

SOWK 696 Advanced Practicum Journal #3

Agnieszka Wolska: 009595327

November 30, 2016

What has been the greatest practice learning this past month?

This has been a very vibrant and exciting month of learning for me at CFTC. I have been noticing a real shift in a few areas of my practice and learning, particularly around level of confidence and curiosity about the families I work with. Slowly but surely the level of anxiety about my performance has given way to a genuine curiosity about the families, the challenges they are facing and bringing into therapy, and also a curiosity about what I can do and explore (on my own and in supervision) in response to the needs. I have also noticed a willingness in myself to challenge myself, to explore different styles of therapeutic approaches (even though this feels really confusing and can add to anxiety), and to ask for supervisions and feedback from therapists whose styles are very different from what I “like”.

I also learned that there are difficult dynamics to learn from, understand, reframe, and sometimes simply let go of, not only in the families I work with but also between supervisors and fellow students. I was able to “study” a challenging situation and to process and sit with different perspectives, including the power differential and different interpretations that happened in the situation. This was a really awesome learning for me, and I am proud of the fact that I did not shy away from following through on my authentic response, and then processing and understanding the situation, opening the lens a little wider and allowing different perspectives.

Where did I feel stuck in the past month? Is there “gold in the shadows”?

I think that my most “stuck” place this month was around the sense of impatience with my struggles with asking therapeutic questions and having a particular model that I “run”. I continue to “dabble” with different approaches in the sessions, sometimes shifting from what little I know about solution focused, and sometimes using techniques from narrative therapy. I will like a toddler who does not know how to walk yet but keeps trying to run. This leads me to think that I am not developing therapeutic skills very intentionally. I keep feeling torn between my need to practice one model and what I see as the real needs of the family I am sitting with, whatever that might be. It is such an uncomfortable place to be. I also continue to be torn between some supervisor’s perspective that learning the specific steps of a model is absolutely essential, and the alternative constructivist approach that is more about collaboration and being lead by the clients’ presenting needs in the moment and trusting that the outcome does not come simply from my perfect acting out of particular steps. It is definitely an awesome challenge to work out what I think, where I am leaning, and how to approach my work with families at this developmental point.

I would say that the “gold in the shadows” is in the courage that I am feeling to speak these concerns out loud, to not pretend that I can sort this out on my own, particularly when I am going into a session with a family where the challenges are very real and it is important to me that I can leave the family with something to work with. The benefit of this courage is that I can ask honest questions of the supervisors, and reach out for different perspectives on my experience and my hypothesis, and on the interventions I used.

How have I evolved as a Clinical Social Worker in the past month?

In one particular family session, I found myself observing a pathologizing interactional pattern parent attacking child and child withdrawing and hiding. This was a very difficult to see, particularly because I had worked hard to bring this child into the therapy, to engage him and give him a voice. But in this session, I realized that I could potentially lose the engagement with the mother if I confronted or tried to interrupt the pattern in a more direct way. In order to protect the relationship established with the child, I needed to find a way to interrupt the pattern, acknowledge the difficult feelings that were happening between the family members, and then see if I could reconnect with each family member again. There was a lot of tension, frustration and hurt in the room. I knew that I did not have a lot of tools in that moment to address the situation from the kind of therapeutic stance (empowering stance) that I want to work with.

I did find a way to help the family and myself step back from the tense situation, by speaking out loud some of the hard feelings that the family (and myself included) were experiencing together, and by drawing out what the preferred feelings and ideas were that the family wants to have more of. I suspect that this particular intervention does not have a lot of long-term value for the family, but it did help preserve the relationship we had in the therapeutic system! That was a big relief to me. And taught me just how far I have to go...

When I reflect on this session (and watch the recording and discuss it with my peers and supervisor), I see that this ability to stay with the situation, despite not having the perfect tool or the experience to use it, and having to think of a way forward towards the goal of positive outcomes, is something that could be an example of my growth as a clinical social worker. I also see that I have evolved a little bit in my clinical social work skills in terms of being able to calmly assess the needs in the moment and then come up with an intervention that might not be "expert" (or based in evidence-based practice) but that does make it possible to maintain the therapeutic relationship.

Other Reflections

Overall, I am happy with my learning and growth this past month. I became more committed to my self-care again, which I'm really happy about. Even if it means needing to lower some standards in my life, I need to continue putting my well-being and time with my family I am still keenly aware of just how much I need and want to learn. I have to remind myself that I am limited by my humanness (how quickly I can learn), and the realities of life (there is only so much time in the day and so many days in the week). I need to work on trusting that I will and already am learning as much as I can be, integrating knowledge to the best of my abilities, and that I do have a strong ethical core that guides me in my decisions, in my work as a clinical social worker, and in my life in general.

Going forward, I want to be more and more intentional in my sessions. In practice, I want to be more intentional in using models I am interested in learning about, and also paying attention to what philosophical and practical approaches I am attracted to, all while paying close attention to the needs and directions of the families and their needs and preferences. This still feels like a very big project – I am very cautious of imposing my need for practicing (aka fumbling through) models when there are pressing needs in the therapy sessions that might require creative ways to respond to and to empower clients.