

DR. HELEN NORTHEN
Interviewed by Dr. John Milner
in Los Angeles, CA
on June 10, 1987

MILNER: Dr. Northen, the question I would like to ask is how did you ever happen to become a social worker?

NORTHEN: I don't know. I cannot remember a time that I was not interested in working with young children. First of all, probably, in pre-school, kindergartner, elementary years. Then I became concerned about the difficulties they had in getting along well in school. So I sought the best education I knew of at that time, which was a degree in psychology from the University of Washington. Then I went into graduate work at the University of Washington, which was a very behaviorist-oriented school. I gradually became disillusioned with that way of helping people and quite accidentally discovered that there was a profession of social work, which might have given me more of what I wanted than with a graduate degree in psychology. It was a natural development.

MILNER: Can you remember how you discovered that? Was it from reading or friends or?

NORTHEN: It was really quite funny, because I went in to complain to an advisor whose name was Stevenson Smith. He was the Director of the Psychology Department at the University of Washington. I said I did not want to do a dissertation on automatic response theory. He was very disappointed in that, because he thought I could make a good contribution there. In great disgust he said, "Maybe there's a fellowship in psychiatric social work, and maybe you should investigate that, instead." I did, but I did not go to the University of Washington School of Social Work, which was a very poor school at that time.

MILNER: So you went to the University of Chicago.

NORTHEN: No, I did not. I went to the University of Pittsburgh.

MILNER: I knew you had (laughter). Very good. Then your Ph.D. is from Pittsburgh?

NORTHEN: Bryn Mar.

MILNER: Bryn Mar? Very good. That shows how inaccurate my knowledge is.

NORTHEN: You don't know me very well, John.

MILNER: I do, but not that well. (Laughter) Prior to joining to faculty at the University of Southern California, what was your social work practice experience?

NORTHEN: Before I went for a master's degree in social work, I worked in a variety of things in Seattle, which is my home town. I directed a camp for children who were suffering from (laughing) - first of all, nutritionally-deprived children, and secondly, children with - oh heavens!

I can't think of the name of it right now. So I got to see very quickly the relationship of health to satisfactory functioning, and so forth. I also worked for a while in Jewish Family Service in Seattle, as what we now call a para-professional, but as an untrained worker. Also, as a camp director - program director - in a Campfire Girl's camp. I worked with them in their teenage program as an advisor to adolescents. It was at a time when there were many, many problems they were having. I knew that I had to learn more about how to help them with their personal and family problems. That's what led me into wanting more education.

MILNER: Then did you start teaching after you got your degree?

NORTHEN: No, I went to the University of Pittsburgh. I went there because after exploring schools of social work, I wanted a school where I could learn both individual and group work, which was not very popular at that time. There were two schools of social work at that time

which offered that. One was Western Reserve University and the other was the University of Pittsburgh. I could not say I want to be a group worker or I want to be a case worker. I said I want to be both, which absolutely knocked most schools of social work off of their rockers. They couldn't understand that. At that time, Pittsburgh was a relatively new school, and they had that kind of focus. Then I became, very quickly, a field instructor for that school, in a new program where I supervised students who were both in case work and group work. That ultimately led me to decide I wanted a doctorate. So I went to Bryn Mar, because it was one of the few schools of social work in that day which offered a doctorate, and because it had a very good reputation for research, which I was interested in at that time.

MILNER: And after that, you went to Hawaii.

NORTHERN: After that, I went to Hawaii for two years.

MILNER: You were on the faculty at the University of Hawaii School there?

NORTHERN: The University of Hawaii, where I taught group work with a person named Tom Coleman. We developed fieldwork placement in the mental health center which was located on the University of Hawaii campus. We both worked together in providing case work and group work for the students placed there. I also taught research, community organization and group work there.

MILNER: Tom Coleman was in school in New York when I was there.

NORTHERN: I thought you might know him, because he'd come out of Seattle at one time.

MILNER: That's right. That's right.

NORTHERN: Interesting, small world.

MILNER: You came to the University of Southern California in what year?

NORTHEN: 1953.

MILNER: 1953, yes.

NORTHEN: That's a long time ago.

MILNER: At the time you came, I think Arlien Johnson was Dean, and she brought you in as a specialist in group work. Then what happened?

NORTHEN: Oh, I know when she wrote to me, her challenge was that she wanted the faculty of the School of Social Work, of whom you were one, to become more knowledgeable about the group process and group work so that it could be more fully integrated into the curriculum of the School of Social Work. She had - she was one of the most visionary people I ever knew in terms of her commitment to what she called "the whole of social work," and social work as a profession as contrasted with an amalgamation of a series of specialties. So it was very interesting. She said that as a first step, the faculty had planned one integrated course in the second year to be taught by Rose Green, the Dean, and me. We were to look at the similarities and differences among case work, group work, and community organization. The students had two hours with the three of us, and then they broke up for the third hour in terms of case work, group work, and community organization. The three of us thought that course was very successful, but some of the faculty complained that they didn't think their students were getting enough depth in case work. Arlien didn't want to battle that any longer, so that went by the wayside.

MILNER: But that really was the beginning of generic practice.

NORTHEN: That really was the beginning. That was very important, although I felt that the Dean gave in a little too quickly for what were a few comments from faculty. I think if we'd

talked it through more fully and worked it through, the faculty might have come along and further developed it. She and Rose - me being new, didn't deal as much with being taken aback by not having a fully positive response to it - gave up too soon.

MILNER: In relation to that, a little later, you were heading a project at the School, a student project with Metropolitan State Hospital, which I found to be a fascinating project; it was written up, published, and became nationally known. I wonder if you'd explain a little what this was, because it really was a merger of group work, case work, community org.

NORTHEN: That was very interesting, because at the time I came there, one of the things they were interested in was expanding the use of groups in many different kinds of settings. We had started that at Metropolitan State Hospital, along with several other places. Pacific State Hospital was another one. Rose Green was a liaison and advisor for case work. I was the liaison for group work. So we'd go trottin' out there together, because we thought that was better. It became very obvious to us that there was an awful lot of the generic that the students were getting. At that time, NIMH was giving a lot of money for new projects in mental health, so we applied for a grant and got it, which made it possible for us to have student stipends at Metropolitan where students would get both case work and group work, to pay for a full-time field instructor there, and for part of the time for one of our research faculty, Edith Tufts, who worked with us on that project.

MILNER: This really was taking the severely mentally ill patients out of the back wards and eventually placing them out into the community.

NORTHEN: Absolutely. Part of the groups were on pre-discharge planning. It has bothered me ever since that we really demonstrated the success of some of that; about the groups before

they were ready to do that and then the pre-discharge planning groups, helping them back into the community. We really had a very good record on that, and look what's happened now.

MILNER: They never followed through with it.

NORTHEN: Never followed through - and it's painful to see that some of the good things that were demonstrated, just haven't been carried on.

MILNER: Part of that project was published. Was it in *Social Work* or one of the other professional magazines.

NORTHEN: I don't remember exactly. There was a report, but there were several articles.

MILNER: Yes. I remember one, particularly, that was good. In addition to your work at the School, I know that you've taken leadership in many of the local and national agency programs. One particularly, was with the Camp Fire Girls. So you continued your interest in some of your early experience with the Camp Fire Girls. Could you tell us a little about that.

NORTHEN: I was invited to come into a Los Angeles area Camp Fire Girls to do some staff training in relation to primarily understanding the needs of girls of different ages and adapting their programs to that. Before I knew it, I was elected to the national board at a time when that agency was really reaching out to new ways of doing things. You spoke at one of the national meetings, I remember. That led to a number of very interesting outreach programs. I was the chairman of the National Program Committee. One of the things that was developed in relation to the Los Angeles Council, was a program that really brought mental health services to seven and eight-year-old girls who were failing in school, socially and academically. I worked very closely with the Los Angeles School System, employed MSW social workers, several of whom were our own graduates, to work with these youngsters in groups, to work with the school, to

help them better meet their needs, reach out to them. Edith Tufts did the research on that. It was funded by the NIMH grant. It was a very successful project. But again, once the demonstration project was over..... Another was a national project which was an outreach to communities in several major cities around the country to see how they could reach girls who were from minority ethnic backgrounds or more poverty communities. But again, there was change in national leadership, and it was no longer their priority. I think of it has been preserved. A lot of it has been preserved, but the particular thing went by the board.

MILNER: Change comes slowly. Have you continued your interest with that organization?

NORTHEN: No, not really.

MILNER: Not recently.

NORTHEN: Not recently. Not since I left the board.

MILNER: What do you see as some of the major changes that have taken place in the practice of social work since you began your career? That's a big question.

NORTHEN: Nobody can answer that question adequately, I think. I believe that it has gone in cycles. I think first there was the great movement toward understanding interrelationships between work with individuals and work with groups, looking at the similarities and differences, trying to move in there the great expansion of social work was into mental health settings. A little later, the great of expansion of social work into medical settings, where it had always been. That was a first so-called specialization, probably, but really of very limited use of social workers. I would think it was more as hand-maidens to physicians than as a profession in our own right. Then there was the greater development of feeling in a profession to the real movement toward generic practice where social workers were expected to, and hopefully

competent to work with, people according to the assessment to their needs. That might mean an individual or a couple, a family, or a group, or some kind of community intervention. Back more not to the same kind of specialization that existed early in the development of medical social work, which was practically medical case work, but to what we call concentrations in fields of practice, to today. I'm afraid - I shouldn't say "I'm afraid," but I think we're moving into an era of even greater specialization and losing track of the generic knowledge of human behavior, of the generic knowledge of principles of helping people. I think that's where we are today. I suspect we'll come again to understanding that there's a common base of knowledge and principles. I hope so.

MILNER: Yes.

NORTHEN: I give my life to that.

MILNER: You feel there's a movement away from social agency practice to private practice?

NORTHEN: Oh, certainly.

MILNER: Do you feel that will be extensive?

NORTHEN: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. I don't know how extensive it will be in terms of people in full time, independent, private practice, because I think in all the health professions that is not going to be as prominent. Physicians, psychologists, and so forth, are moving much more into health maintenance organizations -- clinic practice where they share together, working across specializations. There aren't very many social workers who are going to work full time just alone, in an office. There's going to be many more ways of collaborating with other social workers and collaborating with other social agencies. But I don't know where that's going to go. It certainly is here.

MILNER: Yes, yes. Your internationally known for your.....

NORTHEN: No, I'm not (laughing).

MILNER: Yes, that's right - for your publications, and I know that you've written several books as well as a great many articles. I wonder if you'd give the titles of the books you've published.

NORTHEN: I haven't done that much.

MILNER: Yes, you have.

NORTHEN: No. I did *Social Work with Groups*. That's the first book.

MILNER: That was published by what publisher?

NORTHEN: Columbia University Press in 1969.

MILNER: In 1969, yes..

NORTHEN: I edited a book with Bob Roberts on *Theories of Social Work with Groups*. Then I was part of a group of five other colleagues who did a very small book called *Child, Family, Neighborhood: A Model of Practice*. June Brown, Bill Finch, me, Sam Taylor and Marie Weil. It was a very small thing. Then I did my *Clinical Social Work* book. Now I've just done a new edition of *Social Work with Groups*.

MILNER: You say that's not very much?

NORTHEN: (Laughing) Well, you know, that's a long period of time. I probably never would have been promoted to Associate Professor in today's world, you know.

MILNER: These have been translated into a number of foreign languages, haven't they?

NORTHEN: Hmm hm.

MILNER: How many different countries have published these?

NORTHEN: German, Dutch, Portuguese, Japanese.

MILNER: That's truly international.

NORTHEN: Some people say it is.

MILNER: Very good. Are you working on another book, currently?

NORTHEN: I've just finished the new edition of *Social Work with Groups*. With Kathleen Ell - she's the senior author on the book - I'm just the junior author, with Kathleen Ell. It is a book on families and health settings.

MILNER: That will come out when, do you think?

NORTHEN: She signed a contract that said October, but it's going to be a lot longer than that.

MILNER: (Both laughing) Recently, you were chairman of a national conference on group work here in Los Angeles. I wonder if you're going to continue to be active with the National Association.

NORTHEN: That is a very small group. It was started spontaneously by a few people who thought that people interested in group work should get together. So they sponsored annual symposiums. We'll have one in Boston in October. As chairperson of the last one, I've been on the National Executive Committee, but my term expires now. I personally am not in favor of their decision to set up a special - they call it a "special organization" as contrasted with a committee that sponsored conferences. They decided to have an association - a membership association for the advancement of social work with groups. I'm not in favor of setting up another so-call professional organization. I believe they should work within the existing organizations such as NASW.

MILNER: Yes, yes.

NORTHEN: I believe that the way to advance social work practice with groups in today's

world is to get more integrated into social work as a whole, as contrasted with separating it out. I'm not in favor of the kind of separatist movement that I think it is becoming.

MILNER: Yes. Some insist on keeping that one identity.

NORTHEN: No. That's not my identity. It never has been my identity. I'm a social worker, not a group worker, community or a researcher. I'm a social worker!

MILNER: I've heard you say that for many years. (Laughter)

NORTHEN: And I don't like to be stereotyped.

MILNER: My understanding is that you're planning to soon leave Los Angeles and live in your home state of Washington. I wonder what your plans are in relation to this.

NORTHEN: I have to sell my condominium.

MILNER: You have to sell your condominium here.

NORTHEN: Then I'll move there.

MILNER: You'll be living where in Washington?

NORTHEN: I'm not sure, but I believe I'm going to Panorama City in Lacy.

MILNER: You'll be spending some of your time at your summer home?

NORTHEN: In my cabin on Pleasant Harbor on Hood Canal, which is not a canal, but more a fiord. It's not a man-made canal. It's a beautiful, beautiful soft water beach.

MILNER: I know it. And are your plans to do a great deal of traveling?

NORTHEN: Yes.

MILNER: And writing?

NORTHEN: Yes.

MILNER: Good (both laughing). You won't desert Los Angeles completely, will you?

NORTHEN: I have been commuting to the Peugeot Sound area two or three times a year.

Perhaps I will reverse that and commute to this area two or three times a year, instead. Just in reverse.

MILNER: I certainly hope that you will.

NORTHEN: (Laughing) I won't desert you. That's enough, John.

MILNER: Oh, you want to end this at this point. Don't you have something you'd like to add?

NORTHEN: No. No.

MILNER: Do you have anything to say to those students who might eventually want to become social workers?

NORTHEN: Just wish they would have the vision that Arlien Johnson had, of social work as a great profession, with its values, its clarity of purpose, and the interrelationship of parts that makes up the whole.

MILNER: I think you've put that in your career.

NORTHEN: Really? Really?

MILNER: Dr. Northen, thank you very much. We appreciate your doing this for us.

NORTHEN: Oh, Professor Milner.....(exit laughing)

