



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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SENSITIVITY TRAINING IN ABUSE ISSUES: HOW REAL CAN IT BE?

As a “forty-something” psychologist, I turned to teaching as my third career (the first was as a police officer). It seemed an easy task to take 18 young college students interested in the field of psychology and teach them to be sensitive to the issues, trials, and tribulations of domestic abuse. I mean, how hard could it be to train today’s young minds to be receptive, compassionate, and thoughtful? Although domestic abuse is not nearly as secret or taboo a topic today as it was in the mid-twentieth century, it remains a topic about which most students have little or no knowledge.

A common misconception is that if women (or men) are so abused, why don’t they just leave? Psychologists have written extensively on “learned helplessness”—the learned tendency to give up. It limits the ability of abused persons to extricate themselves from harmful situations. Students often underestimate the deep controlling nature of an abusive relationship, and so I decided to experiment with some activities to inform and encourage them to be more sensitive to the plight of the abused.

I invited 18 students (aged 18-39 years) in an entry-level counseling class to participate in a role-play simulation designed to increase their sensitivity to the plight of persons living in abusive relationships. Students admitted they had no significant personal experience with an abusive relationship. Prior knowledge was assessed by the Know, Want, Learn (KWL) method, as described on the Social Studies Center for Educator Development (2000) website (<http://www.tea.state.tx.us/resources/ssced/instass/3.htm>). Students were asked to list what they already “knew” about domestic abuse.

Initial assessments indicated that students had broad misconceptions about the nature of abuse and/or the dynamics that contribute to it. Many students thought abuse was the physical and violent acts so popularized in the media. Many had little real knowledge about the nature of the control the abuser has in abusive relation-

ships and focused on the abused person as a “victim” and on the personality qualities that keep the person in an abusive relationship. Following the discovery of prior knowledge, students were asked to describe what they would “want” to know about this area if they were to work with a client who had been abused. A common theme was “How does one talk to someone who would want to stay in a relationship like that?” Students wanted to know how to solve the problem quickly or how to be sensitive to individual needs.

Given the results of the KWL exercise, it seemed prudent to engage the students in a training experience, designed not only to increase their knowledge, but to give them a reality base to facilitate their sensitivity to the deeper issues of controlling relationships—hence, the game: A Battered Woman’s Experience.

The Game

Students were asked to participate in a classroom role-play experience and divided into three groups of six participants each. One student from each group was appointed by the instructor to the position of “controller.” Similar to the role of the banker in Monopoly, the controller’s job was to facilitate monetary transactions, as well as to retain ultimate control of the game, up to and including a changing of the rules or having a final say in any discrepancies as the game progresses. The other students in the group were selected by the controller to play one of five abuse-victim roles. Students were given biography sheets, detailing the demographics of the abused person and the abuser, and the current relationship between the abuser, the abused, and other relevant persons or situations (police, courts, relatives, children, jail, etc.). The abused person came to the game with all available resources (measured in pennies—usually 25 to 30). The resources each individual received were indicated on the biography sheet. The game progressed as each student took a turn at selecting a “daily card.” Each card detailed the current events in the abused person’s life, including often physical or emotional abuse. Information on the cards described the event (i.e., “Your abuser gets drunk and shows up at your work. The incident costs you four pennies. Talk



about your feelings.”). The game progressed as each student selected a card, described the event, decided on a course of action, discussed his/her feelings, and then either gave or received money (resources) from the controller. Essentially, the game ended when the students were ready to end it. One hour of play allowed each player five or six turns.

Following this role play, students were asked to describe what they had learned from the exercise. On exit evaluation, one student wrote, “It has vividly created real examples in the real world, where not everyone is sympathetic to the situation. It gives great insight on the woman’s perspective and how few her resources are after being either in a long-or-short term violent relationship, because all of her self-worth and self-esteem have disappeared.” Another student wrote: “There are so many factors that coincide with the abuse. There are family and power issues, and this activity helped me better understand the feelings of abused persons and learn why they allow the abuse. We had to put ourselves in the person’s position and make decisions—they weren’t always the right ones, but it had to be that way...excellent learning experience.” Most students commented on how frustrated and angry the exercise made them feel about how society treats, or ignores, abused persons.

Conclusion

This simulation was devised to create a safe and authentic environment to promote student learning about domestic violence. It is important, however, to recognize the stress that it can generate; allow any students who are especially bothered to bow out gracefully. The game appears to have sufficient richness to mirror the complexity of abusive relationships, the real world, and “what if” variables—each of which requires students to react in unfamiliar and, sometimes, uncomfortable ways. All in all, the game helps everyone learn something. As one student wrote: “The exercise was valuable, and it helped me answer some of the questions about abuse that I never knew...from an insider’s perspective.”

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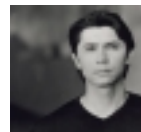
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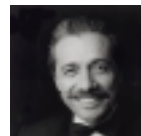
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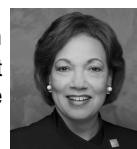


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