CHAPTER 3
Communication and Relationships with Clients

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INTRODUCTION

Clinical sociologists practice at many levels across the social spectrum. They use a variety of theoretical perspectives and apply techniques germane to the setting of practice, the assessed problem, and the client system. The structuring formula common to all clinical sociologists—and to all the helping professions—is that a client comes seeking help. People expect professionals to have special knowledge, procedures, and techniques. The success of specific techniques, however, is related to the quality of one’s relationship with clients. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the nontechnical issues of clinical work (Parloff, 1986), the client–professional relationship.

Forming positive relationships with clients is as much art as science. It involves coming to the encounter with certain mind-sets, a few techniques, the ability to “read” people, and the flexibility to adapt interaction in response to others’ behavior. As Schon (1983) observed, “the unique case calls for an art of practice which ‘might be taught if it were constant and known, but it is not constant.’” For Schon, the art of practice calls for “reflection in action,” the adroit selection of behaviors based on the dynamics of the relationship and on what the client presents from moment to moment. No amount of instruction in how to draw, how to use light and shadow, how to use color will produce a Degas or Monet. But these and other mundane skills may be necessary when artists apply their creativity. So it is with the art of practice.

Relationships emerge from interaction. Your communication skills and how you “use yourself” often determine the course of interaction and the developing relationship. This chapter will consider communication and the development of relationships between clients/members of a client system and clinical workers. Because my own practice is primarily with individuals, families, and small groups, this chapter is biased toward sociological practice on the microlevel, but at any level, you must eventually meet face to face with identifiable role occupants, gain trust and cooperation, and form a productive working relationship.
A note on terminology is relevant here. I use the term client to refer to the person or group that hires you. The term client system refers more broadly to the client and others within the client's social network. This could mean family members, co-workers, adversaries, employees, services providers, or anyone else that you might interact with as part of your work with a case. For simplicity, the term client will be used to imply both.

The importance of the relationship with clients cannot be overstated. Your ability to conduct a valid and useful assessment and design and implement an intervention program depends on how willing clients and members of a client system are to trust you and work cooperatively with you. People may have to reveal embarrassing or threatening facts and feelings or expose their vulnerability in the face of powerful norms that stress adequacy or even perfection. You may need to ask them to expose their deeply held—and often hidden—feelings, or question their definition of self. The course of the work will depend on your ability to develop an effective working relationship with clients.

ON RELATIONSHIPS GENERALLY

Relationships between people are emergent and come to be rule governed. Factors that influence interaction and the development of relationships can be identified, but emergent phenomena cannot be completely predicted from knowledge of the context, sociocultural background, or characteristics of interactants. The possibilities for the emergent structure are infinite. Communication is both an expression of culture and a creator of it. Although social roles, statuses, context and purpose of interaction as well as normative social behavior act as constraints, a relationship emerges as participants communicate, process information from transactions, and adapt in context. The emergent relationship and its rules are the result of a specific kind of negotiation among interactants.

When strangers meet, Person (defined here as the one who initiates interaction) presents self to Other (Goffman, 1959). This presentation is influenced by Person's history, self-conception, and definition of the situation—Person's role definition, status vis-à-vis Other, purpose for the interaction, context in which interaction takes place, and so forth.

In the normal course of everyday life, Other, conforming to a normative social contract, generally accepts Person's presentation of self and also offers a presentation of self. Both try to manage the impression the other forms. Usually, they collude in each other's impression management. As interaction continues, the different selves try to adjust to each other. They continue to "train" each other on how they are to be seen and treated.

Training is conducted outside the awareness of the participants; most of the time, the interactants are not aware they are training and being trained. Training is carried in the messages each gives in response to messages received from others. As Bateson (1972) argued, relationships are the exchange of ... messages. Interactants set and try to maintain personal boundaries as they respond to others (Vuchinich, 1984).

As mutual training continues, the relationship is a source of information that is fed back. Each person adapts, reads the feedback, adjusts some more, and so forth. Interactants adopt specific rules in interaction, define other(s), self, situation, as they interpret messages. The process is dynamic, not static. An actor's definition of the situation is not fixed but the actor continually adapts to the flow of feedback. Over time, the relationship develops patterns and norms and becomes governed by implicit rules. The training is a form of negotiation. As each trains the other, they are negotiating their relationship. Actions that Person directs to Other are accepted, modified, or rejected. Actions that are accepted are likely to be repeated and become