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

Based on the work of:
Mimi Chapman, Ph.D., Susan Oppenheim, DSW, Tazuko Shibusawa, Ph.D., & Helene Jackson, Ph.D.

Presentation prepared by Jenny Nicholson, MSW Student

“What We Bring to Practice”

- 7 week course developed at Columbia University’s School of Social Work
- Designed to help students confront difficult questions about professional use of self
- Course content examines the phenomenon of counter-transference and requires students to explore the basis of their reactions to clients.
- Designed to enhance students’ awareness of how their personal history and characteristics may affect their work with clients.
Literature Review

- Recent changes in agency settings brought by restricted models of health care, especially managed care, have eroded the ability of many field supervisors to attend to questions of counter-transference and use of self.

- Current emphasis on short term intervention and outcome-based practice at many schools of social work hinder the type of process-oriented training students need to understand and develop their use of self.
Literature Review

- Media representations of helping professionals (i.e.: *Prince of Tides, Good Will Hunting*) show these therapists violating professional boundaries and provide students with unrealistic images of helping roles.
Professional self-awareness has been advocated as a practice principle since the early stages of professional social work.

Counter-transference has been deemed by many clinicians as an essential component of clinical practice.

Disclosure of therapist counter-transference can elevate clients’ self-esteem, heighten the therapeutic alliance, and serve as a model to the client of managing reactions toward others.
Literature Review

- But – knowing how and when to share counter-transferential reactions is complicated even for veteran therapists.
- While there is professional recognition of the importance of these issues in practice, little attention has been paid to the methods necessary to teach these issues in the classroom.
Primary Course Objectives

Students should be able to:

- Articulate the major theoretical perspectives that address professional use of self.
- Identify and discuss the potential impact of clients' traumas on themselves and develop strategies for coping with that impact.
- Use course content to systematically examine their own professional use of self in their clinical practice.
Teaching Methods

- Classroom instruction is designed to integrate theory with students’ own clinical work.
- This is accomplished by series of professional logs submitted to the instructor 2 days prior to each class.
  - The logs are written in response to a specific assignment from the instructor.
  - The instructor, having read the logs prior to class, structures discussion around the issues they broach.
1st Log Assignment

- Geared toward helping students 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.
- Students are asked to describe their gut reactions to the helping character.
- Did they believe the helper was acting ethically? Did the character’s behavior mesh with what they have learned about use of self? Would they want to emulate this character in their own work?
1st Log Assignment

- In response to the assignment, many students in the Columbia class equated self-disclosure about their personal life with being “genuine.”

- Once students turn in this assignment, the instructor encourages them to examine alternative ideas about how identifying with clients and crossing boundaries may hinder or help clinical work.
2nd Log Assignment

- Used to help students thoroughly articulate personal reactions stimulated by their clients.
- Many students come to class thinking that negative feelings toward clients are to be ashamed of, hidden from supervisors, and generally denied.
- *Love’s Executioner*, Irving Yalom – a required reading that helps students re-evaluate their belief in denial of strong feelings towards their clients.
The assignment asks students to write about one of their clients “in the style of Yalom,” meaning with devastating honesty, confronting their feelings, both positive and negative, about that client.

This assignment serves to free students from what many have internalized as the proper way to deal with counter-transferential feelings: “I have a reaction to my clients, but I must refocus attention on the client and leave myself out of it.”

Once students can see that this reaction is part of the process, they can take the next step and think about how their reactions shape the helping process and understand what choices they have once they’ve identified their reaction.
“Sculpting Exercise”

- Helps students understand how they are functioning in their work with particular clients.
- The exercise asks students to present a therapeutic impasse, a situation where they were unable to make progress in their work with a client.
“Sculpting” Exercise

- A student is asked to list all of the parties involved in the situation they chose (the clients, family members, teachers, agency staff, etc.).
- The student selects other class members to represent each involved person and “sculpts” them in a way that represents the clients’ situation as the students sees it.
- Once all the players are positioned, the student selects another student to play his or her “double” and shows that person how he or she interacts with every person in the sculpture.
“Sculpting” Exercise

- The student is then asked to stand back and observe his or her “double” move from one sculpture to another.
- Then, each person in the sculpture gives feedback about their reactions while the “double” moved around them.

What this “moving sculpture” accomplishes is a visual and experiential understanding of how the students is interacting with each person in the case, issues that he or she may be avoiding, areas where he or she might be colluding, and people the student may be ignoring.
Additional Teaching Strategies

- Personal family genograms
- Articles on family systems theory
- Discussions and readings on racial identity
- Specific discussions of the frequency and danger of both burnout and sexual boundary violations.
- Allowing students to confront and discuss their feelings toward clients allows them to consider other ways of using their life experience without always self-disclosing.
- Greenspan (1988) describes the various types of self-disclosure one might use.
Student Reactions to Course

- Based on standard evaluations, the course is consistently ranked among the top courses in the program.
- To evaluate the program, researchers contacted students who had taken the course 9 months after course completion.
- Students were asked by a current student not enrolled in the course to participate in a ten minute anonymous phone interview.
Evaluation Results

- n= 16
- 75% of respondents were working in health/mental health or child welfare settings
- 81% received a combination of administrative and clinical supervision at least biweekly
- 88% described the course as one of the most important classes they took at Columbia
- 94% would advise current students to take the class
- 94% said that the class continued to influence their thinking
Student Comments

- “The best class I ever took in undergraduate and graduate school. It has been extremely important to me.”
- “Everyone should take this class at some point.”
- “I refer back to this class all the time by thinking about my reactions to the people I work with and where those reactions are coming from.”
References


