one of three school district social workers. Miss Burke, 25, had been meeting with Lucita every week and, in general, had kept a close eye on her. However, things began to change about two months ago. Miss Burke's case load almost doubled when one of the other social workers went on maternity leave and the school committee, determined to save some money, didn't replace her. Consequently, Miss Burke, only able to meet with Lucita once every three weeks, began losing track of her.

Lucita began to be taunted and bullied by students at Harvard High School (85% white, 10% Black and 5% Hispanic), reportedly because of arguments with three other girls over her brief sexual relationships with their boyfriends, all hockey players. The three girls, the boyfriends and other boys on the hockey team, all 18 years old, persistently taunted and harassed her. They called her a slut and made fun of her lack of English-speaking skills.

Her grandmother, Mrs. Rivera, called the school principal, Walter Armstrong, to report the bullying. Armstrong told her he would have Miss Burke look into it. Two weeks later, she had not heard back from the principal. Knowing that her lovely Lucita was depressed and the bullying had not stopped, Mrs. Rivera took time off from her minimum-wage job as a grocery store cashier and went in to see him. He told her he was surprised Miss Burke had not gotten back to her, but that he would speak to her again and promised to call Mrs. Rivera the next day.

The next day it was Miss Burke who called. She apologized for not getting to this situation earlier, but that she was overloaded and overworked. She had, however, finally spoken to Lucita, and also to the Harvard Hornets hockey coach, who said he would talk to the players. She didn't tell Mrs. Rivera that she wasn't very optimistic that the coach would follow through. He was a tough, disciplinary-type man, but also protective of his "hornets" and all about winning. She doubted he would want to get any of his players in trouble.

Burke also chose not to mention to Mrs. Rivera that there were unconfirmed rumors of a culture of sexual entitlement and some boorishness among the hockey players, all of whom were white. She personally knew that one of the players Lucita complained about was a “blockheaded Neanderthal” with a degrading view of both women and minorities.

Burke did say, however, she had discovered that other students and one teacher had intervened in the bullying on occasion. The teacher said he had reported one incident to the principal. Burke also asked Mrs. Rivera if she knew whether Lucita was pregnant because Lucita had confided in her that she was. Mrs. Rivera, quite shocked, answered that she did not know of any pregnancy, but she would ask Lucita.

When she confronted her granddaughter that night, Lucita denied it, got angry and ran out the door. At 11:30 PM, Mr. Rivera, who had just put on his winter coat to walk to his graveyard shift (midnight to 8 AM) job as a baggage handler at Bradley International Airport, answered the phone. He was told that Lucita was in the hospital emergency room with serious, but not life-threatening injuries. On the way to the hospital, Mr. and Mrs. Rivera talked. What were they going to do?

The emergency room doctor told them Lucita was, in fact about two months pregnant, but worse, she was very likely going to lose the use of her legs due to a spinal injury. Lucita was groggy, but they could speak to her. After many tears, hugs and words of comfort from her grandparents, Lucita told them what happened.

She had gone to confront the boys. They had forced her into the back of a pickup truck. Two boys got in the front seat and she got in the back with the third boy. With the truck speeding down an icy, winter road, the boy with her in the back started to sexually assault her. She resisted but just as she got out of his grasp, the truck hit black ice. It skidded off the road into a frozen brook. Lucita was violently ejected from the truck. When she woke up, she was in the hospital.

According to the police, her back had apparently hit a large boulder in the brook. The boys, shaken, cold and only suffering minor injuries, saw that she was lying unconscious in the icy water next to the boulder. They pulled her out and called 911. The driver had been drinking, but was not over the limit. Hearing all this, Mr. Rivera, proclaimed to all within hearing, including the police and the hospital staff, that he would exact revenge on the boys.

Discussion Questions

1. Who holds the most responsibility for Lucita being in the hospital and possibly not being able to walk again? (A) Lucita, (B) the social worker, Pam Burke, (C) Mrs. Rivera, (D) Mr. Rivera, (E) Principal Armstrong, (F) the local school committee, (G) the boy driving the truck, (H) the boy who impregnated Lucita, (I) the girls who had bullied Lucita, (J) the hockey coach, (K) the town of Harvard, (L) the capitalist system.
2. Should Pam Burke, the social worker, have done anything differently? What?
3. What, if anything, should Principal Armstrong have done differently?
4. Who should decide if Lucita should have an abortion? (A) Lucita, (B) the grandparents, (C) the medical staff, (D) Lucita and her grandparents, (E) Lucita, her grandparents and the medical staff.
5. What should they do if Lucita's and the Riveras' Catholicism forbids an abortion?
6. Do Lucita and her grandparents have a legal case (and if so, what would the charges be) against: (A) Harvard High School, (B) social worker Pam Burke, (C) Principal Armstrong, (D) the boy who impregnated Lucita, (E) the driver of the truck, (F) the boy who assaulted her in the back of the truck, (G) the town of Harvard, Connecticut, (H) the hockey coach?
7. If this case ever went to trial and guilt was proven, how much money should Lucita receive? How many months in jail or years in prison should the convicted person serve?
8. What should social worker Pam Burke and the Harvard High School officials do now? Why?
9. Could all of this have been prevented? How?
10. How do you explain the culture of the men's hockey team?
11. What would you say now to Mr. Rivera?
12. What factor does Lucita and her grandparents being Hispanic have to do with this case?

Case 3: Saving Apalachicola Bay and Helping the Oystermen

Fresh water flows south from the Appalachian Mountains into the Chattahoochee and Flint Rivers in northern Georgia. These rivers converge on the Georgia/Florida border and turn into the Apalachicola River that runs through the Florida panhandle and empties into the Gulf of Mexico at Apalachicola Bay. The water in this bay is brackish, a mixture of fresh and salt water, which is delicately balanced to provide an ideal habitat for oysters.

Harvesting and selling the oysters has provided a living for generations of north Floridians. The oysters and the livelihoods connected to them are now threatened due to a drought in Georgia, a reduction in the fresh water flow into the bay and a cut in the barrier reef that increases the water flow out of the bay. The oystermen are asking for help in the following multi-level case that involves the Federal government and the states of Alabama, Georgia and Florida.

Three states want the water that flows down 500 miles from the tributaries in northern Georgia to the Gulf of Mexico. Alabama and Georgia want it for industry, recreation, watering lawns and golf courses, drinking, bathing and other needs typical of growing cities like Atlanta. Florida wants it for fish and wildlife along the Apalachicola River and to support the sea-food industry in Apalachicola Bay.

The problem for the folks in Apalachicola is that they are last in line and the Georgians, who have experienced several years of drought, have four Federal reservoirs that control the water flow to Florida, and they like to keep them filled for their own use. So one question is, who has the right to control how much fresh water eventually reaches Apalachicola Bay? A water dispute has been taking place in Federal court since 1990.

In 2009, a U.S. District Judge ruled that Congress must authorize Lake Lanier, the largest of the four Federal reservoirs in Georgia, to provide water to Georgia cities. He also ordered that this water use must be cut off in three years. The 11th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, however, overturned the decision and directed the U.S. Corps of Engineers to analyze its authority over releasing water out of Lake Lanier. Shortly thereafter, Alabama and Florida appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court to review the case. On the same day that the U.S. Supreme Court upheld President Obama's Affordable Care Act, it refused to take up the case. This leaves the future of the Apalachicola Bay oysters and the families who depend on them in great jeopardy.

There are many questions and challenges. Who has the right to control the water flow? The U.S. Congress? The Federal courts? The U.S. Corps of Engineers? The Georgia state government? Can the three states work together towards a mutually beneficial water-sharing agreement? Should state and local governments mandate water conservation? Would people be willing to conserve? What industries would be economically hurt by conservation? Should there be public hearings and environmental studies on the water flow question? Who should fund these?

But the amount of fresh water flowing from Georgia into Apalachicola Bay on the Gulf of Mexico is not the only issue. There is also the question of keeping less water flowing out of the bay. There is a 26-mile-long and 2-mile-wide island (St. George) that separates Apalachicola Bay from the Gulf of Mexico. This island used to greatly restrict the water flow from the bay. In 1954, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers constructed a ship channel, known as the Bob Sikes Cut, right through the island. The cut benefits the Apalachicola fishing and shrimping fleets because it gives them a convenient shortcut to the Gulf. Some people think that a temporary six-month closure of the cut, or a renovation of the cut to include a lock or gate at the mouth of the cut, would be beneficial for oystering because it would greatly reduce the undesirable brackish water outflow (brackish water is necessary for oysters to survive) while only inconveniencing the Gulf fishermen.

The problems with a closure or renovation are that it would be very expensive to build and maintain, and it might catch debris and contaminants flowing down from Atlanta that would get caught in the bay.

Not lost in all this, and the impetus for the above history and description, is the plight of the people in the Apalachicola Bay area, such as the oystermen and their families, restaurateurs and the like, who are negatively impacted economically and psychologically by the fresh water shortage and the resultant dwindling oyster population. Some of their stories have now been documented by social workers Alice Sullivan (MSW) and Moss Combs (MSW) who work in the county welfare office. Their Apalachicola Bay Disaster Relief Report (a section of which is included shortly) was sent to the Florida governor's office as part of a plea for assistance.

Also in their report was an observation that these people have worked hard; they don't want "handouts," but they are feeling powerless to change things. Many are from families that have relied on oystering for an income for generations. Theirs is a culture. They take great pride in using long hand tongs that are handmade and tailored to the oysterman who is using them, *instead of* oyster dredges that tear the oyster beds. They also depend on their 22-26 foot, uniquely designed and hand-built, wooden oyster skiffs. They never wanted or expected to have fancy things. Many have no dreams of ever having other than what is viewed as a low standard of living. They have always believed that the bay will provide.

Helping the displaced workers and their families is just as much a focus for social workers as is finding a long term solution to the fresh water shortage in the bay which is a broader social concern.

The first is micro social work and the second is macro.

Apalachicola Bay Disaster Relief Report	
Name	Current Situation
John P.	Single. 41 years old. H.S. diploma. Out of work oysterman. Went to work for BP Oil. Was given no Hazmat gear or training for spraying dispersant on oil spill. Became ill. Lost his hair and front teeth. Still weak and unable to work. Local oysterman confided that he was a druggie for years, and that they don't think that it was the dispersant that caused his health problems. No medical. BP has not addressed his claim. Was told by BP that if he engages a lawyer then BP will not settle.
Robert and Alice C.	Married. 37 and 43 years old. Robert out of work oysterman. No children, but have taken in a 14-year-old nephew for \$160/mo. Their rented house was flooded by hurricane Debbie. Had to move due to mold. FEMA allotted them \$140/wk to "relocate." Can't find a rental for this amount and still pay bills. Owe back electric bill and will need a chunk of a deposit to turn electric back on when they find a place. Alice is looking for a job as a waitress or cashier.
Jackie and Michael W.	Both 22. Both out of work. Dropped out of H.S. Michael is oysterman. Jackie was oyster culler. \$587 electric bill past due. \$276 of this is due now or cut-off. Behind two payments for water bill. Car insurance monthly bill of \$205 due in two weeks. Car needs two new tires. Jackie is 5 mo. pregnant. No health insurance.
Polly S.	20 and single. Has college degree and lives with unemployed parents. Owes \$58,000 in student loans. "Over-qualified" for local jobs available. Does some baby-sitting and yard work. Father is disabled oysterman.
Blackmon L.	Homeless. Out-of-work oysterman. Currently staying with Ron K. who is also unemployed. Wants to help pay Ron's bills but can't. Ron has received a cut off notice from Progress Energy as he is behind in paying his electric bill. Has applied to local technical college and for student loans.
Tatum A.	Can't oyster because tropical storm Debbie (6/2012) sunk his boat. Has repaired the boat, now trying to get motor fixed. No money to buy parts or a running one. He needs his boat to work. Has been "boat hopping" for 3 months. Has 2 dogs, a cat and bird.
Samantha and Cory K.	Ages 40 and 45. \$156 car payment now due. Both worked at local oyster bar before being laid off. \$788 electric bill past due. Fear cut-off. Have 20-yr-old daughter who lives with them and attends local community college where she currently has \$18,000 in loans.
Ellen and Leon W.	Live in trailer with 4 small children. Have pets. Use neighbor's home for cooking and washing as their water and electricity were shut off due to non-payment. No owed amount given. Leon depressed. Embarrassed about asking for help.
Sandy and Walter B.	50 and 53. Both dropped out of school. Sandy is cashier. W.B. is out of work oysterman. No savings. Can't pay \$325/mo. rent. Have received eviction notice. W.B. knows carpentry, but can't find job. Their son and his wife have offered to take them in if they would move to Georgia, but not interested.
Tony and Vicky F.	Aged 59 and 61. Tony has been oysterman for 41 years. Still oysters, but due to a scarcity of good oyster source in the bay, only makes about \$40/day. Their son (out of work) and his wife and two young children (5 and 6) have come to live with them in trailer that T. and V. own. They are behind on paying their lot payment. Electric has been shut off due to non-payment and have no phone. Applied for Food Stamps.
Jason and Kyle G.	Brothers. Age 32 and 34. Parents deceased. Both divorced and disabled. Both out of work. Get SSI and food stamps. Children live with mothers. Own four 24-ft oyster skiffs they made themselves. Had rented them for extra money, but no more. Live in shack. Electricity cut off. Need \$1,345 to pay all bills.

Discussion Questions

1. Who do you think has the right to control the flow of river water that affects so many people in different states? Why? How should the control question be decided?
2. If you were in charge of determining how much water should be released from the four Federal reservoirs in Georgia, thus controlling the southern flow of fresh water to Apalachicola Bay, how would you decide?
3. What resources are available to the folks listed in the above Disaster Relief Report and other folks like them?
4. Computer search “Florida Food Stamps.” How do people qualify? How long does it take to get a card?
5. How should the social workers, Alice Sullivan and Moss Combs, proceed with the cases listed in the report? What priorities do you see?
6. Which case do you have the most empathy for? Why?
7. What do you think, and how do you feel (angry, sad, happy, etc.), about the utility companies shutting off peoples’ service for lack of payment? Explain.
8. Who holds the most responsibility (and why?) for the loss of oystering jobs? (A) the oystermen, (B) The U.S. Corps of Engineers, (C) the U.S. Supreme Court, (D) God because he “caused” the drought in Georgia, (E) the Georgians with their own interest in fresh water, (F) Bob Sikes, U.S. Congressman from Florida who pushed for the construction of the “cut” through St. George Island, (G) the governors from Georgia, Alabama and Florida for not agreeing on a solution to the water flow.
9. Do you think that Apalachicola Bay should be recognized as a Federal disaster area and thus receive Federal relief funds? Why?
10. How might Alice Sullivan and Moss Combs work with the oystermen as a group?
11. What community organizing efforts could the social workers pursue?
12. Why don’t the out-of-work or financially struggling oystermen move out of the Apalachicola Bay area and find a different kind of work?
13. Where are the ethical dilemmas the social workers might face here?

3.0 Conclusion

With no “right” or “wrong” answers to the preceding decision cases, multiple approaches and interpretations were called for. Who held the most responsibility for the deplorable conditions that Winston Abell found at Janet Stevens’ Hasbrook Apartments? Why was the culture of the men’s hockey team in the Lucita Alvarez bullying case allowed to fester? Why can’t an easy solution be found for the fresh water shortage in Apalachicola Bay that is affecting the lives of so many people?

It is easy to fall into the trap of either “blaming the victim” (Ryan 1971) or jumping too quickly into micro solutions with little regard to grasping the larger social context. To what extent are we masters of our own fate? To what extent are our situations and private lives shaped by the social forces around us? What is the role of local, state and Federal government in providing opportunities for better health care, employment, child protection and education? Who has the power to distribute items like natural resources and funds when there is a limited amount to go around? What role does family and religion play in the social order? When the social order seems dysfunctional, how can it be “fixed?” Why is the welfare system in the United States a “band aid” system while in other countries it is a social safety net? There are no easy answers to these questions, but the use of the sociological perspective does offer some clarification.

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