

Unpacking Our Professional Assumptions,
or “Boy, Those Lawyers/Social Workers/Psychologists Can Be Jerks”

Case discussion – Laura Lawyer, Stan Social Worker and Paula Psychologist are at a case meeting about Mrs. Jones’ custody case.

Laura says: Well, Mrs. Jones has a lot of non-legal issues that you can help her with, Stan. For instance, she needs to find affordable housing, find a job, do a budget, get on Medical Assistance and figure out public transportation, oh, and she needs affordable day care.

[Stan hears: I expect you to fix this client’s whole life, so that I don’t have to be bothered. I’ll just do the interesting, important legal stuff. I’m in charge and you work for me.]

Stan says: I have a lot of experience in housing issues, but I would not be comfortable working on a budget for the client. I could try to find her some resources.

[Laura hears: I don’t want to work that hard. I’ll just pick the easiest problem for me, and forget the rest.]

Laura says: What do you mean, you can’t help with a budget? Budgets are simple.

[Stan hears: You’re an idiot!]

Stan says: When I talked to Mrs. Jones, the thing she was really concerned about was whether she should file a workers comp claim, and how to do that. I told her that was a problem that legal services would help with.

[Laura hears: I just promised the client you would handle a legal matter in an area that you know nothing about.]

Laura says: Our legal clinic doesn’t do workers comp. Maybe I could find a pro bono referral.

[Stan hears: I don’t like to do worker’s comp stuff, let somebody else handle it.]

Laura says: Paula, we are going to need an inkblot test for the 14-year-old to show that his mental illness is due to his father's violent behavior.

[Paula hears: I expect you to say whatever I want to hear for my case. Also, that inkblot thing sounds like fun.]

Paula says: The Rorschach is a highly specialized tool that I am not trained to administer or interpret. I'm not sure that is the most useful test for this case. However, the tools we generally use aren't normed for adolescents.

[Laura hears: I am not a very good psychologist, and you're just going to have to live with my limited skills. I too can use jargon to hide my incompetence.]

Laura says: What test would you use to prove that the son is crazy because of his father?

[Paula hears: I don't care about actual mental health issues, I just want you to lie for me, if necessary, to win my case.]

Paula says: Assuming we can find the right test, I won't know what it will show until after I administer it.

[Laura hears: I'm not willing to work with you. If you let me at your client, he's MINE. Mwahahahaha!]

Stan says: I have been doing some work with the boy, and I do think that Dad's behavior could have caused a lot of the boy's problems.

[Paula hears: I'm not really trained in psychology, but I still think I can diagnose just by talking to the kid. And I'm going to suck up to the lawyer and say what she wants to hear.]

Paula says: I'm not really comfortable with an off-the-cuff assessment without any psychological testing.

[Stan hears: Social workers can't diagnose. By the way, I'm smarter than you.]