

An Introduction to Use of Self in Field Placement

Contributed by Heath B. Walters

As the child welfare field coordinator at Lewis Clark State College, I have the honor of attending an annual child welfare conference where many of my students present their research on issues that affect child welfare in the State of Idaho. One of my duties at this conference is to introduce our institution's student presenters, which includes a quick description of their internship placements and a few positive notes on what I have enjoyed about supervising their field placements during the previous year. As I introduced one of my students this year, I praised the student regarding her unique ability to use her personality and sense of humor to set families at ease and to build relationships and rapport with clients. Due to the fact that this student came from a lower socioeconomic background where she had to face many obstacles in her own life before returning to college and getting her BSW, she was able to draw from her own feelings and experiences to develop empathy and understanding for clients and the situations they found themselves in. The student was employing "use of self" in her social work field placement. {mosgoogle right}

The term "use of self" is sometimes confusing for both social work students and the discipline of social work at large. Social workers believe they know what it means when they hear the term, but they have a hard time defining and describing the term when pressed. The use of self in social work practice is the combining of knowledge, values, and skills gained in social work education with aspects of one's personal self, including personality traits, belief systems, life experiences, and cultural heritage (Dewane, 2006). It is the use of self that enables social workers to strive for authenticity and genuineness with the clients we serve, while at the same time honoring the values and ethics we so highly value in social work practice. In an effort to explain the use of self to my child welfare interns and other students, I will often use their micro skills coursework as an example of how use of self looks in professional practice. When I teach interviewing skills, each student is exposed to the same basic skill set (e.g., paraphrasing, summarization, responding to content, feeling, and meaning). However, no student's use of this skill set is exactly the same, because these skills are manifested through the individual student's personality, relational skills, and developmental capacity. What I have found in the classroom, as well as when I am supervising field placements, is that successful students have not only mastered the skill set taught in social work practice courses, but have also mastered the integration of their social work skills with their authentic selves.

To integrate the authentic self into the skills required for your social work field placement, it may be helpful to view the use of self from five different perspectives: Use of Personality, Use of Belief System, Use of Relational Dynamics, Use of Anxiety, and Use of Self Disclosure (Dewane, 2006). Through analyzing each of the constructs and their application to your daily practice, you will begin to discover the unique attributes that will enable you to relate to clients in a more authentic manner and contribute to the field of social work in a way that is uniquely reflective of you.

Personality

One of the most important aspects you bring to social work practice is your personality. Although fundamental to social work practice, the social worker's theoretical orientation and mastery of skills appear to have the least impact on client satisfaction when compared to the social worker's authenticity and how they use personality traits as a therapeutic tool (Edwards & Bess, 1998; Baldwin, 2000). What is important regarding authenticity is to reflect your "real self" at all times. If you accidentally run into your client while shopping for groceries or at the park on the weekend, the client should be able to engage with the same person he or she met during your last home visit. In other words, social workers need to take time to fully understand who they are as individuals, as well as their identities as professional social workers, in order to holistically integrate these two roles.

The first step toward this authentic integration is taking time for personal discovery. Making a list of your most prominent personality traits and identifying how these traits can help you relate to clients, as well as limit your efficacy, is a helpful exercise. A second exercise that may prompt personal discovery is identifying what first attracted you to the field of social work and analyzing your motivation for choosing social work as a career. What need did becoming a social worker meet in your life? Was it a healthy need, and how does this need affect your work with clients and families? In addition, individual and group therapy can also be effective tools for understanding your personality traits and how these traits affect your relationships with others.

Belief System

A second aspect of self that has an impact on social work practice is your belief system. Belief systems do not necessarily have to be religious or spiritual in nature. Instead, belief systems can be a method for understanding, organizing, and making sense of the world around us. Often, social work students will hear this referred to as their "worldview." It is important for social work students to take time and assess their personal views of the world. What do I believe about the nature of humankind? How do I explain pain and suffering? What is the meaning of life? By exploring our personal values and beliefs through these kinds of questions, we are able to understand our individual perspectives of life and the world around us. Through defining our worldview, we are better able to understand the congruence between our personal philosophies and the values and ethics of the social work profession, as well as those of our clients. A disconcerting error that many social workers make when beginning social work practice is to impose their own values upon the client and failing to honor self-determination. This mistake often happens because the social worker has not clearly defined his or her own values and beliefs, and unconsciously projects his or her worldview onto the client's presenting concern. Social workers may also hold too rigidly to their own values and fail to

recognize clients' rights to their own standards and beliefs. Once a social worker has clarified his or her worldview and personal values, it is imperative to assess how these values contribute to the development of relationships with clients and how their beliefs may negatively affect direct services.

Relational Dynamics

A third aspect of use of self is relational dynamics. Carl Rogers (1957) developed the necessary and sufficient conditions that form the foundation of all helping relationships, including congruence, unconditional positive regard, and empathy. The integration of the necessary and sufficient conditions into your personal and therapeutic relationships is imperative when delivering effective service to clients. Upon completion of a client interview, it is imperative for social work students to review how they reflected these elements during the interview process and how they could improve future interviews. An important tool that can help you evaluate your use of relational dynamics is listening to a tape recording or viewing a video of your interview with clients. If tape recording and video recording is not appropriate for your agency, then you can develop a process recording by typing up the dialogue that you engaged in with the client, as if it were a screen play. Make sure to leave enough room in the margins to make comments on your integration of congruence, unconditional positive regard, and empathy. By reviewing audio tapes, video tapes, and/or process recordings with your agency supervisor and field instructor, you can obtain feedback on your strengths and weaknesses regarding your use of relational dynamics.

Anxiety

The fourth aspect of use of self is recognizing your own anxiety when engaging in a therapeutic relationship. It is normal to feel anxious and nervous during the initial stages of your field placement. It is also normal to experience some anxiety when serving clients. What is important is not to become paralyzed by fear or to deny your experience of anxiety, but instead to embrace your anxiety (Dewane, 2006). When you first experience anxiety, you need to realize that your sense of self is speaking to you as a social worker. At the first sign of anxiety, you must ask important questions, such as: What thoughts are contributing this anxiety, and how does this anxiety affect my relationship with my client? How does my anxiety manifest itself in my emotions, thoughts, and behaviors when working with the client? What makes me anxious about working with this particular client?

Discussing your experience of anxiety in working with particular clients during field seminar, with your field instructor, and/or with your agency supervisor are important steps to remedying anxiety and preventing its impact on your relationship with clients.

Self Disclosure

A final aspect of use of self is self disclosure. Sharing your own experiences and past problems can often normalize a client's experience and provide an opportunity for modeling appropriate behaviors and responses. Yet, inappropriate self disclosure can result in a client's lack of confidence in the social worker's abilities and role reversal in the helping relationship. When you are about to self disclose information to a client, ask yourself, "Am I doing this for the client, or is this more related to my own interest? What is my goal in self disclosing my experiences? How do I predict sharing this with the client will benefit the client?" In addition, you may want to ask the client's permission to self disclose by informing him or her of your reason for self disclosure and what you predict the benefit of this disclosure will be for the client. A good rule of thumb that I tell all my students regarding self disclosure is, "When in doubt, wait it out." If for any reason you believe a self disclosure will not be helpful to the client, then wait a week and see if it is still important in the context of the client's well-being. As a final precaution, always review what you would like to self disclose with a supervisor or colleague to get feedback on the risks and benefits prior to self disclosing to a client.

Conclusion

Although the use of self is a powerful therapeutic tool that enables the social worker to integrate aspects of personality, belief system, relational skills, and personal experience into the helping relationship, the social worker should keep in mind ethical boundaries of the social worker-client relationship. The use of self in social work practice places the client and social worker at greater risk for transference and countertransference negatively affecting the helping relationship. Transference occurs when a client "attributes characteristics of a significant person, generally a primary caregiver, onto the social worker" (Poorman, 2003, p. 197). Countertransference "includes both conscious and unconscious feelings of the helper toward his or her client" (Poorman, 2003, p. 199). As you seek to integrate aspects of your authentic self in daily practice, it is imperative to review ethical concerns and potential boundary violations with an agency supervisor or field instructor. In addition, students should continually review the NASW Code of Ethics (1996) to ensure standards of professional practice are followed.

In conclusion, your field placement provides an excellent opportunity to explore the blending of the values, skills, and knowledge you gained in your social work education with the personal and professional use of self. Through the use of self as a therapeutic tool, you will be able to effectively establish rapport, improve outcomes of interventions, and contribute something to the field of social work no one else can contribute—your unique personality, worldview, relationship skills, and life experience.

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