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CHICAGO INSTITUTE FOR CLINICAL SOCIAL WORK

AN EXPLORATION OF INFLUENCES OF STAFF RESPONSES  
TO ADOLESCENTS ON A TWENTY-FOUR HOUR TREATMENT  
MILIEU; WITH SPECIAL EMPHASIS ON SELF PSYCHOLOGY

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE  
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## PREFACE

Milieu staff working in adolescent residential treatment settings play an important role in determining the success or failure of the adolescent's treatment. It is important that these staff appropriately manage their relationships with adolescents in treatment. Relationships that develop between milieu staff and the adolescents in treatment are typically intense. Most of the literature to date has centered upon the adolescent's personality makeup and pathology as the primary influences of staff's differential response to them. Contributions from the staff are frequently considered as countertransference.

This research project sought to identify and examine the experiences of milieu staff who work intensively with groups of very disturbed adolescents in twenty-four hour care settings. The focus was on the staff's range of cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses to the various adolescents in their care. It was found that some of the themes the milieu staff identified in their relationships with the adolescents as being particularly meaningful had genetic underpinnings in the staff's own growing up experiences. This recapitulation of important childhood themes for staff can be accounted for by Therese Benedek's

(1959) construct of the parallel process phenomenon. This construct is particularly useful when staff are recognized as legitimate substitute parent figures.

Thirty-one adolescent milieu staff were interviewed from eight different treatment settings in the Midwest. The staff consistently reported having very intense relationships with select adolescents in their care. The staff/adolescent relationship themes that staff identified as most significant are contained in this report. The milieu staff were generally eager to provide information about their work experiences as well as personal background information.

This study was conducted with a psychoanalytic theoretical base with particular emphasis upon the contributions of self psychology. It was found that this refined psychology of the self had a great deal to offer the field of adolescent milieu treatment. Much of the information obtained from the interviews was put into the framework of self psychology offering a new perspective toward the dynamics of an adolescent milieu. A unique contribution of this project was the development of an operationalized measure of the selfobject function, a construct considered the cornerstone of self psychology.

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## CHAPTER I

### RESEARCH QUESTION AND PURPOSE OF PROJECT

The central research question of this study was as follows: How are the adolescent milieu staff's work-related feelings of comfort, satisfaction, and self-confidence influenced by their own childhood and adolescent growth experiences?

Inherent to the research question is the understanding that the milieu staff in fact experience a wide range of feelings, both positive and negative, in the course of their work. The question was framed positively in order to promote the idea that optimally the staff would feel comfort, satisfaction, and self-confidence in their work experiences.

This research question allowed for an exploration of the work and life experiences of individual members of the adolescent milieu staff. These staff had an opportunity to describe the milieu as they personally experienced it. During the interviews staff were asked to focus their attention on the treatment milieu, and focus especially on those many hours of unstructured time with the adolescent. The project was designed to gather first-hand information about the milieu staff's feelings about their work experience.

There was a special emphasis on the interactions that the staff had with the adolescents but the focus stayed on the perspective and experiences of the milieu staff themselves.

This research project maintained a psychodynamic perspective. Accordingly, significant importance was given to understanding some of the earlier life (genetic) influences upon the milieu staff's own individual development. In short, the staff were asked to identify their self-perceived strengths and deficits in their job performance. This information was then compared with data which the staff provided about their own upbringing. Even though the interview was purposely designed to be semi-structured, it was expected that the staff would normally and voluntarily disclose information about their own earlier life experiences. This would allow for some meaningful comparison of the staff's experiences of being the object of caregiving and later becoming professional caregivers.

Among the psychoanalytic models available, that of self psychology was chosen as most pertinent to the goals of this study. Therefore, the study sought to identify the strength and availability of selfobject functions which the staff felt they were able to provide for the adolescents in the treatment setting. The staff were also asked to identify just how available these same functions had been to them in their own upbringing. Using the information gathered from the milieu workers one can draw an inference

regarding the apparent influence of the milieu staff member's early life experience upon his/her ability to carry out the role and responsibility of managing disturbed adolescents on a treatment unit. The interview data were examined to identify particular early life experiences of milieu staff which might either enhance or detract from the staff's ability to understand the adolescent and constructively interact with him in treatment.

#### Secondary Goals of Project

There were several secondary goals of this research project which include the following: (1) the project provided milieu staff an opportunity to formally self-reflect on the responsibility and personal meaning of their work. (2) The project served to illustrate the usefulness of self psychology theory as applied to the field of milieu treatment of adolescents. (3) The project explored the role of the milieu staff by making liberal use of psychodynamic treatment principles which focus upon the treatment provider (usually referred to in the literature as the analyst or therapist). (4) The project focused on milieu staff as having an important function as parent substitutes. (5) Drawing on goals three and four, the project demonstrated a relevance for use of the concept of the "parallel process" (Benedek, 1959) in understanding the role and pitfalls for the adolescent milieu worker.

#### Self-Reflection of Milieu Staff

This project provided the milieu staff an important opportunity to stop for a moment and reflect upon their work. It allowed them an opportunity to think about how they make use of themselves in their work with very disturbed adolescents. The project itself served to reinforce the idea that the milieu staff were a very important component of the treatment programs and therefore worthy of detailed study. The staff were acknowledged as the "experts in their field."

In many interviews the staff reported that they rarely had the time or opportunity to reflect upon their own work in the treatment milieu. While individual treatment programs frequently challenge adolescents to learn how to reflect upon their own experience and behavior, this skill is less well promoted for the staff in many adolescent treatment programs. Some further comments about the milieu staff's response to the opportunities for self-reflection provided by this project will be offered in the discussion section of this report.

#### Integrating Self Psychology with Milieu Treatment

The findings of this study strongly suggest that self psychology theory has a great deal to offer the field of milieu treatment with disturbed adolescents. Many of the leaders in the field of adolescent milieu treatment have

drawn from psychodynamic theories but to date there has been very little written which incorporates the concepts and principles of the theory base of self psychology. This may be in large part because of the fact that self psychologists as a group have been more focused on developing the theory for use in psychoanalysis and other types of individual treatment.

One of the goals of this research project was to examine whether or not the principles of self psychology have applicability to the general field of adolescent milieu treatment. Information gleaned from staff interviews has been examined with particular reference to principles of self psychology. The milieu staff were asked to identify how well they thought they were able to provide certain selfobject functions to the adolescents in their care. The staff subsequently rated their childhood caretakers on how well these same selfobject functions were provided for them. A comparison of these two ratings served in large part to answer the main research question: How are the adolescent milieu staff's work-related feelings of comfort, satisfaction, and self-confidence influenced by their own childhood and adolescent growth experiences?

The task of operationalizing concepts of self psychology is an important component of this research project. The specific focus is on operationalizing a most important self psychology construct, namely, selfobject functions.

This work may make a contribution toward clarifying the theory of self psychology and may encourage its application to the practice of milieu treatment of adolescents.

Research measures of clinical constructs have recently impacted significantly upon clinical practice (Luborsky & Horowitz, 1989). Psychoanalytic research has been laboring to adapt to accepted research protocols without losing its historic emphasis on dynamic and anecdotally descriptive measures. This research project seeks to add to the momentum of providing specific and concrete measures of clinical constructs.

#### Clinical Role of Milieu Staff

There is little consensus within the wide field of inpatient/residential treatment of adolescents as to what role the milieu staff play in the overall treatment effort. In some programs the milieu staff are held in high status and their opinions and experiences carry great weight in the planning of the adolescents' treatment. Some programs have taken to calling their staff "milieu therapists." It appears that this is more the exception than the rule. In most programs the milieu staff are given relatively lower status and consequently the clinical significance of many of their experiences is likely to be underestimated.

A secondary goal of this dissertation project was to examine the role of the milieu staff, granting significant appreciation to their clinical contribution to the adoles-

cent's treatment program. Such a perspective elevated the importance of the relationships which developed between the milieu staff and adolescent residents. It was identified that the staff's ability to better understand and control their own responses to various adolescents would significantly impact upon the course and quality of the adolescent's treatment. These staff experiences were therefore examined employing liberal use of the clinical constructs available in the literature to identify experiences of other treatment providers such as analysts and psychotherapists. Constructs including that of countertransference, treatment alliance, etc. were used in this study to better understand the role of the adolescent milieu staff. It is not intended that milieu staff should be thought to have a role or function equivalent to that of these other professionals. Rather it is proposed that one can further the study of adolescent milieu staff by borrowing from the literature of other mental health professionals who also have significant clinical relationships with seriously disturbed adolescents.

This study reinforces the idea that all clinical practitioners can learn from one another. In order to make the best use of information across disciplines, an appreciation of the differing contexts of their respective professional roles need be considered. This project has more thoroughly examined the role of the milieu worker. It is

expected that this study will help sophisticate the milieu treatment of adolescents.

#### Milieu Staff as Parent Substitutes

The notion that milieu staff function as parent substitutes is not new to the field. The idea is an important one and is carefully considered and elaborated upon in this study. The literature review includes detailed reference to the concept of milieu staff functioning much as parent substitutes. It was of central importance to this study to identify some of the specific parenting experiences the milieu staff had had. The staff's recollected experience of being parented was then compared with their current day performance of "parenting" tasks.

Staff were asked to comment about how their work with the adolescents resembled parenting. The staff were also asked to comment on their attitudes and relationships with the parents of the adolescents in treatment. All of this information was intended to be used for comparison with the staff's own experiences of being parented. It was expected that some important growing up themes would emerge as the milieu staff discovered that they had become parent figures themselves. This theme of recapitulation of earlier life experiences will be further elaborated upon below.

#### Milieu Work and "Parallel Process"

It was a goal of this project to examine the ex-

periences of the milieu staff within the context of the concept of the parallel process which was identified by Therese Benedek in 1959. This concept will be further explained in the literature review section of this report. Benedek's use of the term parallel process essentially refers to a process whereby parents reexperience their own childhood in a manner that sequentially parallels the life experiences of their child. The manner in which Benedek uses the term, parallel process, will be distinguished from that of other clinicians who have used this same term in the clinical literature to refer to different clinical treatment experiences.