

MH3400: REQUIRED ASSIGNMENT History of human services and disabilities

MH3400: Disability and History in the United States

You are responsible for reviewing and understanding the following information. **IMPORTANT:** There is a **REQUIRED ASSIGNMENT** at the end of this summary!

INTRODUCTION: Just as we cannot understand race relations in the United States without understanding history, the same is true for understanding disability—how we as a culture view disability (our cultural mental sets about people with disabilities, and ableism (discrimination against people with disabilities)). The purpose of this unit of the course is to give students a brief overview of how our cultural attitudes toward people with disabilities have evolved over time. ALL of us have been influenced by these cultural and historical forces. Our goal, as ethical helping professionals, is to be aware of these cultural and historical factors so that they do NOT impact negatively on our clients.

The era of **INFORMAL** human services:

Imagine you are living in Brooklyn two hundred and fifty years ago. Obviously, things were very different then. First of all, Brooklyn wasn't really Brooklyn. It was a collection of small villages where everyone knew each other and most people were farmers, growing the food they needed to survive. Each of these villages was really small, having fewer people than live on just one Brooklyn block today! There were no factories with machine to manufacture the things most of us now buy in a store. Clothing, shoes, furniture and other necessary items were made by hand. When there was an emergency, in order to survive and because everyone in our small village knew everyone else, people pitched in and helped each other out.

The kinds of human services we have today (hospitals, schools, prisons, fire departments, public assistance, foster care, etc.) did not exist. Instead, people helped each other out informally when that help was needed. For example, let's continue to imagine that you are living back then in a small Brooklyn village and that you have three children. You want your children to learn to read and write and do simple math, but you are having difficulty teaching them these skills. You know that your neighbor was very successful teaching reading, writing and math to her children. Therefore, you make an arrangement with her to teach your children. In exchange, perhaps you give her one of your best pigs or offer to help repair the roof of her barn. In other words, human services were provided by

people helping each other meet their needs through INFORMAL arrangements where they exchanged help.

Some more examples: Imagine someone in your village is good at caring for sick people. He or she would provide care to the sick, and the family members of those sick people would provide other services in return. If someone was good at straightening out troubled teenagers, other villagers might send a child to live with that person so that he or she could get the rebellious teenager into line, and that help would be repaid in some concrete way. The point is, people during this time period made arrangements with each other to get the help they needed when problems arose. There were virtually no organizations providing the more formalized human services we have today.

The Industrial Revolution and the Rise of FORMAL Human Services

A huge change began to take place in the United States in about 1790 called the Industrial Revolution. By this time, technology had developed to the point that people were now able to mass produce items such as clothing, furniture, shoes, and other necessary items by MACHINE rather than making each item by hand as had always been done in the past. This made a wide range of products available to almost everyone and also changed human society forever. As a result of the Industrial Revolution, many people left small agricultural villages and poured into cities looking for work in the factories.

This population explosion in cities brought HUGE CHANGES and HUGE PROBLEMS! For example, there were little or no sewage systems in the cities. On farms, when people disposed of their waste, it was not a huge problem because the population density was so low. However, now people in the newly populous cities disposed of their waste in the streets and alleys, and it piled up. Adding to this problem was the fact that most transportation was provided by horses who also relieved themselves in the streets of the city. This filth was not only disgusting, it led to the spread of disease. In addition, the factories were new and there were no safety rules. Many workers were injured by the machines and were therefore fired and left to beg on the streets. Because of the spread of illness and injury, many children were left as orphans. Eventually, gangs of orphans ran wild through the streets, trying to survive by any means (including robbery and burglarizing) they could. In the mid 19th century (1800's), people in Manhattan, for example, were terrorized by huge gangs of orphans attacking and robbing them when they ventured out on the streets.

The net result of all the overcrowding, resulting filth, injury, disease, and crime in the cities was the recognition that there were problems that could NOT be fixed in the old way through informal exchange of human services among neighbors. Because of the enormity of the problems, people were strongly motivated to find solutions. Since the old informal way of solving these problems no longer

worked, this led to the rise of FORMAL human services such as hospitals for the sick, orphanages, prisons, juvenile facilities, schools, charitable organizations providing food and shelter, and so on. These formal human services were very different from informal ones. Many of them were run by the government and mandated by law. These organizations had professionals on staff who were paid, and written rules in terms of who qualified for services and who did not. Written records were usually kept in terms of the people served by the organization and the services provided. Today, much of our human services are still provided by formal human services agencies such as mental health clinics, hospitals, the police, etc. However, informal human services still exist. For example, most of us still provide some informal help for which we are not paid to the people around us, such giving up a seat on the bus to an older adult, babysitting for a friend, lending money to a family member, or helping someone move.

FORMAL Human Services: Era #1: Institution-based Human Services: 1850 to 1960

Mental sets and the rise of institution-based human services: As stated, when the Industrial Revolution took place, it led to huge numbers of people moving into the cities which in turn led to filth, overcrowding, disease and crime. It is relatively easy to see how this led many people to have the mental set that: cities are dangerous, bad and the cause of most problems while the rural life style of the past was much better. As a result, many people thought that the BEST way to cure someone with a mental illness, intellectual disability or other disability was to REMOVE them from the “bad” city and to place them in an institution located in a rural area. This belief led to the rise of INSTITUTION-BASED human services beginning in the 1850's.

As a result, thousands of institutions were built in rural areas throughout the United States. People with all sorts of disabilities were sent to these institutions for a supposed “cure.” Professionals advised the families of people with disabilities that their loved ones would be best off if sent to these institutions for treatment.

While the original intention of institutionalizing people with disabilities may have been good, the results were horrific. First of all, institutional human services began BEFORE there were telephones and automobiles, let alone computers, videos and other forms of travel and communication that we take for granted. Therefore, when a person was sent away from the city to an institution in a rural area, they were cut off from the love and support of family members because the technology did not exist for family members to remain in touch and transportation difficulties prohibited family members from visiting regularly. As a result, there was no one there to watch over patients in these institutions to insure that they were being treated well. Added to this was the fact that very little was known

about disabilities and the proper methods for helping people with disabilities. Further, many of these institutions were understaffed by untrained workers. The net result of all this was that most people in these institutions were NOT helped. Instead, they were controlled through physical abuse, and other forms of abuse such as sexual abuse and emotional abuse were rampant. Why could they get away with this? Because the institutions were isolated and no one was watching! We should also take a look at how institutionalizing people with disabilities affected our cultural mental sets. First of all, for many, it was a socially convenient solution. It separated people with disabilities from the rest of us, got rid of people who were inconveniently different, and placed them far away in an institution, out of sight, out of mind. When professionals told families that it was “best to put them away where they can get help” it allowed some families to feel justified in getting rid of a family member they considered to be a problem. Further, as a society, it allowed us to label people with disabilities as “different” and justify allowing institutions to control them and take away their human rights.

A personal story: Thirty five years ago, I was a social worker and worked in a nursing home here in Brooklyn. One of the residents of the nursing home that was assigned to me was a woman who had been locked away in a mental institution up state for sixty years, from the time she was 15 years old until she was 75. When she was 75, the mental institution she lived in for all those years had been shut down and she was sent to our nursing home due to her age and lack of family connections. This woman (I’ll call her Sophie) was a little strange, which is understandable given the life she led. However, Sophie could carry on a normal conversation with me and she was alert and aware of her surroundings. Sophie’s background information clearly illustrates how sending people to these institutions often was done for the convenience of others and how these institutions violated people’s human rights.

Here’s Sophie’s background information: Sophie grew up in a tight knit working class family in Brooklyn. When she was fourteen or fifteen, Sophie began having sex with some of the young boys in her neighborhood. Her parents came from a strict culture where it was considered a disgrace for a young woman to like sex and engage in unmarried sex. As a result, her family felt shamed by Sophie’s behavior, but Sophie didn’t want to stop having sex. Frantic, her parents brought Sophie to a local psychiatrist who diagnosed Sophie as having nymphomania, a so-called mental disorder that involves a female that likes to have sex! Based on this diagnosis, Sophie was sent upstate to a mental institution where she was basically held prisoner for the next sixty years. Problem solved for Sophie’s parents, but Sophie paid a heavy price—the loss of her freedom and her human rights for her entire lifetime.

REQUIRED ASSIGNMENT: Willowbrook: Institution-Based Human Services in New York City

PURPOSE OF THIS ASSIGNMENT: As mentioned above, for a long time after the Industrial Revolution brought huge changes to society, institutions were viewed as the preferred way to provide human services to people with disabilities. Willowbrook was an institution on Staten Island where children and adults from the five boroughs with various developmental disabilities were sent for “treatment.” In the 1970s, Geraldo Rivera, then a young journalist, went inside Willowbrook, videotaped conditions there and these videotapes were shown on television. The result was a huge outcry from the public and demands for reform that could not be ignored. The purpose of this assignment is to help you understand what institution-based human services were mostly like and the effect these institutions had on the mental sets of people in our culture during the era where institution-based human services were prevalent.

ASSIGNMENT: Willowbrook and Institution-based Human Services
Suggested Due Date: April 13, 2020

Watch the following two videos about Willowbrook on youtube.com I have included the exact length of each video so that you can make sure you are watching the correct ones:

Video #1: Willowbrook: The Last Great Disgrace - Geraldo Rivera Time: 27:30

Video #2: Willowbrook II Time: 25:38 (In this video, Geraldo Rivera re-visits the issue ten years later. He also interviews a former patient of Willowbrook who has become an advocate for people with developmental disabilities.)

WRITE A REACTION ESSAY: Once you have watched both videos, write an ESSAY answering the following questions:

- Describe specifically what you observed when watching the Willowbrook videos.
- How did watching these videos impact on you? What were your thoughts, emotions and reactions? How would you feel if a family member of yours was treated this way?
- What were your feelings when you saw the young man who had been at Willowbrook in the first video and who had become an advocate for people with disabilities by the time the second video was made?
- WHY do you think that places like Willowbrook were allowed to continue for so long? What factors led to this?
- What were the factors that allowed staff members to treat the patients at Willowbrook so badly? How can we prevent this kind of thing from happening now or in the future?

-Going forward, how can we, as helping professionals, make sure that our clients' human rights are respected and that our clients are actually helped rather than harmed by people in the helping professions?

-Is there anything else you would like to say on this topic? If so, please do!

All completed assignments should be sent to my email: