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## Planning Ahead: Relationships and Power

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*ABSTRACT: The author explores the role of power within three different professional relationships: with clients; with staff whom he supervises; and with students in his class. Are these relationships similar or are they different? As power is more manifest in the relationship with clients and as this relationship is the most satisfying, what role does power play in effective relationship building – or is this just a personal dynamic for relationship satisfaction of the author?*

**A**s I approach my twentieth year in the field I have recently completed my third professional transition. In 1994 after completing my MSW degree program I became a supervisor of a federally funded Basic Center shelter for runaway and homeless youth. While I had years of experience in supervision of youth as a line worker, this was my first foray into the area of staff supervision. In late 2003 I once again found myself in a transition as I left the provider world and entered into academia as a Teaching Academic Staff at the Youth Work Learning Center at the

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. It was within my current role that I began to examine the way my different titles and roles have impacted the relationships I have had to develop in these roles. My professional work, as always, sprung from the belief that I am the tool within the work we call Child and Youth Care and therefore I have always placed great emphasis on the creation of pro-active and professional relationships and am always reminded of the role that power plays in these relationships.

Below are three vignettes from my career that ruminate

within me as examples of the power of relationships and the relationship of power. In a later issue of this journal, an analysis of the role of power will be presented along with other similarities and differences found within the following relationships: client; staff; and student.

### I: Client activity

*Why am I always late for “my Monday” shift exchange?* As I flew down the stairs to the basement meeting room I scanned the client board and saw that we were low on kids tonight, seemed like only half the board was filled in, and that Paul was back. *Has it been 4 months already?* I jumped down the last two steps. I entered the room and interrupted a vigorous discussion regarding whether Paul should be kicked out or not.

CYC-NET LINK

### Editor’s Note

Following the publication and distribution of this issue of *Relational Child and Youth Care Practice*, the three stories in this chapter will be posted on [www.cyc-net.org](http://www.cyc-net.org) (the website of the International Child and Youth Care Network) for comments and discussion on the role and use of power in our work. Following this input, the author will prepare a follow-up article.

My shift partners (two newer agency staff) had dealt with him all week and were tired and avowedly scared of his behavior; the case managers were used to Paul's antics and were trying to reassure the line staff. I, too, was used to Paul; anyone who had been at the agency for more than 4 months knew him well. *How many times has Paul been with us since I began working here; 5, 7, 8, ... 12 times; wow that must be some kind of record.* For one reason or another every four months or so he (or his family) need a break from one another and so he comes to us.

"For no reason at all he got in young Chris' face this weekend and wouldn't let up for almost an hour! I almost called CIS to remove him." Sally was clearly frustrated as she recounted the event. "And then he was done with Chris and began to turn on me, this is a big kid and I was scared."

"But he never hits anyone," said Judi, the senior case manager in the room, "he just struts around and then when his steam is out he calms down."

"Well than you can come by and let him blow his steam all over you, I am telling you that this kid is disruptive; we never know when he's gonna blow and when he does – BOOM! This usually happens so late in the evening routine that bedtimes are way off"

"He even showed me the part of the wall in the kitchen that he hit during one of his stays last year," chimed in Jack the newest

of the agency line staff. Everyone chuckled, everyone except Sally and Jack, as they weren't here when Paul hit the wall and ended up breaking a few bones in his hand – a natural consequence at it's finest.

"Let's see how tonight goes and I'll talk with Paul before we send him over to the shelter," this coming from Myndi, Paul's most current in a long line of case workers.

Paul entered the house just as we were all eating. After serving himself some tacos and fixings he sat at the table with me and four of the younger kids, including Chris. I sensed a sigh of relief from Sally and Jack as they were sitting with the two other kids (including older Chris).

**Dinner flew by rather quickly as the kids seemed more interested in eating as many tacos as possible as opposed to talking. The most any of us could get out of them were monosyllabic grunts as answers to our attempts at conversation.**

"Why the fuck should I have to clean the rec. room when I wasn't even fucking here this afternoon?" asked Paul from the foyer where the chore chart hangs. Sally's voice hesitated as she reminded Paul about the no cussing policy. "Don't tell me about the fucking rules, this place sucks," stated Paul as he headed downstairs to do his chore.

"See what I mean," mumbled Sally as she passed me in the hall.

After chores it was time for the evening's group, Creative Story Telling. As usual we divided the kids into two groups with Sally and Jack taking the older kids (including Paul) and me getting the younger ones. The group involves each person sharing a topic and a starting sentence or paragraph of a story, and then we switch and the new person adds to it; and then we switch, and on and on. I always get the younger kids when we do this group as I also use this as a time to help with some basic spelling and grammar that the kids in the shelter so desperately need. It's an opportunity for the inner English teacher in me to come out. The older kids just shut down when I attempt to correct their grammar and spelling, the younger ones seem to be OK with it.

Just as we were going to switch for the first time, Paul runs into the living room from the basement and loudly claims that he just needs to pop in a tape to record this radio station he listens to, "they're gonna play the new Eminem song and I want to make sure I have it." I ask how his group is going and he smiles wide, "were making stories up about girls, it's going great." He is grinning from ear to ear as he manages to place in a tape into our old outdated 1950 Buick-sized radio with tape player. "FUCK!" I hear him scream as he goes back



downstairs; from the sound of it I assume he stubbed his toe. *This is one clumsy kid.*

From the room I am in I can hear the activity in the basement below. What had begun as laughing and low murmurs was getting louder and intermixed with both more cussing from Paul and clear words coming from staff as they attempted to re-direct the group. My own group was doing OK and had begun to color the pictures for their stories by the time Sally came upstairs. "I need some help with Paul, he is bubbling over and interrupting the group."

"Send him up here, I'll talk with him."

As she leaves the room I reach over and turn off the tape player. "Paul's gonna be pissed at you for doing that," said young Chris who then returns to coloring the most detailed tree I have ever seen.

Paul enters the room. "Go sit in the dining room for a minute," I say, "and I'll be in to talk with you."

"Fucking dining room," he mutters as he complies with the request. As I ensure that the kids in my group are all settled with a task at hand, I enter the dining room and ask, "What's up?"

"That fucking bitch, all I did was say that Britney has big tits and she goes all ballistic on me."

"Who's Britney?"

"The girl in my story, jeez man."

"Oh." I try a few techniques to help Paul see the situation from another light, but all to no

avail; *he is as Judi and Sally have described, "bubbling."*

"Well Paul, stay here until group is over and then we can figure something out."

"Whatever."

As soon as I return to the living room Paul is behind me going towards the tape player, "who the fuck turned this off, I'm gonna fucking kill whoever did this," he says with a raised voice and lowered head.

"I did Paul, the noise of the old machine was interfering with what I was trying to do here."

"Why the fuck did you do that," he says moving towards me. *He is getting bigger.* I stand up and repeat what I had said, this time adding, "let's go on the porch and you can be angry with me there."

"I ain't going no where until you tell me why you did this," he says as he follows me outside onto the porch. I can see Jack entering the living room as I look in through the porch window. I motion to Jack to watch the young ones and he settles down in my spot and begins to color the picture in front of him.

I let Paul know again why I turned off the tape machine and then just listen to his ranting about what a "fucked up" thing that was to do. I intersperse a few "uh hums" and "anything else's" in with a few "I hear ya's." After around 10 minutes he begins to lose steam and gets quiet. I ask him if he wants to stay out here until group is over.

"Yeah."

On my way inside I turn back to Paul and tell him that after snack we can listen to the radio to hear if the song comes on. "Whatever" he says in a low voice.

Returning inside I relieve Jack who goes back downstairs. The remaining 15 minutes of group sail by as the kids share their final version of their original story.

Afterward we all regroup in the kitchen. Sally gives a brief run through of the evening activities (phone calls, showers, TV, etc.) as a reminder to everyone, and then the house settles into the evening dance.

Paul completes all his tasks with minimal redirection and even offers to help young Chris with some schoolwork. Evening routines turn to snacks and then afterward I turn the radio on, not too loud, but loud enough for Paul to hear. At the scheduled bedtime, Paul goes to his room having not yet heard the new Eminem song.

The house is quiet and the kids seemingly asleep as Sally, Jack and I debrief while we log. Sally asks why I turned off the tape. "Better he be pissed at me than one of the kids."

"But weren't you afraid of him, he's a big kid."

"Not really, in the years he's been here he has never even come close to hitting a person; walls yes, at least until he broke his hand, people no."

## II: Supervision

“Are you really gonna fire John?” asked Susan as she handed me John’s final payroll check.

“Probably,” I say, looking at the forms I have with me wanting to make sure I have them all: *COBRA, paycheck, final agreement of termination*, etc.

“You’re gonna fire him after all these years he’s been here?” Susan replies glaring at me.

“If need be, yes.”

“Why?”

I respond with a look back at her, a look that she reads correctly by stating, “OK, I know you can’t tell me why, but have you run this by Dan and Melanie?”

Getting annoyed I respond, “No, I never thought about talking to my supervisor and HR director about this. In fact I decided to fire a twenty-year employee on a whim just this morning.”

“Well no need to get snippy. I just wanted to make sure you have done everything you need to do.”

As I leave the room, Susan’s last statement blares in my head and I feel my insides boiling: *If other people, including Susan, Dan and Melanie had done what they needed to do, I wouldn’t be in this predicament. At one point or another they all supervised John and so why didn’t they solve this problem long before I came on board?*

As I drive to Prospect House I review our pending dialogue in my head in order to ensure that I

don’t forget anything: *Well, John, today is the day, do you have the client files ready?*

*Kinda, but since I was out last week I need a few more days to get the forms all signed.*

*John, we’ve reviewed this already. You were given plenty of chances to get all the forms signed by the caseworkers. I let you know before you asked for last week off that it in no way excused you from the looming due date when everything needed to be done. I even asked if you had all the work finished; remember what you said?*

*Yes, I said that it was almost all done and that I could do both.*

*By doing both you meant take the week off and get the work done?*

*Yes.*

*Our State review is in two months, we all agreed as a team that client files would be done by now and that then we could focus on the staff HR files and our policies and procedure manual. This is the third due date you have had and this is not the first time the issue of timeliness with paperwork has come up.*

*That’s just it; I always get things done eventually. I also know when and what is important to get done. No one is actually gonna review the entire client files. The HR ones are the ones they pay more attention too.*

*Nevertheless, John, you had agreed to complete them on time. And when that time came and went we met with Melanie and placed you on supervisory probation. You signed the agreement stating that if the files were not completed by today that you knew you would lose your job. As they are not completed, by your own admission, I have no choice but to*

*terminate your employment effective immediately.*

*But . . .*

*No buts, John. We have been talking about this issue of paperwork timeliness for over a year now and the program can no longer tolerate your complete lack of follow-through with these demands. I am sorry, but here is your final check and some employment transition forms we can review.*

As I pull up to the house I see John’s car in the driveway. The house van is gone which is good; I don’t want kids in the house as I do this. I don’t want any other staff in the house either, but can see that a few staff are there.

“John, let’s go downstairs and meet for a few minutes.”

After we settle in the basement supervisory office I ask him directly, “John do you have the completed client files with you?”

“Yes I do, here they are,” he states as he hands me the twelve files. I take a quick look and they all seem complete, signatures and all. “I am sorry it took so long for me to get them to you. It won’t happen again.”

“I have heard that from you before John, it had better not. John, as a follow up to the meetings we have been having, I am going to set up another meeting for us with Melanie, as I need assistance in assuring that this type of behavior does not occur again.”

“That’s cool. Again, I’m sorry about this.”

“Now let’s go upstairs and get started on the staff HR files.”



Before the actual review, I get transferred to another part of the agency. The management team within Prospect House is solid and they can finish the review prep on a course that I laid out before I left. Jill becomes the new supervisor. The staff and program does very well in the review; with one exception that is: the staff HR files that John oversaw were horrendous. In-fact, they were barely touched. Jill calls me afterward to fill me in on the good news about the review and to express concerns over John.

“Peter, didn’t you and John work on the issue of his reluctance to do paperwork?”

“Yes we did, it’s all in his file – the evaluations, supervision notes, letters of disciplinary actions, everything. In fact, the last agreement was that John would complete the paperwork on time or else be terminated. So it seems to me that you have grounds to do so”

“Nope. I met with Melanie today and since the letter you all wrote focused on client related paperwork and as I am John’s new supervisor, we can’t terminate him based on the staff related paperwork. Plus I have to see if I can assist him along with the issue using my values based management approach.”

*No wonder John’s been here 20 years!*

### III: Student

“What?! No way; an R-rated movie should never be shown to kids in care.”

“But there are some great R-rated flicks out there and kids love to watch them.”

“Kids also like to smoke pot but we don’t let them do that in a group home.”

“Hey, I like watching the movies too and if I gotta sit through one every week I ain’t watching G-rated ones all the time.”

“The point I was making is that R-rated films are filled with too much sex and violence, kids don’t need to be watching that shit.”

“Why not, their lives are filled with it.”

“Yeah, isn’t it part of today’s youth culture and wouldn’t we be denying them a natural part of the adolescent experience?”

Just how did these three get on this subject anyway? We were talking about the use of a daily schedule in a group home and BOOM, movie ratings came up. Where did I lose control of the discussion?

“That’s a load of crap. Even if it is part of their experience we need to be showing them other ways of life and not reinforcing the violence they came from.”

“I don’t even let my own kids see R-rated movies.”

Oh, now I remember, we were creating an example of a daily schedule and Saturday was the day. Movie time was thrown in as the evening activity. Jeremy had mentioned taking the kids

to see *Hellboy* and that’s when Genie threw in her two cents. Hmmm... the discussion’s a good one and one which always comes up in care but not everyone seems interested in it.

“I think it’s a chick thing anyway.”

Wait, am I the only one who hears this? This is yet another example of Jeremy’s sexism coming out. Last week it was something about school uniforms and how cute girls look and today it’s about ‘chick’ flicks. I must be the only one who heard it as no one is responding. Come to think of it, these comments are usually made in a quiet murmur and, yep, he is looking at Genie. He always looks at Genie. Geez, why doesn’t he just ask her out after class or something?

“Anyway, I don’t think it has anything to do with the rating of the movie but more with the content. I mean *Dumbo* glorifies alcohol use and it’s a Disney movie.”

“Yeah, remember what VanderVen said about activities: it’s not just the activity but also how you use the activity that counts. Aren’t movies an activity?”

Now they’re getting it. Good.

“I think it has more to do with the exploitation of women anyways. We need to show kids that women are not just sex objects but can be as strong as men. There are some good films that do this.”

“As I said, chick flicks.”

*This was definitely an aside and*

*no one heard it. His papers are good, his answers to the test are usually right, and yet Jeremy is just so flipping sexist and un-genuine. If the class didn't hear it, should I even bring it up? Just how do I grade someone on genuineness in the first place? It's so clear he is just trying to get Genie's attention.*

## **Closing**

The three vignettes above have one obvious common denominator: me. As the child care worker, the supervisor and

the teacher, I was placed in each event as the guide. Yet I felt more comfortable in my earlier role than my latter; is this just due to time and memory or is it more skill-based? Clearly I am in a power role within all three, yet there are so many competing variables at play that it can be difficult to note what role, if any, power plays as a lone variable. After all, contracts, labor relationships, goal of the milieu, number of people present, importance of the event, age and

position all play a role too.

In a future issue of this journal, the author will attempt to ferret out the variables and come to some conclusion regarding the role that power played, his power, within each professional position.

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