Peer Educator-Counselors In Sexuality For the Disabled

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ABSTRACT: In October 1976, under a grant from NIMH to the Human Sexuality Program at the University of California, San Francisco, the Sex and Disability Training Project began training disabled and nondisabled persons as socio-sexual educator-counselors for disabled persons; their spouses, intimates and families; and health care providers and agencies. The year-long training (20 hours per week) included didactic and supervised field placement experience. Evaluations by field placement supervisors indicated that the first group of 9 paraprofessionals trained by the Project were effectively utilized to deliver a variety of services in habilitation and rehabilitation settings.

Many investigators have described the lack of available sex education and sexual health care services for persons with a physical disability or debilitating illness.1-5 In pioneering efforts to respond to these needs, the Human Sexuality Program at the University of California in San Francisco began in the early 1970s to present large scale educational sessions on sexuality and disability. Attended by disabled and nondisabled consumers and providers of health care services, these sessions included presentations by disabled individuals sharing personal experiences in regard to their sexual development.

Research for this article was supported, in part, by Grant MH-14346-01, NIMH. The authors wish to express their deep appreciation to Robert C. Geiger, M.D., Susan E. Knight, B.S., and Mary M. Rodocker, R.N., M.S. for their work with the Project and comments on this paper. This article represents a combination of papers presented at the annual meetings of the Society for the Scientific Study of Sex, Inc., Las Vegas, October, 1977; and of the California State Psychological Association, San Francisco, January, 1978.

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Course participants, in evaluating the content of Human Sexuality Program courses and workshops, have consistently rated the panels of disabled individuals as being of the most significant personal and professional benefit. Participants from a variety of professional backgrounds and life experiences have indicated that there has been a specific lack in our culture of role models of sexually competent and comfortable persons who are themselves disabled.

Due to the many requests for further consultation, counseling and education specific to sexuality and disability, the Human Sexuality Program recognized the need to train individuals to provide these services.

In recognition of the above, a three year grant was awarded by NIMH to the Human Sexuality Program, Department of Psychiatry, University of California, San Francisco. The Sex and Disability Training Project was funded to develop a year long program to train socio-sexual educator-counselors for the disabled, their families, and health care providers. Of the 30 people to be trained over the three years, 70% were to be themselves disabled.

Agency Supervisor Evaluation Questionnaire. An evaluation questionnaire was developed with which the field placement agency supervisor could rate the trainee at the completion of the placement. It included 30 multiple choice Likert-type items (rated “1” = most favorable, “6” = least favorable), plus open-ended items. The Carkhuff Scales of empathy, respect, and genuineness were modified and included in the present study. Each of these scales consisted of five descriptive paragraphs as examples of increasing levels of therapist functioning. Agency supervisors were asked to choose one of the levels (1—5) which corresponded most to their judgment of the trainee’s counseling; they could also choose a level of functioning between the scale levels.

Numerous studies have related these scales to a variety of therapeutic outcomes, and they possess face (content) validity by corresponding to several dimensions of interpersonal processes.

Sample Description. Nine agency supervisors were mailed the evaluation materials and were requested to complete and return them. These persons included five women and four men whose professional backgrounds included counseling, medicine, nursing, occupational and physical therapy, and social work. All questionnaires were completed and returned to the Project within six weeks of the completion of the field placement experience.