Personal Theory Paper

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Theoretical Perspectives in Counseling

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**Introduction**

A personal theory is an important backbone in becoming an effective counseling practitioner. Human behavior looks differently when viewed from different theoretical frameworks, as do techniques for change. I believe that theoretical orientations can evolve, however below is an introduction of my personal theory as it is now. I will discuss my view on the nature of people, the nature of problems, the process of change, techniques utilized, and multicultural and developmental considerations.

**The Nature of People**

Each person is unique and complex. In understanding people, I take a holistic approach. It is important to understand the overall intellectual, emotional, and physical wellbeing of each person.

The postmodern idea of social constructionism is important in my understanding of people. Social constructionism is the idea that reality is subjective, individual, and internal. Genetic factors, family experiences, and the overall cultural climate influence ones socially constructed reality (Corey, 2013). Each individual has her own unique perception of reality.

Each person is embedded in a larger system of cultural, familial, and group influences. I agree with the Adlerian concept that people are highly motivated by social connection and community (Corey, 2013). As such, socialization and culture is a powerful force to consider in working with people.

I believe in the Adlerian notion that people are generally goal-driven. They lead unique lifestyles in the pursuit of personal and social goals. These goals are constructed based on individual reality, and are subject to faulty logic (Corey, 2013).

**Healthy Human Functioning**

I believe that the notion of ‘healthy’ human functioning is vague and hard to define. The concept of health varies across cultural lines and differing perspectives. Regardless, I will do my best to outline my views on what it could look like.

**Lifestyle Satisfaction.** I believe that people are functioning with health when they are satisfied with their way of life and it is congruent with their values. Lifestyles are created in the pursuit of goals. One must have self-awareness and a positive self-concept to develop life-affirming and realistic goals. According to Adler, healthy human functioning occurs when one acknowledges that, “genetics and heredity are not as important as what we choose to do with the abilities and limitations we possess” (Corey, 2013, p.96).

**Presence.** According to Gestalt theory, experiencing fully is an important factor in healthy human functioning. This requires that an individual experience his full range of emotions, even those perceived as ‘bad’. This moment-to-moment presence allows a person to constantly interact with life and live fully in every moment (Corey, 2013; Hahn, 2002).

**Developmental Considerations.** Healthy human functioning is mediated and influenced by an individual’s developmental level. The healthy functioning of an adult will not look the same as the healthy functioning of a child. Erikson’s psychosocial stages and Piaget’s cognitive developmental model are helpful in understanding developmental levels (Sigelman & Rider, 2015).

**The Goal of My Theory**

The basic underlying goal of my theory is to empower people to gain courage to create and lead a fulfilling life, moment-to-moment. This idea is rooted in the Adlerian framework and mindfulness orientations (Corey, 2013). I think that each individual has a unique set of goals and obstacles. As such, individual therapeutic goals are influenced by the client’s socially constructed view of reality and are largely created by the individual (Corey, 2013).

**The Nature of Problems**

 In my own personal theory, I attempt to maintain a positive stance, while acknowledging and exploring the nature of individual problems. In line with both the Adlerian and Postmodern viewpoints, I do not view people with problems as ‘sick’ and avoid labeling (Corey, 2013). Below is a more detailed discussion of my view of the nature of problems.

**The Importance of Perception**

I believe in the Adlerian notion that interpretations of past experiences set a theme for current perceptions (Corey, 2013). Memories and interpretations inform current problems, because individuals often form beliefs based on experiences (Corey, 2013). Postmodernists believe that themes in language and perception are important; similarly, I believe that themes in memories should be noted (Corey, 2013).

In line with the postmodern viewpoint, I value the client as an expert in identifying problems to work through. Problems often manifest in language that is problem-centered, negative, or portray an external locus of control. A problem can arise when an individual’s capacity for living fully is blocked by this sort of negative perception (Corey, 2013).

**Presence and Connection**

According to the Gestalt framework, “unacknowledged feelings create unnecessary emotional debris that clutters present-centered awareness… they linger in the background and are carried into present life in ways that interfere with effective contact with oneself and others. “(Corey, 2013, p. 198). Alternatively, people can attach to their thoughts and feelings by forming an identity around them, basing their lifestyle on unhealthy beliefs (Hanh, 2002; Corey, 2013). When people are not fully present in their experiences of the moment, they are less able to make genuine contact with experience, themselves, and others (Corey, 2013).

**Developmental Perspective**

According to Erikson, problems arise when one is not able to complete a psychosocial developmental stage (Sigelman & Rider, 2015). I believe this can happen for various reasons, including adverse life conditions, a lack of attachment to caregivers, or an underlying genetic predisposition to anxiety or depression (Sigelman & Rider, 2015). When an individual becomes stuck in a psychosocial stage, he is less able to connect with peers or focus on creating a fulfilling lifestyle. Similarly, problems can arise when family members do not have a clear understanding of human development and form unrealistic expectations for their child. This can result in family tension or even abuse.

**The Process of Change**

 I believe in the postmodern concept that change is inevitable. I think that people are naturally inclined towards positive change. Thus, I believe that change and progress can occur without counseling, however counseling can help clarify the path towards change that is most in line with an individual’s unique perspective. Below is a discussion of my personal perspective on the process of change, as it applies to existing theories such as Adlerian, Postmodern, Gestalt, and mindfulness frameworks. There is also a brief discussion on working alliance, to introduce the next section: my theory in action.

**Courage**

According to Adler, change occurs when a person gains the courage to make change. “Without fear, there would be no need for courage” (Corey, 2013 p. 101). Developing courage and faith in oneself requires self-awareness (Corey, 2013).

Recognizing and focusing on strengths and internal resources such as courage can be a powerful catalyst in change (Corey, 2013).

**The Role of Perception**

According to Adler, shifting unhealthy private logic is an important step in change. To do this, one must understand the root of the logic (Corey, 2013). Examining history and systemic influences helps to fully understand how these thought patterns developed. One can recall past experiences and examine them in a new light. In doing this, beliefs and perceptions may shift as one recognizes faulty or immature logic (Corey, 2013).

**Awareness and Mindfulness**

One must accept, acknowledge, and experience her full range of emotions in the moment, according to the Gestalt framework (Corey, 2013). When one can experience his feelings with self-compassion and understanding, the negative feelings are likely to evolve into more productive energy (Hahn, 2002). When an individual practices mindfulness by living with presence and awareness, they are practicing positive, life affirming behavior that is likely to continue in the future (Hahn, 2002).

**Working alliance/Therapeutic relationship**

The therapeutic alliance can be a powerful catalyst towards change. As a counselor, I draw upon the Adlerian framework, which posits the importance of creating a positive, supportive, and encouraging relationship with clients (Corey, 2013). This relationship can help clients find the courage to make positive change (Corey, 2013).

Postmodernists value the client as a capable expert in the therapeutic relationship. Although the counselor is present to support, empower, and encourage the individual towards positive change, the client has the ultimate say in the changes she would like to make (Corey, 2013). As such, I will take a non-directive, collaborative stance in the negotiation of goals. Because the power to change is ultimately in the client, I will expect her to take steps and complete tasks between sessions to practice the skills she is developing in session (Corey, 2013).

 Because I will work in a school with children, it will be important to also develop a collaborative relationship with parents, as this is an important factor in a successful alliance (Shirk, Carver, & Brown 2011). Similarly, I can collaborate with teachers and other school staff to foster a supportive community for children in my care.

**My Theory in Practice**

Below is a more detailed discussion of specific techniques I will utilize in session to help client find courage and internal resources, gain awareness and experience fully, and shift harmful perceptions. I will maintain a client centered, nondirective, empathetic, supportive, and flexible stance while utilizing these therapeutic techniques.

**Client Centered**

In my approach, I will draw upon the Adlerian, humanistic, and postmodern ideal of maintaining focus on the client (Corey, 2013). I agree with the postmodern idea that the client is the expert on his own situation. As such, I will value and accept “ the client’s reality without disputing whether it is accurate or rational” (Corey, 2013, p. 361). I will maintain a nondirective, empathetic, and collaborative stance in my counseling work. This will require the client to take a leadership role in exploring problems, solutions, and goals. I will collaborate and recommend tasks that may assist the individual in developing the skills he needs to reach his desired goal (Corey, 2013).

This idea goes hand in hand with the Adlerian method of encouragement; presence and empathetic understanding can be a powerful means of helping a client discover and act upon self-worth. I will encourage clients to look within to find the courage they need to overcome harmful perceptions and behaviors (Corey, 2013).

The egalitarian, non-directive approach to counseling requires that the counselor be fully present and genuine. This leaves the session open to an appropriate amount of self-disclosure to build rapport. I will utilize immediacy, discussing my experience in session, to enhance the relationship and foster a genuine connection with the client (Corey, 2013).

**Goal Formation**

When working with clients, my focus will be on the moment. Working in a school setting, there are no guarantees that I will be able to meet with students on a regular basis. So, I will take the lead from Solution Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT) and view each session as if it were the last (Corey, 2013). As such, creating small, achievable goals each meeting will be important.

**Awareness**

Self-awareness is an important step in positive change. I will help clients in understanding personal strengths, limitations, and beliefs. Through this self-awareness and acceptance, people will be more likely to find the courage to face feelings and situations (Corey, 2013)

Present moment awareness can be a powerful tool in cultivating wellbeing. I will teach mindfulness techniques in session, so that clients can learn to experience life fully, moment to moment. For example, I can teach clients how to take mindful walks, by simply paying attention to all the sights, sounds, smells, and feelings one experiences while walking (Hahn, 2002). Similarly, I will encourage clients to experience their full range of feelings in a compassionate and non-judgmental way (Corey, 2013; Hahn, 2002).

 **Evolving Harmful Perceptions.** Adlerian theory emphasizes the importance of encouraging clients reframe private logic so that it is more positive, and life-oriented. This will lead to reorientation into the “useful side of life”. A focus will be on helping the client foster feelings of self-worth, significance, and community. Through the process, the client view life as an adventure, with endless possibilities (Corey, 2013).

 According to postmodern theory, language is a powerful tool counselors can use when listening to understand underlying meaning behind client statements. In addition, language can be a powerful tool in shifting perceptions and themes. Narrative therapy, for example, is a technique in which a client is asked to examine their life story and recreate it to be more positive and life affirming (Corey, 2013).

Another technique I will utilize from narrative therapy will be to externalize the problem. In doing this, the client can detach and dis-identify with the problem and view it objectively, as an outside force. For example, I may ask a client “what is the mission of the anger, and how does it recruit you into this mission?” this technique will both externalize the problem and allow for mapping a further exploration (Corey, 2013, p. 380).

 Although I agree with the Adlerian ideal of examining past experiences to understand the present, I will utilize postmodern techniques to foster a focus on strengths and solutions. For example, I will ask the client to describe instances when the problem or behavior did not manifest. Exploring the exceptions will help the individual recall the experience of living without the problem and perhaps feel more capable. In addition, I may ask the client to behave as if the problem did not exist, between sessions, and follow up with him on the experience (Corey, 2013).

**Setting**

Ensuring that each counseling session is comfortable for the client is important. As such, I will be flexible in my work with people. For example, the session could be held outside while walking, or in the office doing art. Finding an activity to do while in session can help counseling become more accessible.

**Multicultural and Developmental Considerations**

 To be a successful practitioner, it is important to consider how one’s theoretical orientation aligns with perspectives of various cultures. It is also important to consider the developmental level of the individual one is working with and adapt techniques accordingly. In addition, it is important to consider the local culture of the school and community. Below is my discussion of how I will negotiate these issues, along with a discussion of multicultural strengths and drawbacks presented by my theoretical orientation.

**Developmental Level**

 Working in a school, it will be important to ensure that my approach is congruent with the developmental level of the students I work with. I will reference Piaget’s cognitive developmental model, Erikson’s psychosocial model, all while being mindful of attachment and family systems theories (Sigleman & Rider, 2015). Knowing that each human is on his own, unique developmental path, I will be careful not to make any assumptions about the cognitive and socio-emotional level of the student I work with. For example, I will use caution using abstract thought and symbolic reasoning until I know that the student is developmentally ready. Similarly, I know that talk therapy is sometimes difficult to access for developmentally younger individuals (Sigleman & Rider, 2015). I will utilize play and narrative therapy techniques to make it more accessible.

**School Culture**

Each school has it’s own unique culture, however most rely on a hierarchical, authoritative structure. This structure may be incongruent with my egalitarian approach to counseling. The mere fact that I am a school counselor will present a power imbalance. Doing the best I can to neutralize the imbalance while maintaining school rules may be difficult. Perhaps the best approach will be to explain my limitations to the student.

**Strengths from a Multicultural Perspective**

Considering the cultural context is important in my personal theory, which allows for flexibility when working with individuals from diverse backgrounds. The Adlerian theory, which I often draw upon, emphasizes a cooperative and interdependent philosophy. Culture and social positions are a vantage point to understand the client more deeply and develop goals, according to Adlerian theory (Corey, 2013). Gestalt theory views the individual’s interpretation of her cultural experience as important. For example, it might be important to work to reconcile multiple cultural identities an individual maintains, Gestalt theory provides techniques to do this (Corey, 2013).

Importantly, Gestalt theory emphasizes the importance of understanding one’s own cultural identity. As I explore my cultural identity, I work to identify biases and values, so that I can be mindful to put them aside in my work with clients.

**Challenges from a Multicultural Perspective**

The egalitarian relationship may be difficult for individuals who view the counselor as the “expert” and come to me looking for a more directive relationship (Corey, 2013). In addition, my Gestalt focus on feeling could be difficult for individuals from a culture that does not emphasize this way of being (Corey, 2013) In addition, my emphasis on mindfulness may be vague and difficult to grasp for many students and parents identified with western culture. Some may misunderstand it is religious based. I must be clear and outspoken about my reasoning for utilizing mindfulness techniques, so that it is not misunderstood.

**Summary**

Maintaining clarity on my own assumptions and beliefs is important in my counseling work. It provides a lens for viewing individual functioning. It also provides a toolkit of techniques to utilize in my work with people. As I learn, grow, and explore, my orientation will likely evolve, however, maintaining a clear theoretical backbone will be important.

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