

PROCESS RECORDING: A TOOL FOR STUDENT EDUCATION

Process (narrative) recording is a specialized and highly form of recording. Everything that takes place in an interview is recorded using an "I said then he said" style. In effect, the social worker writes down everything that would have been heard or observed had a tape recorder and camera been monitoring the interview. Most process recording uses direct quotes:

W (worker): How are you?

C (client): I'm fine, how are you?

Comments about client behavior or feelings experienced by the social worker are recorded in a separate column. Using a self-expressive style- "I felt annoyed because..." - or a more summary style- "Mrs. Jones looked like she wasn't feeling very well." There is also a kind of process recording that paraphrases and summarizes what was said rather than record it exactly as it took place: "I asked Mrs. Jones how she was feeling and she said she was fine." The use of direct quotes is preferable.

Process recording used to be the accepted mode for daily social work practice. In the early 1900s there was a feeling that "social investigations" had to be thorough, and the client was often viewed as the least trustworthy source of information. It was considered important to verify and double-check almost everything, and completely detailed records were essential to this process.

The picture has changed dramatically today. Clients are regarded as persons with needs, feelings, and certain basic rights. Consumers of social work services must be treated with dignity and respect, and their views and feelings are solicited and listened to. Recording has changed along with the philosophy of social work practice. It is briefer and more goal-oriented. Unfortunately, the pendulum has swung to an extreme position. Whereas process recording was once used almost exclusively, it is now looked down upon. This is a mistake. Process recording is a very valuable tool for enhancing student learning if it is properly used. Abuse of it, combined with present-day distrust of the old philosophy of social work practice, has created a real aversion to process recording.

One might ask why so much space in this text is devoted to a discussion of process recording when there are so many better and more modern ways of teaching. The answer is simple: reality. We all know that tape recording, videotaping, and other techniques can be used creatively, dynamically, and effectively in student teaching. But how many settings actually have this equipment, and how many have tape recorders stored in the dark recesses of some back cupboard and don't even use the technology available to them? In reality, process recording ends up being the only practical method that even comes close to direct observation of what takes place in student interviews. Thus it might as well be used as creatively and dynamically as possible, but with full awareness of its limitations and the cautions that must be observed.

INFORMATION THAT SHOULD GO INTO PROCESS RECORDINGS

Well-done process recordings usually contain the following elements:

1. Identifying information: The name of the worker or student, the date of the interview, and the client's name and/or identifying number. It may be helpful to state the number of the interview (i.e., "fourth contact with Mrs. Smith").

2. A word-for-word description of what happened, as well as the student can remember. For example:

I told Mr. Garcia. "In order to find out what kind of work you might be able to do. You will be seen by the psychiatrist as well as the physician."

Mr. Garcia said. "Psychiatrist? What do you mean?"

This student has chosen to spell out "I told Mr. Garcia" and "Mr. Garcia said." An abbreviated style is preferred, using "W" for "worker" and "C" for "client." Quotation marks are not necessary.

W: In order to find out what kind of work you might be able to do, you will be seen by the psychiatrist as well as the physician.

C: Psychiatrist? What do you mean?

3. A description of any action or nonverbal activity that occurred. For example:

I invited Mr. Garcia into my office and asked him to sit down. He did so slowly and just seen there starting at the floor.

W: How are you feeling today Mr. Garcia?

It took him a long time to answer but he finally raised his head looked at me and said.

C: I feel terrible.

Before I had time to say or do anything he rose up out of his chair, started pacing around the room and was shouting that there was nothing wrong with him mentally and that he "didn't need to see no psychiatrist."

4. The student's feelings and reactions to the client and to the interview as it takes place. This requires that the recorder put into writing his unspoken thoughts and reactions as the interview is going on. In the interview with Mr. Garcia, for example, the next few sentences might read:

At this point I began to feel a little uneasy. Mr. Garcia seemed to be getting awfully up; and I didn't know why. I was a little frightened and wondered what he would do next and I didn't know what to say.

5. The social worker's observations and analytical thoughts regarding what has been happening during the interview. Most experienced interviewers think to themselves constantly during an interview - "What should I do next? I wonder how it would affect the client if I said such-and-such? Why is he acting this way? I wonder what he really meant by that statement? That seems to contradict what he told me earlier. He said he felt happy but he certainly didn't look it." In process recording, all these silent thoughts are put into writing. If the example of the contact with Mr. Garcia were continued, the next few lines might read as follows:

I was a little puzzled and wondered what to do next. I didn't know whether I should let shout and get it out of his system or whether I should try and calm him down. I was curious he was getting so upset but I didn't dare ask him any questions because I was afraid of getting him even more upset. I finally decided I had better show some empathy since he would probably argue and disagree with most anything I said anyway about the psychiatrist.

W: I can see that something about the idea of going to a psychiatrist is very upsetting to you.

C: (turning and looking straight at me): You bet it is. I've been to those headshrinkers be and I've had it with them.

As soon as Mr. Garcia said that a lot of questions came to my mind about his past history and knew he had opened the door for me to talk with him about this.

Another example of the worker's analysis and observations during the process recording might be as follows:

I asked Mrs. Jones if she had any income other than what she gets from our financial assistant program. She said not. She seemed very nervous thought as she told me this. She was sitting uncomfortably on the edge of her chair: she had scarf in her hands that she kept winding around her fingers and she couldn't seem to sit still. She seemed so nervous that it made me wonder if she was telling me the truth or not. I asked her again. "Are you sure you don't have any other income?"

6. A "Diagnostic Summary" or paragraph on the "Worker's Impressions" at the end of the process recording. Here the worker should summarize his analytical thinking about the entire interview he has just recorded.

7. "Social Service Plan." "Casework Plan." Or "Treatment Plan" immediately following the diagnostic summary statement. It indicates the worker's and client's goals for further social service contacts.

MAKING A PROCESS RECORDING

The most efficient way for the student to write down his process recording is to use legal-sized paper, dividing each page lengthwise into three equal columns. * The page would look something like this:

SUPERVISORY COMMENTS	CONTENT-DIALOGUE	GUT-LEVEL FEELINGS
In this column the supervisor can make remarks right opposite the interaction or gut-level feelings that have been recorded.	Record word for word what happened during the interview, including both verbal and nonverbal communication. Be certain to include third-person participants, interruptions, and other Occurrences that were not part of the planned interview.	Right opposite the dialogue, record how <u>You</u> were feeling as the activity or verbal interchange was taking place. <u>Do not Use this column to analyze the client's reactions</u> – use it to identify and look at <u>your feelings</u> . Be as open and honest as you can and don't worry about having to use any special professional language tell it as you feel it.

Some students either have difficulty understanding the purpose of the "gut-level feelings" column or feel so uncomfortable putting their own feelings in writing that they use this third column to comment on the client's feelings and reactions (see Chapter 6, Example 3). It is often helpful in this instance to use a four-column method, with the fourth column headed "analysis." This forces the recorder to differentiate between his feelings and his analysis, and also encourages his budding diagnostic thinking skills. (See Chapter 6, Example 4. For an illustration of process recording using the four-column method.)

PURPOSES OF PROCESS RECORDING

Process recording is not practical or desirable as a method of social work recording for daily practice, but it is an effective way of helping students learn interviewing skills. Students must have experience with other types of recording as well – writing summaries, special histories, and diagnostic statements. Otherwise they will graduate with unrealistic, unworkable concepts about social work recording and will be unable to meet recording expectations of the agencies that hire them.

*The exact titles for the headings of these three columns may vary somewhat or be abbreviated. This is acceptable, as long as each column is used in the manner described here.

Process recording is often used to help supervisors determine how their students are functioning and to identify areas where effective techniques are being utilized as well as areas where guidance is needed. It is especially important for field instructors to determine the student's capabilities in order to develop an educational training plan that will give him the experiences he needs to acquire the desired skills. Similarly, process recording can be used as an evaluative tool for staff. Supervisors may ask newly hired staff to process record a few interviews so that they can get an idea of how the worker operates. While process recording is not so complete or accurate as tape recording or videotaping as a method for achieving direct observation, it is a useful tool that produces less anxiety in the student. Since it provides him with greater control over what aspects of verbal and nonverbal communication will be revealed to the supervisor. That process recording allows for some selectivity is not usually seen as a positive factor, but it often works that way for the student. It is not always desirable or necessary for supervisors and field instructors to know everything that takes place in the student's interviews, and the selective factor in process recording can work to their benefit as well.

Detailed recordings can prove threatening for a supervisor. Beginning students will inevitably make mistakes. Few will do outright harm to their clients (consumers are quite tough!), but the interaction between beginning practitioner and client can be expected to be awkward at times. The supervisor can become overwhelmed if everything in a beginning student's first interview seems wrong, and he doesn't know where to begin to teach him.

Process recording provides added security for both the agency and the new worker or student. If the person process records in appropriate detail exactly what has taken place during interviews, the agency is kept informed of his activities. This makes it relatively easy for the supervisor to give appropriate guidance and prevent serious mishandling of case. It also permits the supervisor to intervene in situations the novice might be unable to handle.

Students often express some anxiety over the possibility that they may harm a client. Through ignorance, it is possible for a student to react inappropriately, assume an improper role, commit himself unwisely to something, or fail to pick up the real meaning of what is happening. But if a supervisor is keeping close track of the student's activities and there is reasonably good communication between student and field instructor, major mishaps can be avoided. Very rarely do students maliciously attack their clients. * Supervisor and field instruction approaches that rely solely on the student's telling the supervisor where guidance is needed are usually ineffective. Some students provide only selective feedback. I more often, learners provide open, honest recordings, knowing that they may elicit a critical response from the supervisor. However, many students sincerely say that they see no problem areas in an interview because they do not yet have enough knowledge of human behavior and treatment skills to be aware that something needs attention desperately.

In process recording, students are asked to write down everything they can remember, as opposed to summary recording (Chapters 7-11). Where only the highlights are noted. This means that if a student considers something unimportant, he may not include it in his summary, and the field instructor could be totally unaware of a key dynamic that might affect the entire case situation. If the student is required to write down everything he can remember about what took place, he will usually come back with enough to give the supervisor a fairly complete picture.

Example 1 in Chapter 6 illustrates this point rather dramatically. The client was a suspected drug user and the student aggressively pursued this possible presenting problem. At one point he wrote down a statement that indicates the possible existence of a disturbed mother-son relationship. It would be obvious to the experienced

*See Chapter 6, Example 19, for an ineffective but harmless interview by a beginning student, as opposed to Example 20, where the student actually harms his client.

* See Suanna J. Wilson, *Field Instruction: Techniques for Supervisors* (New York: Free Press, 1980), for a detailed discussion of techniques field instructors can use to assess student work. Many additional examples of student process recordings, both with and without supervisory comments, are also provided.

Reader that this must be affecting the client deeply in many areas of his life. However, the student failed to pick up the significance of the client's statement. When this was discussed with him, he stated that he included it because in process recording he knew he was required to write down everything, but admitted that if he had been using the summary style he would probably not have considered the patient's statement significant enough to report to his supervisor. This is understandable and "normal" for a beginning student who has had little formal training in the psychodynamics of human behavior. However, the use of process recording enabled the supervisor to provide much-needed direction and a rich learning experience for the student. In this instance, part of the learning revolved around recognition of the student's professional limitations, which required that the case be transferred to an MSW-level individual who could assess and deal with the underlying psychodynamics.

Process reading, if done using the three-column method suggested here, can increase the student's self-awareness and help him differentiate among factual data (what actually took place in the interviews, his own gut-level reactions to what was occurring, and an objective analysis of what took place. The act of putting personal feelings into writing is an important step toward achieving self-awareness in the new role of professional helping person, and enables the student to talk more freely about his own feelings and how they can affect service delivery. On a more advanced conceptual level, the process can be invaluable in the identification and examination of transference and countertransference (see Chapter 6, Example 17).

Process recording is used by experienced practitioners in special situations. Occasionally something so unusual will take place that the worker does not want to try to summarize it and apply diagnostic labels. Instead, he may prefer to describe the situation as it occurred and let the reader draw his own conclusions. On the other hand, the worker making a complex diagnostic assessment may include brief excerpts of process recording to illustrate interactions and behaviors that support the analyses. In many settings supervision or consultation is offered to advanced practitioners on an as-needed basis. If the worker is facing or has had an unusually difficult interview, he may process record it deliberately to solicit feedback from peers or supervisory staff. In effect he is using them as a sounding board to test his own reactions and assessments of what took place in the interview. Tape recording is also used for this purpose and is usually preferred by the advanced practitioner.

Students sometimes compare their process recordings in a kind of informal peer consultation. This can be helpful, but it also has a major pitfall. If the student who is acting as the "consultant" also has limited experience and/or training, the consultation can easily become a sharing of ignorance.

There are a few settings (e.g., programs granting financial assistance) where it is important to document in detail who said what, how, and exactly what took place. In a fraud or protective services investigation, for example, the client's exact words in response to certain key questions could be very important. Staff and students functioning in settings that require this modified version of process recording usually receive special instructions.

Process recordings do not become part of the permanent case record but remain the property of the agency. They should be collected by the field instructor when their purpose has been accomplished. It is often advisable for the field instructor to save the first few recordings done by the student at the beginning of field placement and then let him compare them with his work at the end of placement. This can present an effective, and sometimes startling picture of the student's growth. *

Wilson, Suanna J., "Process Recording: A Tool for Student Education," RECORDING GUIDELINES FOR SOCIAL WORKERS. The Free Press, New York, 1980. pp. 18-22.

*See Chapter 6, Example 7 and 8. For example of "before" and "after" recording.

