

Integrative Paper on Group Counseling

Luis Diaz

SWK 658: Clinical Social Work Practice III W/Groups

Professor Carleton Jean, LCSW

Nyack College

Due April 26, 2020

ABSTRACT

Individuals attend therapy for many reasons. However, despite their purpose, one thing is clear, all seek to develop an improved perspective of themselves in order to feel that they have a purpose in life. This is achieved through their direct interaction(s) with experienced social workers/therapists, who provide counseling or guidance that aims to provide said individuals with an understanding of how they collaborate within the world.

In order for a therapist to be successful at helping individuals make beneficial connections with other individuals and attain a better understanding of their emotional and cognitive process of circumstances and experiences. Zastrow (2015) states that “The social work profession exists to provide humane and effective social services . . . So that social functioning may be enhanced and the quality of life improved. . .” (p. 4). Therapists achieve this by exploring all evidence-based techniques and approaches aimed towards helping individuals decrease their responses to experiences of uneasiness, depression, anxiety, lack of control, and other life stressors.

INTRODUCTION

This integrative paper will discuss the correlation between Psychodynamic, Experiential and Relationship-Orientated, and Cognitive Behavioral Therapeutic approaches. Through the discussion of said approaches, I will demonstrate my understanding of each therapeutic approach, and how it is that they are individually, and collectively utilized during individual and group sessions in the day to day operations with my targeted population of youths ages 17-24 through my role with my organization.

PART 1 (Theories of Group Counseling)**Psychodynamic (Psychoanalytical) Therapeutic Approach**

The understanding obtained regarding the psychodynamic approach is that it allows an individual to engage in a self-reflective process in order to better understand events relating to their childhood, which have contributed negatively to their personality, treatment of others, and self-perspective and interpretation of how others see them. Through my application of this specific therapeutic process, I have been able to assist the client(s) to understand their behavioral responses to miscommunication, social interaction, and self-perspective. I believe that I have been successful at applying this therapeutic approach through direct conversation in order for the client(s) to identify how best they can overcome their own hesitations at understanding the choices they make. Some of my specific techniques have been to use their own stories regarding issues they feel affect them, to overcome their own thoughts.

Through the application of this approach, the client(s) can engage in the group development process without realizing it. As with most groups, clients participating in my workshops are diversified. Many come from low-income households, and nearly all are from various cultural backgrounds. Once one student shares their story, a bond with the other client(s) is formulated, causing a domino effect to occur. The process allows the client(s) to align themselves with those who they identify as relatable. After they have become familiar with one another, my approach becomes more authoritative, in that, I lean on my personal experiences to remind them of my struggles and successes. This in turn always brings to life the storming stage in group development. client(s) compete with each other to be deemed favored, and it is during this stage when the client(s) engage in conflicts requiring that I apply more counseling techniques of psychodynamic therapeutic approach in order to hopefully have them enter the norming stage

collectively with the other client(s). The approach isn't always successful as some client(s) require longer sessions of counseling before reintegrating fully back into the group.

I always find that this is the best stage to apply the psychodynamic approach. Once the client(s) are able to overcome their power struggles amongst each other and realize that my counseling and/or group discussion are an activity that they look forward to participating in, their level of cooperation allows for normalcy to be integrated into the group. The collective synergy then allows for each student to respond in a productive manner, which then makes the goals of the group activity, in this case, completing my workshops, more attainable, making the adjourning stage take place more smoothly.

A major factor for this has been my theoretical orientation approach, which is to channel and utilize my personal experiences along with my relatability to the student's societal expectations of genuineness. Through my role as an authority figure amongst the student population within my organization, client(s) can lean on me for guidance, as well as accept my direction for group activities, and events that cater to their overall growth and development.

Experiential and Relationship-Oriented Therapeutic Approach

It is my belief that the application of Experiential therapy has to be one of the most utilized therapeutic approaches in combination with Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) in both group and individual therapy sessions. During the implementation of this approach, as a counselor, I mandate that during group discussions client(s) engage in music and role-play activities. One of the music activities that I utilize is to have the client(s) select songs that represent each of their emotions: anger, happiness, sadness, excitement, confusion, love, and determination. Through this activity during both group and individual counseling session(s), the client(s) are able to identify their emotions related to events and relationships related to their past, as well as their present.

This technique allows clients to individually and collectively understand their sentiments of hurt, and anger that they have not resolved or brought closure to. Additionally, the technique creates a newfound perspective among the client(s), and they are able to then consider alternative approaches to dealing with their unresolved issues.

At times during the course of the activity, I am able to have the client(s) relate the associated emotion they identify from the song to events of their past in order to help them come to terms, or cope with an unresolved problem. Zastrow refers to this as “. . . new interaction approaches” (pg.179). Though the technique is usually applied more in individual sessions, I have found that the application is just as effective in group sessions. The approach allows clients to develop an awareness of their own emotions. A benefit of the therapeutic approach is that it gives clients the ability to make constructive informed decisions as they journey through the program and life. This approach overall allows for me to apply more effectively what Corey (2015) regards as a “. . . focuses on the quality of the person-to-person therapeutic relationship.” (pg. 10).

Cognitive Behavioral Therapeutic Approach

The most recognized form of theoretical orientation utilized in all forms of therapy is by far CBT. As a group leader in my practice, CBT is highly favored and relied upon for both individual and group counseling sessions. Most clients that I engage with always express having feelings of anxiety over assignments, overcoming personal barriers (relationship conflicts, peer group interaction, self-esteem issues), and, most importantly being able to control their negative emotions relating to past or current traumatic events. In my current practice, when afforded the opportunity, I apply the CBT model in groups. An activity that I enjoy using with clients is consequential thinking. Through this activity, I encourage clients to view their belief systems, and their current behavioral practices, in order to identify if there are any contradictions in their

thought and response process. Through the activity, clients are able to recognize some of their negative thoughts and feelings in order to understand not only their behaviors but their beliefs as well. Corey (2015) recognizes that “. . . much of our behavior is a product of learning and conditioning.” (pg. 6). With this in mind, the CBT approach within groups really allows me to help clients assess their own cognitive process and bring to the forefront any suppressed feelings or thoughts in order to address them. I believe that I am achieving more results with clients when using the CBT therapeutic approach. This is because I am able to help clients recognize their unproductive thinking, and encourage them to adapt new methods, which they add to their daily routine.

PART 2 (Personal Group Experiences)

In understanding the impact that my role has upon each of the clients during group related sessions, I make it a point to have clients feel that I am truly listening to what they say, and what they mean. Many of the clients come from households and backgrounds where their role in the hierarchy does not allow for them to feel that they have a voice. Due to the location of my site, the cultural diversity of clients is large. This always allows for the clients to truly address issues relating to race, culture, and socio-economic backgrounds. I believe that as a therapist, it is my duty to assure that clients are made to feel that they are not alone in dealing with their issues but are discovering either someone with whom to connect to as a way of not giving up, or discovering a support system to help them cope. Combining each of the therapeutic approaches in group sessions at times is rewarding. By combining the approaches clients learn from each other on how they can overcome their issues, and most importantly, that they have a support system in place to make that goal of achieving a sense of control over their lives possible. What I enjoy about the process is that it allows me to remain neutral and be of assistance to someone in need. Sometimes

my role is minimal and other times it is deeply involved. Both aspects provide me with a rewarding feeling to see the groups realize the answer to their own question(s), without ever having to give any suggestions. Seeing that aha moment in their eyes is what the process rewards me with and contributes to my own personal growth and development.

When considering what types of concepts or techniques I use in my group work I have to implore the importance of utilizing the following techniques, which Zastrow (2013) suggest are useful in a macro practice “brainstorming; . . . and building rapport.” I find that it is important to use these techniques to create a cohesive and functional group setting. This suggests that the technique of brainstorming is beneficial because it gives an individual a sense of belonging as the technique allows for each participant to contribute to the development of the group. However, an important technique to consider more so than brainstorming is rapport. In order to be effective, I make a priority to assure that the rapport technique process is implemented at the onset of the group formulation. In my role as a counselor, I have learned that my responsibility in working with groups is getting better when I make building rapport an essential and primary point at the onset of group formulation.

When reflecting on the benefits and disadvantages of this technique, I always consider the long-lasting effects. A benefit of brainstorming is that it gives individuals a sense of ownership of the group. A disadvantage is that it can cause individuals to be resistant to change and unwillingly to embrace a new perspective. When assessing the benefits and disadvantages of rapport, this becomes more challenging. This is because the rapport process creates a sense of wholeness. I have discovered through trial and error that, and a benefit is that it can be easy to gain the trust of the participants.

The disadvantage is that it can lead to attachment issues with the clients regardless of their participation voluntarily or involuntarily. An additional disadvantage to this is that it can cause a client to feel a sense of superiority over the other members of the group, which in turn can create more challenges for me in establishing individual rapport with each member of the group. Zastrow (2013) identifies that as “If members feel that they are being treated as inferiors, they will be less motivated to reveal and discuss personal issues.” (pg.231). The nominal group technique presents its own set of pros and cons. For example, the technique requires that participants engage in the same activity without interacting with one another directly. I have had the opportunity to implement this technique during workshops where I would have the participants identify and list barriers they feel contribute to the delay of their forward progress in life, and then disclose one item from their list to the group. The challenge for me is always getting one of the clients to open up first. Once I achieve that, each client begins to remove a layer through their shared story, which allows each participant to share in the activity equally.

Working with a fellow team-member has always been a rewarding and safe experience. Team facilitating, or counseling has provided me with a more insightful understanding of not only the Dynamics of group counseling but also working in teams. Having more than one individual service in a social worker capacity brought forth the clarity needed to see that not one individual has the potential solutions to a problem. I truly appreciate how sharing the leadership torch gives a form of unconscious guidance and provides the team the ability to give the clients a dual level of support towards developing coping skills and alternative approaches to addressing their problems

One of the most pressing issues that I have discovered while working with groups is that many participants enter the group dynamic with preconceived notions regarding culture, socio-economic status, and racism. At the start of any group discussion, it is important to engage in an

ice-breaker activity that removes this thought pattern but allows for the discussion regarding the topic to be had without a negative fall-out. A great way to achieve is to engage in a role-play, with the facilitator as one of the main characters.

Recently I was able to engage in such a role play. Though the subject-matter on racism was a sensitive topic, especially for some of the male clients in the group, the irony was that my experience was from a Hispanic perspective and the other male(s) had their experience from an African American perspective. The first challenge was for the group to determine where racism first started. This was challenging for them to achieve, as they could not collectively agree on where racism started first. So instead we simply decided to discuss the subject matter from our own individual perspectives in order to provide insight to each other. Through the group's own natural process, a group leader did emerge and began to lead the questions related to our discussion. For me, it was great to hear how the females identified racism and discrimination, but it was also disheartening to learn that they were oblivious to the male experience. The female perspective was extremely different from the males, and at one point it came across as if one of the women was in agreement with the suggestion that "That individuals bring it upon themselves for Presenting a personification that causes alarm, insecurity, or fear to other people." This suggested to me that she felt that males placed targets on their backs to treated with racism, discrimination, and racial profiling. T

The group's discussion was truly healthy and despite the few differences of opinion, the group was able to discuss the subject matter without creating any sense of resentment or hostility towards each other. The professionalism that each individual displayed during the discussion truly impressed upon me that group discussions can have a debatable topic so long as everyone agrees to respect each other's opinions. The group was not able to fully conclude, and the topic carried

over past the class period. I left the class and the group discussion with the Question would society ever reach a point where appearances don't really matter but rather the character of the individual.

An interesting element to highlight is the deliberation between equally seasoned facilitators deciding who would lead the group. This always presents some resistance between everyone. I quickly learned that there is a fear of leading groups, even for social workers. I recall one task was to facilitate a support system and safe space for a female client and for her group to discuss the family conflict issues that they were experiencing.

During the activity, we determined as a group that we would focus on the underlying cause of the client's avoidance to discuss family conflicts. We achieved this by having one of the participants play the role of the aunt of the client. As the role-play began, I remember leading the group with instructions on respecting each other's voice and being open-minded about everyone's concerns. However, the co-lead of the group, stressed that during the role-play the client does not hold back her thoughts or feelings, and say what came to mind. Due to the differentiating directions, the group became divided. Some accepted my directions and others accepted the co-lead. Without having to regulate any of the communication between the client and participant, the group took it upon themselves to implement rules surrounding communication amongst each other. Without realizing it the group reinforced my original directions and proceeded with the role-play. This allowed for the group to respond in a more receptive manner.

The issue of addressing family conflict or concern was unavoidable. The participant portraying the aunt was able to reflect the real concerns shared between the client and her actual aunt. Through this approach, the client and the aunt were able to highlight their conflicting areas, and gain the support needed from the rest of the group members. I felt somewhat out of place as they

were in their moment of exchange and wondered if the assignment was at all beneficial to the client, and appropriate for the participants to be a part of.

Throughout all my sessions, each group's response to a different therapeutic approach demonstrated the effectiveness of my ability to help them alter their original form of thinking. I was always under the impression that having a culturally diversified group versus groups from one specific population always changed the characteristics of the individuals. Once their process of change took place, then each group created its own characteristic, making them unique from the previous group.

CONCLUSION

During my last group session, I was fortunate to incorporate all the therapeutic approaches in a group workshop via video conference call. During the session, I was able to apply certain techniques of Existential therapy to help clients manage their current emotional state related to the COVID-19 quarantine situation. In particular, I was able to incorporate a combination of key concepts from the existential and psychodynamic approach by having the clients discover their purpose, value, and meaning for existing by having them utilize their past as a tool to identify their strength to cope with overcoming and accepting changes to their circumstances. Through this process, the clients were able to verbally highlight their sources of strength from which they leaned on to accept things, in order to develop a newfound form of assertiveness to embrace their struggles with dealing with the current situation. Many of the participants struggled to accept the new regulations established by the government surrounding social distancing, and in order to better help them understand this, I incorporated part of the key concept of cognitive-behavioral therapy. I had them reflect on their behaviors in order to understand their own identity and how meaningful relationships can be maintained until the quarantine and social distancing ban is lifted.

References

Corey, Gerald (2015) (9th Edition). Theory and Practice of Group Counseling.

Brooks/Cole Cengage Learning

Zastrow, C. (2015). (9th ed.). Social work with Groups: A comprehensive worktext. Belmont,

CA: Thompson/Brooks Cole