

TEACHING HOW TO FOCUS A PROBLEM IN FAMILY COUNSELING

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THE function of the family counseling agency as does the function of any agency determines the goal and content of the supervisory process and of the helping process which it is its responsibility to teach. Since the worker learns mainly through the supervisory relationship, the degree to which the supervisor has incorporated the agency function within herself and carries it out in each aspect of her supervision significantly influences the way in which the worker learns to make it part of her professional self. The point at which the supervisor's responsibility to teach agency function converges with the worker's necessity to come to grips with it creates a true focal point for learning.

Intellectual clarity and conviction for the worker about her agency's function and the process that leads to its fulfillment have validity only as they are rooted in a learning experience that involves the worker in an organic way. This is made possible only through a relationship in which the supervisor as the teaching person is related to the worker, through her understanding of her particular way of learning, which is essentially an expression of the way in which she feels about taking help from another. Since this relationship in-

volves the supervisor too, what safeguards her from becoming dedicated to the worker's need as an end in itself is her identification with the agency function which is represented by the client rather than the worker. The need of the client thereby serves a dual purpose:—it introduces a third person into the supervisor-worker relationship who acts to separate them and at the same time requires them to come together around his need, rather than for their individual purposes.

The conference which I have chosen to illustrate one aspect of the supervisor's function—the teaching aspect—represents in its content a particular problem for the supervisor in a counseling agency. Generally, the client who comes to the counseling agency asks for help with some inter-personal problem. Sometimes, as in the case under discussion, the problem may be stated in terms of a tangible need, situationally focused. Whether it is presented in this manner or in the more usual explicit request for help with some emotionally charged relationship, the worker is confronted with the problem of relating to the client with understanding of the inner need he is expressing, and with capacity to relate this need to the help the agency has to offer. If the worker relates lit-

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erally to the specific request without sufficient awareness or utilization of the motivation of the person making it, the result may be a loss of opportunity to help in a maximal way. If, on the other hand, the worker relates to the client's behavior and the problem it indicates, without paying sufficient attention to the significance of her formulation of the problem, the client may feel threatened by the totality contained in an immediate focus on an inner conflict. This may result in a withdrawal from, or struggle against involvement with the worker.

One of the most complex problems therefore that confronts a supervisor in a counseling agency is teaching a worker to develop skill in focusing a problem in the light of the client's emotional and social reality, relating this in a meaningful way to the help the agency can offer. This requires a different level of skill and use of self than are called for in those situations in which the client's expressed need for tangible assistance dictates the focus of the problem, as, for example, in requests for financial assistance, housekeeping service, etc.

Workers who are trained and experienced in the rendering of specific services traditional to the family case work agency face the difficult task of learning to reorient and reintegrate their skill and understanding when they undertake a counseling service. The limits of this discussion do not permit further elaboration of this problem, other than to recognize that it exists and that it affects the supervisory as well as the helping process.

The worker involved in the conference I am presenting had come to the agency after three years of experience in a family agency which offered largely specific, tangible services. The confer-

ence which I will be describing took place four months after she began working in the agency, when she was still making a beginning attempt to risk herself in the deeper involvement required by the new function. My choice of this conference is related less to this particular worker's way of learning than to the problem I have touched on—how the nature of a counseling function affects the teaching aspect of supervision.

The client in this case was a thirty year old woman, whose marriage to a mentally ill man had terminated in annulment. At the point of application, she was living with her parents. Her mother was taking care of her six year old daughter since she had to work. The client applied on two previous occasions to another agency, once to ask about nursery facilities for her child who was then three, and again to find out whether she could be helped to secure her own apartment. She had not returned after the initial interview.

When Mrs. S. came to Consultation Center in December, she again presented her problem in an externalized way. Could we help her plan for camp for her daughter? She had heard that arrangements had to be made long in advance and had therefore decided to come early. The worker indicated that the agency would not be accepting applications for camp for several months, but expressed interest in knowing what led her to consider this plan. She then brought out dissatisfaction with her mother's methods of rearing her daughter in a way that made it evident that she was using her energy towards changing her mother's ways, and had not as yet found a way of establishing herself as the child's mother. At the end of the interview, she expressed interest in returning to see whether we could help

her with the upset she was feeling as a result of her daughter's increasing unruliness.

Miss L., the worker, had had two interviews with the client at the point at which she brought the case to conference. She felt that the second interview had taken such a different direction from the first that she needed help from me in focusing the problem. When the client had been interested in coming back to work on her relationship with her child, Miss L. had been prepared to get into this problem with her. What happened, however, was that the client used the second interview to talk primarily about her own problems—her conflict with her mother, her lack of self-confidence and her difficulty in developing a satisfactory social life. The client expressed her wish to remarry and establish a home for herself and her child, but was having so much problem around dates with men, because of her mother's disapproval and her daughter's crying when she went out, that she tended to avoid such situations altogether.

I wondered how Miss L. saw Mrs. S.'s problem and how she was inclined to work with her. Miss L. expressed strong feeling that Mrs. S. had never emancipated herself from her mother and that until she did, she would probably not be able to make a life for herself. Her positive feeling for Mrs. S. came out primarily in terms of her wish to be opposite to Mrs. S.'s mother by encouraging her to assert her right to have something for herself, particularly in terms of a social life. I agreed that everything pointed to Mrs. S.'s continued childhood struggle with her mother and that it would be important for Miss L. to pay attention to the manifestations of this problem in working with

her. I wondered, however, whether she saw any problem in offering to help Mrs. S. in terms of her relationship difficulty with her mother. Miss L. recognized that the client had a lot of guilt toward her child but thought that since Mrs. S. had been willing to return in four or five months to make application for camp that she could then get into that problem around the camp service. She reiterated her feeling pretty emphatically that the client seemed to have been reaching out for some help for herself and that to focus on her problem with the child might imply a lack of recognition of her own needs as a woman, and would therefore carry for the client the same denial of her as she experienced with her mother. I believed too, that Mrs. S. needed acceptance and recognition as an individual. I wondered though whether Miss L. in her eagerness to give Mrs. S. what her mother withheld from her was not running the risk of splitting the problem in the same way that the client and her family were doing, except that she was affirming the part they were denying. This question led Miss L. to re-examine the client's problem. She could see that since the client was herself the mother of a child this could not very well be ignored, but again came back to the fact that even though she was a married woman, she was living with her parents and her problem was with her mother. I was puzzled as to why Miss L. singled that factor out of the situation as the most significant one. Was that really what differentiated Mrs. S. from other married women? At first Miss L. blocked over this but finally brought out that if I was referring to the fact that Mrs. S. had no husband, although she has a child, that she realized this too, and how it made for problems for the client. I

said that nevertheless, Miss L. feels that Mrs. S.'s relationship with her mother is the most important causative factor in her problem. When she affirmed this, I agreed that it might well be at the root of her problem but that still left open the question of how to work with her since we could not give her therapy. Apart from that, Mrs. S. in actuality was no longer in the same relationship to her mother as she had been prior to her marriage and to motherhood.

Miss L. wondered whether I meant that to focus on the client's role as a daughter would be to ignore the adult part of her and emphasize her childhood relationship to her mother. What blocked her was that if she were to emphasize the client's role as a mother she might feel that the agency too was questioning her right to something for herself.

I was glad that Miss L. was sensitive to that. At the same time, I questioned whether she could free the client to move towards a greater assertion of herself as a woman as long as the client continued to feel that she was doing this at her child's expense. As a family agency, I felt we could put together the problem that the client as well as her mother was splitting—that is, how to take on her role as a mother without having to give up wanting things for herself as a woman. This led to a discussion of the feelings Mrs. S. had, apart from her mother, about her right to be someone in herself. Miss L. was able to recognize that the client's abdication of her place as a mother was in part due to her sense of inadequacy as a person and in part to her guilt over creating the kind of situation that she had for the child through the marriage she had contracted. It became clear to Miss L. that the child symbolized Mrs. S.'s inade-

quacy as much as her mother did, and that she was using herself negatively with both.

I wondered how Miss L. saw the application for camp. Was it entirely a negative expression on Mrs. S.'s part towards the child? Miss L. did not feel this. She thought the client was struggling to take more responsibility for her child but did not trust herself to have much for her and therefore sought to make things available to her rather than giving of herself. Miss L. mentioned at this point the client's repeated assertion that until she could move away from her mother, she felt pretty hopeless about what she could do to improve her child's situation. She agreed with my comment that to help the client assert herself as a mother while living with her own mother could do a great deal to emancipate her from her negative struggle with her.

Miss L. said that she was feeling much clearer about the way in which she could help the client. With a little more help from me, she was finally able to crystallize her purpose in helping the client assume her place as a mother in the reality situation in which she finds herself, which would involve a different use of herself in relation to her mother, as well as to her child. Perhaps if she felt more comfortable about what she was giving to these relationships, she would become more comfortable in taking something for herself too, and not need to feel that her needs and the child's had to be in conflict.

During the worker's four months in the agency, she had begun in a few instances, such as in this case, to permit herself to become related in feeling to a client even though she had nothing tangible to give her in the interview.

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The lack of something tangible to give had at first paralyzed her so that she did not even give what she had within herself. Her tendency at this point was to swing towards becoming involved entirely in the client's feelings and to lose sight of the reality situation into which these feelings had to be put back, if the client was to be helped as a person in a given family situation.

Since the worker in a counseling agency is deprived of the focus contained in a specific request and has no ready-made structure upon which to depend, she has to learn to draw upon her understanding of each individual client and relate this understanding to the purpose of the agency in such a way that the two meet in a meaningful way and create the basis whereby a helping process can be set into motion. When it is up to the worker to define the problem and the structure, she may at first fall back into an identification with her

own needs, which in this case accounted for the worker's over-emphasis on the daughter role and her proneness to over-estimate the client's readiness to make dates, if only her mother were more permissive about this. Whatever the nature of the worker's developmental problem and the way in which it may become injected into a case situation, it is not within the supervisor's scope to help her directly with this, unless it blocks her in learning. In that case it becomes incumbent upon the supervisor to approach the worker's personal problem directly in order to see whether she can free her sufficiently from it through the supervisory relationship. As the worker experiences the supervisor's understanding of her as a person and the way in which she employs this understanding in order to fulfill agency purpose, the worker will be enabled to integrate her understanding of the client with her role in being there for him.

THE USE OF PRIVATE PSYCHIATRISTS BY A SOCIAL AGENCY*

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THE Jewish Community Services of Queens-Nassau is a multiple-service agency which has been given the responsibility of meeting basic social service needs in a middle class community. When the agency was established six years ago, it was the intention of its founders to cut across traditional agency patterns and to mould agency structure in accordance with the proven needs of the community. The territory which the agency was set up to serve comprises a Jewish population of about 200,000, which formerly had no professional Jewish agency of its own. It was, therefore, possible to start with a clean slate, so to speak, and to develop a social service pattern *de novo*. The board of the agency and the Federation of Jewish Philanthropies, which maintains it, had no interest in the perpetuation of any traditional pattern and both encouraged experimentation with new ways of bringing basic social services to the community. Family services were to be provided, but the traditional family agency patterns were not necessarily to be followed. Child guidance was to be offered, but there was no obligation to follow established ways in child guidance clinics and other agencies. Services for the aged were seen as one of the most important of the agency's functions, but this was recognized as a field which was

seriously limited by tradition, and experimentation with new services was encouraged.

It is perhaps natural that an agency such as this should go through a sequence of stages in the first few years of its existence. While the agency was still very small, undifferentiated case loads were tried, but quickly discarded as impractical and unintelligible. Centralized intake, after some attempt was made to differentiate case loads, was also tried, but did not work out particularly well. More recently when the agency attained sufficient size to warrant it, three units or departments were set up, one in services for children, a general family unit and a unit in services for the aged. Each of these units does its own intake. Each is headed by a unit supervisor who carries full responsibility for the functioning of his unit.

With this departmental form of organization, it is possible to attain many of the advantages of specialization within a fairly complex setting. There are advantages from a training standpoint and great economies have been effected from an administrative standpoint. While this form of organization puts great emphasis upon specialization and is, in fact, designed to meet the specialized need of the particular client, there are certain services which are common to all three units. One of these is the psychiatric program of the agency, within which there is specialization in

* Presented at the National Conference of Jewish Social Welfare, Atlantic City, May, 1948.