

Developing Cultural Competence In the Shoes of Children Who are Homeless

The culture of homelessness is one that many of us can't

T imagine. There are many situations that can lead to a child becoming homeless. Consider a parent fleeing an abusive home with her children in tow, a youth who has runaway, or been kicked out of his or her home, who has been abused, or a child with serious mental health and substance abuse issues. For this example, think of yourself as a 10-year-old, not having a space to put your head at night and wondering where your next meal will come from. What does it feel like to move from place to place or live in a temporary shelter that you know is only for a week or so? What about living in a car, crashing on a couch, or sleeping on a bench? Put yourself in the position of a child who has to go to school gets a free lunch every day, wears clothing that is too big,

has no sustainable friendships within his or her school and has survived through months of not knowing what tomorrow might bring. Imagine the student's locker becoming the only place that is his or hers. Imagine falling behind in math and reading because you have switched schools three times in the past year. Having imagined yourself as a 10-year-old, what words best describe the culture of homelessness for school children? How might this inform your approach to children who are homeless? What are your perceptions about children who are homeless? As the social worker in a school setting, how would you address this child in relationship to his or her homelessness? Do you ask direct questions? What information would you share with the teachers? How might you support and encourage this student to stay in school?

Box 8.1 Theory into Practice—Rogersian (Client-Centered) Therapy: Case Study

Rogersian therapy is drawn from humanistic theory and the work of psychologist Carl Rogers, its founding father.

Rogersian therapy is grounded in a fundamental belief in the human capacity for change. Through the use of active and accurate listening, empathic reflection, and clarification, the social worker facilitates client growth toward self-actualization. The essential attitudinal conditions for effective Rogersian therapy are empathy, unconditional positive regard, and congruence or genuineness. Congruence is defined as a good match between a person's affect, cognition, and behavior that results in high levels of authenticity and sincerity (Carpetto, 2008; Rogers, 1957). Consider the following case:

Curtis, a court-ordered client, age 18, and the social worker, Randall, are meeting for the first time. Curtis has been mandated to see a social worker after being charged with shoplifting. During the intake interview, Curtis answers all of the questions with short responses, such as "I don't know" or "Yes" or "No."

Randall tries to engage Curtis in the conversation, veering away from the standard questions on the intake form. Curtis continues to respond in an uninterested and nondescript way. Randall states, "You seem really bored as though I am wasting your time. I would like for us to talk to each other. But it seems like I am talking to myself, or to a brick wall. Is there anything at all that I can do to help you feel more comfortable and be more willing to give me a chance?" Looking at Randall, Curtis said, "No." The session ended as Curtis left. Randall said, "I

hope to see you next week," and Curtis mumbled something unrecognizable.

Session 2: Curtis is 20 minutes late for his appointment. Randall did not mention it at all; he just started the session with a welcoming smile. Curtis again sits down in his chair and shows no interest in a conversation. Finally, Randall asks Curtis if he knows how to play chess. Curtis states that he does not and that it is a game for smart people. Ignoring this remark, Randall pulls out the board and places the pieces in their correct spots. Curtis seems only slightly interested but is listening as Randall describes the role of each piece. Randall gives him a book on the game of chess, and he takes it enthusiastically.

Session 3: Curtis is on time and brought back the chess book. After some small talk about the weather and the latest sports event on TV, Curtis states, "I read the book, and I would like to learn how to play." A connection has been made. Randall introduces the strategies of the game. By the end of the session, Curtis is smiling and thanking Randall for the chess lesson.

Session 4: Curtis is on time and brings his own chessboard. Randall is surprised and very pleased. Curtis explains that the chessboard was his dad's and that when he was little, they used to play together. Randall listens as Curtis tells him that his father was killed by a drunk driver five years ago. Curtis is now living with his mom, who is very depressed and hardly ever leaves the house. Randall listens with

Box 8.1 Theory into Practice—Rogersian (Client-Centered) Therapy: Case Study (Continued)

understanding and compassion. He offers Curtis a gentle tap on the shoulder as Curtis's eyes fill up with tears.

Session 5: Curtis is on time and smiles as he walks into Randall's office. He has done the homework assignment that Randall had given him the week before. He has written a short story about his dad. It is filled with funny tales about a boy named "Curtis" and a dad named "Joe." While playing chess, Randall demonstrates unconditional positive regard, support, and encouragement. Curtis is starting to trust Randall. He tells him more about his mother and how he worries about her. He feels it is his responsibility to try to make her happy. Randall affirms the burden he must feel and listens to him, letting the next part of the story unfold. At the end of the session, Curtis said, "I never thought I would end up liking you, but you are an okay guy. Thanks."

Over the course of five sessions, Curtis and Randall's work together deepens. Randall is accepting of who Curtis is and does not push change on him. In this case, the social worker is patient and understanding. It is because Curtis feels heard and accepted that he eventually begins to open up. It is through Randall's show of genuine empathy and positive regard that Curtis begins to respond. Although Curtis is a mandated client, he is no longer an involuntary client. He now comes to sessions ready to talk about his mom and the challenges that they are facing together. If Randall had pushed Curtis into opening up and disclosing the sadness in his life, Curtis may never have returned (even facing jail time as an alternative). Randall very gently offered him an opening, and Curtis eventually followed through. He knows Randall is on his side.

Developing Your Personal Style

As you become more confident using interviewing skills, you have the opportunity to develop your personal interviewing style. Some social workers are more verbal throughout the interview; others are more reflective and less talkative. Neither approach is correct or better. Watch other workers and mentally note what you liked about their interviewing style. The more opportunities you have to observe others in action, the wider your interviewing options will be. Convincing yourself that you can do this and that you are confident and feel in control is one way to overcome the anxiety you may feel. In some ways, the adage "Take it till you make it" holds true. Hold your head up high. You want the client to see you as a capable social worker even though you may not feel that way at all. Keep it a secret, and before you know it, using the skills will be second nature. As indicated throughout this text, it will take time to develop your personal interviewing style. By understanding your strengths and developing comfort in who you are as a person, interviewing will soon be fun and a source of professional confidence, fulfillment, and pride.

In Box 8.G, you are asked to reflect on your personal style. How would people whom you know well and in a variety of roles and situations describe your style?

Box 8.G Now You Try It . . . Personal Style

What is your personal style?
How would your best friends describe your personal style?

How would your coworkers describe your personal style?

? Assess your understanding of the intake process by taking this brief quiz.

How would your classmates describe your personal style?
How would your family members describe your personal style?