

Social Work Praxis

An Experiment in Learning



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Background

Samraksha is a developmental organization working to release the potential of people to meet their own needs and that of those around them. Its initial focus has been on health and HIV in particular. As early as 1993, when Samraksha started HIV related work, it recognized the critical role of counseling in all its interventions. This led to counseling being included as a crucial component of its work to reduce HIV risk, vulnerability and impact. By 2003, Samraksha was involved with prevention programmes with around 12000 women in sex work and members of the sexual minority community in five districts. By then over 8000 people living with HIV were also actively seeking services at Samraksha . Clearly, a large cohort of counselors was needed.

Identifying this huge human resource for the HIV Prevention to Care continuum was a major challenge. At one level, it was difficult to find qualified candidates prepared to take up counseling roles in rural North Karnataka. Even when a few were identified, they expressed the view that their studies had not equipped them to deal with issues like sexuality, marginalization, stigma, loss and grief faced by people vulnerable to and affected by HIV. They were largely students who had joined work straight after graduating and did not always have the life or work experiences to deal with the counseling scenarios that HIV presented. Many of them had not undertaken counseling as part of their field work practice.

Samraksha tried to address this gap in human resources by building up a cohort of community counselors drawn from the general community as well as affected communities. They were provided training for around 60 days, over a one year period. To be selected for this, the trainees needed to broadly demonstrate a non-judgmental attitude, listening skills and an openness to learn; in short, a suitable temperament for counseling.

The community counselors had accessed a multi-layered capacity building that included regular training workshops, clinical supervision, initial pairing with senior counselors and a lot of work on 'self'. Monthly debriefing and sharing across the group had created a pool of shared experiences from which the counselors could learn. Counselors could now build great rapport and deal with HIV test related counseling, but they did not feel equally competent dealing with more complex issues like mental health, marital conflict or substance abuse.

THE NEED FOR A COURSE ON SOCIAL WORK

There were, thus, two different profiles in Samraksha's counselor pool: those with professional degrees but little or no experience; and those with training in counseling who brought experiences from the field or life, but with no formal education in Social Work or Psychology. While they complemented each other as a team, the question arose whether each group would benefit from a course that would fill in the gap areas and create a more holistic counselor "self".

Since many of the community counselors had dropped out of formal education after PUC or sometimes even high school, theoretical constructs needed to be simplified and made available in

Kannada. Kannada texts that were available were difficult to understand and not contemporary. Samraksha decided to take up the challenge and develop a pilot programme. American Indian Foundation fully supported the idea and funded it.

DESIGNING THE COURSE

To design this course, Samraksha consulted with a few academic institutions and explored the option of meeting the need with some modification of existing courses. A few modules were tried out with the National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro Sciences (NIMHANS). However, the varying educational levels of the existing counselors and the need to conduct the programme in Kannada, led Samraksha to design a specific course.

An informal training needs assessment pointed to certain gap areas of theory and practice that the existing pool of counselors reported. A small working group of two internal and two external consultants was formed to design the course and work on the curriculum.

The two internal faculty were those who were leading the counseling programme in Samraksha since its inception, K.Sulekha and Sanghamitra Iyengar both with a background of Psychiatric Social Work from NIMHANS.

External Faculty consisted of Dr.Rajaram Subbian, whose experience included designing the curriculum for the Diploma in Social Work in Tamil and a Social Work Graduate Course in Sri Lanka for the National Institute of Social Development, Ministry of Health & Social Services, Colombo and Ms. Joyce Tan, a Social Work Educator and Practitioner whose experience included the professional development of social workers and counselors across a range of settings in Singapore. Ms Tan had recently worked on a bridge course for social service practitioners who aspired to a formal training in Social Work in Singapore.

The Pilot programme for the Certificate in Social Work Praxis was initially designed to help the pool of Samraksha's counselors gain more competence. Hence it is tailored around the ground realities of these counselors who were all working in different programmes within Samraksha. The demands of those programmes and the ability of those projects to release them for a minimum of 48 days over a period of 18 months also shaped the design of the course.

The working group suggested a design of a theory component of 10 modules. Each module consisted of 24 to 36 teaching hours and it was spread over 18 months. During this period, there were 192 hours of supervised counseling practice at Samraksha's Asha Jyoti HIV Care Centre and 126 hours of peer-based learning through case discussion. Detailed documentation of case histories and interventions was mandatory. The participants also continued to practice in their own settings.

SELECTION OF PARTICIPANTS

This course was open to all counselors within Samraksha. However, those opting to take this course had to make a commitment to 18 months study and supervised practice while continuing their concurrent job responsibilities. A few felt that they could not handle both, but 18 participants enrolled for the course.

There was a minimum requirement of attendance at the classes, supervised practice and case discussion to qualify to receive the Certificate. Sometimes, the counselors could not satisfy this due to personal and programme commitments. They had the option of completing the requirements at a later date. Certificates of Completion were awarded to those who fulfilled all the requirements of the Course on Social Work Praxis. Participants who were not able to complete these requirements could still opt to attend the course, although they would not be eligible to receive the certificate.

Contextualisation as the Key to Learning

THE BACKGROUND AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE COURSE

Samraksha had decided to design a course to strengthen capacities in their counseling team to deliver a continuum of HIV care . I was then working on developing a bridge course on social work in Singapore. The team at Samraksha was eager to see if some of this content could be relevant in the course, and therefore our engagement started.

Primarily, I drew from the relevant theories and tried to break the concepts into simpler parts. Then I re-scoped the curriculum for each module after intensive consultation with Sulekha and Sanghamitra. The lesson plans were drawn from each sub-topic. For me, the guiding principle was the field of practice and I tried to relate the course material to both personal human development as well as professional experiences. Theories of personality and human development, the impact of culture, and socialization processes were contextualized into the lived experiences of the participants. Thus, the experiences shaped the understanding of the theory. The concepts were enriched by the participants, and the integration of theory and lived experience made it all come alive. As an art therapist I also took the opportunity to engage the participants in reflection through art-making as a means of connecting and integrating the theoretical concepts with their lived experience.

UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPTS IN A PERSONAL AND MEANINGFUL WAY

The background of the participants was very diverse. A few of them were fresh out of college. A few of them had not formally pursued degrees in social work or counseling, but had many years of experience, but each group connected with the material. Those, who had studied the subjects formally, reframed the material to the context of their own lives and practice. Those who did not have the formal training were not reticent or shy. They were eager to jump in to share their experience and understand the theories. The insistence that every concept be repeated and clarified till it was understood in the context of their own lives was remarkable. There were at least four reviews or recaps. At any other training program, so many reviews would be considered an over-kill. However, these participants were so keen and committed to learning that they wanted to feel that they really understood the concepts and theories in a personal and meaningful way, not just book knowledge. In reality, this reiterative internalization is a time-tested method of learning and remembering.

THE PARTICIPANT-FOCUSED NATURE OF THE COURSE

This course drew its strength not so much from the curriculum as from the delivery of it. When I was teaching the concepts, Sanghamitra and Sulekha were there to ensure that the theories became relevant to the experience of the participants. It was not content- focused, but participant-focused, and that made it dynamic and responsive to participant needs.

MY MOST IMPORTANT LEARNINGS

The most I expected from the participants was that they would understand some theory, write an exam and pass it. But because of its delivery, the course came alive and took on a momentum of its own and I learnt from simply being present. I now have more faith in the tried and tested material which social work educators have developed over the years, and feel that if the material is handled well, then it can benefit different kinds of people.

VISION AND COMMITMENT TO THE COMMUNITY

The most important role of Samraksha as an organization has been that it had a vision for its community and a commitment to them. Samraksha wants to serve the communities they work with to the best of their ability, and therefore, they value the people who are delivering the service. That is why the organization invests in this continuous process of learning and growing.

Ms Joyce Tan is an art therapist and a Social Work Professional based in Singapore. She has been involved with Social Work Education and Practice for many years. She is currently part-time faculty at the LaSalle College of the Arts where she is clinical supervisor to students in the Master of Arts in the Art Therapy program. She was one of the core faculty in this course, and participated in the development and teaching of the modules on psychology, sociology, and family life cycle development.



New Insights Evolved from Practitioner Reflections

MY INVOLVEMENT IN THIS COURSE

I have been involved with Samraksha in the past, and I know it has always expressed concern about the limitations found in formal courses to actually support and strengthen people who are working with individuals and communities affected by HIV, face to face. HIV infection, often preventable, becomes complex in the way it spreads, intolerably challenging when life styles don't change, extremely difficult to manage if the family and community resist involvement. Within this context, I saw this course as an opportunity to tailor the professional inputs to the specific situation of the people, rather than having the standard-size-fits-all approach observed in formal education. I was part of the small working group to discuss the design the course. I chose some of the modules, to develop the content and deliver it. During the course, I used my own experiences with Samraksha in the field, as well as the participants' practice and experiences.

For each module, I prepared a specific framework, and then in the session, the exchange of ideas and experiences between the participants would fill the framework. I would collate the experiences of the groups with field exposure as well as the experience of the groups with professional training during the process; blend the two, and then segregate them, based on certain principles. This is how I was able to deliver the modules on subjects like social work principles and values, ethics, and the boundaries between the personal and professional self.

THE CHALLENGE OF WORKING IN A HETEROGENEOUS GROUP

I was very apprehensive about the diverse backgrounds of the participants. This experience was totally new, a group not seen in University campuses or any academic setting.. But I realized over the course, that each group complemented and challenged the other to achieve more.

I was not satisfied with the first module I taught, because I had tried to do something different. Generally, as a trainer, I go to a session prepared with a certain framework, take time to get to know the participants and their level of knowledge and understanding and then build on that. But here for the first module, because I felt this was a formal course, and the participant's background was diverse, I went in prepared with detailed session plans of my own. But it didn't work. For the subsequent modules, I retained my original method of building on what the participants were bringing in, based on a skeletal framework. This was more effective.

AN IMPORTANT BRIDGE BETWEEN THEORY AND PRACTICE

This is an important bridge between social work theory and practice. Many of the current social work courses suffer because they are not able to give the students the field experience which helps them to understand the theory. This observation gains more significance when we see that the number of schools of social work keep increasing while the field work opportunities keep shrinking. Whereas in this course, the complex theory made sense as every theoretical construct was supported by field practitioners and the participants' community experience.

MY LESSONS FROM THIS EXPERIENCE

Social work practitioners articulate their understanding best when engaged in extensive deeper reflective discussions with colleagues/trainees who have similar insights into the field and often, the intricate knowledge that evolves is not found in existing theories. This happened in this training

THE ROLE OF SAMRAKSHA

I see Samraksha not as an NGO but as a CBO that has grown in capacity. I say this because their fundamental commitment is always towards community strengthening. While organizations work as per specific project objectives, Samraksha has always had a different set of goals and objectives for strengthening the community, and the projects are used in order to satisfy the larger goals. That is precisely the rationale for this course. The purpose is not to just help the counselors perform their project roles better, but for the capacity of the counselors to be strengthened so that they play their roles in society better.

That is why even participants who had resigned from the organization came back to attend the training. Samraksha was not interested in how the training would benefit the organization, but how it would benefit the participants and in turn the communities they work with.

Dr Rajaram Subbian is a renowned Trainer and Social Work Educator at the national as well as the international level. He continues to be a practitioner and supports many Schools of Counselling. He was one of the core faculty for the course and developed and taught all the modules on Social Work and the Module on Mental Health and Mental illness.



A Dream Come True.....

It is a dream come true to hear the participants of this course share their experiences.

As a social work professional working in the field of HIV and AIDS, I have been amazed at how much the Social Work profession has to offer this field. Social Work as a profession has drawn its theoretical base from many other disciplines like Psychology, Sociology, Economics as well as Humanism, Ethics and the Human Rights discourse. These theoretical frameworks have been embedded in core values and principles which form the very basis of practice. In this, the profession is truly unique.

In the past 18 years at Samraksha, there have been different experiences of bringing social work practice into the work of the organization. In that process, one gap was always felt: the lack of adequate recognition of the value of social work education by those who had received it; and the lack of its appreciation in those that did not receive it. The motivation and passion to make a difference had somehow got subdued in the people possessing theoretical knowledge; and people determined to make a difference, often did not see the necessity of deepening their practice with theoretical constructs. The synergy of theory and practice was rarely felt.

I was privileged to have had a good social work education and felt that this should not be denied to many practitioners, who have discontinued formal studies after school or pre-university. Most of them were connected to the communities and had the desire to make a difference, but there was no place for them in the formal educational system. Besides, after years of practice where they had been exposed to contemporary ideas and thoughts, they needed to enter the world of formal education with something that was relevant. On the other hand, there were counselors who had completed the MSW course and had a body of knowledge which had yet to be internalized. That is how this course was born.

THE CREATIVE SPACES IN THE PROGRAMME

The interesting part of this programme was the space to be creative. Introducing ideas and concepts to a mixed group like this, making it relevant and providing new insights led to an extremely fun way of learning. Using games, exercises personal stories and role-plays internalized and consolidated the learning. From the local to the global experience and back to local responses led to a broadening of one's horizons. Peer exchanges made it truly richer.

MY OWN LEARNING

What was really exciting was my own learning!! Preparing for the Sociology module, I saw connections and relevance which had missed me when I studied these subjects formally. When discussing the purity and pollution concepts from the caste system, for example, one could see the parallels in the way stigma was enacted against people living with HIV in India. How the patterns of

behavior which were encultured, took new forms and shapes was startling. The diverse nature of the group and the faculty intensified the learning and made the whole an exhilarating experience. It also brought home the quote from the Tamil poet Avvaiyar “*Kattradu kaimannallavu, kallaadadu olagalavu*” “What I have learnt is a handful, what I have not, is the whole world.”

RECOGNITION OF THE VALUE OF SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

The experiences shared by the participants on how they were able to convert this learning into practice, in their personal and professional lives, has also been so rewarding. It is exactly the outcome that we desired. Additionally, as many as four participants have gone on to register for a Bachelors or Masters programme in Social Work. The value of social work education has been recognized in its true sense!



Sanghamitra Iyengar is a Social Work Practitioner who has a Masters in Social work from Bangalore University and an M. Phil in Psychiatric Social work from NIMHANS. She is currently Director of Samraksha.

Counselors Develop Empathy towards Clients

THE ROLE OF SUPERVISION AND CASE DISCUSSION

I was responsible for the supervision of the participants during their field practice in Asha Jyoti and they could also call me for support if they faced any difficulties or challenging situations during their regular counseling practice. The main role for me during supervision and the monthly case discussions has been to help them reflect to what extent they are using the theories they have learnt in their understanding of the clients and in planning the intervention.

Supervision through direct physical contact was not always possible or practical, but counselors made extensive notes on individual cases, including verbatim reports. I would read this and give them constructive feedback. This process also helped me track the growth of each counselor individually.

Case discussions also gave an opportunity for integrating theory and practice. Before this course, when I used to facilitate these discussions, I tried to link some of the discussions to the theories. But because many of them had not studied the theories, they could not always pick up these links. Once the course was started, discussions on a case always included the links between the theory and the case, and the counselors were able to draw new insights on client behavior through this integration.

THE MAJOR GAINS FROM THIS COURSE

Counselors in the HIV field primarily have to focus on behavior change in the clients. Frequently, in their attempts to motivate this change in clients, counselors reported a sense of frustration. Although most of them brought with them a temperament for counseling and a non-judgmental attitude, sometimes, certain aspects of the clients' behaviour like alcohol abuse or repeated non-adherence to treatment would frustrate the counselors. The most significant gain from the course has been that the counselors have been able to understand the clients, their backgrounds and their circumstances. This has helped them a lot in developing empathy towards clients.

Their increased understanding is also making them more responsive to the client's situation. For example, earlier, if clients repeatedly complained about lack of sleep or appetite, while the counselors would actively listen and respond to them, the responses were limited. Now, they understand concepts of mental health better; they are able to assess the clients, see if there is a need for other interventions like medicines and refer appropriately.

I can say that every participant is now able to go beyond just pre and post test counseling. They do repeated follow-ups and take a case right up to the resolution of the issue (not strictly termination, since clients continue their contact with Asha Jyoti). Earlier, I used to often wonder, with the kind of

challenges in HIV related counseling like counseling in end-of-life stages, whether we were expecting too much from the community counselors to take up those roles. Now I have more confidence in their capacities.

IMPORTANT LESSONS FROM THE EXPERIENCE

I feel a course like this has a lot of potential. Mainly, we used a judicious blend of theory and practice to address the needs of different groups and draw on their varied strengths

MANAGING THE EXPECTATIONS AND APPREHENSIONS OF THE TWO GROUPS

Both groups of counselors, the community counselors and the ones with the educational background had some hesitation and apprehensions about the course. The community counselors had the experience, they were active during monthly meetings but they were not confident about studying the theories. The newly recruited professional counselors were in their turn apprehensive about being together with people who had so many years of experience. Assuring each group of the complementary strengths they were bringing in was a challenge.

CHALLENGES IN THE EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT OF PRACTICE

The counselors practice in vastly different settings, many times in collaboration with other services, and they have little or no control over what happens in these settings. They learn about different principles and values like self-determination and confidentiality. But in these systems, frequently there are pressures to meet testing targets etc. Even if they personally overcome the pressure without imposing on the clients, they witness other people in the setting violating some of these principles. Sometimes they have to deal with the aftermath if a client has not had appropriate preparations before testing or the confidentiality has been compromised. This leads to a lot of frustration.

This is actually a larger challenge for all social work educators and professionals. While the ethics of the professions emphasize on certain things, the role which is imposed on the graduates in the field is very different. We need to reflect on how we can support them to carry out their roles in the most ethical way.



Sulekha is a Social Work Practitioner who has done MSW from Bangalore University and PSY from NIMHANS. She is currently Director, Continuum of Care, at Samraksha.

Increased Competence and Confidence

Basantamma identifies the confidence she has gained in her counseling capacity as the most important contribution of this course. “Earlier, at the hint of the slightest problem which the client brought up, we would call the senior counselors and seek their support. But now, I am more confident about my capacity to handle the situation. I am able to break the problem into smaller parts and proceed systematically, one at a time. “

She identifies the lessons from different modules like psychology, human development and the impact of culture on people as being integral to her understanding of clients, colleagues, and family. “Understanding the biological, emotional and social roots of behavior is very critical in a counseling situation. I learnt about Erikson’s stages of psychosocial development of individuals, and I have young children of my own. Because I had this understanding, my bonds with the children strengthened. Again, after looking at the impact of culture on a person’s belief systems and behavior, I am more accepting of people’s behavior.”

Basantamma also shares about how some of this exposure and experiences have helped her cope with a great personal tragedy. “I lost my young son recently in an accident. For me, it is a grief which will never go away easily, but I am learning to live with it. I am able to reflect on the grief and distress, and then start coping with it a

little bit at a time. I also see my role in my family. I seem to be the one who is having some strength



to cope. I have to assume this role for the sake of stability in the family. I feel that but for all the experience and exposure to people I had because of my work and my training, I would have definitely broken down completely following this event.”

Basantamma works in the focused intervention programme with women in sex work in Uttara Kannada district. She has received training on counseling skills and supportive supervision on the job in Samraksha.

The module on social work as a profession taught me a lot. I have in a way drifted into this job as a social worker, but I can now see how much I have grown in it. It helped me appreciate the potential of social work, how systematic it is in understanding clients and their situations and responding appropriately. We do some of these things almost unconsciously, but now I am able to be conscious of my role as a social worker. I learnt the value of timely and empathetic responses. I could also relate to the concept of advanced empathy. We are not always able to achieve advanced empathy, but this is what we should hope to achieve in every counseling session.

Uncovering New Strengths

Manjula identifies the impact of this course in her personal life, her relationships with colleagues and with the community and her understanding of her own life in the larger context of the norms of the society.

She feels her acceptance of some of the marginalized groups have become deeper after this course. “I was accepting of sexual minorities but now I am able to accept them in their female identity, and I acknowledge and articulate this acceptance. I feel that the rapport immediately becomes deeper, when I do this.”

She adds that after understanding the different determinants of human behavior, and how certain roles demand certain behavior from people, she has been able to mend her relationship with a colleague. “I was having a lot of problems with a colleague, because whenever she made a comment about my work, or pulled me up, I felt she was personally criticizing me. This was really affecting my work. Now I understand why she behaves in that way, the kind of pressure she is under, and the role she is expected to play. When I stopped taking it personally, the relationship automatically improved.”

At another level, it has also given her an appreciation of social structures and norms, and the social changes which we are even now witnessing. “When I got to know about how the roots of the democracy and liberty we now enjoy go back to the French Revolution, I realized just how much people have struggled to get us this democracy. When I realize that even till recent years, women coming out of the house and working was a very rare thing, and I now see women, who have chosen not to marry and who live alone and work, I realize I am witnessing a social change. I am part of this social change, and that is very heartening.” She was also personally motivated to complete her post graduate degree in sociology through distance education after starting this course.



For Manjula, counseling is an ‘inspiring’ experience. “Everyday people share with you their problems, but you also get to see how they are finding the solutions to their problems. Finally, it gives you a belief that every problem can be solved. I am now confident that I can work as a counselor in different settings, and I hope I create an atmosphere in counseling, where people can find a solution to their own problems.”

Manjula works in the focused HIV prevention programme with women in sex work and sexual minorities in Gadag District. She has recently completed her post-graduate degree in Sociology.

There was a module on intercultural awareness which helped us understand that all of us carry our own beliefs, which we rarely give up. Earlier, if clients expressed some strong belief or traditional practice, I would ignore it, or discourage them from following it. Now I realize that in these beliefs and rituals also, there is potential. If they give the client strength, then we should draw that also into the counseling situation and use it positively.

Understanding Social Work Practice

Dinesh identifies the unique feature of this training to be the continuous emphasis on linking theory and practice. “I have studied most of the theories before, but during this training, I had to constantly link the theory to practice. Even the exams were based on linking and giving examples from the field or from our lives.

Recently, in Asha Jyoti, I had a client, a seventeen year old boy, who was positive. He did not have too many problems, but was suddenly showing an extreme reluctance to go to school, and his behavior had changed substantially. During counseling I was able to locate the problem within the stage of life he was in. He was a growing adolescent, but had very poor physical development, and compared to his peers, he looked like a school-boy. This was affecting his self image, and he was not able to cope with the peers teasing him about it. This also increased his own anxieties about his health. This understanding helped us plan the intervention.

He adds that the training has helped in greater individualization of the clients. “Sometimes as we keep practicing counseling, we start grouping clients together and responding to them similarly. This training has helped me get back to understanding clients as separate individuals.”

Concepts from different modules combined to give a better understanding of the clients. “Erikson’s stages of development helped me understand how people systematically progress to different stages; problems can be seen as an inability to resolve some issue in a specific stage. We learnt about culture and its impact on people; this was a topic I was familiar with, but I

had never reflected on certain questions, for instance, how migrants will feel in a culture which is different from theirs.”

Dinesh also feels he has benefited from the module focusing on social work practice. “I have studied psychology, but social work has a different orientation. We look at clients within certain systems, and think of interventions at certain levels. This is a useful perspective to have, while working with individuals and groups”. According to Dinesh, the learnings from the job are relevant to newer roles and challenges he has taken on. “I am not working as a counselor now, but am managing the link worker programme in a district, with a big team. This course has helped me understand about human motivation and emotion. I hope this will help me manage my team better, and also support any team members, if they are facing problems.

Dinesh has completed post-graduate degree in Psychology and was a counselor in Asha Jyoti care centre. He has recently moved to the position of team leader in the Comprehensive District HIV Prevention programme. He continues to support the care centre regularly.



Comprehending the Importance of Counseling

In college, I never really took the counseling process seriously. But now I realize how important counseling is, how much of an influence we hold over a person's life in our role as a counselor. At one level, this influence is frightening. So I am so careful and think deeply before anything I say and do while counseling to ensure that I am supporting the clients, and not harming them.

Bhagyajyoti attributes all her understanding about the lives of women in sex work and sexual minorities to the inputs she received in this course, and she feels this is what helped her establish a relationship with the clients. "When I took up this job, I really had no understanding about the women. So I couldn't develop a relationship with them and sometimes women wouldn't even acknowledge their sex worker identity to me. Now, because I understand their lives and circumstances, they are sharing their concerns with me."

According to her, the course helped her understand and operationalize social work principles much better. "We have learnt social work principles in college, but then it was just something learnt for an exam. Here I understood what is acceptance, what is emotional support, the need for confidentiality, and how do we ensure confidentiality and assure a person about confidentiality. They were very relevant to the work I was doing and they made sense.

She has also been able to understand and appreciate the differences between professional social work and basic human responses. "I used to think of social work as a specific job, but the relationship with the community has made it more than a job for me. I am now involved with the women, and I want to support them and help them at a personal level. Now I understand my personal and professional roles much better".

Bhagyajyoti adds that understanding how family, society and culture shape a person's behavior has made her more conscious of identifying these factors and linking them to behavior. She shares an instance when she was extremely frustrated by a client's inability to articulate anything. "When I visited her at home, I realized in her family her male relatives never let her talk at all. After that I persisted in trying to draw her out, she has started opening up and talking to me."

Bhagyajyoti is a counselor in Samraksha's focused intervention programme with women in sex work and sexual minorities in Koppal district. She has a post graduate degree in Social Work and this is her first job in counseling.



Shared Experiences Contribute to Learning

Role plays of different counseling and social work situations which were enacted during this course and the subsequent discussions on the role plays have been major learning opportunities for Jayalakshmi. “I had to handle a situation of a client with suicidal thoughts during the role play. I think because I was not comfortable in the situation, I kept evading the issue while counseling and focusing on something else. Afterwards, when we reflected on the situation, other participants gave me suggestions on how I could have handled the issue, and some examples from their own experience. Later, I actually had a similar experience in the field, and I was able to manage it much better, helping the client overcome the thoughts, and opening up to me to share her problems.”

Jayalakshmi lists changes at different levels following the course. “In psychology, we learnt about different determinants of behavior. I realized how important our own body was in determining our behavior, the effect of hormones etc. I understood the importance of being aware of our own health. I think that helped to motivate me to go in for some medical tests, to check some hormone levels. Now I am undergoing a naturopathy programme for wellness.” At another level, she also cites improved relationships with family members, as an important consequence of the training. “I always had a problem with an aunt, with whom I live. But these days, I have a better relationship with her, because I understand her better.”

We were a mixed group. Some of us had studied the subjects before; we would help the others understand a specific concept or the meaning of a word better. There were people who had many years of experience. When we did role plays, they used their experience to give us a lot of examples, and helped us learn better.

She also values the exposure to using different mediums like art to understand and articulate experience. “We were able to use art to explain our own lives. I realized when we are working with children and all, how powerful this medium is, because children will otherwise not be able to speak or express their feelings to us.

Overall, Jayalakshmi feels that the course has helped her appreciate human beings as ‘unique and different’.



Jayalakshmi was working as a counselor in the focused intervention programme for women in sex work and sexual minorities in Haveri District. She has completed post-graduate degree in Social Work.

Understanding Theory through the lens of Practice

Amrutha feels that the critical element of this course has been the way the theoretical inputs have been illustrated through practice and situations from the field. “When I studied for my degree, I don’t think I understood or used even 10 % of what I studied as there was no opportunity. Here, I have been able to use at least 75% of what I studied in my own work. And when I was using it in practice, I was able to understand the theories also better”.

An important take-away for Amrutha from this course has been an understanding of external and internal determinants of behavior and the manifestations of this in verbal and non-verbal communication. ‘It has made me more observant and responsive to client’s behavior’. The module on social work values was also, she feels, “more interesting and relevant than my earlier experience of studying it.”

Other important inputs she identifies are human growth and development, mental health, and development of sexuality in different phases of human life. “I think, as counselors working with women in sex work and sexual minorities, the role and development of sexuality during a person’s life is important, in order to be able to relate to the clients, and to support them. I got to understand a lot about sexual minorities, their identity, their problems, and what they are seeking.”

I remember a very challenging case for me, when one of the community members who was very depressed and also not responding or opening up in counseling. This person had recently tested positive, and this added to the distress. But I was able to develop empathy with the client, and I was persistent in follow-up. Finally, the client felt confident and comfortable to open up with me. This training gave me the capacity to develop the empathy, and also the persistence to repeatedly follow-up with the client, and keep presenting them the opportunity to open up to me.



Amrutha is working with the focused intervention programme with women in sex work and sexual minorities in Haveri. She has completed Masters in Social Work.

Gaining a Perspective on Marginalization

Rajappa feels that this course has used the raw material of his earlier education as well as his extensive experience in the field, filled in the gaps and built it into something constructive. This, he feels, has helped him pursue social work with a humanistic perspective, in a better way. “I felt whatever I learnt here was new and fresh, it was more specific and more relevant to my life than anything I had learnt earlier.” He adds that the course helped him get back in touch with clients as individuals. “Sometimes, after years of experience in specific sectors like HIV, we tend to address all clients in a similar way with a similar set of interventions. This course helped me regain a broader perspective on client’s lives beyond the HIV situation, and respond to them holistically.”

He adds that different disciplines like human behavior, sociology and culture helped in a better understanding of the client, and locating of their problems. “We were able to understand behavior as a result of internal and external factors, and also links between society, culture and behavior. In the module on sociology, we studied about social stratification, and marginalization. Since we work extensively with marginalized communities, we need to be familiar with these concepts, so that we can locate the client’s problems appropriately. We need to understand whether it is within the client or whether it is a larger systemic problem. “

In the link worker programme, I work with migrants. In the course, I studied different reasons for migration, social, economic, religious, and also about different kinds of migration, short term, long term, planned and unplanned. I draw from this understanding when I interact with the migrants. I am able to see how the causes for migration and the nature of the migration shapes a person’s risk and vulnerability.



Rajappa has completed his post-graduate degree in social work and for many years worked in Asha Jyoti Care centre. He has also supported the focused intervention programme in Koppal and worked in the District ART centre.

Understanding Human Behavior and its Complexities

Sheetal expected this course to be different from other trainings, and focus on a more holistic understanding of human behavior. My earlier training focused mostly on certain skills and my job covered areas such as STI RTI counseling, risk reduction etc. In the course it was very broad, it covered very different kinds of modules, social work, psychology, human behavior, culture. All of this has helped me understand human beings with all their complexities, much better.”

Sheetal shares that the learnings from this course have helped her in different contexts of life. “Recently, we completed a module on mental health and mental illness. During the course, I realized that a relative of mine is suffering from a mental illness. I also realized what kind of support is needed to help a person coping with mental illness. None of us, in our family have supported him when he was having the problem, including me. But now I know what kind of support and intervention he needs, if ever there is a recurrence, I will support him in the appropriate way.”

The modules covering social work were very useful, because I learnt how to assess clients within their family systems, how to interact with clients and family, making assessments during home visits. I also understood the importance of developing cases studies and also documenting them in terms of assessment, diagnosis and intervention. This is very useful for further learning.

Sheetal feels that this training has given her a confidence to take on any job in the social sector, within the organization as well as otherwise. “I did not have an opportunity to study many of these



subjects formally but I was very interested in these subjects. This course allowed me to get exposed to different subjects initially, when I heard about a course and exams I was very scared. I didn’t want to go for it at all. I would insist on the concepts being explained repeatedly, till it was clear in my head, because I always feel that sometimes right after we hear something, we feel we have understood it, but later we forget. The revisions helped me. ”

Sheetal is a counselor in the focused intervention programme with women in sex work in Uttara Kannada district. She has received training in counseling skills and supportive supervision.

Theory and Practice Reinforce each other

Shilpa feels that the most important thing she has learnt in this course is the extent of relationship between social work theory and practice. “In college, I never linked the theories in class with the practice. In fact, my teachers also told me that what we learn in class, and what happens in the field are very different. But in this course, everything we learnt in class was completely linked to what we were doing in the field. We all shared our own experiences. I realized how much we need to apply social work theories in practice. Learning the theory helped us practice better, and by practicing we understood the theory better.”

Shilpa identifies different elements in the course which helped her understanding. “In Psychology, we studied Erikson’s stages of development, which is a very useful framework to understand human behavior. If children are being stubborn or difficult, they are in a certain stage, it is important to understand accept this. Similarly, when adult behavior is difficult, we can try to understand the issue in the context of the stage of life they are in, and help them resolve it and move to the latter stages.”

She adds that the module on sociology helped her understand how different attributes of a person determine whether they are a majority or minority, and how this determines their lives. “I had always thought of majority or minority as a religion or caste related grouping. But I realized every characteristic of you can place you in a majority or a minority. And in any given situation, certain characteristics become important and place you as a majority or minority. This is not constant, it can change. In our own group at that time, we were mostly women, so the men were a minority. In that group we had the power to make decisions suitable to us. But in other circumstances, this can change.



Shilpa would like to be involved in social work education in future. “I would like to be a social work lecturer. And I will make sure that when I teach, I draw from my own examples, and also encourage my students to relate examples to understand the theories better.”

Shilpa was working in the focused intervention programme with women in sex work and sexual minorities in Gadag. She has completed her Masters in Social Work

We work with groups who are very marginalized and stigmatized, and we have our own prejudices against them, especially if they have habits like drinking. We had learnt social work principles before; here we actually realized how important it is to really accept people, to not pass a judgment against them. We realized how important it is to maintain confidentiality. Suppose a husband is positive, on one hand we have to manage confidentiality, while at the same time preparing and supporting the person to disclose.

Validating Experiences and Choices

Hanumanthi says that following the course, she has developed a greater understanding of human behavior beyond its external manifestations. She also understood the roots of this behavior as driven by various external and internal factors. The course has satisfied her biggest expectation, “I expected that it would give me confidence that the decisions and choices I make in a counseling situation are correct. I have always been interested in counseling and was very happy when Samraksha selected me and gave me training in counseling skills. Supporting Asha Jyoti care centre has also been a wonderful experience. In this course, after understanding some theories of human behavior, I am able to review the decisions and choices I make as a counselor.”

She also identifies other gains, which have added to her knowledge and skills. “We were also able to learn about different tools like genograms, eco-map and social network map. This tool helps us in understanding the person within a system very well. We had another session on expressing through art, and I was very reluctant to draw anything at all. But I was astonished at how art could be used to understand human beings.”

Hanumanthi has now enrolled for masters in social work.

“I would like to get a degree as a formal qualification. Because of my long experience, and also the inputs in this course, I am finding the coursework to be quite easy. I can understand and relate to the concepts better. After this I will also have the qualification to take up jobs like ICTC counselor which insist on a qualification.”

After the module on sociology, I am able to view people from a sociological perspective. I realize how much a person, especially from our communities (women in sex work and sexual minorities) is impacted by what others think of them. Prejudices are so ingrained in us. We even have prejudices about places, not just people.



Hanumanthi was working in the focused intervention programme with women in sex work and sexual minorities in Raichur district. She has received training in counseling skills and supportive supervision.

Theory Enhances Learning from Practice

For Suvarna, the greatest learning from this course has been an understanding that each of us is shaped by our own families, culture and background, and the need to leave these behind, as we interact with the clients. “If we try to understand their life with the lens of our lives, we will never succeed. We need to leave this behind, when we go into counseling”.

I was able to identify some marital discord in a couple. I also noted a pattern of behavior in the man, where he would say he has taken his medicine, while not having taken it. His wife used to believe him initially. I was able to see this as a pattern arising to a certain extent from the discord. When I brought this situation up during couple counseling, we were able to explore why he was behaving in that way. The man had an opportunity to reflect on how his behavior was harming him. The couple was also able to discuss their conflicts and start working towards resolving it.

Suvarna feels that the exposure to basic concepts of psychology, sociology, and human behavior have helped her understand certain client behavior better, and plan the interventions. According to her, the module on social work practice helped her understand clients within certain systems, and the different possibilities of intervention. “I work in a centre based setting. My clients are generally very sick. The family members come to us with a lot of worries about the well-being of the clients. I am able to understand better, what kind of inputs I can give as a social worker to my clients in these situations. I know that I need to look at the client within the family and society, and see what kind of interventions can be done at different levels. Now, even when I document a case, I use this kind of framework to understand the client’s situation. This gives me greater clarity for planning the intervention.”

According to Suvarna, this course has helped her see the value of theoretical understanding in practice. “I have been doing counseling in the field, and now I see the value of understanding certain theories while practicing counseling. At the same time, because I had field experience, I was able to understand the theories better. And now the theories help me in practice and also help me learn from practice.”

Suvarna works as a counselor in the Asha Jyoti Care Centre for people living with HIV. She has received training in basic counseling skills and supportive supervision. She is currently pursuing a bachelor’s degree in social work through distance education.



Using tools to deepen practice

We understood how to use different frameworks like genograms and ecomaps in order to help our understanding of families. I used this in one instance where a client had been thrown out of her house because of her involvement in sex work, although the family had earlier known about and accepted this involvement. When we mapped her family relationships, we were able to identify strengths in her good relationship with her parents and elder brother, and the recent marriage of her brother as a factor which could have provoked this change. When I involved the parents and brother in the counseling, the family agreed to take her back and also resolve the issue with the daughter-in-law.

Malleka found this course to be an ‘exciting opportunity to learn’, because she has had no formal training in social work, and whatever she has learnt so far has come from practice. The course has strengthened her commitment to continue work in the social sector, and she has also signed up for a Bachelor’s programme in social work, after starting this course. “I did not have an opportunity to complete my studies because of family responsibilities; I had to assume an adult role in the family. Now that I have supported my siblings and also built a house, I want to get back and complete my education. I have signed up for BSW, because I want to continue in the social sector.”

She illustrates how her understanding of clients and their needs has improved after the course and how her field experience has strengthened some of her understanding. “When we had a module on mental health and mental illness, I understood the importance of mental health for a person. But I have seen that for each client, different things are important for their mental health. For some of

them, the knowledge that they are taking ART and their health will get better with it improves their mental health. For others, they may have some specific beliefs; sometimes even superstitions which will help them manage their mental health. We need to understand what is critical to ensure mental health for each client, and respond accordingly.”

She also feels that the course helped her understand and appreciate the scope of social work in different settings. As a social worker, we play an important role in so many different settings. I will always continue to be involved in social work, because I have learnt so much from the community and from this job, and I want to continuously put the learning to good use.”

Malleka works with women in sex work in the focused intervention programme in Raichur, and counsels at the Asha Jyoti care centre as a volunteer.. She has received training on basic counseling skills in Samraksha.



Self as the agent of change and focus on 'self change'

Asha values the multi-dimensional understanding of human behavior, which she has developed because of this course. "Earlier, while counseling I focused mostly on single dimensions of client behavior. Now I understand internal and external influences, what makes a person's behavior bad or good, what is his family, what is his culture. So while counseling, I am able to probe deeper to understand the social context of the clients, their emotional needs, their hopes and aspirations".

She adds that her knowledge about human behavior and mental health was considerably enhanced after attending the module on mental health and mental illness. "I always thought mental health was an adult issue. But now I realize that factors in childhood and even in prenatal stages affect a person's mental health." This learning, she feels has been crucial as she interacts with her young son. "I am able to see his obstinacy, or temper as arising from a certain stage of his life. I am now more patient but firm with him".

She adds that exposure to different theories and perspectives have helped her in her multiple roles even within the family. Asha's work is not restricted to a centre, but involves different levels of engagement with the community. "I have been able to adapt counseling to the kind of work I do. I have become a person who in all interactions with the community tries to adopt counseling principles. It is like counseling is no longer within a room or a centre for me, but a part of life."

I have attended other trainings, but usually the focus is on some skills and on understanding the clients. Here the focus was always on self understanding; and as I become more and more conscious of myself, my actions and the reasons behind it. In myself I was able to see that how sometimes, I would get angry if a client did not adhere to treatment or if they wanted to marry. Because of this anger, non-judgmental attitude was clouded. After this course, I am now able to recognize this emotion of anger in me, and try to overcome it in the counseling situation.



Asha works as a peer counselor in the ART centre. She also works on strengthening networks, ensuring social entitlements for affected community members and other issues related to advocacy. She has received training in counseling skills and supportive supervision.

Diverse Inputs Shape Understanding

Meenaxi says that the course has helped her look beyond the obvious of human behavior not just in counseling situations but in every other interaction in life and encouraged her to understand people in depth. “I was expecting a course which would focus maybe on counseling process or how to engage with people on certain subjects. But it gave me a perspective on human behavior in general.”

This new perspective, she says is shaped by the different inputs during the course. “We studied different kinds of subjects subjects like psychology, sociology, mental health etc. We studied about how human behavior changes due to various factors, their body, their family, society and culture. We also studied about society and social change, the beginning of modern age and beyond. I have studied a bit of sociology in pre-university, but here we studied many new concepts, the rise and development of the concept of human rights over the years, the changes which have happened after the start of the modern era, and where our society is currently. “

Meenaxi also adds that this has helped her in understanding herself. “I am now able to understand my own behavior. What factors in my life have influenced me, why I behave in certain ways. I have identified certain areas for development, and I will now focus on them.”

After the module on mental health and mental illness, I am able to understand the importance of mental health and the reasons for mental illness. I am more alert while counseling, watchful of any signs of mental health problems. Moreover at a personal level, I realize how crucial mental health is. I am now reflecting on some of the stressors in my own life, and working on managing them.



Meenaxi is currently working in the focused intervention programme with women in sex work and sexual minorities in Haveri. She has earlier worked with geographical communities to stimulate responses to HIV and promote community ownership of the issue.

Understanding Human Behavior in Bio-psycho-social context

Gita works with geographical communities, to stimulate community response to HIV and promote community ownership of the issue.



Gita was very glad to have this opportunity to understand and learn about the basics of counseling and working with individuals. “Frequently, in my work with communities and when I was working with women in sex work, I used to be the first to get to know of some issue as a frontline worker. I would refer them to the counselors, because I did not have the required skills or understanding to engage with them at a deeper level. But I always felt that if as the first point of contact, I could myself act as a counselor, the process would be much more effective.”

There was an instance in a village when a lady tested positive during pregnancy and her husband was refusing to go for a test and blaming his wife. Finally after counseling, he did get tested. His major worry was that his own family should not get to know his status, although his wife’s family knew it. When I learnt about systems of patriarchy in the sociology module, I was able to understand this behavior better and not be judgmental. This man was a part of the patriarchal system. This system puts a different kind of pressure on men. He wants to protect his image with his parents and family at all costs.

For Gita, the most important take-away from this course has been a certain perspective, which helps her view the problem within the framework of the client, their social situation, their families, the roles they are expected to perform and the interaction between the biological, psychological, social and cultural factors in determining an individual’s behavior.

She feels that she has a greater understanding of human behavior and its range of manifestations, and is now more sensitive to pick up non-verbal cues or even non-articulated expressions. “I remember one instance in Asha Jyoti (HIV Care centre where she provides periodic counseling support), when a lady was just silent. But I could sense that she was under a great deal of distress, and gave her some space for expression. Finally, she just started crying, and then cried for a long time. But I think

that gave her great relief, and after that, she was able to articulate her problem, and we progressed in the counseling.”

She adds that she has imbibed important values like client self determination. “When I studied about social work principles, I understood the importance of values like client self-determination. Sometimes, I had a habit of actually giving out a solution to the problem, and maybe at some level forcing the solution. Now I am very conscious and watchful of my own behavior, to ensure that I ensure true self-determination.”

Deconstructing one's own prejudices

Kamalakshi looked forward to this course because she had not had an opportunity to explore subjects like psychology, sociology or human behavior at a theoretical level. "I was as eager as a child to learn, excited with every new lesson, always asking questions."

Kamalakshi feels that she has developed a lot of insights into human behavior following the modules on psychology, human growth and development. "I understood that multiple factors determine human behavior and there are stages in human growth where some behaviors are common. That has helped me deal with a lot of people. For instance, I used to always feel bad, because my father had a very bad temper. Now I understand the kind of stressors he has, physically, psychologically. He is also growing old. That has helped me to be more understanding, whenever he has an outburst. Similarly, after understanding about child development and the phases in children's lives. I have changed my expectations and behavior towards my adolescent children. Earlier, I used to want to control even the friends they have. I felt that they should not associate with low performing students, because it will affect their performance in school. Now I let them be. One son is in 10 std now, but I don't want to impose any decisions on him. I will let him follow what he chooses."

When I heard that one of the women in sex work with whom I had been involved in risk reduction counseling had later tested positive, I was frustrated. I felt that no matter what you tell them, these women don't change. Then when I reflected on it, I realized that I was taking one example and generalizing it to a whole group of people. Thus I was getting prejudiced against a group. Moreover, I was feeling bad because she had not changed her behavior. I did not focus on how to support her in her current condition, helping her deal with the diagnosis. After I realized this, I was able to help her in the initial phase of coping with the diagnosis.

She also feels she is able to understand social marginalization and its impact on people, especially in the context of women in sex work and sexual minorities, who are also her clients. More importantly, it helped her identify some of her own prejudices, which she did not even realize she had towards members of these groups. "We think because we have so much experience and engagement with these communities, we have overcome all our prejudices. But somewhere, we are all products of our own society, and we have internalized some prejudices, which will eventually show up. I have identified some of these in myself, and am overcoming them."



Kamalakshi works as a counselor in Asha Jyoti Care centre for people living with HIV. She has received basic training on counseling and supportive supervision.

Making Social Work Praxis a Reality

The course was envisaged to fill certain critical gaps in knowledge, understanding and practice of a group of counselors within Samraksha, who were practicing in various HIV related participatory programmes strengthening community capacity. The inputs which the participants brought in from their prior experience, training and education, became the foundation on which the course was built. The delivery of the course was an experiment in combining people with a range of experiences and educational attainments into a single group, with the assumption that the inputs they would bring from their education and experience would be complementary.

There were several challenges, stemming from the fact that this was a group of working individuals with their own work pressures, needing to travel several times a year for the theory and practical sessions, besides documenting the changes and learnings in their day to day work. Projects had deadlines and pressures and were sometimes unable to release the participants for 3-4 days for the training. Some projects phased out and staff left the organization. Some left for better opportunities.

Samraksha took a flexible stand on this course. All who joined the course could complete it, even if they were not part of Samraksha's project any more, as long as they kept up the practice. Even if they missed some sessions and were not eligible for the Certificate, they could still attend for the learning experience. If they had missed the practicals, they were given the chance to complete it within 6 months to get the Certificate. This resulted in 14 out of the 18 participants completing the course while some need to complete the practicals.

The participant-focused, outcome-based approach of the faculty was the cornerstone of the course. Their ability to draw connections from the various threads of experiences presented by the participants and to link them with theory transformed the learning into a highly personal and powerful experience. With an increasing emphasis today on the phenomenological approach and interactive adult learning that is peer based and experiential, this has been a useful experiment.

One of the core instruments in Social Work Practice is the Self. Social work education provides the background learning in psychology, sociology and allied disciplines to understand the context of "Self". However, large classrooms, limited personal supervision and early entry into subject specialization are often barriers to building a full exploration of the Self. Thus, despite the recognition that the use of Self is the most critical aspect of counseling, there is not adequate preparation in most of the Social Work courses currently being offered. This course has been useful in its experience of understanding theory and practice through exploration of personal and professional experiences.

Diverse participant profiles have been long considered as critical in several courses to stimulate cross learning and deepen learning experiences. This programme could really demonstrate that.

The Future

This approach offers possibilities for refresher courses for social work practitioners where they can refresh their theoretical knowledge and become familiar with emerging perspectives. This fresh look at theory after years of practice will bring a new understanding and reflection on human behavior, culture and society This will initiate a cycle of reflection, change and altered practice.

With fine-tuning and modifications, this course will be able to offer a great bridge between theory and practice, between formal education and lived experiences, beyond the HIV sector.

Samraksha started in 1993 as the HIV/AIDS sector of a larger developmental organization, Samuha. Now an independent trust, its goal continues to be to prevent the transmission of HIV and reduce its impact on the people vulnerable to and affected by it. Its current areas of operation are Raichur, Koppal, Gadag, Haveri, Dharwad and Uttara Kannada districts of Karnataka.

Samraksha believes that individuals and communities, if armed with information and power, can and will take responsibility to halt the spread of the epidemic. It believes that it is critical to empower entire communities to act.

It also believes that it is the right of every person living with HIV and AIDS to access care and support in public, private and social sector. It is the responsibility of individuals, communities, private sector and the State to ensure this. Its belief in a prevention to care continuum has led to a range of initiatives across this spectrum.

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