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Using Professionally Trained Actors in Social Work Role-Play Simulations

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The literature available to social work educators contains limited discussion of the use of role play simulation in the classroom. This paper presents the experiences of first-year MSW students in a foundation generalist practice class who were evaluated using role play for their final examination. In a unique arrangement, clients in these simulations were role-played by first-year acting students from the university's theater arts department. The reaction of the social work students to role play with professionally trained actors is described and discussed from voluntarily submitted descriptions of the experience.

Twenty-five years ago, Dr. Alfred Kadushin (1972, p. 1) wrote, "(s)ocial workers spend more time in interviewing than in any other single activity." Kadushin's observations continue to be relevant today. According to the National Association of Social Worker's, 70 percent of all professional social workers are employed in clinical direct service (Gibelman & Schervish, 1997, p. 113). Recently, Kadushin and Kadushin (1997, p. 1) have written, "interviewing is the most important and most frequently used social work skill. This is most clearly true for the direct service social worker . . . The interview is the context through which social workers offer and implement most human services. The interview is the primary instrument they use to obtain an understanding of clients and their situation and for helping clients deal with their problem."

Given the profession's emphasis on interviewing, it is not surprising that role-play is a frequently used pedagogical tool for teaching interviewing skills to social work students. "Role play

focuses attention on human interaction and provides students with the opportunity to imagine and act out human interplay as it might occur in a designated situation. It allows students the opportunity to demonstrate an ability to put theory into practice in a safe environment" (Doelker & Bedics, 1997, p. 55). Role-play is inexpensive, may be as simple or as complicated as the instructor desires, and is congruent with the emphasis in adult learning theory on learner participation. Indeed, it is the rare social work student who completes baccalaureate or graduate education without having experienced at least one social work role-play simulation.

Yet, a review of the social work education literature provides limited direction for using role-play in the classroom. This paper presents the experiences of first-year MSW students in a foundation generalist practice class who were evaluated using role-play for their final examination. In a unique arrangement, the clients in this final exam were role-played by first-year acting students from the University's theater arts department. The reactions of social work students to this role-play simulation, as described in voluntarily submitted assessments, are discussed. This paper is intended to elicit discussion on the use of professionally trained actors in social work role play simulations; the requisite first-step in a research agenda designed to evaluate this pedagogical technique.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The literature contains limited discussion of the use of role-play simulation in social work education (Carillo & Thyer, 1994; Barret, 1986; Whatling & Wodak, 1979; Schinke, Smith, Gilchrist & Wong, 1978; Weinberg, 1978). Whatling & Wodak (1979) found role-play simulations to be a helpful method for integrating theory and practice and for developing interpersonal communication skills. Doelker and Bedics (1987, p. 55), in a review of the literature on role-play in social work education and other disciplines, reported: "Role play is found to be as effective as lecture in cognitive mastery and retention, but is more effective in forming attitudes—particularly self-confidence. When used in conjunction with feedback, it is more effective than lecturing in

shaping behavior." More recently, the use of structured role-play has been described in relation to the development of supervision skills among field instructors (Cohen & Ruff, 1995) and differential group work skills among BSW and MSW students (Kopstein, 1994; Amann, 1993; Regan, 1993; Hepler & Rose, 1988; Coulshed, 1987; Rabin, Amir & Nardi, 1986).

No literature was found addressing the use of professionally trained actors to simulate clients in a social work role-play, a technique often used in other professional schools. For example, the use of professional actors as simulated patients is a common practice in medical schools across the United States and Canada (Levitt, 1998). Medical educators have long felt that utilizing actors to simulate patients is a useful tool for teaching interpersonal communication skills, with students welcoming the experience (Ladyshevsky & Gotjamanos, 1997). In fact, in prospective studies of the practice, professional actors as simulated patients have been found to be useful in assessing as well as in teaching communication skills to doctors (Finlay, Stott & Kinnersley, 1995).

DESCRIPTION OF THE CLASS

Generalist Foundations of Social Work Practice, an introductory MSW course, is offered by the School of Social Work at the University of Pittsburgh. The course provides students with knowledge and skills in social work practice with individuals, families, groups and communities. The purpose of this course is to help students integrate the generalist perspective into their professional frame of reference. To accomplish this, one of the course objectives is the development of interpersonal communication skills.

The foundation generalist practice course met weekly for three hours during the standard 15 week fall semester. Students enrolled in the course under discussion were first semester, MSW students who did not have advanced standing. Between the midterm examination and the final examination, students were introduced progressively to interviewing skills appropriate to the stages of the social work general method. As part of this process, students were assigned to dyads that role-played interview simulations on a weekly basis. Hence, by the end of the term, students had role-played with their peers during seven class sessions.

While preparing for the final examination, the instructor became interested in a pedagogical approach that would assess the student's ability to translate the interviewing skills they had learned in classroom role-plays to a more lifelike interview simulation. Aware of the use of actors to simulate patients in medical schools, the instructor developed a final examination in collaboration with a faculty member from the theater arts graduate program at the University. The goal of the final exam for the social work students was to evaluate their ability to assess a client presenting for an initial interview at an agency. The social work students were told that Master of Fine Arts (MFA) theater students would be simulating the clients' role and were asked to sign a release so that the acting students could submit their videotaped performance as a concurrent course assignment in their acting course. Both groups of students were offered alternative assignments if they did not wish to participate in the simulation. None of the students exercised this option.

The week prior to the final exam, the MFA students were briefed on their roles and vignettes by the theater arts instructor. MFA students were familiarized with the agency that would serve as the setting for their "scene." They also were given an opportunity to practice their roles with their instructor.

Quite serendipitously, there were equal numbers of male and female students among the MFA student "clients" and MSW student "social workers." Therefore, all female social work students interviewed a female client while all male social work students interviewed a male client. With respect to ethnocultural background, all social work students identified themselves as "white," while one male MFA student identified himself as African American. The students were homogenous in terms of age.

A private room was reserved at the University for the interviews, and a media services camera operator videotaped each role-play simulation. When social work students arrived for their final examination, they were provided with a packet of information on their "client." This information included a description of their employing agency, a face sheet on their client, and a vignette that described their assigned interviewing task. The agency setting and clients' characteristics were familiar to students from class lectures. Unbeknownst to the social work students, each was

given the same client vignette, employing agency, and position within that agency, enabling consistent assessment of students' skills across interviews

After receiving their packet of client information, MSW students were given 30 minutes to prepare for the interview. At the end of that time, the MFA simulated-client met the social work student and their final examination interview began.

Upon completion of their final exam role-play simulations, the social work students took their videotapes home to review and assess them. Students were provided with a form that asked them to identify and rate their application of the skills they had learned in the course as illustrated in their videotaped interview with the actor-simulated client. If students' felt they had not performed a particular skill to the best of their ability, they could submit dialogue demonstrating understanding and better application of the skill. Grades were applied based on the instructor's assessment of the student's skill application and/or suggested dialogue.

Students submitted the videotapes and assessments at their last class session. During their final class, students were asked to respond in writing to an open-ended question regarding their experiences with the MFA simulated-clients. Students were told not to include any identifying information with their responses in order to preserve anonymity. Students could either submit their responses to the instructor's secretary or mail them to the instructor's office. All students submitted their responses to the instructor's secretary. The instructor did not review these responses until final grades for the course had been submitted to the University registrar.

STUDENTS RESPONSES TO THE EXPERIENCE

Final exam grades for the 25 students enrolled in this foundation generalist practice course were very high, with the class averaging an 'A-' grade. Qualitative responses describe their reactions to their role-play experience with actor-simulated clients. Obvious limitations to the information provided by these students require viewing their experiences with caution. However, this is the first presentation of the use of actor-simulated clients in the literature regularly reviewed by social workers. The goal of this paper is to inspire discussion with subsequent evaluated replication.

Content analysis revealed that, in addition to their general reactions to the learning experience itself, students' responses fell into two distinct categories. First, students described their responses to the use of acting students as simulated clients. Second, students discussed their experience being videotaped during this role-play simulation.

With the exception of one student who would have preferred a written exam, the remainder characterized this role-play experience in positive terms. Typical of their responses was the remark, "*This {role-play} was very practical training.*" Another student commented, "*I definitely could not have learned {these skills} by reading the book.*" Finally, another wrote, "*I actually began to 'feel' like a social worker. I experienced the frustration, fear, curiosity and excitement. All in all, it was a wonderful experience {for} me.*"

All of the social work students expressed enthusiasm for the use of acting students as clients in the role-play simulation, with a number commenting they wished they had had the opportunity to role-play with the actors on other occasions. One student's remarks are typical, "*{Interviewing an actor} was a great tool for actual practice. Perception is reality. As a learning experience . . . we interacted with a 'real person' and were able to see and feel how that was instead of pretending with a classmate.*" In a similar vein, another wrote, "*I usually get very nervous when I know I'm going to have to {role-play} a client. It's hard enough to {role-play} the worker, but I'm not a real client and I'm not an actor. This was a great experience because I didn't have to worry about acting, I could concentrate just on my interviewing skills.*"

With respect to having been videotaped, a number of students admitted to high levels of anxiety about having their final exam videotaped. However, responses were generally positive to being videotaped. "*I really enjoyed the videotaping experience, even though I was nervous about being taped and I hate to see myself on TV. Part of the reason . . . why people are camera-shy is that they don't want to see themselves as others do. I thought it was a good experience to actually see my body language and to 'objectively' hear my speech patterns. Certainly I wish I were more perfect in my technique, but I learned a lot from seeing my imperfections.*" Another student remarked, "*Doing this video{tape} helped me understand everything we learned and discussed this semester. I was able to learn firsthand what I read about in the text. I*

think I learned more and will remember more from this video{tape} than I would if I simply {had} taken a test."

DISCUSSION

This paper provides a description of a unique use of role-play simulation in an MSW foundation generalist practice course. Students' views of their learning experience when MFA students simulated "clients" during a role play are described. Consistent with the medical education literature, social work students described their experiences with the actor-simulated clients in very positive terms. Medical educators have also found students to welcome the experience of interviewing actor-simulated patients for the real life experience (Ladyshefsky & Gotjamanos, 1997). This was also the case with social work students, a number of whom commented they would have liked additional opportunities to role-play with acting students.

According to the medical education literature, the use of actor-simulated patients is useful for teaching interpersonal communication skills (Ladyshefsky & Gotjamanos, 1997). Role-play simulation is intended to provide social work students with a safe way to explore these developing skills. However, as one of the student respondents indicated, when role-play is overshadowed by anxiety about "acting" the role of client, it is difficult for students to maximize their role-play simulation. Utilizing actors to role-play clients allows the social work student to free him or herself to focus exclusively on the skills they are learning, refining and demonstrating.

Role-play that utilizes professionally trained actors to simulate clients also lends a reality to the role-play simulation that may otherwise be lacking. As underscored by one of the social work student responses, utilizing actors as clients forced creative interpretations that facilitated "experiencing" rather than simply "acting" the role of a social worker. Social work students began to conceptualize and to "feel" how a social worker would react in a given situation rather than simply imagining the actions that would take place.

Medical educators have also found the utilization of actor-simulated patients useful to instructors in assessing their students' skills (Finlay, Stott & Kinnersley, 1995). The instructor in

this course found this to be true as well. With actor-simulated clients, the instructor felt better able to make accurate assessments of students' skills. There was not the distraction of the poorly role-played client to potentially affect skill assessment.

Given the additional freedom to focus on skill development as well as to experience a reality that would not otherwise be present, it would appear that utilizing professionally-trained actors in social work role play simulations should, indeed, be pursued as a legitimate component of a social work educator's pedagogical repertoire.

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