



Relational Cultural Theory and Field Education

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Abstract:

The authors examine the potential uses of Relational Cultural Theory for strengthening the many relationships inherent in field education, pointing to three main elements of Relational Cultural Theory: mutual engagement, mutual empathy, and mutual empowerment. The authors give examples of field education situations in which each of these elements plays a role.

Field education is primarily a relational experience. The very nature of field education requires that students engage in and maintain relationships with a host of individuals and systems.

In a child welfare field placement, for example, a social work student will interact with staff members in the county department of family and forensic services, such as the judge, probation officer, guardian ad litem, child advocate volunteer, substance abuse counselor, school counselor, classroom teacher, and housing counselor while simultaneously reporting to the field instructor and faculty liaison. Failure to establish and maintain any of these relationships will disrupt the work being done on behalf of the child.

There are also multiple relationships in field education, including the relationship between the field instructor and the student, the student and the client, the student and agency staff members, the student and the faculty liaison, and the student and members of organizations involved with the client. This article will illustrate how field educators can use Relational Cultural Theory to build connections and move through disconnections in the advisory and supervisory relationship, while modeling for students the application of the theory in practice (Comstock, Hammer, Strenstzch, Cannon, Parsons & Salazar, 2008; Ornstein & Moses, 2005; Walker & Rossen, 2004). Relational Cultural Theory focuses on the development of relational competencies that are necessary to create and sustain growth-fostering relationships, such as the capacity to recognize and attend to the needs of others. Berry Edwards and Richards (2002) identified three aspects of Relational Cultural Theory which are important for social work education, especially field education: mutual engagement, mutual empathy, and mutual empowerment.

Mutual Engagement

Based on Miller and Stiver's (1977) work, Berry Edwards and Richards (2002) define mutual engagement as "an ongoing process, which develops a special connection between the student and teacher" (p. 38). To foster this special connection, the field instructor must pay attention to connections and disconnections in the relationship with the student. Berry Edwards and Richards (2002) also point out that the key to building and maintaining this connection is involvement, which can take tangible forms, including reliable contact and support. While mutual engagement usually begins on the first day of a field placement, the process may also begin with phone calls, e-mail messages, and drop-in visits prior to the beginning of the field placement. Mutual engagement is promoted first by the field coordinator and requires that the field coordinator focuses on the student and acknowledges the student's needs (Berry Edwards & Richards, 2002).

Example:

At one midsize public agency, the coordinator of field education interviewed all six students assigned to the agency. The field coordinator provided general orientation information to the students and collected necessary biographical information. The field coordinator then contacted the agency field instructors to ensure that the necessary paperwork was completed, so by the time the students arrived, the required security checks would be completed. With the necessary paperwork completed, the student could use an agency car, visit a child at school, read a case record, and speak to foster parents.

The first direct contact between the student and field instructor in field placement usually takes the form of a phone call to schedule an interview. The field instructor can also glean information about the student's interests and experience from application materials; in addition, the field instructor may note information about the student's race, class, gender, age, religion, or other potential sources of bias. Care must be taken to acknowledge the mutual interest between the agency and student. To enhance the connection, the field instructor can provide information about the agency, appropriate instructions for parking, and details of where the meeting will take place and who will attend. It is crucial that the field instructor be prepared and on time for the first meeting. On the first day, the field instructor should greet the student in a casual and friendly manner: "Hi, how are you? We are so glad to see you." After the field instructor welcomes the student, the meeting should proceed in an environment conducive to an exploration of the student's interest and readiness for the work required in the placement.

The agency also demonstrates engagement by preparing for the student on the first day of the placement. The agency should organize a welcoming event (informal or formal) to integrate students into the work culture; this can take the form of a potluck brunch, a unit breakfast, or a coffee break.

This welcoming event helps to meet the relational need of the student, as well as the agency staff members. The field instructor should arrange for the student to have a place to work, an ID card, and all necessary materials and equipment. Each student should be given a designated workplace, including a desk, telephone, access to a computer, and office supplies. The field instructor should also select meaningful assignments that will support the student's learning experience. Students should not be left feeling as if they are doing "busy work"; the students are not in an internship to file papers and answer phones for the social work staff, to do administrative tasks, to fill in for staff shortages, or to provide free translation services for the agency. Students are paying money and earning academic credit for legitimate learning experiences and for the development of practice wisdom. Student learning expectations must be addressed and respected. This attention on the part of the field coordinator and field instructor to the student's feelings on entering a new system provides the holding environment needed to learn (Watkins, 1995).

Mutual Empathy

Mutual empathy is a willingness to be moved by another's experience and the intention to move the other by being authentic (Berry Edwards & Richards, 2002). The creation of this mutuality requires a leveling of the playing field; however, this can be difficult, given the inherent power differential between students and field instructors. Because it is so satisfying to be idealized, field educators are tempted to buy into what Miller and Stiver (1977) call "power-over cultures, instead of working to create power-with cultures" (p.160). We believe that the development of mutual respect is crucial to the creation of mutuality, and the creation of this mutual respect begins with the field coordinator.

Example:

A student came to an internship interview at a large urban agency on time and proceeded to share some of his interests and goals for the field experience. The field coordinator spent time getting to know the student so that a good match could be made with a field instructor. The field coordinator briefed the student on the relational culture of the organization and the organizational processes, timelines, and expectation of the internships. The field coordinator showed interest in the student by asking questions about the student's interests and goals. This student came to the interview wearing shorts and a T-shirt. The field coordinator took note of this but said nothing until enough time had elapsed and she could sense there was a degree of rapport. While the student's presentation was thoughtful and engaging, the field coordinator felt curious about the degree of professional experience the student had with interviews. When the time came to discuss the dress code, the field coordinator casually began to give examples of customary dress, and after a moment, the focus shifted to the student. Each could feel the tension in the room. The field coordinator congratulated the student on his thoughtful presentation and on securing the placement. Then, at just the right time, the field coordinator commented, "You look cool for a hot day in July." With some

relief, the student stated, "It's clear from the examples you gave I am going to need to do better." The field coordinator smiled and asked with genuine curiosity, "Have you interviewed many other places?" Then she wondered aloud how it felt for the student to be taking the first steps to developing a professional identity and assuring him that he would grow more confident with each step, beginning with choices as to his professional/casual look. The student was able to hear and integrate the evaluative feedback because it was said with sensitivity and in the spirit of genuine relational curiosity, which led to a deeper conversation about "putting on" a new role both literally and metaphorically.

Field instructors can demonstrate respect for students in a number of ways. They take care to attend meetings on time, frequently arriving early in case students need to talk. They try to remember and use students' names. They involve students in discussions, ask students their opinions, and respond respectfully, even to opinions that differ from their own. They take student comments seriously and look for the truth in each student statement. In creative teaching moments, they engage in ways that are intended to foster students' growth and develop a better connection. They learn from students and acknowledge their contributions publicly.

A feeling of safety is critically important in field instruction, given the vulnerability of the learning process for the student and the teaching process for the instructor (Knight, 2001; Frawley, Dea, & Sarnat, 2011). Applying new behaviors with clients requires a degree of risk and opens the student up to an evaluation process where beginning practice skills are analyzed and critiqued and the risk of narcissistic injury is heightened. As such, supervision meetings should promote mutual empathy between field instructor and the student. At orientation, the field instructor must arrange a regular supervisory meeting schedule to be followed throughout the student's placement. The field instructor should honor this time and avoid intrusions that accompany the practice area, such as beepers, cell phones, email alerts and emergencies. Over the first few weeks, the student comes to know that someone is there for him or her, and that she or he will not complete the internship alone.

This regular supervision should include a discussion of the student's process recordings as well as a discussion of general clinical and administrative matters. Since relational theory encourages an authentic sharing of feelings, the field instructor can encourage a parallel process by which students can learn to share their feelings in supervision and can therefore better help clients to share their own feelings in the therapeutic relationship.

Example:

A student wrote in her process recording about her frustration with a client's passive and dependent response to her. When the student called herself "judgmental" in response to the client's difficulty with directions, the field instructor explained that

anger is a response to frustration over a disconnection in the relationship. The field instructor wrote, "First, you were in a hard place because you didn't anticipate that the client would not know where to go. Second, re: being judgmental, what do you want to do? You may want to consider discussing your frustration with the client in an authentic way rather than keeping your frustration to yourself. You could say, for example, 'I hate it when I don't know where I am going; how do these feelings affect you?'"

Here a parallel process illustrates the respectful connection and the assurance of its constancy that result in the beginning of mutual empathy.

Mutual Empowerment

Miller and Stiver (1977) state that mutual empowerment is the result of mutual empathy and connections experienced in growth-fostering relationships. Mutual empowerment manifests in five ways: zest, action, knowledge, worth, and a desire for more connection. The key to empowerment is personal growth, which results from the student and instructor working together to build a deeper and more meaningful connection. Relational Cultural Theory suggests a number of sociological variables that can impede the potential for mutual engagement and empathy, creating disconnections in relationships in field education. Field educators should explore sociological differences between themselves and their students, such as race, ethnicity, age, religion, sexual orientation, and social class. If the field educator senses that these differences could present a problem in the relationship, this must be addressed in supervision in a sensitive and authentic manner. The exploration can take the form of a statement, such as, "I am noticing some discomfort between us, and I wonder what that may be about." Follow up questions could include, "I wonder if our age, race, religion, or gender differences might be an issue?" Field educators should collaborate in these discussions and give students the opportunity to consult field instructors or field coordinators with whom they are most comfortable.

Example:

An African American student in a predominately Caucasian MSW program requested a second-year placement with an agency with an Afro-centric approach to mental health and substance abuse. The agency was owned and operated by African American medical professionals who provided multiple social services to primarily African American clients. A few weeks into the experience, the student felt uneasy and conflicted about the learning opportunities her field instructor was providing. The student initially went to her field coordinator, who is Caucasian and Jewish, to explain her concerns. The coordinator listened to her concerns and provided instructional feedback. However, given the student's experiences in a racist culture as well as her personal experiences with racism, the student still struggled. When the problem persisted, the

student sought out her faculty consultant, who was African American and with whom she shared historical cultural experiences. The student expressed frustration with the manner in which the field instructor at the agency treated her and volunteered information about her concerns with the field consultant that was personal and cultural. The student was able to admit her disappointment with the agency from a racial and cultural perspective. The student felt this information could only be entrusted to an African American faculty member. It was difficult for her to trust telling a Caucasian faculty coordinator about her concerns for fear that they would generalize and think negatively about all African American organizations. In this example, it was important to respect this need of the student, who only felt safe telling her faculty consultant for racial and cultural reasons.

It is empowering for the student (and for the field instructor) to recognize and discuss all concerns that could impede connection. Discussion of differences between student and supervisor, as well as discussion of the power differential in the supervisory relationship, allows the student to begin to approach issues of difference with clients and to understand the true nature of empowerment in a relational model.

Example:

A student wrote in a process recording, "I feel like a stand-in for this client's mother. I am not sure that I can handle all the pressure!" The field instructor explained that relational cultural theory stresses interdependence, saying, "You are the client's change agent. She might turn to anyone other than herself for support because she does not experience herself as competent. She may have been frightened or was being polite or inclusive as part of her culture; you need to ask about this. You can help your client prepare for more independent experience, but interdependence and not self-sufficiency is the goal."

Conclusion

Professional social work education has always integrated theory and practice. The combination of theory and practice helps students to engage with, assess, and intervene with clients in a wide range of settings addressing a variety of issues. A special feature of social work education is the combination of class work and field education, which involves the process of linking the knowledge base of the profession to the field practicum. According to the CSWE (2008) "The two interrelated components of curriculum – classroom and field – are of equal importance within the curriculum" (p.8). Students are introduced to a host of theoretical approaches in the areas of human behavior and development, intervention methods, and community and systems theories. However, integrating these theories into practice is not easy. As Fox (1998) states, "the most important vehicle available to make this happen is the field instructor's ability in the relationship with interns to model behavior, reflect

attitude, explore thinking and feeling she/he expects them to draw upon in their work with clients” (p. 60). This article has offered practical examples of how to apply the basic principles of Relational Cultural Theory – mutual engagement, mutual empathy and mutual empowerment – in the relationship between field educators and students.

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