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# **Advocacy In Response To The Conceivable Predatory Uses Of People In The Service User Role**

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Paper Prepared By:

Michael J. Kendrick PhD  
Kendrick Consulting Intl  
4 Bullard Ave., Holyoke, MA  
USA 01040  
[kendrickconsult@attglobal.net](mailto:kendrickconsult@attglobal.net)  
[www.kendrickconsulting.org](http://www.kendrickconsulting.org)

## The Roles And Perceptions Assigned In Formal Services

The public and more official language of the world of formal services is often quite notable in its one-sided depiction of what is actually going on in "service". Most notable in this regard, are the dissimilar roles and standing assigned to the person in the "server" role in contrast to the person in the "served" role. Often we find that "servers" are virtuous, competent and well motivated, whereas the people served are needy, inadequate and possibly poorly motivated. In this regard, people in "server" roles tend to be seen in positive valued roles, whereas those in the served role are more often seen in negative and less valued roles. In other words, "service" is often depicted by those in the server role in terms that are enhancing to them. While one occasionally encounters situations where the people in the "served" role are granted a status, perception and value that is superior to that of the server, this is quite an exception to the more common instance of overly positive server self-description.

While we see ample emphasis on the "neediness" of the people served, we rarely ever encounter a thorough depiction of how comparably needy staff and professionals can be. Apparently, staff and professionals do not have any needs whatsoever that would have an untoward effect on how service gets conducted. Yet, this would be entirely inconsistent with their identity as human beings. We are all needy, and we all derive something from our encounters in life. Our wants and preferences are never entirely inactive, and may well be at work unconsciously. Thus, it is all the more interesting and remarkable that they so rarely get factored into the descriptions of service offered by the "servers", whereas the perceptions of service users quite often picks up on the role that their needs and wants play.

The difficulty that is undoubtedly at work here may not only be explained by the needs of many people in these "server" roles to see themselves in highly valued, albeit distorted ways, it may also derive from a set of rarely talked about norms amongst staff and professionals as to how "human" they can portray themselves, and still maintain their credibility as professionals. In this regard, it can be assumed that professionals devote at least some energy to upholding their status by creating an image of themselves that is positive, reassuring and convincing not only to others, but to themselves as well.

The consequence of this largely unspoken, and perhaps unnoticed "reality construction" process, is that "servers" tend to deny their humanity, and then create a view of themselves that is distinctly contrary to what we could normally expect from human beings and human nature. For instance, while many people have difficulty with using authority and power wisely, many professionals act like they do not have such power, would never use it unwisely if they did, and are routinely great advocates and proponents of the

empowerment of service users. Yet these notably flattering assertions make no sense whatsoever when examined carefully and empirically, as professionals normatively have more power than the people they serve, do misuse authority on occasion, and may actually work to reinforce their own power and limit the power of service recipients.

Another instance to contemplate is that of the self-assessment of competence of professionals in comparison to their assessment of the competence of the people they "serve". It is rarely heard from professionals that they are, in actuality, incompetent or impotent on many matters of great substance, that they improvise and guess with great regularity, that they have made many errors, and that they ought to only be trusted in a limited way given their fallibility. Yet, it would be quite accurate to say that many professionals lack competence to meaningfully solve many matters, that responsible guessing is more a part of their work than is the possession of certainty in their nostrums that all humans err, and no professional ought to be elevated to a status where they are trusted uncritically.

In contrast, one often hears from professionals about the insufficiency of the people being served, their many pathologies, inadequacies and weaknesses, their "unmet needs", their incapacity to change and adapt, their poor motivation and other such depictions that lead to the inevitable conclusion that the solutions that are going to work best will be the ones that arrive from "without" i.e. from professionals as opposed to the ones that those being served could generate for themselves. Yet, in fairness, all people have strengths that can be mobilized, professionals are as awash in as many pathologies and weaknesses as their clients, and they too have unmet needs and difficulties with adapting to change, and are as prone to motivation difficulties as anyone else. In fact, the evidence from self-help strategies is generally reinforcing of the efficacy of these approaches, and their empowering character for the people involved.

Naturally, in drawing such general distinctions about professionals and staff, and others in the "server" role who are unpaid, as well as about those in the "served" role, there is a quite real danger in over generalization when it comes to the specificity of given persons. Nonetheless, setting this danger aside, it does not mean that the pattern of roles that are normatively assigned, to both server and served alike, are not problematic in the way described here. It also can mean that both "served" and "server" may collaborate unconsciously and consciously in the creation and sustaining of these roles, since both may have an investment in an exaggerated view of the capacities of servers.

## Accepting That The Inclination To Devalue Others Is Intrinsic To Human Beings

Nevertheless, it is important to remain curious about whether there is a larger societal process at work, in which the placement of whole classes of people into the role of needing to be “helped”, does not somehow help to serve deeply unacknowledged needs in all of us to be needed, to be potent, to be seen as virtuous, to be seen more as a liberator rather than an oppressor, to be part of a wholesome rather than perverse social order and so forth. In other words, is it not possible that what we now call “service” in the modern technocratic sense of formal bureaucratic systems of “helping”, may be something more than the convenient fable that we are all, with inexplicable “routine” nobility, attending to the needs of “the unfortunate” amongst us. Perhaps *we* actually need “the unfortunate” more powerfully than they need us. Perhaps, the key fundamental engine of “service” is not actually the needs of others, but more our own needs to see and publicly credit ourselves in good and flattering terms, whether the facts support this or not. Perhaps, our moral conceit, and our hunger to be progressive and righteous, is forever at work underneath our pretence, self-centeredness and failure to rise to the truth of who we might really be.

Naturally, some part of us resists the idea that we are part of a charade of psychological self-dealing disguised as self-sacrificing service. This is as it should be, as genuine service to others ought to be given the legitimate credit it deserves. Similarly, we need to guard against a reflexive and quite unfair cynicism that sees the sinister even when it does not exist. Even more important, we must never deny the fact that, as rare as it may be, there are individuals amongst us that are exemplars of the best instincts in human nature, and may well deserve to be regarded as saintly, just and inspired.

If, in fact, the people placed in “client” roles are merely symbolic hostages to our need that they should exist as failed human beings, so that we can, in turn, be successful through our liberation of them via our acts and roles of “service”, then we are most certainly caught up in a morally significant and deeply psychic drama of mythical proportions. It does not mean, however, that we need to preserve this myth, any more than the many other myths that have so dangerously elevated some people over others, and enslaved the remainder, be that through gender, race, language, religion, class or the many other features of our humanity that have been exploited down through the centuries.

On the contrary, one of our most redeeming capacities as human beings is to recognize the truth of who we are, and what we have become, and to change it for the better. We have always before us the possibility of establishing “right relationship” between ourselves and others, though the cost of doing this may well exceed what we, in our weakness, could bear. Nonetheless, those who are open to the possibility that we can, in our own

small way, help undo the enslavement of others, might well serve to be precisely the kind of person who is of genuine service to others. We might also find that we serve better by elevating others than we do by elevating ourselves. Perhaps by not “needing to serve”, we can be of more authentic service.

### **Some Implications For Advocacy**

- **Recognize That Service Users Are Vulnerable To Being Exploited**

It is unlikely that advocates will be able to properly uphold the voice, needs and interests of the people they are meant to advocate for if they are not alert to the many ways that people can be exploited to meet the unacknowledged needs of others. This is even more likely to occur if the parties doing the exploiting have a free hand, and disproportionate power to define their exploitation in virtuous sounding ways. Pretences, once socially institutionalized and sanctioned, can often rise to the level of seemingly unassailable facts, never to be questioned. Yet, this is precisely what advocates, acting with integrity, may need to do.

- **Preserve One’s Independence Of Mind And Position So As To Be Able To Defend And Challenge**

It is often very hard to keep one sufficiently untangled from ones society such that there remains some capacity to see it for what it is, and to be able to have the fortitude and autonomy to challenge it when it is misguided or misbehaving. Such structural and psychological independence has long been prized by admirers of good advocacy. The ability to dissent from, and to counter an entrenched and unapologetic society is a rare quality, but not unheard of. Advocates who will be reliably able to do this can also act as a safeguard for others who might otherwise not have seen or challenged key issues were it not for principled advocates.

- **Attempt To See Behind Possible Deceptive Portrayals Of People And Events**

It could serve as a maxim to say that harmful conduct will tend to be portrayed in terms which help legitimize the behaviour and to conceal the true motives, actions and consequences that are involved. In the case of people who are in denial about their own selfish exploitation of vulnerable people to satisfy their own emotional needs, it is to be expected that the truth of matters will be hard to establish, being as it is likely to be well camouflaged, consciously, unconsciously or both. This is why advocates will have to develop the ability to discern what may truly be at work beneath appearances.

- **Consciously Help Create And Sustain Positive Roles For Those in The Service User Role**

The valued roles of people in the service user role are threatened by people whose need it is to degrade them in order to satisfy their own psychological needs. Consequently, a key part of the remedy is to reverse this erosion of valued roles and positive perceptions of the person by intentional efforts to strengthen the regard for such persons, and to help keep them in, or return them, to valued roles. Advocates can provide much leadership on this question.

- **Give Credit Where Credit Is Due**

It would be wrong to unduly vilify human service workers simply because they succumb to devaluing tendencies, since a judgment on them is really an indictment on all of us, given our own tendencies in this regard. Equally, some of these same people, may in their paradoxical way, and on some occasions, be some of the best allies that people may have. If we only have the two categories of either perfect or failed, we cannot possibly do justice to our humanity.

## **Conclusion**

Though it may seem a little harsh and overstated to portray even a portion of human service staff and professionals as being occasionally exploitive of their clients in order to meet their unacknowledged wants and needs, this kind of reaction may miss the point. Most certainly, there is part of all of us that is susceptible to such temptations, and it may be somewhat irrelevant to attempt to assign a statistical prevalence to such a phenomena if the real concern is the quality of service provider conduct. As such, even if only a few of us succumb, it is still a valid and worrisome issue that should be addressed constructively and repeatedly by advocates and others on its merits.