

UNDERSTANDING ABNORMAL BEHAVIOR: WEARING THE OTHER SHOE

Antonio E. Puente

University of North Carolina at Wilmington

This activity is suited for an abnormal or psychopathology course. No materials are needed. The instructor must devote time out of class coaching student volunteers and must be willing to set up appointments with other professionals whom the volunteers will interview. Volunteers will present skits on the day that the disorder they have researched is being introduced by the instructor.

CONCEPT

Students tend to form stereotypes about mental illness and to distance themselves from it rather than attempt to confront and understand this complex, abstract set of behaviors. One way to sensitize students to abnormal behavior is to have them view it from the perspective of the person who is mentally ill. This exercise is best applied in courses, such as psychopathology or abnormal psychology, where a series of lectures on abnormal behavior is presented.

MATERIALS NEEDED

Students should have access to texts and other outside resources that objectively describe abnormal behavior. Wherever possible, arrange interviews for students with professionals who are willing to discuss the challenge of viewing behavior from the standpoint of the client or the patient.

INSTRUCTIONS

This activity should precede the lectures on specific forms of abnormal behavior. Announce to the students that they may volunteer to participate in a research project that will culminate in a skit that uses role-playing to demonstrate abnormal behavior. Provide the volunteers with readings, appointments with mental health professionals, or both. Before students begin researching their topics, instruct the student volunteers as well as the class to write a brief paragraph describing their preconceived notions of the disorder to be studied. This serves as the pretest. The instructor should meet with the student volunteers to develop a game plan because, once confronted with the complexities of the task and the time between assignment and presentation, the volunteers may stray from their intended goals. Informal and intermittent contacts with students during the planning period provide the student with direction and support.

On the day of the lecture on a specific form of mental disorder, the student who has researched that disorder presents a 5–10 minute skit. A skit can be performed by a single student volunteer or by several volunteers who act out the roles of psychologist, parent, and friend as well as patient. The skit should depict typical behaviors seen in persons with that disorder. There should be at least one skit for each of the major disorders. Students from the audience may ask questions of the "patient."

It is important to point out that the instructor must be prepared to deal with inappropriate self-disclosure on the part of both the student actors and the rest of the class. This problem is best avoided by structuring a pre-skit discussion in which the importance of objectivity and the inappropriateness of a class as a setting for self-disclosure are addressed.

Once the skit has been completed, ask the class and the student volunteers to write a posttest paragraph describing their views of the disorder.

The paragraphs written in the pretest and posttest serve as the basis for the class discussion. The "patient" should discuss with the class how his or her views of the disorder changed as well as what was unusual about being a "patient." Encourage the students to compare how their original perception of the abnormal behavior changed as a function of the activity. Direct the class discussion to focus on a more accurate appreciation of disordered behavior while taking care to keep students from losing sight of their objectivity and from bringing up their own problems for discussion. While emphasizing that students should not act out personal problems they are experiencing, the instructor should also screen students who may identify closely with some disorder. An example is an anorexic student who volunteers to act out anorexia for the class. It is helpful to emphasize the distinction between acting and self-disclosing.

Participants and classmates alike should be encouraged to avoid stereotyping as a means to understand the complexities of abnormal behavior. Applicable ethical principles should be discussed at this point. Of special relevance are the issues of responsibility, objectivity, integrity, confidentiality, and, above all, the welfare of the patient.

DISCUSSION

SUGGESTED READING

Fadiman, J., & Kewman, D. (1979). *Exploring madness*. Monterey, CA: Brooks/Cole.

Gardner, N. (1974). *The shattered mind*. New York: Vintage.

Sechahay, M. (1951). *Autobiography of a schizophrenic girl*. New York: Signet.

Sheehan, S. (1982). *Is there no place on earth for me?* Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Spitzer, R. L., Skodol, A. E., Gibbon, M., & Williams, J. B. (1983). *Psychopathology: A case book*. New York: McGraw-Hill.