Clinical-Community Social Work from a Relational Perspective

The East Carolina University School of Social Work Master of Social Work program has a single concentration: Clinical-Community Social Work from a Relational Perspective (CCRP). This title identifies two interlocking concepts that are equally important to the program. The first is a practice model: Clinical-Community Social Work. The second is a perspective: Relational. This model and perspective advance social work education by building upon the generalist practice model and by broadening and enhancing the concept of Person-in-Environment.

The term Clinical-Community captures the basic ideas of the practice we teach. The term clinical refers to helping individuals and families; community refers to formal and informal social networks. These two areas of practice are joined in our concentration by an emphasis on teaching students how networks of individuals impact both individual and community functioning, as well as how to intervene with networks to improve individual and community functioning. Through the four core practice courses and electives students develop the advanced practice skills to work with individuals and families in our region and/or help formal and informal groups and communities.

An important feature of this practice orientation is the degree to which we stress that “clinical” and “community” are not separate, and that helping people on one of these levels requires knowledge and ability in the other. From the “clinical” perspective, our students learn how communities impact the development, capacities, and functioning of individuals. This gives them the ability not only to work successfully with individuals and families seeking help, but also to work effectively with the individual representatives of communities when the focus of change is on the community level. On the “community” level our students are able to engage in use of self to be maximally effective in helping communities identify and carry out change initiatives. In the Clinical-Community curriculum, the focus is on building relationships, especially in the interest of self-determination, social justice, dignity, and individual and community well-being.

The Clinical-Community practice model builds upon the Generalist practice that students learn in their first, or foundation year. On the foundation level our students acquire a general knowledge of all levels of social work practice. However, on the advanced level we focus on only two areas of practice: clinical and community. We see agency structure, social policy, and research as important areas of practice, but these specializations are studied as they relate to clinical and community intervention.

Clinical-Community practice combines the individual and social group through an important piece of the concentration: its relational perspective. The importance of human relationship is a core value of the National Association of Social Work Code of Ethics (http://www.socialworkers.org/pubs/code/code.asp). Our program adopts this value as an overall perspective, stressing its importance in the change process.

Many of the relational ideas in the program are applications of current research that began in the clinical field but have expanded to wide range of human service and social programs. This research stresses the degree to which the
professional relationship is a fundamental ingredient in the change process. The relational perspective teaches that growth and healing occur in the context of relationship. This is based on the growing research demonstrating that the working alliance is the best predictor of success, not just in counseling and therapy, but in a host of social service settings. Our students learn how to create, maintain and repair working relationships with individuals, whether the individual is a direct client or a representative of a larger social system.

Another relational idea that is important to the perspective we teach is the importance of social networks in creating, maintaining, or improving problems in living. Every problem felt on the individual level both impacts and is impacted by a social network. Every social network is the result of the coordinated activities of individuals. Networks are understood as processes. Our students empower people to decide and act for themselves, rather than treat people as clients to be changed.

Clinical-Community Social Work from a Relational Perspective may be seen as “Person-in-Environment 2.0” (P-I-E). The P-I-E model suggests that a person is nested inside the larger social environment the way a Russian nesting doll is inside a larger doll. We believe that this perspective ignores the role that people have in creating, maintaining, or changing the social environment. From our perspective, the person is in the environment the way that a football player is in a game—the players co-create the game (Kondrat, 2002).

CCRP provides both a cause and an approach to help improve problems in living. Problems in living can be seen as the result of a problem in accessing networks of power. This includes making the social environment more responsive to the needs of individuals and families and communities. Well-being happens when people can access these networks to articulate their own experience.

In summary, the single concentration in the East Carolina University School of Social Work Mater of Social Work includes a Clinical-Community practice model in which the individual is understood in relation to his or her community context, and the community is understood in terms of the concrete activities of individuals within the community. Clinical and community are intertwined, and successful practice requires that the practitioner be able to understand both clinical and community practice.

The second component of our practice model is the relational perspective. From this perspective, we focus on how social networks can create, maintain, or help resolve problems in living and promote well-being. We understand that the relationship between the social worker and the client, or members of the client system, is an important factor in the success or failure of the helping encounter. These two components rely on knowledge of generalist practice and enhance the person-in-environment perspective that have been the traditional hall-marks of social work education and practice.

References

Other Related Readings


