



Practice Learning Qualifications (Social Services) Communication Resource Development

Discussion of the supervision meeting – Stage 2

(i) Emotions & Feelings

Emotions and feelings are central to communication. The social psychologist Arlie Hochschild (1983) argues that for some professions, using feelings is actually part of the job which they are paid to do. So an ever-increasing number of workers, from flight attendants to social workers, are paid to smile, while at the same time disguising any feelings they may have of, for example, irritability or tiredness. Hochschild calls this 'emotional labour'. She makes a strong plea for naming our feelings; for getting in touch with the emotions and feelings which we suppress in our working lives, and listening to the cues in our bodies about how we are feeling. Only then will we be able to function authentically in our dealings with others.

In western societies, concepts of emotional self have commonly been gendered. So women are routinely expected to feel and express emotions more than men; men are seen as more cool, more logical and perhaps even stunted in their emotional lives. These are, of course, stereotypes of which we should be aware. They also, however, can lead us to behave in certain ways; women are 'allowed' to be 'more in touch with their feelings'.

People from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds may also express their emotions in different ways. So we might expect an Italian person to be demonstrative and flamboyant; likewise someone who has grown up in mainland China or rural Scotland may be expected to present themselves in a much more cautious, reserved way. But again, these stereotypes can be misleading, and it is important to keep as open a mind as we can on what facial expressions and body movements may be telling us.

(ii) Non-verbal communication

To unpack what someone's facial expressions and body movements are telling us, we turn to the subject of non-verbal communication. Koprowska (2005) points that differences in non-verbal communication may be:

- common to most people
- culturally determined
- related to impairment or mental state
- specific to this particular person and their frame of mind now
- or a consequence of interaction with us

It is important that in situations of unequal power relationships (such as in practice and in education), we need to think about what might be going on. Yet we are often not very good at taking notice of non-verbal cues.

Drawing from the work of Koprowska (2005), non-verbal cues may be:

- Facial expression – are often fluid, changing, and fleeting, so they can be difficult to interpret, but we look for these expressions as we speak in order to try to ‘read’ the listeners responses as we speak. You may notice that Jean plays close attention to Nazra’s facial expressions while she asks Nazra about her impact on Paul, as she senses that there will be an emotional response to what she is saying. Jean may use her own facial expressions consciously to convey information to Nazra e.g. smiling to convey ‘it’s all right’, whereas Nazra may be less aware of what her facial expressions are conveying due to concentrating on thinking what to say.
- Eye contact – Nazra comments on Paul’s lack of eye-contact with her, and she clearly finds this difficult. Thompson (1996) comments that ‘too little eye-contact can be problematic because there is a tendency for it be interpreted as one or more of the following: boredom/lack of interest; disapproval or antagonism; lack of confidence or assertiveness; or even shiftiness/ untrustworthiness’. In Paul’s situation, it may not have been any of these, but Nazra has no way of interpreting this non-verbal cue unless she seeks more information from Paul and from others who know Paul. She is also unaware, at this stage in her training, that research suggests that there are gender differences in the use of ‘gaze’ – that women use ‘gaze’ more than men (Henley 1995), so in an ordinary interaction she could expect Paul to look at her less than a woman service user might (depending, of course, on the individual woman).
- Posture & movement – we all ‘hold’ our bodies in a particular way during interactions with others, and the way we choose will communicate information to another person. For example, we did not see the interaction between Nazra and Paul, but we can guess that Nazra held herself ‘tightly’ and that she did not consciously try to relax her body – despite Paul’s own mood, he will probably have sensed her unease. This was part of the reason why Jean assessed that it was important for Nazra to learn to take more control of her body and gave her material on ‘grounding techniques’.
- Clothing and artefacts – at the start of Nazra’s practice learning she probably asked (as advised by the University) Jean about the ‘dress code’ that was expected within the organisation. Jean will have explained the variety of circumstances where she might dress more formally in order to communicate respect for the occasion/setting (e.g. in Court). You may have noticed that Nazra talked about Paul’s clothes, and she placed a meaning on what she thought his clothes communicated about his feelings – this might not have been accurate, but it was ‘information’ for Nazra. Also, you may have noticed Nazra started to fiddle with her watch strap when Jean started to ask her about her up-bringing, Jean might have noticed this and interpreted it as Nazra feeling some discomfort.
- Orientation – this refers to the way we face when we are speaking to another person. You may have noticed that in the supervision session Jean & Nazra are not sitting directly opposite each other; Jean has placed the seats purposefully in order that they are at an angle to each other which she hopes will feel less formal for Nazra. The issue of ‘orientation’ might have been another aspect of Paul’s non-verbal cues which Nazra found difficult – he did not face her, or speak directly to her when he spoke, and she could have found that she felt ‘invisible’ to

- him; her experiences to date could have led her to expect another person to acknowledge her presence when she is with the person.
- Proximity and the use of touch – in the circumstance of Paul's flat Nazra probably placed herself some distance from Paul, as this would have felt comfortable for her; if she had been visiting a woman service user she might have felt comfortable with less distance. There are culturally influenced 'rules' about how close we stand to each other in specific circumstances, and Nazra was aware of this to some degree when she talked about her comfort with proximity and touch in working with children. Thompson (1996) considers the use of touch to be very effective in the following circumstances: 'providing comfort & reassurance when a person is distressed; demonstrating solidarity; calming someone who is agitated; showing respect (e.g. a handshake); and praising or congratulating someone'. However, he adds that 'when it is used inappropriately or indiscriminately it can: invade privacy; embarrass; intimidate; destroy trust; or constitute sexual harassment'. We noticed with Nazra that she was able to reflect on her experiences with men in distress and this did not appear to include use of touch, so Jean would have to take this learning into account when assisting Nazra to develop an array of professional skills – she might have to assist Nazra to provide through her verbal behaviour what might for someone else be comfortable to provide through non-verbal cues.