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Live Family Sculpting

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Despite the fact that college campuses and, more specifically, college counseling centers are known for their emphasis on holistic growth and development, I found there to be little attention paid to the interplay of families of origin and the experience of students as they tackle college life. In light of this observation, I believed a group where students could process this rarely discussed aspect of their lives would be valuable to improve their growth as students and individuals. "It's All Relative" was formatted to be mainly a process group. In the two initial groups, however, plans were made to educate the members on other ways to look at their family and then to provide an icebreaker to allow members to feel more comfortable in discussing this somewhat taboo subject with complete strangers. For this I decided that live family sculpting would be a perfect tool.

I learned about family sculpting in graduate school and how powerful it could be help a family gain perspective on how others feel in their family roles. For those that are not familiar with this method, it involves a member of a family molding their perspective of the family dynamic. This is sometimes done in clay, but in this case we use members of the group as "clay" in live family sculpting. Learning from a colleague* of mine how this could be beneficial outside of the nuclear family setting, I was prompted to think of it as an ice-breaker.

Group members were instructed to volunteer when ready to present their family sculpture to the group. They were encouraged to use whatever, and whoever, was in the room. No time constraints were spoken of and they were encouraged to bring any member of the family in the room that has an impact, directly or indirectly, on their life. They were also encouraged to become creative with props, action, distance, height, and all other dimensions that would express someone's role in their family.

I was sure the group members would find value in this exercise through understanding the others' back story without having the pressure of having to spill their life story in a painful monologue while others look on as if in a theater or lecture. What I did not expect was how this introductory tool would be utilized by the group in a genuinely therapeutic way. As the first member presented his family to the group, describing hierarchy and emotional distance, each member followed his lead obediently. One or two prompting questions were needed to engage the group in understanding the dynamics of the family. The only thing more impressive than their inquisitiveness was their ability to become genuine about their own experiences. From inside the sculpture, group members began to speak about their experience as they stood in this hierarchy.

"I don't like having the pressure of having to watch over all of these people in this family," said the woman portraying a father figure.

"I don't like Mom looming over me," stated the woman playing a little

sister with a mental illness.

And as the woman playing the mother in the family began crying, she said "I feel trapped here."

As each discussed their experience in the sculpture, the presenting group member's face ranged from shock, to amusement, to sadness. Through the entire conversation the "clay" remained in their positions without moving, sharing experiences and asking their own questions. At the end of the group, the presenting group member remarked on how he had never looked at his family this way and that many of things that were said in the room had gone unsaid for a very long time. He revealed a feeling of being exposed and unsettled, though it was the type of exposure that he believed was needed. He was encouraged to do a little extra to take care of himself during the week. As the final words were said at the end of this first day of the exercise, group members remained in their seats looking at each other expectantly. No one seemed to want to leave. They began engaging one another about the day's activities, their classes, etc. They laughed and talked loudly. Only one seemed to have somewhere that she wanted to be other than this room. They had not responded at all to the prompt that the group was over.

An exercise that was supposed to last for 10 minutes ended up taking half the group time, and continues to do so for each group member. My attempt to save time and promote group cohesiveness had a surprisingly mixed result. Time had actually been limited due to the exercise. In fact the number of sessions originally planned for open processing had been cut in half. The resulting cohesion, however, was undeniably strong. Members did not appear afraid at all to ask personal questions about values, beliefs, or attitudes. These are some of the things of which families are made.

*Emily Rudenick, LPC Supervisor

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