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DEVELOPING SOCIAL WORK INTERVIEWING SKILLS THROUGH A MICRO-VIDEO ANALYSIS TRAINING PROGRAM

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Abstract

Effective interviewing techniques are required for successful social work practice. Consequently, mastering this relatively complex technology is vital for both social work students and agency professionals. This article will provide a descriptive analysis of the Micro-Video Analysis Training Program which may be operationalized in either an academic classroom or agency. Also discussed are the primary components of the training program and their inter-relationships within the context of the Micro-Video Analysis approach. Hopefully this material will assist those with social work education responsibilities to teach interviewing skills more effectively.

Introduction

One of the most vital components of direct practice in social work is the ability to communicate with clients in a manner that will facilitate positive behavioral change. Consequently, it is essential that social work students learn this deceptively complex activity so thoroughly that a wide range of correct verbal and non-verbal behavior patterns are assimilated into their professional knowledge base.

Teaching professional interviewing and other microcounseling skills has always been a formidable challenge. Through observation and experimentation over the past several years, I have developed a teaching methodology which provides students with an optimal learning experience.

This paper will furnish a detailed description of this microcounseling training model, including its interrelated components: the single skills approach; rotating quadrille simulations; role playing; single-subject videotaping procedures; and videoanalysis. The paper will

conclude with a brief summary.

The Single Skills Approach

The difficulties many social work educators face in teaching microcounseling skills to beginning students are often compounded by the utilization of pedagogical formats which are largely ineffective, or, in some instances, even detrimental to learning. At one extreme are instructors who tend to overwhelm students with a large conglomeration of diverse skills, usually to be learned simultaneously. At the other end of the methodological continuum are educators who oversimplify counseling, teaching only a few elementary skills. It is also common for social work practice courses to be taught entirely by the lecture or discussion method, with little or no time or emphasis placed on learning interviewing techniques through classroom exercises (Wells, 1984).

In the single-skills approach to teaching microcounseling, the interviewing process is broken down into several skill categories (Evans, Hearn, Uhleman, and Ivey, 1984). These are further subdivided into specific behaviors, or single skills. The techniques in each category are then practiced, one group at a time, until mastery is attained. The process is cumulative, in that each set of previously acquired skills is practiced again in conjunction with each new learning experience. Thus, step by step, students develop an extensive repertoire of both basic and advanced skills, and learn how to utilize them individually or in combination with others.

Interviewing texts also include specific, concrete techniques to be acquired through a series of progressively complex learning procedures. These are often extracted from the narrative and enumerated in the form of exercises at the end of chapters (Cormier and Cormier, 1979), in a workbook (Iverson, 1980), or in an instructor's manual (Stewart and Cash, 1982). In such cases, learning the single skills in each category can be accomplished only as long as the other procedures for teaching microcounseling are followed.

Rotating Quadrille Simulations

Social work interviewing techniques can also be learned effectively through role-playing exercises (Iverson, 1984). My rotating quadrille simulations system allows each student to participate in interviews

and/or videoanalysis during a single class period. To accomplish this, the class is divided into several quadrilles, or groups of four, whose members assume the roles of social worker, client, evaluator, and recorder. The interviews are relatively brief, as I have found that approximately ten minutes provides sufficient time for students to practice the skills to be learned in one session. In addition, there is some evidence that brief interviews can be as effective as much longer ones (Singh, 1982).

After each interview, the students rotate roles so that every student assumes each role at least once during a class period. Consequently, there is no inefficient use of class time, such as when the majority of students are passively observing interviews as part of a large classroom audience. The four roles are complementary, with the task performance in each one reinforcing the learning objectives in the other three.

This method appears to be effective regardless of class size. Indeed, it has been successfully utilized with groups as small as four trainees in agency staff development programs and with university classes as large as sixty students. The only real limitations are room size and the availability of audiovisual equipment.

Procedures to regulate the order of rotation through the four roles in the quadrille may initially seem unnecessary. However, without specific guidelines students end up in some roles twice, and as a result do not have an opportunity to assume every role. Accordingly, a rotation procedure has been developed to eliminate unnecessary confusion and duplication, while insuring that each student has an opportunity to assume each role during a class period. Figure 1 illustrates a rotation system in which the four students (A, B, C, and D) in a quadrille rotate through their roles during the four interviews in a single class session.

Figure 1 Here

Obviously, the number of students needs to be divisible by four if all are to participate in quadrilles. If this is not the case, one solution is to assign each of the extra students to a different quadrille as an alternate. This student can then be included in the rotation as a worker and/or as a second client or evaluator.

Role Playing

FIGURE 1
The Rotating Quadrillle Model

<p><u>FIRST INTERVIEW</u></p> <table border="0"> <thead> <tr> <th><u>Student</u></th> <th><u>Role</u></th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>A</td> <td>Worker</td> </tr> <tr> <td>B</td> <td>Recorder</td> </tr> <tr> <td>C</td> <td>Client</td> </tr> <tr> <td>D</td> <td>Evaluator</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	<u>Student</u>	<u>Role</u>	A	Worker	B	Recorder	C	Client	D	Evaluator	<p><u>SECOND INTERVIEW</u></p> <table border="0"> <thead> <tr> <th><u>Student</u></th> <th><u>Role</u></th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td>D</td> <td>Worker</td> </tr> <tr> <td>A</td> <td>Recorder</td> </tr> <tr> <td>B</td> <td>Client</td> </tr> <tr> <td>C</td> <td>Evaluator</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>	<u>Student</u>	<u>Role</u>	D	Worker	A	Recorder	B	Client	C	Evaluator
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Each role includes behavioral objectives that must be carried out if the quadrille is to function properly. They are interdependent, so role performance success or failure in one has an effect on the learning experience of the students in other roles and, hence, the entire group. Fulfillment of role expectations is so important that each of the four roles will be described.

(1) Worker:

Since the central purpose of the course is to acquire the techniques utilized in professional interviewing, the learning emphasis is on the development of specific communication skills. Students are expected to gain knowledge and competence in this area of social work technology, in excess of that considered necessary for entry-level direct practice positions.

Consequently, the role of worker is the primary learning role. To meet the learning objectives, each student should conduct his or her interview as if it were taking place in an actual agency setting. The worker is generally responsible for the overall progress and outcomes of the interaction, and should utilize the interview to develop professional communication skills and/or eliminate weaknesses.

To this end, he/she is expected to demonstrate the new verbal and non-verbal communication skills to be learned with each successive lesson. Repetition is crucial to acquiring these specific behaviors, so each student should repeatedly practice the various skills until mastery is attained. In addition, learning microcounseling techniques is a cumulative process, and therefore those acquired during previous sessions should also be practiced.

Regardless of the text used, some of the methods will initially seem difficult to learn. However, over the course of a term, skill mastery will be so thorough that many of the new behaviors will be assimilated unconsciously into each student's professional repertoire of microcounseling skills. In addition, students will have acquired expertise in numerous other direct practice methods and will have the knowledge base necessary for using them appropriately.

(2) Client:

This role is intended to assist the worker in skill acquisition. Thus, it is essentially a facilitative role. When students assume a client role, they are expected to portray the client realistically and to exhibit verbal and non-verbal behaviors that will maximize the worker's opportunities to demonstrate and practice the skills to be acquired during that particular learning experience. While portraying a client will be difficult for a few students, some suggestions have proven to be helpful.

First, students should use their own names, sex, and age. Those who use pseudonyms tend to forget this midway through the simulation exercise and experience some cognitive dissonance when they are addressed by a name other than their own.

Secondly, each student should create two client roles. One role can relate to a problem she/he has had, or is having now. The other should be based on the problem of a friend, relative, or acquaintance. The student should know enough about this person and his or her problem to develop a convincing client role. Two different roles are suggested because students often desire diversity in their roles, and a second role provides more options. Some students prefer to develop a different client role each week or modify the same role prior to each exercise, in order to provide novel opportunities for the interviewer to practice the skills to be mastered in a particular lesson.

Third, some notes of caution are in order. As a general rule, it is best that those in the client role do not choose to exhibit serious personal problems which they are currently experiencing. This can be too traumatic for everyone involved. Also, another person's problems that are serious and were discussed in confidence should be avoided. Finally, fictitious roles, while initially attractive, are difficult to sustain over the course of an interview. This is due to the frequent spontaneous cognitive and emotional responses that are necessary. Most students have trouble with these unless the person and problem they are portraying is "real."

(3) Evaluator:

Since the evaluator's own skill acquisition is reinforced continuously while carrying out the behavioral objectives of this role, it is considered to be a secondary learning role. The function of the evaluator in a quadrille is to observe worker-client interaction and

evaluate both individuals in accordance with their respective roles. For example, evaluators may ask a worker or client to repeat any segment of their interaction, in which it was apparent that mistakes were made which warrant additional practice. Upon termination of the interview, the evaluator should briefly provide feedback based on the realism of the client's verbal and non-verbal behaviors, and the worker's skills in achieving the behavioral objectives for that particular learning experience.

Preparing and operating the audiovisual equipment and lighting is another major responsibility for the person assuming this role. However, once the equipment is working satisfactorily, she/he should begin observing both the client and worker. At the conclusion of the interview, the evaluator should shut off the equipment and lead the group discussion.

(4) Recorder:

The purposes of recording these exercises include; (1) increasing students' understanding of the worker-client interaction, (2) developing skills in accurate, concise, and rapid recording, (3) providing a record of learning experiences, both in terms of successful skill acquisition and in areas that need improvement, and (4) giving students a preliminary understanding of some of the demands of professional accountability (Wilson, 1980). Thus, recording can be considered an introspective role.

As soon as a student finishes an interview in the role of worker, she/he should leave the group and attempt to complete the recording exercises during the subsequent interview. When that interview is concluded, the recorder must return to the group whether or not his or her recording exercise has been completed. Time should be set aside to finish the recordings after all the interviews are concluded.

There are two basic types of recording exercises that have proven to be most helpful. One is the construction of a "checklist" which includes several interviewing skills that students need to learn. For each of these, the recorder should attempt to recall the instances during the interview that she/he made correct responses, and note these in the appropriate spaces. The completed checklist may also serve as a frame of reference for students during the videoanalysis of their interviews.

The other type of recording is the "original/better response exercise." This provides an opportunity to record, verbatim if possible, the responses made which need improvement. Recorders should list several responses which they believe were their most serious errors. Directly below each of these "original responses," the student should give an example of a correct or "better" response. This exercise is intended specifically to assist students in eliminating or reducing mistakes and in developing the skills of accurate recall and professional self-awareness (Kagle, 1984 a).

Single-Subject Videotaping Procedures

A crucial aspect of teaching social work interviewing skills effectively is the availability and proper utilization of audiovisual equipment, both while taping the interviews and during the subsequent replays. If a class is to receive maximum benefits from this technology, certain guidelines must be followed to ensure that the equipment is used at the right time, in the right way, and with the right subjects on camera.

It is important that all students learn to operate the audiovisual equipment, so that the instructor does not have to be moving constantly from one group to another focusing or adjusting the equipment. The instructor needs to be free to observe all worker-client interaction. To accomplish this, one of the first class periods in the term should be devoted to teaching all the students how to operate the equipment. During the actual interviews, the evaluators are assigned that responsibility.

Another factor that must be taken into consideration is the fact that many students may be somewhat apprehensive about seeing themselves on television for the first time. This self-consciousness can be reduced or eliminated in the initial class periods by having students take turns as camera subjects, while others learn how to operate the equipment.

Thus by the end of the second or third class session, all students should be able to operate the camera, T.V. monitor, and microphone. They should also have had sufficient time on-camera, so that receiving this type of exposure ceases to be a novelty and can be utilized as a vehicle for learning.

Two of the most important aspects of videotaping are the correct

positioning of students in relation to the camera and the number of individuals to be included in the picture. Beginning students (and teachers for that matter) seem to think that all the members of the group should be on camera all of the time. While this egalitarian philosophy is fine for family photographs or class pictures it simply is not appropriate for teaching microcounseling techniques. In fact, quite the opposite is true.

It must be remembered that the main purpose of the training is to assist students in learning interviewing skills. Obviously, then, the only person who should be in the picture is the student in the role of worker. The students who serve as client, evaluator, and recorder do not need to be on camera. To attempt to include any or all of these individuals necessitates a wider camera angle, thereby reducing the emphasis on the worker and eliminating the possibility of having a "close-up" picture of that particular individual. Having additional students on camera is also distracting for the group, both while taping the interviews and during the subsequent videoanalysis.

In my first experiments with videotaping, I found that having all four students on camera simultaneously resulted in each of them being overly concerned with how they looked and sounded in their respective roles, and only minimally interested in the progress of the student assuming the worker's role. This phenomenon was even more apparent during the subsequent videoanalysis, where each student seemed to attend primarily to his or her own behavior, rather than providing additional feedback to the worker.

Another potential problem concerns the positioning of the students relative to the camera, monitor, and microphone. The temptation is to have the worker and client facing each other with the camera situated at a 90° angle from them, thus taking a profile shot from their side. Again, experience has shown that this is not the best use of the technology. First of all, including the client in the picture wastes camera space. Secondly, focusing on the worker in profile greatly reduces the impact of the medium's feedback vis-à-vis such crucial non-verbal communicators as eye contact, facial expression, and gesturing.

I have developed a format which has proven to be the best for positioning students relative to each other and the equipment. As shown in figure 2, the single-subject videotaping procedure requires that the

worker and client face each other with the camera positioned behind the client, focusing exclusively on the worker. The evaluator sits off camera at a right angle to the worker-client axis, at a point midway between those two persons. The recorder sits further away with his or her back to the other actors and the equipment. The microphone is placed between the worker and client, but slightly to one side. The T.V. monitor faces away from the students, toward the instructor at the center or front of the room.

Figure 2 Here

There are several advantages to this model:

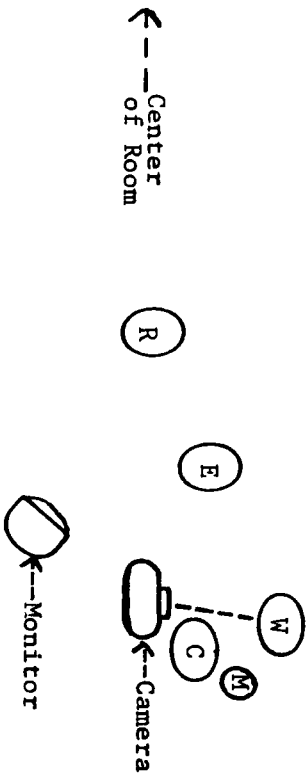
(1) The camera focuses solely upon and, hence, isolates the student in the worker's role. There are no distracting on-camera influences, either during the videotaping of the four interviews or during the subsequent videoanalysis. In addition, the worker, while facing the client, also looks directly towards the camera. This position allows the evaluator/camera operator to "zoom" in for a close facial shot when necessary, and/or to focus on the worker's other communicators such as hands, arms, posture, etc.

(2) The other students in the quadrille are positioned out of camera range, so each can concentrate on their respective roles without the additional stress of being on camera. The evaluator is in an excellent position to observe both the worker and client, but is far enough away to operate the equipment without disrupting the interaction. To carry out this function it is important that the evaluator has a clear view of what is being recorded on the T.V. monitor, so that periodic checks can be made to see if the video equipment is running properly. Furthermore, the recorder needs undisturbed time to complete the written portion of the exercise. I have found the best solution is to have the recorder sit some distance away from the group, facing away from the other students and the equipment. This results in better concentration and leads to more accurate and comprehensive recordings.

(3) In contrast to the camera angle, the microphone needs to be positioned to record both the worker and client. While it is not necessary to see the client on the videotape she/he must be heard, otherwise it is difficult to evaluate the worker's responses during the

FIGURE 2

Single-Subject Video Taping Format



Key: W = Worker; C = Client; E = Evaluator; R = Recorder
and M = Microphone. The camera and T.V. Monitor
are so designated.

videoanalysis.

(4) The screen of the T.V. monitor, which records the video portion of the interaction, should not be visible to any of the members of the quadrille except the evaluator. Any other arrangement is far too distracting, especially for the worker. In addition, students in the worker's role have reported an increase in anxiety when they are conscious of the professor observing them. Accordingly, it is best if the instructor attends discretely to the T.V. monitor. Indirect observation also allows the instructor to watch portions of several interviews simultaneously, without the students being aware that they are being observed.

When all students have finished their interviews, the group should allow ten or fifteen minutes for the last student to complete his or her recording, while the others can review and correct theirs. This time enables students to prepare for the videoanalysis period, and should not be used for socializing. That not only distracts the students who are still working on their recordings, but also disturbs other groups in the class.

Videoanalysis

When all of the members of the quadrille have finished their interviews and recordings, the videoanalysis period begins. For many students, this is the most valuable aspect of the entire course. As the videotape of each interview is played back, the other three students provide additional feedback to the worker whose interview is being shown. Any member of the group can stop the tape at any time and replay the portions that are considered significant.

The analysis of each interview should continue for several minutes after its conclusion on the tape. At this time, each of the students should give an analytical summary to the others vis-à-vis their respective roles during that particular interview. Suggestions for positive change should be included, so that all students can build on their strengths and reduce or eliminate weaknesses. Thus, videoanalysis provides reinforcement for each student in developing microcounseling skills. Furthermore, many of the learning benefits of the recording exercises are gained through audio and videotaping, since they offer an accurate picture of the simulated service

encounter (Kagle, 1984).

Virtually all students are able to utilize videoanalysis to develop interviewing skills, and the improvement in some cases is astonishing. One young woman was totally unaware that she spoke in a monotone, and that her facial features were almost completely devoid of expression. Consequently, the self-awareness that resulted from her first videoanalysis session came somewhat as a shock. Fortunately, she resolved to use the technology as a vehicle for positive professional change. Her improvement was so profound that it was difficult to tell that the worker on the first and final videotape was the same person.

In another instance, a male student was surprised to discover that he spoke very rapidly, and tended to repeat or paraphrase almost every statement he made. His solution was to ask the evaluator during each of his interviews to stop the interaction and critique him whenever he would exhibit either of the problematic behaviors. Using this system, he was able to develop a normal rate of speech and eliminate the repetitiveness not only in his professional work, but in his personal life as well.

Perhaps the most unique example of utilizing this technology to improve interviewing skills involved a graduate student. She had an unconscious habit of fidgeting with an object, such as a pen, or continuously wringing her hands if she had nothing to grasp. After videoanalysis gave her an understanding of the severity of the problem, she became determined to eliminate these behaviors. Unfortunately, they were too deeply ingrained for her efforts to achieve much success. As soon as she would stop concentrating on her problem and begin focusing on the client, the unwanted behaviors would reappear.

After several weeks of frustration, one of the members of her quadrille had a novel suggestion. She should try holding an object, such as a pen or pencil, in her hand while interviewing the client. But, instead of fidgeting with it, use it as a non-verbal communicator, much like an orchestra conductor uses a baton.

Although initially the suggestion seemed frivolous, she began to experiment with gesturing with a pen in her hand. To everyone's

surprise, she was not only comfortable doing this, but gradually became very effective at gesturing with her pen to emphasize points, and also in directing the worker-client interaction. By the end of the course, videoanalysis clearly showed that she had succeeded in turning a very distracting weakness into a most unusual strength.

Conclusion

This microcounseling model, with its interrelated components, has proven to be an efficient and effective method for teaching microcounseling skills. Reports from graduates now in direct practice positions indicate that this training has been beneficial to them in their jobs. This approach has had positive results because it does not fragment the training process, but illustrates that the roles a successful therapist must assume are inter-related. Additionally, this style of learning allows for feedback that is not possible either in the classroom or agency supervisory model, the two most frequently used modes of training. This style of training is holistic and realistic, and thus easily transferable to the types of settings where social workers are employed.

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