

Psychological Center as a Foundation for the Practical Training of Clinical psychologists at the Saint-Petersburg State University

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Summary:

The presented article describes the work of the Psychological Center at the Saint-Petersburg State University, in particular its history, structure, and ethical aspects of its research and activities. Special attention is given to the most commonly addressed problems at the center. The article features a comprehensive analysis of the main challenges faced by young professionals at the beginning of their counseling careers. In addition, this paper presents the results of a study conducted in the framework of the Psychological Center. This report, aimed at identifying perceptions of graduate students about the most important professional qualities, is a qualitative analysis of 74 student essays on the topic «The image of an effective counselor». In overall, the Psychological Center with its long-term experience of preparation and practical skills training for the students of the Clinical Psychology specialty, has proven its necessity, relevance, and effectiveness.

counseling, student training, client challenges, effective counselor

INTRODUCTION

An urgent problem of all public higher education institutions in Russia that train specialists in the field of clinical psychology is their practical preparation for a future career. In particular, this problem exists at the Department of Psychology at the Saint-Petersburg State University.

Since its inception, the training of clinical psychologists was conducted within the framework of the Leningrad School of Psychology, respecting the traditions established by V.M. Bekhterev, B.G. Ananyev, V.N. Myasishev, and B.D. Kar-

varskiy. V.M. Bekhterev was the founder (1907) of the only institution in the world that specializes in the treatment of a range of existing neuropsychiatric disorders, geriatrics, and child psychiatry. His student, B.G. Ananyev, developed a systemic model of human knowledge and pinpointed human hierarchical subordination levels: individual, personal, individuality level. V.N. Myasishev is the founder of the psychological theory of relations and author of pathogenic (reconstructive) psychotherapy. B.D. Karvarskiy advanced Myasishev's theory on neuroses and developed a self-oriented (reconstructive) psychotherapy. These scholars' ideas are reflected in the views of the employees of the department of Medical Psychology and Psychophysiology and the Department of Psychology in general.

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During their time at the department, students receive vast theoretical knowledge through various classes. Senior students have an opportunity to participate in research, learning, and counselling internship programmes. The aim of these programmes is familiarization with different medical facilities and approaches used by practising psychologists. During training students are given an opportunity to conduct independent scientific research which later usually becomes the foundation of their thesis projects. However, the diversity of these practices, in which students serve only as observers, does not imply that they receive independent consulting experience. Department alumni, who already started applying their counselling skills in various psychological centres, teaching and medical institutions in Saint-Petersburg, often seek advice from their former professors. Such dynamic is usually established due to the lack of additional practical training as counsellors.

Considering this situation, in 2003 the Psychological Centre was founded after calls from the student body and on the initiative of the Medical Psychology and Psychophysiology Department. The centre provides a place for senior students majoring in clinical psychology to develop their professional skills as counsellors. The Centre achieved the official status of a subsidiary division of the Psychology Department, Saint-Petersburg State University, in 2005, and included three divisions: psychological counselling, organizational counselling, and professional-personal counselling.

The Centre has undergone significant changes over time, in particular, it expanded and transformed into the Psychological Support Service, which included the following four divisions: Newborn and Children's Mental Health Division, Professional-Personal Counselling Division, Psychological Support Service, and Psychological Centre. This article describes the activities of one of the divisions, namely the Psychological Centre, and will cover its structure, goals and objectives, as well as challenges faced by the staff and students working there.

The Centre is guided by the Charter of Saint-Petersburg State University, as well as other University regulations. It is led by a Director, appointed by Faculty Dean. Permanent staff of the Centre are employed based on the approv-

al from the Dean in consultation with the Centre's Director's recommendations. Currently, the staff comprises Faculty members and researches.

The idea behind the Centre's foundation belongs to the Faculty: Associate Professor I.V. Grandilevskaya, Ph.D, clinical psychologist, specialist in psychological counselling; and Associate Professor L.V. Rykman, Ph.D., psychologist, specialist in professional counselling. After the Centre opened, each division had a few specialists working there. Currently, the Centre specialists are: I.V. Grandilevskaya, L.V. Rykman, M.V. Danilova, E.A. Burina, P.K. Trombchinsky, and others.

The main objective of the Centre is the application of theoretical knowledge in student practical activities. As the main practical platform, the Centre provides undergraduate and graduate students with an opportunity to learn first-hand psychological diagnostics, counselling, and psychological support. Students are given a chance to work independently under the supervision of the Centre's staff and Faculty, which means that the students can form, develop, and practise their counselling skills. Guidance for the young specialists is provided through group and individual supervision by their experienced colleagues.

In order to achieve its main objective, the Psychological Centre identified the following goals:

- Providing psychological support to the population to improve their quality of life, adaptation assistance in different stressful situations, and self-help skills training;
- Developing personal and professional qualities in undergraduate and graduate students that are essential to practising psychology;
- Introducing various correction and diagnostic methods to the student body;
- Providing psychological support when dealing with family issues;
- Providing parental guidance;
- Conducting various training and seminar sessions.

Ethical aspects of the Psychological Centre's work

Counselling sessions are led by senior and graduate students majoring in clinical psychology under the direct supervision from a Faculty member. Potential clients learn about an opportunity to access free psychological assistance from an advertisement published on the University website. This ensures that the client is informed about their counsellor's credentials. When seeking help at the Centre, the client agrees to a third-person presence during sessions.

Clients and main issues

The client contingent is relatively wide, however most of them are students from the Saint-Petersburg State University, as well as other educational institutions in Saint-Petersburg. On average the Centre receives between two and five clients per day.

There are many issues addressed at the Centre, however the most frequent ones are adaptation problems: adaptation to new life conditions in isolation from family members and adaptation to educational activities. The new life conditions adaptation issues are usually brought up by students who have relocated from other cities in Russia in order to attend the University, as well as international students. For instance, some issues addressed might include problems faced by the students living in dorms: relationship with their roommates, domestic issues, budget planning. In addition, freshmen tend to have issues with adaptation to the education scene as the learning process at the university level varies significantly from that in high school. Freedom, in particular lack of parental control, often leads to issues arising as early as the first semester. Moreover, issues related to the major and future career choice are common among freshmen as well.

A significant proportion of requests for support relates to relationship issues: family, children upbringing, spousal issues, intimate problems, and friendship issues, as well as work-related questions. A co-dependency problem is a stand-alone issue addressed at the Centre. A high number of complaints concern phobia

and anxiety problems: personal and situational anxiety, biological, social, and inner fears.

Along with the above-mentioned problems, young adults often seek help in relation to existential issues: personal crises, religion and death questions, and the search for life meaning. Considering that the Centre's counselling experts major in clinical psychology, some of the requests for help deal with various symptoms of psychiatric nature. In such cases, experts redirect these clients to different medical facilities in Saint-Petersburg.

Counsellors and their work challenges

The problem spectrum includes not only the issues brought up by clients, but the challenges faced by the Centre's staff as well. An analysis of the 10-year work of the Centre identified how students perceive the profession of counsellor and issues that are most common among young counsellors. Such an analysis was essential in order to identify career challenges owing to the students' lack of practical application of their received theoretical knowledge. The main issues were:

1. A sense of self-incompetence
 - 1.1 Fear of the client;
 - 1.2 Insufficient knowledge of methodologies;
 - 1.3 Work with the problem and not the client;
 - 1.4 Inability to analyze information provided by the client;
 - 1.5 Lack of attention to the client's non-verbal clues.
2. The need for professional support
 - 2.1. Constant expectation of help from senior colleagues;
 - 2.2. Perception of supervision as criticism, rather than as professional advice.
3. Lack of personal therapy experience.

The feeling of incompetence in their own work is a phenomenon that is quite common among professionals working in assisting other people's needs. While studying at the University, students interact with clients and patients in clinics when taking part in internship programmes. However, since these interactions happen during the learning process, the students are prohibited

from conducting individual counselling sessions; thus the client is often perceived as an educational model. Later on, in their independent work, young specialists often feel anxious when interacting with a client, which influences their professional image. Throughout their work with a client, the fear that arises due to their feelings of incompetence leads to their focusing on their personal issues rather than on clients' needs. Such a dynamic impedes the establishment of doctor–patient relations. Young specialists often feel overwhelmed and unable to process all the information provided by the client, or to form a full picture of the client's problems. Entry-level counsellors without significant work experience tend to focus on the verbal component, thus forgoing the non-verbal signals, which often leads to false information interpretation. Another practical issue often faced by young professionals is working with a problem, rather than the client. A shift in vector counselling is common in such situations, and usually results in client lecturing and advice sharing.

When concluding education and starting their own careers, young specialists possess a vast knowledge of theoretical material but they often lack application skills. Multiple approaches and methods without proper experience either remain inapplicable information or transform into ready-made templates, and often do not work. When dealing with such issues, a student requires supervision and guidance from their professors.

One type of professional support is supervision: interventions conducted by more experienced professionals in relations to the less experienced ones. Such relationships have certain longevity, involve monitoring and evaluation, and are aimed at the vocational functioning improvement. In addition, a supervision session provides the only opportunity where a starting professional is allowed to talk about the client, as well as their own emotions and experiences related to the counselling sessions. Moreover, young specialists experience difficulties with the acceptance of supervision as mentoring and an opportunity to improve themselves professionally; many perceive it as criticism, which leads to defence mechanism reactions and can potentially result in a refusal to continue practising.

No less important is the lack of personal therapy experience, which is not included in the educational process. Most young professionals unfortunately begin their careers without such experience. This primarily reflects upon them not having experience of being in the role of a client, as well as bringing their own personal issues into the counselling process.

In addition, long-term monitoring of students that come to practice at the Psychological Centre showed that they have predominantly idealistic views of their future careers, and in particular the identity of an effective consultant. For example, students believe that an effective consultant is someone who is necessarily mature, balanced with adequate self-esteem, someone who is not easily manipulated, who is always objective, kind, sincere and responsible. Certainly, an effective consultant should possess these qualities but not every student is aware of the fact that professional development of a specialist is a long and labour-intensive process. In addition, most students wish to open a private practice, not thinking about the legal and organizational difficulties that they may face. As part of training supervision, specialists also work on these issues with students.

CONCLUSION

This article attempted to systemize the extensive experience of the Psychological Centre at Saint-Petersburg State University. The Centre has proved its effectiveness in preparing students for further practical application of their skills.

FURTHER READING

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