

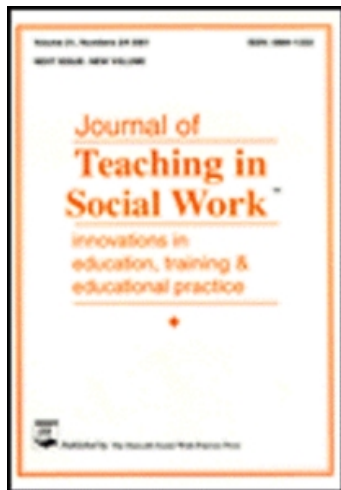
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What We Bring to Practice

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What We Bring to Practice: Teaching Students About Professional Use of Self

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ABSTRACT. This article describes “What We Bring to Practice,” an innovative seven-week course designed to help students confront difficult questions about professional use of self. The course content concerns emotional reactions evoked by the client in the therapist, a phenomenon traditionally known as countertransference, and requires students to explore the basis of these reactions. In many public agencies supervision has become mainly administrative, allowing little time for reflection or guidance in dealing with difficult client situations. This course gives fourth semester MSW students tools for examining their reactions to clients and provides a model of peer supervision that they can carry with them into their careers. The article describes the background on teaching professional use of self in social work, describes the teaching meth-

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ods used in the course, and presents findings from an evaluation done nine months after graduation. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2003 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

KEYWORDS. Teaching, social work, professional use of self, counter-transference, self-awareness

“What We Bring to Practice” is an innovative seven-week course designed to enhance students’ awareness of how their personal history and characteristics may affect their work with clients. As students move from graduate education into beginning practice, they are often confronted with clients who evoke strong personal reactions. However, an increasing number of these beginning practitioners no longer have the intensive supervision provided in master’s level field instruction to assist them in dealing with these feelings. In fact, in many public agencies supervision has become mainly administrative, allowing little time for reflection or guidance in dealing with difficult client situations (Fox, 1989). Although most individuals teaching direct practice courses address self-awareness and attempt to provide students with guidance on professional use of self, time constraints and the volume of material to be taught do not usually allow an in-depth examination of this topic. This course gives fourth semester MSW students tools for examining their reactions to clients and provides a model of peer supervision that they can carry with them into their careers. This article describes the literature supporting the need for such a course, the teaching methods used, and provides an evaluation of the course’s impact by former students.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The development of self-awareness, understanding of counter transference, and professional use of self in social work education have been addressed mostly in the field supervision literature (Bryant, 1980; Ganzer & Ornstein, 1999; Itzhasky & Itzhasky, 1996) and professional agency training (Aponte, 1991). Recent changes in fieldwork settings brought about by restricted models of health care, most notably managed care (Berkman, 1996; Raskin & Blome, 1998; Urdang, 1999), have eroded the ability of many field supervisors to attend to questions

of professional use of self. Fieldwork instructors are under immense time pressures posed by increased client load and documentation requirements. Many are no longer able to provide supervision that facilitates the development of self-awareness. Furthermore, the current emphasis on short-term intervention and on outcome-based practice at many schools of social work (Hartman, 1990) hinder the type of process-oriented training necessary for students to understand and develop ways of professionally using themselves in their clinical work. Coincident with these developments are troubling media images of what mental health professionals should be like. Films like *The Prince of Tides* and *Good Will Hunting* show therapists violating professional boundaries in large and small ways. Yet, somehow the questionable behavior of the helping professional in such films leads to miraculous positive change in the help-seeking character. Some students come to the helping professions because of their attraction to the personalities of these fictional therapists. Without professional education that speaks to professional use of self, students may model on images that are compelling screen characters but highly dangerous and unethical in the real world. As a result, the design and development of a course, which facilitates the development of self-awareness and the professional use of self, has become a necessity in graduate social work education.

As Kondrat (1999) notes, professional self-awareness has been advocated as a practice principle since the early stages of professional social work. The abundant literature on self-awareness and countertransference in clinical social work journals reflects the way in which social workers conceptualize the use of self as a clinical tool. For example, countertransference has been conceptualized by social work clinicians as an essential component in clinical practice. Green (1993) conceptualizes countertransference as an instrument that allows clinicians to understand the "curative factors" in treatment, and discusses the therapeutic value of clients "witnessing" social workers manage their countertransference reactions. Strean (1999) views disclosure of countertransference as an intervention which, when properly shared, can elevate a client's self-esteem and strengthen the therapeutic alliance. However, knowing how and when to share countertransference reactions is complicated for even the most seasoned professional.

Goldstein (1994; 1997) writes about the necessity of self-awareness, particularly for "correct attunement" and successful use of self-disclosure in clinical practice. Kagle and Giebelhauser (1994) caution that practitioners must explore their personal reactions to clients in order to avoid falling into dual relationships, such as providing social work services to someone

with whom the social worker has a business relationship, and committing boundary violations. Likewise, both Goldstein (1998) and Abramson (1996) note that the recent practice scene has increased the need for social workers to develop "ethical self-knowledge." Matorin and colleagues (Matorin, Monaco, & Schwaber-Kerson, 1994) call attention to the difficulties that students have in using the self as a clinical tool in practice and note the need for field instructors to set a tone for "disciplined self-revelation" by providing a comfortable learning context for their students.

These articles on countertransference, self-awareness, or professional use of self have been presented in the context of clinical practice or field work supervision. None of the cited articles provides information on how to teach these issues in classroom settings. Despite the recognition of the importance of these issues in social work practice, little attention has been paid to the methods to teach these issues in the classroom. In fact, a review of *Social Work Abstracts* found only one article which discusses how to teach students about countertransference (Altschuler & Katz, 1999). Furthermore, a review of two decades of research on graduate social work education does not include any mention of teaching students about countertransference, self-awareness, or professional use of self. The only reference about this topic is a notation that few studies have examined the effect of social work education on the acquisition of interpersonal skills.

BACKGROUND OF THE CLASS

In the spring of 1997, the Columbia University School of Social Work implemented a redesigned clinical practice sequence. In response to the more stressful and specialized practice environment, it was decided that fourth semester students should be offered a series of required electives that focused on clinical skills necessary for work within a particular field of practice or problem area. A selection of seven-week courses taught by the school's practice faculty was developed. Students were required to choose two of these courses in order to complete their second year practice requirement instead of taking one fifteen-week course. The impetus for "What We Bring to Practice" came from the late Professor Rita Beck Black. After many years in academia, Professor Black spent a sabbatical year as a line worker in a large New York City hospital. She returned to Columbia with the conviction that professional use of self and self-awareness was as critical to effective and ethical social work practice as evidence-based interventions. However, she did not believe that the school should duplicate therapy sessions or encounter groups. Rather, she de-

signed a course that would use critical thinking skills to help students explore and evaluate different theoretical perspectives about professional use of self. Accordingly, she developed the following teaching objectives. These remain the primary objectives of the course:

- (1) Students should be able to articulate the major theoretical perspectives that address professional use of self,
- (2) Students should be able to identify and discuss the potential impact of clients' traumas on themselves and be able to develop strategies for coping with that impact,
- (3) Utilize course content to systematically examine their own professional use of self in their clinical practice.

Following Professor Black's death, the authors became involved in teaching this course and formally updated the course in the Fall of 1999. They wanted to increase attention to issues of multiculturalism, make use of new technological resources, and consider the impact of both the agency context and the media on students' views of the helping professions. They worked together over the course of a semester to update the readings and assignments to reflect the "state of the art" on self-awareness and professional use of self at the start of the new millennium.

TEACHING METHODS

In order to facilitate increased self-awareness and skills for the professional use of self, classroom instruction is designed to integrate theory and students' clinical work. This is accomplished by a series of professional logs submitted to the instructor via email two days prior to each class. The logs are written in response to a specific assignment by the instructor or to two of the assigned readings for the week. The instructor, having read these logs prior to the class, structures the discussion around issues raised in the logs.

The first log assignment is geared toward helping students to begin thinking critically about professional use of self. Students are asked to view one or more specific films that present differing views of client/helper interactions. In the log, students were asked to describe their gut reactions to the helping character, whether they believed the helper was acting ethically, how the character's behavior meshed with what they had been taught about professional use of self thus far in their education, and whether or not they would want to emulate this character in their own work. Interestingly, many of the students reported that they had seen these films before the class

but had never considered whether or not the helping professionals were acting in accordance with accepted standards of clinical practice. Students are given no indication before turning in the assignment of the instructor's views on the helper in question. Here is a representative quote from the email responses to this assignment:

The movie I chose to view was *Good Will Hunting* . . . I think he did cross the lines of professionalism a few times—but his client made such tremendous progress that what he did was justified . . . I am currently working in a field where I can use a large part of myself in the work that I do. I am an adult adoptee working in a post-adoption unit and the main reason I took this class is to try to find a balance in terms of using my personal adoption effectively and appropriately in my practice . . .

Like this student, most students considered a clinician's behavior appropriate because it "worked." In particular, many students equated self-disclosure about the therapist's personal life with being "genuine"—a characteristic all students wanted to develop. In reality, the helping characters in the films make choices about self-disclosure without evidence that they have considered the impact of their behavior. For the most part, their actions appear to be spontaneous, emotional responses to very difficult clients with whom they powerfully identify. However, the effortlessness conveyed by Hollywood seduces even second year students into believing that potentially unethical behavior is okay as long as it "works."

Once students have turned in this assignment, the work of the class begins as the instructor states her position on the images of helping professionals. The instructor and students then begin to examine alternative ideas about how identification with a client and crossing boundaries may hinder or help clinical work.

A second log assignment is used to help students thoroughly articulate personal reactions stimulated by their clients. Many students come to the class believing that negative feelings toward clients are something to be ashamed of, hidden from supervisors, and denied in themselves. A required reading of *Love's Executioner*, a series of essays by Irving Yalom (1989), serves to help students reevaluate their belief in the necessity of denying their strong feelings—positive or negative—toward their clients. In this book, Yalom discusses his own reactions to clients in a devastatingly honest manner. At first glance, many students are shocked by his expressions of distaste or attraction to those who

seek help from him. They often contend that Yalom should not work with someone if he begins the work with strong negative feelings. Through class discussion and scholarly readings, alternatives are generated to automatically referring out clients to whom we have strong reactions. After extensive reading and discussion of Yalom, students are asked to write about a client “in the style of Yalom.” Below is an edited excerpt from one student’s response to this assignment:

Repulsion, I guess that is the best way to describe my first emotional reaction to the severely uncontrolled diabetic, Anne. I denied it was what I was feeling and I tried with every ounce of energy I had to prevent that repulsion from being seen on my face and heard in my voice . . . I do not know what I was first appalled by, the smell of feces or what I saw on the bed. As I turned the corner into the bedroom, I saw a 400-pound woman draped in sheets, with a pile of sheets next to her covered in feces. I wanted desperately to gasp for air. I felt disgusted, nauseous, but mostly ashamed at how I was feeling . . . When I returned to the agency, my supervisor asked me if I was disgusted. I was so afraid to say yes. I truly feared that I was being judgmental and discriminating. Where did such disgust come from? I seemed to hate Anne for “allowing herself to get like that.” . . . What I saw in her is what I’ve always feared in myself. Having been diagnosed with a serious chronic illness in high school, I went from being the star athlete to being 65 pounds overweight and unable to move without severe discomfort. Although, I have been able to manage this illness, Anne represented an exaggerated, concrete example of what I might become. I could be this woman if my body gives out and I have to be pumped full of drugs that make me gain weight . . .

This assignment serves to free students from what many of them have internalized as the proper way to deal with countertransference feelings, that is, “I have a reaction to my client, but I refocus my attention on my client and not think about myself.” By reading Yalom and learning that it is impossible to divorce one’s reactions from one’s interactions with clients, students are then able to take the next professional step—thinking about how their reactions shape the helping process and what choices are open to them once their reaction is identified.

In addition to class readings that explore questions about self-disclosure, boundary crossing, race and ethnicity in the helping relationship, and family of origin issues, students participate in a “sculpting” exercise to under-

stand how they are functioning in their work with particular clients. "Sculpting" is an experiential exercise that draws from the work of Peggy Papp (Papp, Silverstein, & Carter, 1973), and is often used when training family therapists in the impact of one's family-of-origin issues on the helping relationship. In this class, students present a therapeutic impasse, a situation in which they were unable to make progress in their work with a particular client.

The student is first asked to list all the parties that are involved in the case. This includes clients, their family members, and other members in the clients' social network such as teachers, other agency personnel, and the field instructor. The student then selects students from the class to represent each person that she has listed, and then "sculpts" them as if they were a piece of clay. The student positions them in a way that represents the clients' situation as the student sees it. For example, the student might position an adolescent client turning her back towards her mother while positioning the mother as she gazes at the clients' stepfather.

After the student has positioned all the people involved, she then selects another student to play her "double," and shows her how she interacts with every person in the sculpture. The student is then asked to stand back, and observe her "double" move from one sculpture to another. For example, her "double" might lean over to the adolescent client with concern, then move towards the mother who is so involved with the stepfather, and attempt to turn the mother's head towards her client, then move towards the field instructor gesturing a sense of helplessness. The "double" is instructed to repeat the movements over and over again in silence for about a minute and a half. Then each person in the sculpture gives feedback about their reactions while the "double" moved around them. The "double" also gives feedback of how it felt to be the student in the case. What is accomplished by this "moving sculpture" is a visual and experiential understanding of how the student is interacting with each person in the case, issues that she might be avoiding, areas where she might be colluding, and people whom she may be ignoring. Students are often surprised by what they see. One student found her double running back and forth between the client's mother and the field instructor. She revealed that this role of "middleman" or "peacemaker" was one she played in a number of other life areas. Another student noticed family members who were ignored because of the identified adolescent client's issues, issues that were very close to problems she faced during her own teen years.

Additional teaching strategies include the use of personal family genograms and articles on family systems theory to facilitate thoughts

about what type of clients would be most difficult for a particular student to work with, discussions and readings on racial identity, and specific discussions of the frequency and danger of both burnout and sexual boundary violations. Below are excerpts from logs written in response to readings on two of the above topics:

Obviously the articles raised complex feelings centering on my own family of origin, and forced me to contemplate the impact of my own family life on my work . . . I am struck by my own frustration with single mothers who began child-bearing at a young age . . . I harbor anger toward them thinking that if they had “planned” their lives better, they would not be coming to the clinic with the parenting problems they have now . . . Although I believe in feminist principles, I see these young women as being “duped” as I believe my mother was by my father as a young woman.

Colon’s (1998) article on searching for cultural identity brings up many of the issues I have had to face in my life. These issues come up regularly during my sessions with clients. As a young Latina girl who attended primarily white, parochial schools, I was often confused by which ethnicity to identify with. My parents tried to instill pride in me for being Latina. However, in school I received different messages from teachers who insisted I was Caucasian. Like Colon, I did not know what I was . . . In my work with teens, I hear my clients going through the same questions about their ethnic identity and I often want to share how it was for me . . .

Allowing students to discuss and write about these feelings allows them to consider other ways of using their life experiences without always choosing to discuss them with the client. One reading describes various types of self-disclosure that one might use (Greenspan, 1988). Disclosing about events in one’s personal life, an historical disclosure, is only one of many options. Students are able to see that there are a variety of ways to be “genuine” without being clinically inappropriate.

IMPACT OF THE COURSE

Based on standard course evaluations, the course is consistently ranked among the top courses taught in the program. Sections of the course are generally full. Students report that they routinely find them-

selves reading more for this class than for others, thinking about the course as they go about their daily lives, and believing the course should be a full semester course, and required for all graduating social work students. We wanted to know if former students continued to perceive the course as important once they began their professional practice. In order to do this, we attempted to contact all students enrolled in the course during the spring semester of 1999. Former students were contacted by phone between December 15, 1999 and January 31, 2000. They were asked by a current student not enrolled in the class to participate in a ten-minute anonymous phone interview. The alumnae office of the school provided the last known phone numbers for these students. The University Institutional Review Board approved the project. Working phone numbers were found for 20 former students. We attempted to find current phone numbers using various information services; however, a large number of students were not able to be contacted because of unpublished numbers or name changes in the months following graduation. Of the twenty located, sixteen agreed to participate in the survey.

Most (75%) of these new MSWs were working in health/mental health or child welfare settings. Eighty-one percent reported receiving a combination of administrative and clinical supervision at least bi-weekly. A large majority of those interviewed (88%) described "What We Bring to Practice" as one of the most important classes they took at Columbia. Ninety-four percent said they would advise current students to take the class and said that the class continued to influence their thinking. In addition to the structured questions, former students were invited to make additional comments. One described it as "the best class I took in undergraduate and graduate school. It has been extremely important to me." Another stated, "Everyone should take this class at some point." Another reflected, "I refer back to the class all the time by thinking about my reactions to the people I work with and where those reactions are coming from." Although this was a small convenience sample, together with the consistently high course evaluations it appears that the course has a significant impact on students' thinking.

Social Work has always prided itself on having a person-in-environment focus. Yet the person of the new social worker in the environment of practice has not been adequately reflected in our professional education. Although "What We Bring to Practice" cannot remedy a lack of clinical supervision during the MSW field experience and should not replace earlier discussions of professional use of self in direct practice courses, this course does provide an in-depth examination of this topic

that is often insufficiently addressed in clinical education. In addition, because the course is taught following three semesters of supervised field experience, students are able to consider issues of professional use of self differently than they might have been earlier in their education. We believe that the course content is particularly necessary to young social workers who are entering a world where models of practice are changing and practice environments are becoming ever more bureaucratic, time-sensitive, and complex. Educating students to consider questions of self-disclosure, professional boundaries, and other rarely discussed areas, may prevent a variety of difficulties from becoming issues later in their professional life. In addition, ethical breaches and burnout may be prevented, in part, by raising levels of awareness about oneself and one's choices when interacting with clients. However, to address these complex issues effectively, time must be devoted to them in master's curricula. "What We Bring to Practice" is one example of how this might be accomplished.

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