

Preparing Counselors-in-Training to Work With Couples: Using Role-Plays and Reflecting Teams

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Abstract:

The use of experiential learning practices is a cornerstone of marriage and family training. In this article, two novel experiential approaches for teaching couples counseling are detailed. Specifically, the evolution from the original format to the final version of the learning experience is described. The two primary components of the experiences include (a) a semester-long role-play enacted by doctoral student graduate assistants and (b) student reflecting teams. The authors found that students benefited from these experiences and were able to provide validation, offer encouragement, and act as catalysts for change both with their classmates and in mock couples sessions. The reflecting team format was especially helpful in promoting a safe, interactive learning environment. In addition to describing the experience, suggestions are made for adapting the approaches to fit other programs.

Keywords: counselor education; role-play; reflecting team; experiential learning; couples counseling

Article:

One of the challenges facing marriage and family counselor educators is creating experiential learning opportunities that look and feel like real life while providing a safe setting for students to experiment with new interviewing, assessment, and case management techniques. Creating this safe environment is even more difficult when the task of giving (and receiving) constructive peer feedback about one's performance in session is added. Although these obstacles make it harder to develop effective experiential marriage and family counseling experiences prior to practicum or internship, there are creative methods for achieving a successful, hands-on learning environment. Guides for teaching couples counseling tenets provide some information (e.g., Long & Burnett, 2005), but conceiving, developing, and coordinating activities to put these instructional models into practice often proves to be difficult.

Therefore, the purpose of this article is to detail our experiences with creating a novel and effective couples-counseling learning opportunity that involved semester-long role-plays and student reflecting teams. Specifically, we provide a narrative of how the experience evolved during the course of several semesters of experimentation and modification. A brief literature review and rationale for using role-plays and creating reflecting teams is included as a foundation for the overall experience. We also discuss the strengths and drawbacks of our approaches, including recommendations for recreating or adapting our approaches in other programs. It should be noted that the authors of this article all had different roles in the course over several semesters, including class instructor, graduate assistant/actor, and student. We draw from the perspectives of all the authors in this article as well as from informal and anecdotal feedback received from students in the courses.

LITERATURE FOUNDATION

Below, we describe two separate approaches used within the couples counseling course. The two primary components of these experiences were semester-long role-plays (used in both approaches) and student reflecting teams (used in Format 2). Role-plays and student reflecting teams are considered effective experiential

instructional strategies, and the following brief review of related literature serves as a basis for the selection and use of these components.

Role-Play

Numerous authors have detailed ways to incorporate role play into a wide variety of counseling courses (e.g., Rabinowitz, 1997; Woodard & Yii-Nii, 1999), and the use of role-play has been accepted as a standard and expected component of counselor education programs, particularly within practicum experiences (Baker, Daniels, & Greeley, 1990). Role-plays and modeling have been shown to be significantly more effective for increasing trainees' counseling self-efficacy when compared to a wait-list control group (Munson, Stadulis, & Munson, 1986; Munson, Zoerink, & Stadulis, 1986). Although both modeling and role-playing are effective teaching strategies, Larson et al. (1999) found that modeling was more appropriate for beginning-level counselors in-training, whereas role-playing was better suited to higher-level students who were preparing for practicum. In addition, these authors recommended "step laddering" students' experiences from modeling to role-playing during the course of a program, intentionally starting with activities in which they are able to witness successful counseling and building to role playing the counselor. The experiences described in this article provide a blend of these techniques, as students both observe sessions and role-play the counselor in the course of the semester (however, they are not burdened with role-playing an actual couple).

Reflecting Teams

Reflecting teams have been used in marriage and family therapy since the late 1980s and provide an opportunity to influence the therapeutic process by sharing important information with families (Cole, Demeritt, Shatz, & Sapoznik, 2001). The individuals comprising a reflecting team vary based on setting and available participants. Examples of reflecting team members in the counseling literature are counselors-in-training (e.g., Landis & Young, 1994), clinical supervisors or counselor educators (e.g., Roberts, Winek, & Mulgrew, 1999), marriage and family counselors/therapists (e.g., Griffith et al., 1992), and other clients (e.g., Vaz, 2005) as members. Anderson (1987, 1991) developed the process of bringing the reflecting team from behind the one-way mirror into the counseling room so that clients could see and hear the reflective feedback. In the most basic practice, the reflecting team observes the counseling session from behind a one-way mirror. The two groups (counselor/family and reflecting team) then switch places, and the counselor and family listen to the reflecting team's conversation. These experiences usually last between 2 and 15 minutes (Anderson, 1987). Anderson (1987) suggested that the comments of the reflecting team should be speculative rather than pronouncements or interpretations. After the reflecting team concludes its conversation, the counselor and family return to the counseling room to discuss comments made by the reflecting team. This may occur just once or repeatedly within a session.

The basic premise for the effectiveness of reflecting teams is grounded in Bateson's (1972) ideas about difference. Different versions of life circumstances lead individual family members to argue about which perspective is "right." Reflecting team conversations create dissonance and dilemmas for people, challenge the idea of a universal truth, and promote the possibility of change and movement (Roberts, Caesar, Poerry-Clear, & Phillips, 1989). The goals of the exchange are to provide a diversity of perspectives, enlarge the client's view of options, and introduce ideas that will intrigue clients and interest them more fully in the therapeutic process (Lax, 1995).

From a developmental perspective, counselor trainees benefit from the opportunity to develop multiple perspectives as well. Students commonly move through stages of dualistic (i.e., right/wrong) thinking before moving into more relativistic thinking that allows them to more fully appreciate the existence of equifinality (i.e., multiple paths to the problem and solutions; Perry, 1970; Simpson, Dalgaard, & O'Brien, 1986). By encouraging multiple viewpoints of a situation, reflecting teams can help promote more relativistic, less rigid conceptualization among counselor trainees. Furthermore, students who observe a peer using skills (either in session or in a reflecting team) are more likely to exhibit skill improvement and increased counselor self-efficacy than are those who instead view an expert (Hillerbrand, 1989).

Empirical research on reflecting teams primarily has focused on therapeutic applications and benefits rather than counselor education implications and usages. Results from several studies have provided evidence that reflecting teams can help create a stronger therapeutic alliance and facilitate the development and acceptance of multiple perspectives among clients (Höger, Temme, Reiter, & Steiner, 1994; Sells, Smith, Coe, Yoshioka, & Robbins, 1994; Smith, Winton, & Yoshioka, 1992). Smith, Sells, and Clevenger (1994) found that clients were able to remove themselves from the problem by listening to the discussions of the reflecting team, allowing them to view their situation more objectively and openly. Similarly, Sells et al. (1994) reported that clients viewed the reflecting team members as impartial judges who presented an outside perspective, spurring personal reflecting and growth rather than defensiveness. It seemed a buffer zone was created between the clients and the reflecting team, resulting in great therapeutic maneuverability for the team and the ability to take more extreme positions while still being “heard” by the clients (Smith et al., 1992). This kind of increased receptivity to feedback is a trait that counselor educators attempt to promote among marriage and family counselors in training as well.

Despite the potential applications of reflecting teams in counselor education settings, Kleist (1999) found only one empirical study (Landis & Young, 1994) focusing on pedagogical or training aspects of reflecting teams in his 1999 review of the literature. Landis and Young (1994) designed a training experience in which marriage and family counseling students served in three distinct roles during the semester: a role-play couple, a co-therapist, and a member of a reflecting team. Role-played sessions used a format consisting of 20 minutes of a counseling session, 7 to 10 minutes with reflecting team, and 15 to 20 minutes of another counseling session. Based on pre- and post-course results on the Family Therapist Trainee Rating Scale (Amatea, 1986), students rated themselves as significantly improved in performing structural (e.g., setting ground rules, focusing discussion) and relationship skills (e.g., providing support and bonding with the couple, engendering hope). The authors also noted their surprise that students did not improve significantly in the area of structural process behaviors (e.g., identifying recurring patterns of interaction between family members and assigning tasks to disrupt these sequences of problem behaviors), perhaps because of the introductory nature of the course and the advanced nature of this particular skill set. Another possible reason for this finding might be the difficulty of bouncing among the three distinctive roles that students were asked to play from week to week.

Additional authors have discussed the potential use of reflecting teams in group counseling courses, practicum, and marriage and family classes. For example, Griffith and Frieden (2000) argued that reflecting teams help students become familiar with systems theory and collaborative inquiry, building on and learning from others’ observations. However, very few authors have provided a specific format for implementing the reflecting team (e.g., time given for each component of the session, instructions provided to reflecting team members) and anecdotal outcome evidence. Furthermore, there does not seem to be any literature exploring the role that doctoral graduate assistants can play in the overall process as role-play actors and/or supervisors.

OVERVIEW OF TWO EXPERIENTIAL APPROACHES

In the following section, we discuss two creative approaches to implementing role-plays and reflecting teams within a master’s-level couples counseling course sequenced toward the end of students’ programs of study but prior to internship. In both cases, doctoral students with marriage and family counseling experience served as clients for the activities; experiential components began the fourth week of the semester and took place during the final 90 minutes of scheduled class time. Strengths, advantages, challenges, and disadvantages of each approach are discussed.

Approach #1: Three Couples, Instructor, and GA Feedback/Supervision

During the initial 2 years of this activity, three doctoral students were assigned to serve as graduate assistants (GAs) for the course. GAs were arranged into three couples who would serve as “clients” during the course of the semester; the diversity of GAs allowed same-sex and interracial/interethnic couples to be regularly portrayed in the role-plays. At the beginning of the semester, GAs met as couples to formulate their presenting complaint(s) and underlying dynamics. To ensure that GAs felt “connected” to the characters and the situations

they constructed, the couples discussed their ideas with the instructor who provided only enough feedback to prevent too much crossover or similarity of issues.

The three couples then presented for counseling on a rotating basis throughout the semester. Role-plays evolved as though in real time; thus, each session began where the previous session ended. Periodically, the instructor would ask a couple to find a way to infuse current class topics (e.g., adultery) into their work that week. Depending on class size, students rotated through counselor and/or co-counselor roles so that each student was responsible for serving as counselor for at least one full-length session. During these sessions, the instructor and remainder of the class observed the session behind a two-way mirror. Students were instructed to keep notes to aid in post-session processing, but occasionally a group of students would discuss the session among themselves or with the instructor in real time. Such discussions happened primarily during critical incidents. In such situations, student counselors were permitted to stop a session and ask for help if they “got stuck.” Students rarely took advantage of this opportunity; however, when called on, the instructor would enter the room and provide supervision to the counselor(s) requesting assistance. Following each session, the couple would return to the classroom to process events with the class. GAs were also available outside class for additional supervision or processing about an issue brought up in session.

Strengths/advantages. GA and student comments indicated that this approach had a number of positive aspects. Students unanimously agreed that observing and participating in role-plays that developed during the course of the semester was very beneficial to their development. Specifically, students preferred this format to arrangements in which students separated into small groups, role-played among themselves, and received post-session feedback from a GA or instructor. Students frequently commented that the latter, more common scenarios often seemed generic, with each role-play feeling like a first session with a new couple. Similarly, because groups were separated from one another, students did not have the benefit of observing how members of other groups might approach the session differently. In contrast, this experience allowed for a balance of practice, observation, and feedback with couples who felt real. As one student stated,

Until this time, role-plays never captured the essence of counseling, so I was initially skeptical of the benefits of role-plays as a learning tool. Over the course of the semester, however, the role-plays began to look and feel real; my doubts were replaced with growing curiosity and new understanding of the depth of couples work.

This feedback is in keeping with previous writings on the power of semester-long role-plays (e.g., Rabinowitz, 1997). Other noted advantages of this arrangement included the diversity of the couples and issues presented, the opportunity for longer full-length sessions, and the presence of the instructor and classmates in the overall process. GAs reported that the diversity of couples portrayed allowed them to explore both couples and multicultural issues in supervision. For example, one GA noted that she felt “glad to provide the students with the opportunity to work with asexual-minority couple in the safety of the [classroom] experience.” The safety was echoed by a student who wrote, “All four of the instructors in this course worked together to create a safe place for learning. Although we were consistently observed by our peers and classmates, each student knew that (s)he could get help whenever it was needed.” Other students touched on the effectiveness of the post-session processing and supervision, as evidenced the following statements: “The post-session processing led me to a greater understanding of the entire process as I was able to hear multiple viewpoints of the same event,” and “weaker moments of sessions were treated as learning opportunities and impetuses for class discussion.”

Challenges/disadvantages. Despite the positive aspects of this process, this approach was not without disadvantages and challenges. Most notably, a number of individuals involved said that they had difficulty keeping track of the three unique couples who rotated through the semester. One GA noted the difficulty of “separating our roles (role-play participants and course supervisors) in order to provide necessary feedback for counselors-in-training.” Overall, the continuous mixing of different counselors, different styles, and different couples led to some confusion from week to week. One student wrote that she “found [her]self struggling to remember back several weeks to the issues that were presented by the particular couple as well as the leaving-off point from which we would resume.” Maintaining continuity in this format was very difficult and sometimes felt forced, especially when a student had to follow a session in which he or she disagreed with how the previous counselor(s) had proceeded. Even with the opportunity to read “progress notes” maintained by the instructor, it remained difficult to separate work with the three couples, three GAs, and six role-played personalities and issues.

Approach #2: One Couple, Student Reflecting Teams

After 2 years of using Approach #1, changes were implemented to simplify the process for all involved while maintaining the most successful aspects of the original approach (i.e., semester-long role-play, safe environment for peer and instructor feedback/supervision). Most important, only two GAs were charged with role-playing one couple for the entire semester. Rather than relying primarily on the instructor and GAs for supervision and feedback, the class was divided into “reflecting teams” of five or six students. Each team was assigned a schedule of when they would work with the couple, and teams were responsible for deciding who would serve as counselor/co-counselor on assigned weeks. Team members who did not serve in a counselor role on assigned weeks automatically served as reflecting team members. Each person functioned as counselor and reflecting team member at least once during the semester. To prepare for work in reflecting teams, students completed required readings on reflecting teams (e.g., Lax, 1995), discussed reflecting teams in class, and received a handout as a “cheat sheet” (see Appendix).

In this approach, counseling sessions were structured as 20 to 25 minutes of work, 10 to 15 minutes of reflecting team contributions, and 15 to 20 minutes of follow-up work by the counselor(s). Because consultation time was built into the session, students no longer had the option of stopping a session for supervision. After the entire session was completed, time was allocated for class discussion and processing. In contrast to Approach #1, GAs did not join the class for the processing time. Rather, the instructor sometimes chose to communicate with the GAs regarding their perspectives on a specific aspect of the session, and this information was relayed to the class as necessary. This arrangement facilitated communication and allowed GAs to remain “in character” for all interactions with the class.

Strengths/advantages. As in Approach #1, the instructor, GAs, and students provided positive feedback regarding the effectiveness of this semester-long role-play. Notably, participants reported that ongoing role-plays, length of practice sessions, and opportunities to observe and participate in postsession discussions were all beneficial for their development. The inclusion of a reflecting team format resulted in a number of additional benefits, and these benefits mirror advantages of using such teams in “real” marriage/family counseling. For example, one student wrote that teams provided both the counselors and their clients with “validation of their feelings, encouragement, and a catalyst for further work.” These positive aspects (providing validation, encouragement, etc.) are important to engender among counselors-in-training, and it is noteworthy that these positive aspects stemmed from participating in structured peer feedback rather than receiving feedback from the instructor or GA. In addition, reflecting teams allowed students to practice offering tentative impressions, hypotheses, and suggestions in a nonthreatening manner. This is a skill that numerous students later found themselves using quite frequently with the role-played couple and with actual clients. Reflecting teams were especially welcomed among students who reported that they did better processing things “out loud” rather than only considering things introspectively during and after sessions. The teams helped change the default for individual introspection, allowing students to conceptualize the couple in new, broader ways.

The counselor(s) often noted how insightful comments and different perspectives of the reflecting team consistently provided new avenues for exploration or focus in the second half of sessions. Amid the challenges of working with a family system for the first time, anything that decreases students’ anxiety while maintaining a realistic experience is noteworthy. Students who participated in this approach reported that having a “break” after 20 to 25 minutes allowed them to “catch their breath” and not get overwhelmed in session. Students often commented that a safe atmosphere was facilitated by the nonblaming, nonthreatening, and objective nature of the reflecting team’s dialogue. These student sentiments mirrored previous findings with couples and families, which suggested that reflecting team comments can be “heard” and absorbed with less defensiveness than direct feedback (e.g., Höger et al., 1994; Sells et al., 1994). One student eloquently expressed another benefit of the reflecting teams, stating,

As beginning counselors, we sometimes doubt our instincts and assume not only that there is a 'right way' of doing things but that everyone else knows what that right way is ...the reflecting teams helped to build confidence that our own ideas are valid and worth sharing.

This sentiment echoes previous findings supporting the positive impact that modeling and role-playing (the counselor) has on students' counseling self-efficacy (e.g., Munson, Stadulis, et al., 1986); Munson, Zoerink, et al., 1986).

The reflecting teams' comments also had an impact on the client couple, who often came to new insights about their characters and their dyad's relationship after hearing the dialogue. This was especially helpful in this role-play approach because it helped the GAs act with greater intentionality (a very important component with nonactors). In addition, the GAs were able to build on and react to the reflecting team comments just as a real couple might. This anecdotal finding extends previous research that targeted couples' and families' reactions to reflecting teams (e.g., Smith et al., 1992) into the realm of role-playing and suggests a realism within the contrived class experience.

GAs also noted that Approach #2 relieved them of the supervision and involvement in multiple client dyads that was required by Approach #1. This allowed GAs to focus on just one evolving story. Because there were more sessions with just one couple, a greater depth of exploration was facilitated, and more interventions were attempted by students. The instructor also noted that the reflecting teams used in this approach allowed students to begin challenging and confronting issues and dynamics brought by the couple. Confronting a couple in sessions is a difficult skill to develop; the reflecting team provided a forum for students to begin formulating challenging yet nonblaming statements. In turn, this led to more attempts and successes with confrontation in session; indeed, most confrontations occurred in the second half of sessions and followed the reflecting team dialogue. This pattern mirrored findings from previous research in which clients allowed great therapeutic maneuverability to reflecting team members who were viewed as impartial observers (Smith et al., 1992).

Challenges/disadvantages. Although there were many positive aspects of Approach #2, there also were some challenges. In contrast to the first approach, there was only one couple for the class to work with during the course of the semester. Although this allowed for much greater depth in exploring this couple's issues, the approach limited the types and number of areas that could be addressed. Indeed, the couple portrayed in this format has been heterosexual and of the same ethnic origin; as such, few issues specific to same-sex or interracial/interethnic couples were explored within the context of this experience. As with the first approach, the "performance" of the GA couple is of vital importance to the success of the experience; however, using only one couple throughout the experience raises the stakes. As such, instructors must carefully consider whether and how they want to be involved in the formulation of the couple's story and direction during the course of the semester.

From the instructor's viewpoint, it was very important to reinforce the "rules" and structure of the reflecting team's dialogue to prevent students from slipping into more evaluative, less tentative language. This is a new way of interacting for the students and, therefore, occasional reminders may be necessary. Also, some of the couples' issues seemed to tap into students' personal histories and were met with emotional reactions (e.g., gender bias, aligning with one member of the dyad) by involved students. In these instances, some students became defensive when listening to reflecting team and/or whole class feedback. Despite these challenges, proper supervision and processing of these experiences can ultimately facilitate learning and self-awareness. For example, a pair of counselors thought that they had completed a good session; meanwhile, observers experienced strong negative reactions regarding the direction of the session. Post-session processing of this experience was difficult and time consuming, yet most students referred to this session in their course evaluations and identified the session and processing as one of the strongest learning experiences of their graduate career. In this case, the power of the group nature of the reflecting teams and class processing sessions led to a powerful learning experience. In other cases, the group nature of the experience led to difficulties in appropriately and thoroughly confronting similar issues. Thus, we recommend that the instructor be flexible

around such issues by offering or even requiring individual supervision as necessary. One way to do this would be to incorporate a third GA who may attend sessions and assist the instructor as necessary throughout the semester.

Finally, the instructor found that the most common challenge was containing students' discussion in reflecting teams and during post-session meetings; students' discussions could continue for virtually the entire class time. Although we find it positive that students were so engaged, it was sometimes difficult to focus attention on important moments, themes, and learning areas.

ADAPTING THE APPROACHES TO FIT VARIED TYPES OF PROGRAMS

We recognize that many master's-only programs may not have the option of using doctoral-student GAs as actors. Although there are many benefits to having doctoral students in the couple's roles, it would be possible to run either approach with other clients. For example, students from drama departments may be used to portray clients. It should be noted, though, that such actors likely will not have thorough knowledge of common family dynamics that emerge in couples counseling. As such, they might require more preparation time or a very detailed background story. Faculty would most likely want to meet with the actors prior to and perhaps following every session to debrief and plan for future sessions.

Another option in master's-only programs would be to design a practice experience using a couple (or couples) from the community who volunteer to be seen in the school's clinic. This would provide a very real setting for the students at the expense of the "safer" environment of a role-play. In addition, the realities of no-shows and cancellations make it more difficult to have consistency during the course of a semester. The level and type of supervision would need to be considered, as the instructor would be taking on the responsibility of vicarious liability for the students' work in session.

Finally, the experience could be modified in a vast number of ways to better fit a particular course, instructor's pedagogical approach, and so forth. For example, the amount and type of interaction with the "couples" can vary widely (from letting them present without instruction or feedback during the semester, to weekly meetings to process and plan sessions). The length of the session and reflecting team dialogue could be altered to conform to a shorter or longer class period. Some instructors might want to consider having different counselors/co-counselors work with a couple before and after the reflecting team time; or one might have the session "start over" after the reflecting team to allow a counselor an opportunity to experiment with a different approach. The potential for permutations to our approaches are vast and allow for a wide range of applications.

CONCLUSION

We have described two approaches for conducting an experiential learning opportunity in couples counseling involving semester-long role-plays. By using reflecting teams (Approach #2), we found that students were able to provide validation, encouragement, and catalysts for change both to their classmates and the couple. Just as clients benefit from reflecting team involvement in couples and family sessions (e.g., more perspectives, receptivity to feedback, greater therapeutic alliance), so too can counselors-in-training profit from similar methods in their clinical coursework. The peer-supervised, experiential learning activity described in this article has met with positive results in our classes and can be modified and applied in other couples counseling courses to similar ends.

APPENDIX

Reflecting Teams

The purpose of the reflecting team is to provide what Anderson (1987) referred to as a "polyocular" perspective on the problem. The client(s) gain(s) perspective while being removed from the demands of the clinical interview.

This approach involves:

- A team observes an interview from behind a one-way mirror.
- After about 15 to 20 minutes, the observing “team” and the counselor(s)/client(s) exchange places.
- The counselor(s) and client(s) listen to an unrehearsed conversation among reflecting team members.
- After this conversation, the participants exchange places again, and the counselor inquires about client(s) thoughts and perceptions based on the team’s conversations.

Key points:

- Reflecting team members observe silently and develop no “strategy” for their dialogue.
- Reflecting team members offer ideas and thoughts spontaneously in ways that open dialogue and offer multiple perspectives.
- Reflecting team members do not attempt to arrive at consensus, but *do* strive to expand the client’s perceptual field (sometimes called “planting seeds”),
- Reflecting teams can generate metaphors and images that activate, intrigue, and alter the client’s understanding of the problem.
- Reflecting teams can notice and comment on exceptions to client problem-focused view of self or others.

Guidelines for team conversation (adapted from Lax, 1995) are as follows:

- Be positive.
- Talk to one another.
- Frame comments in tentative rather than authoritative terms.
- Engage in sequential talking.
- Look for and highlight ways the client acted contrary to the problem.
- Use your own voice (i.e., talk personally rather than objectively, use your own life experience, be transparent, use ordinary language, not jargon),
- Consider appropriate self-disclosure that might help the couple/family feel that the roles in the process are more egalitarian.

Another approach that we may choose to use during the semester involves organizing the team members into “voices,” each representing one person. For example, in this case, two team members would listen to the woman’s “voice” and two others would listen to the man’s “voice.” The team members agree to conduct the team conversation speaking in first-person present from the perspective they were assigned.

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