Developing Interpersonal Skills through a Dyadic Relationship

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Wilkinson and Pickett’s book, The Spirit Level, effectively touched on the one thing that, I feel, kept me from truly appreciating my partner’s and I’s dyadic relationship this quarter. The roadblock to this appreciation was the anxiety I had developed over our (seemingly) unequal distributions of power. However, now that I have stepped away from the dyad, I have been able to reflect not on what was lacking, but what I realized I should have done/didn’t realize where being done to prevent and end the inequality. These methods include “helping strategies”, interpersonal awareness and practice of interpersonal skills, and understanding the smaller and larger systems that affect us. This paper will discuss those insights and more.

When it came to “helping strategies” that were utilized in our time together, I (though sloppily) used only a small handful, admittedly. At the beginning of the project, we (my partner and I) had the initial meeting where I mentioned several suggestions and discussed some of the needs I have when it comes to accountability and communication with projects. I specifically mentioned the need for constant updates and sharing information—aka not leaving each other out of the loop. I also took this opportunity to make my own faults clear. I told my partner that if they don’t communicate with me, I get paranoid that they don’t see me as being an effective enough member to share information with. That is a big barrier I am forever trying to cross when it comes to group projects. The last need I discussed was equality. It is so important to me that everyone does their equal share. Along with the initial meeting, we had an hour every week to “check-in” with each other. I will be the first to admit that the self-regulated “check-ins” were nonexistent. There were times when I would have liked to at least talk with her about the project for a few minutes. However, sometimes I got into the habit of leaving for other activities and she always managed to sneak out of the classroom first every week. Without those “check-ins”, we lacked a lot of mixed communication; most of it was verbal, or, by text and email. Even the texts and emails were rare. So, when it came time to discuss our assessments of each other, we were both in a predicament. I had entered into my state of paranoia and my partner—I honestly don’t even know where she was or is at. So, I discussed that with my partner. I discussed not knowing what to assess with our lack of interaction and I mentioned a few of the things I wanted to improve upon within our dyad (namely having actual interactions and communicating in a mixed fashion). She agreed that it was hard to write the paper, but when it came time to share her needs, she said nothing. She didn’t even pull out her assessment paper. In my paranoia, I assumed she’s criticized me in it and was nervous to share, so instead of fighting against that fear, I flew. Neither of us exchanged our full assessments, thus communication remained difficult. I felt that I had tried, even in my stressful state. My partner, on the other hand, did not communicate with me what her needs were, never partook in check-ins, and did not share her assessment paper (nor the contents at the very least) at all. She sat quietly and shook her head in agreement, but not once did she clearly state the things I needed to hear.

It could have been me not registering what she was communicating. In fact, I know that was a big piece. However, even with our struggles, I was able to gain some interpersonal awareness about myself as well as what interpersonal skills I have and what needs to be improved upon. In the article, True Partnership, something called “The Drift” was mentioned. This “drift” is the movement from looking at a dyad in the “we” tense, and being fully equal, to “me” and “they” tenses, accompanied by a lack of trust and an arsenal of blame (Zaiss, 2002). A “drift” is exactly what occurred in our dyad. Through our interactions (and lack thereof), I realized where we were both failing. We were failing at being a partnership *together*. It wasn’t just me and it wasn’t just her. *We*’d set up our plan-of-action for the project so that it could be done individually. *We*’d gone about our own business and given ourselves our own deadlines. *We* did not do anything together. This was by far the hardest lesson I learned this quarter. I’d fallen so far into “the Drift” that I didn’t realize I was there until the project was over. It is sad that I had not started earlier, but as of right now, I am practicing the interpersonal skills necessary to prevent such an event from happening again. I am paraphrasing, parroting, and asking pointed, but flexible, clarifying questions. In a non-negative way, I am developing a pushiness. A pushiness for unity.

A lot of outside forces influenced the development of our working relationship, both small and large. While I am not aware of all of Mariah’s smaller systems, I had some obvious affecters on our relationship throughout the project—namely, from my family system. Two large events occurred during our project that restricted meeting the child and their adoptive family and collaborating on the Life Books. The first was the baptism of my nephew. This was an event I was required to attend (and one I would never, for the life of me, want to miss). Unfortunately, this event occurred on the best day for my partner in regards to meeting the family. Besides that, it required me to leave town for the weekend, thus we had no opportunity for face-to-face contact. The second event within my family system was the death of my uncle. I’d known he was dying all quarter. A week before our poster presentations were due, I received a call stating that he was going to die that weekend (or so the hospice care workers strongly believed). Instead of staying in Bellingham to collaborate on finishing our poster and our Life Book, I once again left town for family. Other small systems were not as intrusive upon our working relationship. DSFS and the YMCA were, for me, two smaller systems that kept our fragile relationship working, even if just by a little. The DSFS was the organization we worked with in order to make the Life Books. They had a room available for working on the projects and were the source for all the information about the child. Even if we never really used the resource except for a total of three times, its very existence was effective. My partner and I also shared the smaller system of the YMCA. I had been a previous employee and my partner was a current employee of the Child Care-section of the organization. My awareness of how much time and energy such a job takes and my experience with such gave me something to relate to with my partner, thus allowing small talk (even if it was just one-sided most of the time). Along with smaller systems, we had larger systems that influenced our relationship. These include, but are not limited to, the foster care and adoption system and our individual socioeconomic statuses. The foster care and adoption system, simply by existing, is the reason our project was able to ever occur. Thus, the reason we may or may not have had any communication and relationship building. More than that, however, our socioeconomic statuses affected the relationship. My partner has a job, whereas I do not. Beyond that, I do not know her socioeconomic status. What I do know is she did all her work from home, with her own supplies and I had to rely upon the DSFS’s supplies in the Life Book room. These differing statuses caused a huge wall in our communication and relationship building because it removed our in-person communication opportunities.

Though, at times, our dyad was a struggle and we often missed opportunities to improve upon it, there were many memorable moments during our time together. As a recap, my partner and I worked on Life Books with DSFS. There are three moments that come immediately to mind that I might never forget. The first was not getting the correct files and not realizing it for the entire first week. Our case worker, Shaun, was out of town and away from his email. Without that ability to communicate, we had to assume that the case files were correct—though having the case file of a teenage girl when we were supposed to have one for an 8-year old boy should have prompted us immediately to ask for clarification if the case files were correct. The second memorable moment was meeting the child we were going to work for. This young, 8-year old boy was a bright child full of potential the size of the world over. He was funny, bright, and incredibly charismatic. At the same time, he was very anxious around us. We were there because he was a foster child getting adopted. Based on his case file, his life prior had been very rough. I can only imagine the uncomfortable feelings that talking about yourself, with those memories, can bring out. Still, it was a memorable experience that I’ll never forget. A third memorable experience was the day my partner and I met to complete our poster. We met in the Life Book room of the DSFS office. This room is connected to a conference room—only a foldable wall separates them. On that day, a conference was taking place and the wall would not close fully. We ended up hearing an entire case meeting between professionals working on a foster care adoption case. This also happened to be the case of another Life Book group from our class. It was both interesting and uncomfortable for me. I felt this way because I felt like I should not have heard all the details that were divulged about this particular case. At the same time, I knew that I would be professional and never share the details that I heard. Plus, I had an (almost) front-row seat to experience that style of case work. The conflict between my emotions made this experience memorable.

To conclude, I want to say that I struggled to enjoy my dyadic experience. It’s hard to discuss relationship building and strengths when the majority of the time was spent solo and negative experiences are more prominent. As I stated earlier, I am still working on recovering from the “the Drift” that occurred for me this quarter. I hope to continue recovering, improving, and never falling so far into such a state for future partnerships that I experience.

Reference

Wilkinson, R. & Pickett, K. (2010). *The Spirit Level: Why Greater Equality Makes Societies Stronger.* Bloomsbury Press.

Zaiss, C. D. (2002). *True partnership: Revolutionary thinking about relating to others*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.