

# The Application of Interactional Analysis to an Applied Study of Social Work

ANNE WARFIELD RAWLS

*Wayne State University*

ALBERT J. MEEHAN

*Oakland University*

CATHERINE JOHNSON PETTINARI

*University of Nottingham*

EDWARD D. MAYS

*Wayne State University*

LYNETTA MOSBY

*Oakland University*

Social services in urban areas are often delivered by young workers with little training whose backgrounds differ from the client population. Social work supervision and training traditionally rely on self reports by social service workers of their interviews with clients. Differences in cultural style and lack of training make this problematic. Analysis which focuses on the witnessable interactional details of service interviews, as preserved on videotape, shows that different conclusions can be drawn concerning "what happened" from those drawn via self report. The goal of our study was to provide a videotaped record of events to service providers and evaluate their use of the technology in an effort to improve service delivery and training.

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Direct all correspondence to: Anne Warfield Rawls, Sociology Department, Wayne State University, 656 West Kirby, Detroit, MI 48202.

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This article reports on a four year social service training project which made use of videotape technology to provide social service personnel with a new viewpoint on their social service interventions. Ordinarily agency personnel rely on self-reports from workers in the field for an understanding of problems and successes in their encounters with clients. However, persons engaged in constructing complex social interactions seldom realize the degree of detail involved in producing the recognizability of the situations in which they take part. Sometimes the interactional details which they overlook, and therefore fail to report, are crucial to understanding the appropriateness and effectiveness of the services being delivered.

Our social service training project was simultaneously research and applied in orientation. As an applied intervention the project offered service providers videotapes of their encounters with clients as a new tool for evaluating the appropriateness and effectiveness of their work with clients and as an aid to training new counselors. However, the introduction of video technology changes the social service provider's access to the service delivery encounter. The research side of the project involved evaluating the new technology as a training tool for new workers, while at the same time assessing the uses made of the video technology by the agency, and evaluating the agency response to what was in effect a new perspective on their service encounters. Thus, the videotapes and interactional analysis which formed the backbone of the training intervention were also the primary source of research data.

The participating agency was in a major metropolitan area, served high risk urban, primarily African American, clients at risk for child abuse and was associated with a major research university. The service delivery workers at the agency generally came from different cultural, class, and/or ethnic backgrounds from the clients. Prior to the implementation of our project, the effectiveness of the agency in working with families at risk, and the resources of student/workers who only stay at the agency for one year and often have no prior training, was being strained by the increasing severity and complexity of problems faced by the families they serve. In an effort to speed up the training process and make student/workers more effective in less time, the project sought to reveal the details of interactional troubles in worker client encounters, and increase the information available to the agency about the new problems that drugs and AIDS were causing client families, through the introduction of a video interactional analysis program.

The problems associated with young inexperienced workers are not unique to the agency studied. Social service programs have been making increased use of service providers with very little training. These younger service providers are desirable workers because they tend to be idealistic, possess high levels of energy, and have not yet learned that the "system" has serious problems. In addition, indigenous community members, with little training, are increasingly being utilized in the hope that as members of local ethnic communities, they will have a better rapport with clients than college trained workers raised in the suburbs.

While inexperienced workers bring a range of strengths to service delivery, they also bring weaknesses, and programs which make use of inexperienced and indigenous community workers often find it necessary to combine a program of training with the delivery of services.<sup>1</sup> In addition to a general unfamiliarity with counseling skills, untrained counselors who come from the local ethnic community often display inter-

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