Internship Final Paper

For my final semester as a psychology student, I proposed to do a 10-hour per week internship at the residential mental health facility called Cooper Riis. The values and philosophy behind Cooper Riis are similar to those of Warren Wilson; both organizations emphasize the importance of community and holism. I was introduced to Cooper Riis through my Theories and Techniques of Counseling and Psychotherapy course, taught by Dr. Robert Swoap, Ph.D. Theories and Techniques served as gateway for my opportunity to intern at Cooper Riis by acquainting me with basic therapeutic concepts and skills, like empathic listening. Following Theories and Techniques, I took Dr. Swoap’s Advanced Counseling Practicum course, where I spent an hour a week counseling an individual living at physical health rehabilitation facility. The theoretical approach that I utilized in working with my client was basic supportive psychotherapy, drawing from David G. Martin’s (2010) *Counseling & Therapy Skills*. Through my experiences in Advanced Counseling Practicum, I learned how important it was to have a solid foundation of trust in order for my client to feel safe in expressing her emotions honestly. While my internship was not clinically based, I found it to be relevant for the residents to be able to trust me and feel safe while working with me. Advanced Counseling Practicum also taught me the significance of being mindful when working in a supportive and therapeutic environment; I employed this for my internship at Cooper Riis, through being nonjudgmental and accepting. My experiences at Stone Creek reinforced that I was capable of effectively working with individuals with mental illnesses, as well as that I could be of some help to them. I was initially
attracted towards working at Cooper Riis because of their holistic approach to mental health recovery; such is evident within their mission statement:

Our healing mission is to enable individuals, whose lives are impeded by mental illness or emotional distress, to develop their capabilities for creativity, wholeness, relationship and optimal health, so that they can achieve their highest levels of fulfillment and functioning and respond productively to their future challenges and opportunities for growth. ("Our mission statement")

Cooper Riis has two campuses; their original farm campus in Mill Spring, North Carolina that first opened in 2003, and their urban campus in the Montford area of Asheville, North Carolina that opened in 2009. Because I was also taking other classes and working at Warren Wilson, I interned at the Asheville location, or as the community calls it “85z”; however, both campuses have the same admissions criteria and recovery philosophy. Since opening the farm campus, residents have come to Cooper Riis from 4 different countries and 38 different states. The 85z campus can house up to 24 residents at a time, with the average length of stay being 6 to 9 months, although it tends to vary greatly per resident. Residents have to be at least 18 years old and must be able to function as a responsible community member. Residents are also initially assessed to make sure they’re not at risk of harm toward themselves or others, and if there have been previous issues surrounding drug abuse, residents have to demonstrate that those behaviors have ceased. Common diagnoses include schizophrenia, depression and anxiety disorders, bipolar disorder, and various personality disorders.
The recovery philosophy behind Cooper Riis is based off of the idea that individuals with ongoing mental health issues and/or emotional distress undergo a recovery process similar to individuals who experience other ongoing health issues, like diabetes; they believe that mental health recovery is an “evolving process that involves gradual and sometimes uneven progress over the course of time” ("Recovery philosophy"). The foundation of Cooper Riis’ holistic approach toward mental health recovery stems from the work of Cooper Riis psychologist, Dr. Sharon Young, PhD, who created the Enhanced Recovery Model that outlined the three different phases of the mental health recovery process: The Initial Phase, The Middle Phase, and The Third Phase.

According to Dr. Young, the Initial Phase of recovery is “characterized by achieving a stable sense of acceptance of one’s illness as opposed to the pre-recovery state of minimization and denial” (p. 4). Dr. Young also noted how important it is for an individual with a mental health condition to spend time in the preceding stage of denial that anything is wrong, and how it’s common for such individuals to go back and forth between feeling acceptance and denial of their issues before finally moving into the Initial stage.

The Middle Phase of mental health recovery is “characterized by multiple processes including discovering and fostering a sense of empowerment, gathering new perspectives about oneself and one’s illness, and returning to a level of basic functioning that may have been left behind due to one’s symptoms” (Young, p. 4). The characteristics of the The Middle Phase reminded me of when I interviewed one of the residents at Cooper Riis, and he expressed to me how he felt that he had stopped developing his social and life skills when he was 25 years old because of the severity of his symptoms of schizophrenia. The resident went on to tell me about
how he’s been trying to catch up with re-learning those skills, like with setting and gauging boundaries within his social interactions.

The Third Phase of recovery “entails striving for and attaining a stable sense of wellbeing and a better quality of life” (Young, p. 4). Within these past few months, I feel that I have witnessed residents transition between these stages. When a resident reaches the Third Phase, and is ready to take the step next in their recovery process, whether it’s going back home or moving into Cooper Riis’ community program, a transitioning circle is held. Transitioning circles are where the community gets together and shares how that resident has impacted them, and memories of their successes, reflecting on the resident’s overall journey at Cooper Riis.

Distilled from Dr. Young’s research, there were 7 domains outlined that are meant to facilitate mental health recovery and support a healthy, proactive lifestyle. The first domain is Social/Community/Connectedness, which “refers to one’s ability to connect to others in a healthy, balanced, and functional manner” (Young, 6). The notion of community is fundamental to Cooper Riis, and is enforced throughout the multiple aspects of their program. For example, when a person applies for a staff position at Cooper Riis, a community-processing meeting is held, where residents and staff get together and ask the potential employee a variety of questions.

The second domain, Spirituality, “refers to one’s sense of inner peace and harmony,” as described by Dr. Young. Because spirituality is often highly individual, Cooper Riis supports all of its residents’ spiritual backgrounds and choices. At 85z, this is often promoted through the nature of the morning wellness activities, which range from tai chi to going on a walk. Cooper Riis also has a centering room that has a variety of books related to spirituality as well as yoga mats and a sound machine that plays ambient music.
The third domain is Purpose/Productivity/Fulfillment, which “refers to the sense of accomplishment and fulfillment that derives from meaningful and rewarding activities” (Young 6). This domain is fostered through Cooper Riis’ Life Skills program, where residents note that they’ve regained a sense of purpose, through being a contributing member to the community.

The Empowerment/Independence domain “refers to the development of attitudes and behaviors that foster increased independence and an increased sense of control over one’s life and one’s recovery process,” as described by Dr. Young (p.6). During the first week of my internship, I was going downstairs into the community space, where I found myself walking right into Cooper Riis’ Envisioning Day. Envisioning day is when the residents and staff go over what they like, what they didn’t like, and where they felt there could be improvement for each of the 7 domains. I feel like Envisioning Day promotes a sense of empowerment for the residents by giving them a chance to express how they feel about the certain aspects of the Cooper Riis program in a way that is constructive and healthy. Empowerment and independence is also fostered at Cooper Riis through the residents working towards a point where they are allowed to self-administer their medications.

The fifth domain, Emotional/Psychological Health “refers to an overall sense of well-being and emotional stability” (Young, p. 7). This domain is about developing effective coping strategies and knowing when to use them. Achievements are marked by a decrease reliance on the use of medications and an increase sense of personal and emotional awareness.

The Physical Wellness domain “refers to one’s ability to take care of basic physical needs such as hygiene and healthy sleep patterns as well as other like regular exercise and a healthy diet” (Young, p. 7). Physical wellness is promoted through providing opportunities for the residents to engage in healthy activities, like yoga, meditation, trips to the YMCA, acupuncture,
and massage therapy. It’s also embedded in their emphasis on nutritional health; the food served at Cooper Riis is often either from the farm campus or from the garden at 85z, and if not, it’s still organic and local. Also, all residents receive nutritional counseling when they first arrive at Cooper Riis in order to help them find a diet that supports their individual health needs.

The Intellectual/Learning/Creativity domain “refers to the willingness and desire to learn and to challenge oneself mentally and creatively” (Young, p. 7). In just walking through the Cooper Riis building, one could see how this domain is exemplified. Unlike what I’ve seen in other mental health residency programs, 85z is brightly and festively decorated, making it feel much more like a home rather than a place people go because they’re sick. The creative styling of 85z remind me of Maria Montessori, a developmental theorist whose work has positively impacted early childhood education, because of her belief that a beautiful and orderly environment was just as important as the books a teacher choose for their classroom in stimulating and promoting educational growth and creativity (Mooney, 2005). Of course, I don’t imply that the residents are in any way childlike, however I do resonate with the idea that a beautiful environment is encouraging for creativity. Also, 85z takes advantage of being located in the artistically expressive city of Asheville; some of the off campus outings have involved touring the buildings down in the River Arts District as well as viewing local art shows.

The 7 domains are all integrated throughout various aspects of the CR community, and can mean different things for each resident, and some residents may be more focused in one domain over another.

With each of the 7 domains, residents create long and short-range goals that they work with their team on throughout their time at Cooper Riis. This comes together in the form of a resident’s dream statement. When written, a dream statement is usually about a paragraph in
length, and it’s the resident’s overarching dream for their future. Within each domain, residents list their goals that are to help them work towards their overall dream statement. Residents also list their strategies for achieving that goal (this is what I can do). Then residents list strategies that the community can do to help them succeed towards their goals. Finally, a resident will list their target date for goal completion and assign domain representatives, who are community members requested to periodically check in with the resident about how they’re doing, or for extra support.

The 7 domains and the residents’ dream statements are reinforced and utilized through Cooper Riis’ Life Skills program. Similar to Warren Wilson’s triad, residents spend a set number of hours a week working on a life skills crew, volunteering at local organizations, and/or taking college courses/ finishing their GED. Residents have the choice of five different work crews: Kitchen, Housekeeping, Garden, Maintenance, or the Art crew, which is the crew that I was a part of. For our community service activity, we would go to Brother Wolf once a week and spend a few hours helping them out by cleaning the kennels or walking a dog. I also knew of a few residents who were taking a class at AB tech or UNCA, however Cooper Riis doesn’t encourage their residents to take any more then 6 credit hours, in order for them to still be able to focus on their recovery process.

There are several themes of the Life Skills program that contribute to a resident’s recovery process, including: confidence/self-esteem, responsibility, connectedness/team work, learning, and structure/healthy patterns. Within the Life Skills program, residents can use their past work experiences and knowledge to gain new skills while being in a safe setting for them to practice their interpersonal skills. Also, residents at 85z often go off campus into the Asheville community where they again are able practice their social skills, but in a way that could push
them out of their comfort zone, creating an opportunity for growth. Life Skills teaches responsibility through their work crews, where it is important for residents to show up in order for all of the required tasks to be completed. Staff members keep track of residents’ levels of participation in Life Skills, and the residents that participate 90% of the time are rewarded once a month by taking off from work and going on a fun outing with the staff. In doing so, participation is rewarded on a social level, which I feel could potentially motivate other residents to aspire towards a higher level of participation.

Life Skills creates a feeling of teamwork and connectedness for the residents through being part of a group that experiences success and achievements. Many days the other Art Crew staff member would cheer “art crew, yeah!” to the residents as they would come into the art room after lunch, much like you’d hear from a sports fan cheering on their team at a game. Life Skills facilitates learning for the residents, leading them to further self-discovery and inspiring new ideas. Learning also entails gaining more practical skills like sewing, or general skills, like better time management. And lastly, Life Skills gives the residents a sense of stability and normalcy, through having a daily routine and a consistent schedule.

Life Skills is a crucial part of the Cooper Riis program, as one resident expressed to me: “Life Skills keeps me engaged. I look at it like a job and it’s getting me ready for when I go back to work. I’m able to integrate my developing leadership skills like today the dishes needed to be done so I took the initiative and just did them. It’s an opportunity to practice skills that would help one be successful in the real world.” And much like the domains, Life Skills can help a resident in a way that’s meaningful for them; evident when another resident expressed, “I really took the life skills program on. I was a workaholic before I came to Cooper Riis and now I’ve learned how to enjoy work.”
As I’ve previously mentioned, I was a part of the Art Crew, and I was considered a “Life Skills Support Staff,” meaning that one of my responsibilities was to assist in leading a Life Skills crew. I was originally put on the Maintenance crew but after a few weeks I was moved to the Art Crew because they needed another staff member for their community service outings; participating in such outings was another one of my duties as a Life Skills Support Staff. I was also to help support the residents in completing crew tasks by demonstrating, educating, and working alongside the group while ensuring that the residents were set up for safety and success.

I worked with the Art Crew on Monday afternoons, whereas my other shift was on Friday evenings, where my role ran more parallel to the tasks of the Hall Advisors. Every other Friday, the residents would go on a Necessities Trip to a grocery store in Asheville so that they could purchase goods for themselves that weren’t provided by Cooper Riis, like tooth paste or candy. As a staff member, I was to come along on these trips to help particular residents with making healthy, appropriate decisions. Other evening outings consisted of going to the movies or the bookstore, and playing intramural soccer. When we didn’t go on outings, staff and residents would hold activities like playing a board game or leading a knitting circle. Some evenings I found myself going for a walk with one of the residents or lounging with them, sharing stories. Either way, I was to role model healthy and positive behaviors while being open and supportive for the residents.

Another important aspect of my internship at Cooper Riis was participating in the staff trainings and meetings. Before I could work with a resident one-on-one, I had to attend a Nonviolent Crisis Intervention training session; an 8-hour class that taught the staff how to identify behaviors that could lead to a crisis and the most effective ways to respond to such behaviors in order to prevent situations from escalating. I also participated in a 3-hour training
session called Clinical Orientation, which addressed topics like confidentiality of the residents, setting boundaries, and how to support a resident who’s experiencing anger, agitation, or who is experiencing hallucinations. In addition to the training sessions, I attended the weekly Qualified Mental Health Persons meetings, where the Life Skills staff would discuss relevant issues and concerns within each crew and some techniques and ideas that we could utilize to combat those issues. I also had to regularly meet with my academic and intern supervisors to check in with how things were going. Furthermore, I kept a hand-written journal to document my progress and to reflect on and process my experiences at Cooper Riis.

Throughout my time at Cooper Riis, I noticed several connections between my experiences there and what I’ve learned academically at Warren Wilson. From my Skills of Helping Others course, I was taught some important concepts that I applied to my interactions with the residents and staff, like providing feedback; I would often validate the successes of a resident by telling them specific things I liked about their work. I was also enrolled in Abnormal Psychology during the span of my internship, and I was often able to pair my classroom material with what I experienced at Cooper Riis. Through previously taking all of the developmental psychology courses at Warren Wilson, I had experience working with most age groups, however young to middle aged adults wasn’t one of them. Therefore, one of the original goals of my internship was to explore what it is like working with individuals in that age range. I also appreciated the opportunity I had to be able to work in a place that supported such an array of disorders.

Interning at Cooper Riis served as a wonderful introduction to what working in the “real world” may be like. After taking Professional Issues in Psychology, I realized all of the work that went into applying for a job, and while I covered most of those grounds, some of the
mistakes I made were more likely to be excused because I was still a student. However, I also hadn’t realized how comfortable I had become in my Warren Wilson world, and how nerve-wracking it is when first entering a new community. Interning at Cooper Riis provided me with an example of how a mental health organization functions in a way that facilitates success and growth, and with every week I worked, I felt like I learned something new about Cooper Riis that made me smile. It was also especially rewarding seeing residents succeed with their mental health recovery process, and being able to be a part of that was fulfilling. I’ve started to incorporate parts of Cooper Riis’ philosophy into my own life, like acknowledging that I need to focus on my physical fitness, especially if I’m to promote a holistic way of healing.

Another important result of my internship at Cooper Riis was that working there validated and strengthened my values and beliefs about mental health. After some unfortunate experiences with another organization in the mental health realm, I remember feeling discouraged because it had been my only example of emotional health care outside of Warren Wilson. Now, for when I’m job searching, I know what to look for in an organization that would be the best fit for my employment. Lastly, Cooper Riis has provided me with numerous resources and support for more information about mental health recovery that’ll be useful for my long future in the field of psychology. I have more faith in myself and my abilities, as well as a deeper insight into some of the areas where I’d benefit from more growth. I have a profound appreciation for Dr. Young, and feel inspired by her and Cooper Riis’ thoughtful implementation of the Enhanced Recovery Model. I have seen mental health recovery take place at Cooper Riis, and have the utmost faith and trust in their recovery philosophy.
References


