



The Reflecting Team in Supervision of Social Work Interns

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Programs for People

The Reflecting Team is a process by which a team of family therapists can share their reflections with a family being interviewed by other therapists. The comments build on the reflections of other team members. The reflections are not meant to be pronouncements; they are neither decisive nor instructive. They assume a tentative tone of wondering—of possibilities rather than prescriptions. Since all ideas are valued, what the family hears are multiple perspectives rather than a search for the right solution. At the conclusion of the reflections, family members are invited to comment on what they have heard, and the session is ended. At Programs for People, a day program in Framingham, Massachusetts, the “reflecting team” is an integral part not only of therapy but also of social work interns’ education at the program.

The Reflecting Team is one of the interventions practiced by staff at Programs for People. Programs for People was established in 1974 to assist clients formerly in mental hospitals in their processes of re-integrating into the community. The values of the program include respect for individual decision making, focus on individual strengths and potential rather than deficiencies, and openness and equality among clients and staff. Clients’ behavior is seen not as solely internally motivated, but highly influenced by the clients’ social and cultural contexts. The focus of the Reflecting Team on respect for clients, lack of hierarchy, openness, and encouragement of multiple perspectives was seen as compatible with the values of Programs for People.

Interns from social work and other professions are an integral part of the Reflecting Team at Programs for People. They are trained in two two-hour sessions, the first of which traces the development of systems thinking and introduces Tom Anderson’s description of the Reflecting Team (Anderson, 1995). The second consists of two 45-minute role-plays with staff and interns. After each role-play, there is a 15-minute processing session in which questions are asked, feedback is offered, and feelings and opinions are expressed.

Students often come to social work education with the idea that experts will train them in the correct

intervention, and that they are expected to follow those experts' directions. From the Reflecting Team, as from other experiences in placement, they learn that there is no expert and no right way. The openness and lack of hierarchy in the Reflecting Team empowers interns as well as clients. Seeing others show themselves as wondering, tentative, and imperfect helps them embrace their own uncertainties and reduces self-criticism. As one intern put it, "I saw that professional staff was not expert in the life of families and I was not expert in the life of clients." Seeing multiple perspectives stimulates new ideas. By the end of the year, interns can trust the wisdom they possessed but were hesitant to express; they also have more confidence in their clinical judgment and therefore interact with fewer inhibitions. Participation on the Reflecting Team is an important process in interns' professional development as social workers.

References

Anderson, T. (1995). *The reflecting team in action: Collaborative practice in family therapy*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.