
Helping and Socialization

A concern arising when intervention focuses on deviant behavior is whether the agenda is to help or to socialize or both. The key to differentiating helping from formal socialization interventions is determining primary intent with respect to whose interests are to be served (see Exhibit). Helping interventions are defined in terms of a primary intention to serve individual interests; socialization through formal intervention primarily seeks to serve the interests of the society.

How does one know whose interests are served? This can be defined with reference to the nature of the consent and ongoing decision making processes. That is, by definition, the individual's interests are served when s/he consents to intervention without coercion and has control over major intervention decisions. In contrast, socialization agenda usually are implemented under a form of "social contract" that allows society's agents to decide on certain interventions for the individual without asking for consent, and in the process, society maintains control over intervention decisions.

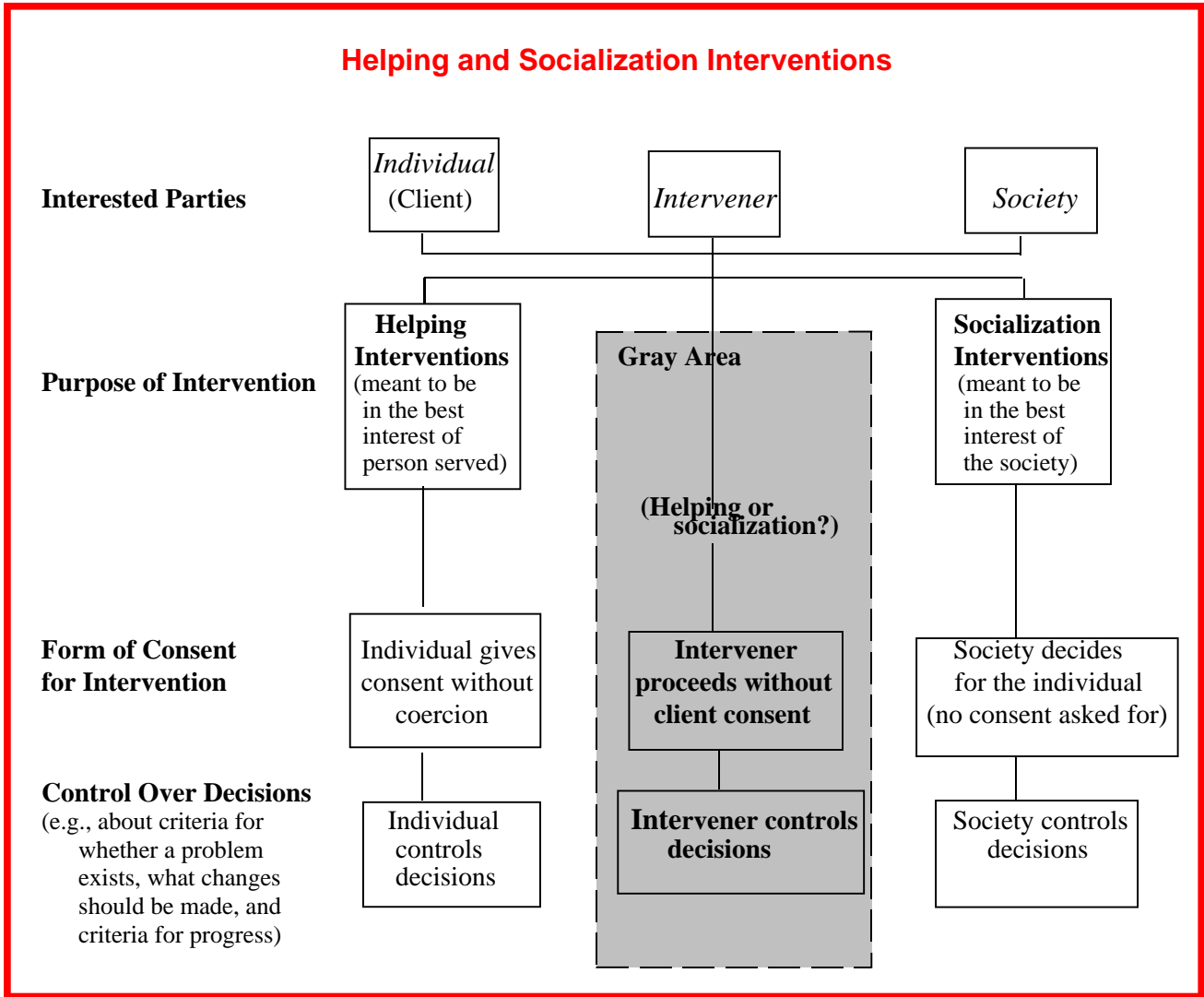
Situations arise when the intent is to serve the individual's interest but it is not feasible to elicit truly informed consent or ensure the individual has control. Then, one is forced to operate in a gray area. This is quite likely to arise with young children and those with severe and profound learning and behavior problems. One also is working in a gray area when intervening at the request of a surrogate (e.g., parent, legal guardian, teacher) who sees the intervention as in a person's best interests despite the individual's protests to the contrary.

Conflict in the form of socialization vs. helping can be expected whenever decisions are made about interventions to deal with behavior the majority of a social group find disruptive or views as inappropriate. Such a conflict can arise, for example, in dealing with children who misbehave at school.

One major reason for *compulsory* education is that society wants schools to act as socializing agencies. When James misbehaved at school, the teacher's job was to bring the deviant and devious behavior under control. Interventions were designed to convince James he should conform to the proscribed limits of the social setting. His parents valued the school's socializing agenda, but also wanted him to receive special help at school for what they saw as an emotionally based problem. James, like most children did not appreciate the increasing efforts to control his behavior, especially since many of his actions were intended to enable him to escape such control. Under the circumstances, not only was there conflict among the involved parties, it is likely that the teacher's intervention efforts actually caused James to experience negative emotional and behavior reactions (e.g., psychological reactance).

It is commonplace for policy makers, practitioners, family members to be confronted with situations where socialization and helping agenda are in conflict. Some resolve the conflict by clearly defining themselves as socializing agents and in that role pursue socialization goals. In such a context, it is understood that helping is not the primary concern. Others resolve the conflict by viewing individuals as "clients" and pursuing interventions that can be defined as helping. In such cases, the goal is to work with the consenting individual to resolve learning and behavior problems, including efforts designed to make environments more accommodative of individual differences. Some practitioners are unclear about their agenda or are forced by circumstances to try to pursue helping and socialization simultaneously, and this adds confusion to an already difficult situation.

The problem of conflicting agenda is particularly acute for those who work in "institutional" settings such as schools. In such settings, the tasks confronting the intervener often include both helping individuals overcome underlying problems and controlling misbehavior to maintain social order. At times the two are incompatible. And, although all interventions in the setting may be designated as "remediation" or "treatment," the need for social control can overshadow the concern for helping. Moreover, the need to control individuals in such settings has led to coercive and repressive actions. Ultimately, every intervener must personally come to grips with what s/he views as morally proper in balancing the respective rights of the various parties when interests conflict.



The center is co-directed by Howard Adelman and Linda Taylor and operates under the auspices of the School Mental Health Project, Dept. of Psychology, UCLA, Phone: (310) 825-3634
 Email: smhp@ucla.edu Website: <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu>

Feel free to share and reproduce this document; no permission is needed.

If you have comments, suggestions, examples you would like to share, please let us know.

Send comments to ltaylor@ucla.edu