COMMUNITY-BASED MANAGEMENT OF PSYCHOTIC CLIENTS: THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF D. W. AND CLARE WINNICOTT

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ABSTRACT: While the term "management" connotes images of impersonal care, D. W. Winnicott repeatedly used this term to describe the responsive environmental holding that is central to all human development. Influenced by observations of how normal mothers and families address the physical and psychic needs of children, he and his wife, Clare, a distinguished British social worker, operationalized this concept in finding and supporting "facilitating environments" with a wide range of disturbed children and adults. Using case material from a contemporary community program for the mentally ill, this paper will review the Winnicotts' important, but often neglected, perspectives on the environmental management of psychotic adults.

As the burgeoning field of "case management" has focused attention on the environmental needs of psychotic clients, the lack of direct practice models has created a disturbing conceptual vacuum which has been filled by bureaucratic attempts to define this work. Reflecting an all-too-common perspective, one author defined case management as:

the process of planning for individuals or families who require the organization of services to effect desired outcomes by assuring that all aspects of that outcome are controlled by reducing harmful effects. . . . case management is carried out by case managers, who in turn maintain a complete record of interactions by timely notations in the case record" (Sullivan, 1981, p. 120).

Reacting to such perspectives, many concerned clinicians have come to view case management as an impersonal service more concerned with

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bureaucratic systemization than providing help to persons in need. While several authors have recognized that addressing the environmental needs of the mentally ill requires a personal relationship and a high level of clinical skill (Lamb, 1980; Kanter, 1985, 1987, 1989; Harris and Bergman, 1987; Harris and Bachrach, 1988). most case management literature reflects an administrative perspective (Sanborn, 1983, Levine and Fleming, 1984; Weil, Karls and associates, 1985).

However, well before the field of “case management” was defined and implemented in the United States, D. W. Winnicott, the British psychoanalyst and pediatrician most noted for his concepts of the “transitional object” and the “holding environment” was stressing the importance of “management” in the treatment of severely disturbed children and adults. As I will outline, he used the term “management” to describe direct interventions with the environment which facilitate the healing and maturation of very troubled individuals, a usage clearly compatible with contemporary case management practice. Drawing from his years of pediatric experience, his usage of “management” reflected the very personal manner by which all “good-enough” parents help their infants and children adapt to the larger environment. In doing so, Winnicott moved beyond the classical Freudian and Kleinian focus on the instinctual components of the parent-child relationship, examining instead the less dramatic regulatory functions of everyday parenting.

In his discussions of management, Winnicott frequently referred to his wife Clare’s writings for further elaboration. A social worker who worked closely with Winnicott during the war, Clare Winnicott was one of the last analysands of Melanie Klein and was awarded the Order of the British Empire for her leadership in the child welfare field (Grosskurth, 1986). Described by a British social work journal as “a well known team in social work and psychotherapy” (C. Winnicott, 1970), the Winnicotts collaborated closely with one another and according to one colleague, E. James Anthony (1989), there is “no way of separating their contributions in (the management) area.”

In this paper, I will outline D. W. Winnicott’s perspectives on “management” with the psychotic client, reviewing both practice and theoretical considerations. As his clinical observations were always integrated with developmental psychology, I will also examine some of his ideas on the role of environment in facilitating personality growth. Finally, after presenting a case vignette and reviewing the writings of both D. W. and Clare Winnicott, I will describe in greater detail how their approach to management can be implemented in clinical practice. As their ideas on management are scattered throughout their papers, I will be quoting their remarks at length to accurately convey the spirit of their thinking. (For purposes of simplicity, I will refer to D. W. Winnicott as Winnicott and refer to Clare Winnicott by her full name.)