

SYSTEMIC TREATMENT OF SUBSTANCE ABUSE: A GRADUATE COURSE

Anthony W. Heath

Brent J. Atkinson

Northern Illinois University

Today, family therapists should have an understanding of the development and maintenance of substance abusing patterns in families. In this paper, the authors describe a graduate course for teaching therapists about the contributions that have been made to the understanding and treatment of substance abuse by family researchers, theorists and clinicians. Course purpose, student selection, instructional methods and course content are delineated.

In 1974, the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism recognized family therapy as the "most notable current advance in the area of psychotherapy" for alcoholism (Keller, 1974). Since then, many valuable texts on both alcohol and drug abuse (e.g., Davis, 1987; Elkin, 1984; Kaufman, 1984; Kaufman & Kaufman, 1979; Lawson, Peterson & Lawson, 1983; Paolino & McCrady, 1977; Stanton, Todd & Associates, 1982; Steinglass, Bennett, Wolin & Reiss, 1987) and hundreds of articles (e.g., Glynn, 1981; Stanton, 1978, 1979a, 1979b; Steinglass, 1976, 1979) have been written to carry the perspective, the research and the techniques of family therapy to family therapists and substance abuse counselors at work in the trenches. Clearly aware of the value of this information, the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT) included a plenary session and 14 additional presentations on the topic in the program of its 1986 Annual Conference. In addition, the Commission on Accreditation for Marriage and Family Therapy Education (COAMFTE) included a course on substance abuse treatment in its 1986 draft of the proposed curriculum for accredited programs.

Without question, family therapists should be prepared to work with families with substance abusing patterns. It has been estimated that 40% of outpatient clients have a substance abuser in the nuclear family (Cummings, 1979), and substance abusers and their families are notoriously difficult to identify and treat. Furthermore, the contemporary sociopolitical climate is offering increasing numbers of employment opportunities to psychotherapists with specialized knowledge of the etiology and treatment of alcohol and drug abuse. Family therapists who understand the application of a systemic approach to helping substance abusing families will not just compete strongly for these jobs, but

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Anthony W. Heath, PhD is Assistant Professor, Department of Human and Family Resources, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, IL 60115-2854.

Brent J. Atkinson, PhD is Assistant Professor, Department of Human and Family Resources, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, IL 60115-2854.

will offer a fresh perspective to the more traditional substance abuse treatment community (cf. Eastwood, 1987).

The purpose of this paper is to describe a 3 semester hour graduate level course entitled "Systemic Treatment of Substance Abuse," which is offered as an elective within the COAMFTE-accredited Northern Illinois University Marriage and Family Therapy Program. The course was designed, in response to the requests of clinicians practicing in the community, to prepare master's level family therapists for work with substance abusing families. The course is described here in order to provide a point of departure for educators who wish to develop similar courses within their curricula.

PURPOSE OF THE COURSE

The purpose of the course is to introduce students to the contributions made to the understanding and treatment of substance abuse by family researchers, theorists and clinicians. The course is seen to complement four other alcoholism and addictions courses offered at the university, which cover the biopsychosocial precipitants of addictions and the pharmacological effects of abused substances. Thus, the course is allowed to maintain its focus on the relatively uncommon systemic conceptualization of substance abuse and its attendant interventions.

In a self-reflexive way, the systemic conceptual view taught in the course mandates that the class look at itself in the context of substance abuse treatment today. Metaphorically, perhaps, when one sees abusing patterns in a familial context, one also sees family therapy approaches to substance abuse treatment in a context of other service providers. Therefore, the course is designed to offer students a clear perspective on the role that family therapy currently plays in the larger treatment community.

Selection of Students

Before the course was developed, the first author assisted in teaching three 12-hour-long continuing education workshops on family therapy and substance abuse for the Institute for Juvenile Research (IJR) Family Systems Program. The heterogeneous audiences that attended the IJR workshops provided the presenters with an experiential understanding of the discordant views of substance abuse and its treatment. It was quickly learned that debates about the origins of abusing behavior could easily supplant planned presentations of family assessment and treatment methods, to the dismay of audience members and presenters alike.

To assure that the purpose of the current course is clear and accomplished, two actions are taken. First, a detailed announcement of the course is distributed, which states, in part:

The family systems model and the disease model of substance abuse treatment will be seen as separate cultures, each complete with its own language, presuppositions and view of reality. The class will assume the relatively neutral perspective of a group of cultural anthropologists in exploring these two cultures. The course will not serve as a forum for integrating the disease model with the systemic view or for debating the relative merits of the perspectives, but differences will be articulated and discussed.

Second, enrollment in the course requires an interview with the instructor prior to registration. These interviews serve an "informed consent" function in that they lead to a common understanding of the intended content and process of the course. Overall, this rather cautious selection process leads to the formation of a class of 20 people who are heterogeneous of background, but homogeneous of purpose.

The course has one prerequisite that is described in the course announcement and explained in the interviews: In order to assure that class participants share a conceptual

framework for the course, students are required to have taken an introductory course in family therapy theory, such as Northern Illinois University's Theoretical Foundations of Family Therapy. Such courses are expected to have provided students with a basic understanding of cybernetics and constructivist philosophy as they relate to family therapy. While this prerequisite delays some interested students' entry into the substance abuse course, it has proven its value in helping students to understand a systemic view of human interaction, and to identify pathologies of epistemology (cf. Becvar & Becvar, 1988) and undocumented claims about substance abuse and its treatment.

COURSE FORMAT

Family therapy courses at Northern Illinois University attract students who live up to 90 miles from the campus. For the convenience of all concerned, several of the marriage and family therapy courses are taught within a weekend workshop format, including the course described here. Held on three weekends (Fridays 3-10 p.m. and Saturdays 9 a.m.-5 p.m.) during a semester, the courses meet for a total of 45 class hours per semester, the same as courses that meet weekly. Weekend courses allow for unusual intensity in a graduate course, immersing students in the material, but limiting the instructor's ability to pace and monitor learning; they also require that teaching methods be varied often to avoid monotony during the long hours. While the remainder of this paper will describe the course as it is taught in a weekend format, the authors believe that it could be easily formatted for use where classes meet weekly.

The course is built upon a foundation of required readings, which will be enumerated later in this paper. The readings, in turn, form the basis for extensive class discussions (cf. Piercy & Sprenkle, 1984) in small groups of four people and in full plenary discussions around a large conference table. To encourage each student's individual participation, everyone is asked to bring three provocative questions or comments about the readings to each day of class, with copies to share with others. These written questions help to ensure that discussions integrate readings into the class process, as well.

Guest presentations are used in the course to convey specialized knowledge in a subject area. Audiotapes bring nationally known experts (e.g. Wegscheider-Cruse, Berenson, Krestan) and interviews with abusers into the classroom. Videotapes of therapy are used by guests and by the instructor to show applications of ideas and methods.

Lectures by the instructor are kept brief (i.e., less than 1 hour) and are conscientiously scheduled when the students are most alert and attentive, as in the morning hours of classes. Students have occasionally been asked to present brief lectures on topics in which they have expertise, such as substance abuse assessment instruments. This practice seems to help convey the instructor's regard for the students' knowledge and abilities and his preference for a full exchange of information among class participants.

The final aspect of the course format that deserves mention is also the principal requirement of the course, for which semester grades are assigned. Evaluations of previous courses had suggested that one of the students' favorite aspects of the weekend workshop format was the interaction they had with one another; the course intensity seems to offer a context in which professional and personal relationships develop rapidly. Based on this input, it was determined that *group* projects would best promote this group process. To relate the class work to the instructor's own research interests, several examples of acceptable group projects are described in the syllabus. These include:

1. Participate in writing a group paper on therapy with involuntary clients. This complete review of the literature should draw from several computer reference searches and present an original and critical review of clinical and research literature.

2. Participate in developing a customer satisfaction evaluation instrument to be used in a substance abuse education program. Collect, compile and interpret the data for a pilot test of your instrument.

3. Participate in developing a model intervention program for court ordered adults who have been convicted of driving under the influence of alcohol (DUI). This model should set specific behavioral objectives for successful completion of a therapeutic experience.

Actual group projects are developed in consultation with the instructor, to allow students to pursue their own specific research. Written contracts for grades are then developed by the students and submitted for approval by the instructor. With the overt agreement of the students, class time is allotted for group work on projects, usually during or just after meals, when attention might otherwise wane.

COURSE CONTENT

The course begins with a brief review of systemic thinking principles and constructivist philosophy, using excerpts from Keeney's *The Aesthetics of Change* (1983) and Segal's *The Dream of Reality* (1986). This review, which is accomplished in 2 hours of lecture and discussion, serves to remind students of the language, presuppositions, and the view of reality held by the culture of family therapists.

In a natural extension of the first segment of the course, students are next asked to suspend their presuppositions about substance abusers and their families and to listen to the way these people perceive their lives. This study of the phenomenology of substance abuse and substance abuse treatment continues throughout the course, but here it is based on readings (Ablon, 1980; Bateson, 1972; Efran, Heffner & Lukens, 1987; Steinglass, 1980; Szasz, 1983), on the discussion of an audiotape of an interview of an adolescent substance abuser, and of videotapes of intake interviews with adult children of alcoholics, DUI clients, bulimics and alcoholics. In discussing this information, students are expected to refrain from interpretation. The end of the phenomenology segment is marked by a small group exercise in which the task is to prepare *generalized* descriptions of the experience of different types of substance abusers, their spouses, their children and adult children, and their professional helpers.

The phenomenology segment of the course is included because the majority of students have not had previous coursework in substance abuse or previous work experience with substance abusers and their families. Nevertheless, the 6 hours of class time spent in encouraging unbiased listening seems to facilitate a sense of empathy for the experiences of this treatment population. Additionally, in this segment the groundwork is being laid for an approach to treatment that attends to the world views and positions of abusers and their families.

Family dynamics in the families of substance abusers is the basis for the third section of the course. In preparing for this segment of the course, students read books by Steinglass, Bennett, Wolin, and Reiss (1987) and Schach (1986), and a collection of articles (Berenson, 1976; Coleman & Stanton, 1978; Davis, Berenson, Steinglass & Davis, 1974; Filstead, McElfresh & Anderson, 1981; Miller, 1983; Scott & Manaugh, 1976; Stanton, 1979a; Stier, Stanton & Todd, 1982; Steinglass, Davis & Berenson, 1977; Steinglass, Tislenko & Reiss, 1985; Woititz, 1978), thereby discovering the wealth of knowledge held by family researchers. In addition, the contributions of authors of books dealing with the children of alcoholics and adult children of alcoholics (e.g., Black, 1981, 1982; Wegscheider, 1981) are reviewed in a brief lecture and videotapes of television talk shows on the subject are shown and discussed. Approximately 15 hours of class time is dedicated to the family dynamics segment of the course.

With an understanding of family process in substance abusing families in mind, the subject matter turns to treatment, with half of the class time left. Here, students begin by reading the review by Stanton (1979b) and the classic book by Stanton, Todd and Associates (1982), followed by Elkin's accessible book (1984), and excerpts from Davis (1987) and Kaufman and Kaufman (1979). Also read at this point in the course are a provocative book on "recovery without religion" (Christopher, 1988), the special issues on substance abuse of the *Journal of Strategic and Systemic Therapies* (Efron, 1986) and the *Family Therapy Networker* (Simon, 1987), and articles by Lovern and Zohn (1982) and Wright, Miller and Nelson (1985). In addition, students view Haley's (1979) videotape, *Heroin My Baby*, following along, if they wish, with the transcript found in Haley (1982).

Once the selected literature on treatment has been read and discussed, guest speakers are called upon to present the alcoholic disease perspective on substance abuse and the 12-step recovery approach practiced in many inpatient treatment settings. On the same day, an outpatient brief family treatment team presents their "solution-focused" work with substance abusers. Taken together, these presentations vividly portray the range of views of substance abuse that is held by treatment professionals. The confusion and excitement generated by these often contradictory presentations seems to provoke a crisis of confidence in any leftover and unquestioned assumptions about treatment of substance abusers and their families.

As the course nears completion, the instructor lectures on the research on substance abuse treatment. Designed to update Steinglass' (1976) review of the research reported through 1975, the lecture cites Miller and Hester's (1986) damning review of the benefits of inpatient alcoholism treatment, the research summary found in Stanton (1981, pp. 394-395), the evaluation chapters from Stanton, Todd & Associates (1982), O'Farrell and Cutter's (1984) comparison of behavioral with nonbehavioral couples group therapy for male alcoholics, Zweben and Pearlman's (1983) discussion of methodological issues in an ongoing study on the efficacy of a systems oriented conjoint treatment for alcohol abusers, and Thomas and Santa's (1982) description of their clinical research on treating alcohol abusers through a more cooperative family member. This lecture illuminates the continuing need for methodologies responsive to systems theory (Atkinson & Heath, 1987).

The course concludes with a class discussion on the contributions that marriage and family therapists can make to the treatment of substance abuse. To date, the students in the course have articulated the following, clearly drawing on the work of many of the authors previously cited in this paper.

1. Marriage and family therapists (MFTs) can provide a viewpoint that explains how substance abusing families function.
2. MFTs can identify substance abusing patterns in families already in treatment.
3. MFTs can contribute interventions designed to get substance abusing families to treatment.
4. MFTs can provide treatment that addresses interpersonal and contextual issues after inpatient detoxification.
5. MFTs can offer alternative services to substance abusers and family members who choose not to stick with Alcoholics Anonymous, Al-Anon, Al-Ateen and similar programs.
6. MFTs can offer to help recovering substance abusers get support for their sobriety from family members while the abusers taper off of a substitute dependency on Alcoholics Anonymous, Al-Anon, Al-Ateen and similar programs.
7. MFTs can treat a substance abuse problem without the participation of the abusing family member by working with other family members who contribute to problem-engendering interactions with the abuser.

EVALUATION

In considering the value of this course in a family therapy curriculum, the authors are reminded of a box that, when opened, explodes with spring-loaded toy snakes. Teaching a single course on systemic treatment of substance abuse seems to have resulted in a face full of questions about the course in particular, the substance abuse treatment community, the limitations on academic education, the hazards of teaching treatments for special problems, and the politics of family therapy, among others.

It seems important, for example, to compliment the exposure students get to the disease model of addiction with a systemic view. But should we, as family therapists, focus on teaching the latter and leave the former to others? It also seems important to help students see beyond constructions which become labels and on to the interactional dynamics of human problems. But how can we do this if we have courses that correspond to the labels? Yet, when politics are considered, how can the discipline of family therapy avoid teaching courses on substance abuse and other fashionable problems? Shouldn't this really be a two- or three-semester course sequence with a built-in practicum?

Until we are able to address these questions or until we learn to deal with the ambiguity, we will continue to work with students to make this course more useful. It has been suggested, for example, that readings be broadened to include more family therapy models and more A.A. literature, and that more videotapes of systemic treatment be shown. In addition, the possibility of establishing a prerequisite course in substance abuse is being considered.

CONCLUSION

As any student of a foreign language will tell you, the best way to learn to speak it is to live where it is spoken. In this fact lies the greatest liability of this course and of similar courses. Marriage and family therapists who only study human problems and solutions by reading systemic literature, and through discussions with others who share a systemic view, will never become fluent in the common language of mental health, psychology and psychiatry. Without such fluency, we will find it difficult to learn *with* our colleagues in the world of professional assistance to troubled and troubling families.

Of course, the pragmatic limitations of the academic context make it impossible to include a residency in a "foreign country" in every course. When teaching systemic treatment of substance abuse, however, students should at least be taken on a field trip to a traditional treatment setting. There, they could listen to the dialect, observe treatment rituals, and practice speaking the language of intoxication and sobriety. Then, together with their teachers, maybe they would learn, or at least glimpse, the world view held by many seasoned travelers. There is a place for everyone.

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