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New Approach to Teaching of Health Psychology Focusing on Social Work in the Family

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Abstract

Authors focus on issue of health psychology in the context of university teaching of social work students. Within the framework of a study programme there is health psychology presented as interdisciplinary field of science which is based on bio - psycho – social model of health/disease. The starting premise is the assumption of functional connection of socio-psychological training with educative process (interactive form of teaching) within the subject of health psychology. The aim is to find out how students perceive learning of this subject and its benefits into practice from the view of a used form of educational process.

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1. Introduction

Health psychology is defined as an interdisciplinary scientific field, which bases its approach to health on the bio-psycho-social model. Unlike the classical somatic medicine, it focuses mainly on the psycho-social factors of health (illness). This definition stresses the joining of the efforts of experts from different professions concerned with health: medical workers, psychologists, social workers etc. (Cassens, 1992; Dawnie and Tannahil., 1996; Křivohlavý, 2001; Křivohlavý, 2002).

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The influence of psycho-social factors on health is generally acknowledged, however, it is not reflected in practice. That is why our course on health psychology is not conceived as a mere acquisition of theoretical knowledge but it should offer an independent view of the issue in the context of the bio-psycho-social model of health to the individual students. We base the teaching on the fundamental ideas of humanist psychology, our own experience with long-term PCA (Person Centered Approach) training as well as psychotherapeutic practice (Pelcák and Vosečková 1999; Vosečková and Pelcák, 1998). We regard a functional connection of psychotherapy and social-psychological training with the education process as useful (interactive teaching method). We believe that mainly in the case of helping professions (doctors, nurses, social workers, pedagogues etc.) interactive education in the form of self-experience courses is necessary for their professional life as well as the preservation of their mental health.

1.1. Person centered approach (PCA)

PCA is a prominent approach in humanist psychology and psychotherapy based on the thoughts and methods of the American psychologist C. Rogers (Rogers, 1980, 1993). PCA is by no means a mere set of techniques or strategies but a complex approach to the world, the people and oneself. Rogers and his co-workers stressed three basic psychotherapeutic attitudes or conditions. The effect of the therapy is maximized if all three factors are present and well balanced.

- Emphatic understanding of the client's feelings and their personal meanings.
- The authenticity and sincerity of the therapist or congruency.
- Acceptation and unconditioned positive attitude to the client on the part of the therapist.

In the domain of education an analogical term to PCA Student Centered Teaching, SCT is used. The application of SCT in classes is necessarily connected with re-definition of the roles of the teacher and student. Traditional education systems put all the power in the hands of the omnipotent teacher, leaving the student little or no opportunity to participate on the teaching.

The asymmetry of the relationship often results in counter-productivity. A more creative approach to the education process consists in a more facilitating attitude focused on the creation of collective atmosphere, which enables to accept oneself and one's own feelings, to develop self-confidence and the skills of realistic assessment of one's own goals and decrease the manifestations of maladaptive behaviour etc. (Hall and Saunders, 1997; Lea, Stephenson and Troy, 2003; Prince and Felder, 2006, 2007; Pedersen, 2003). A facilitating teacher is able to rely on the student, his/her integrity and the natural possibilities of developing his/her individuality and independence in a supportive and stimulating environment of the classroom. On the other hand, facilitating approach is connected with a great degree of student's control and responsibility for the content and ways of his/her own study. Unlike teaching focused on performance, facilitating approach favours teaching through exploration, which supports students' inquisitiveness and stimulates healthy social and emotional development of the personality (Pedersen, 2004; Prince and Felder, 2006, 2007). The changes of power relationships permit students to assume greater responsibility for their own education through active participation at the definition of individual study objectives (Estes, 2004; Iyoshi and Hannafin, 2005; Taylor, 2000).

Similarly to PCA, SCT is based in the quality of human relationship between the teacher and the student. Even in the case of student-teacher relationship, the closeness of another person may create a psychotherapeutic environment thanks to significant level of emphatic understanding, authenticity and warmth (Barr and Tagg, 1995; Carlile and Jordán, 2005). A meeting in such a relationship involves maximal and intense concentration on the other, who receives acceptance and acknowledgement. Such meetings can become a source of inner strength and people who experience them describe them as agreeable confirmation and strengthening of their own identity. The degree of the teacher's acceptance, empathy and congruence is a vital component of SCT. Compared to common classes, study groups (SPT) showed an increase of personal adaptation, studying outside the pre-scribed outlines, creativity and responsibility (Forster and Robson 1992; Vosečková and Pelcák, 1998; Vosečková, 2003).

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