Person-Centered Theory applied to Conrad in Ordinary People

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Person-Centered Therapy Overview

Carl Rogers caused a bit of an uproar when he prescribed a radical new approach to the therapeutic profession called “nondirective counseling” in his treatise, “Counseling and Psychotherapy: Newer Concepts in Practice” in 1942 (Elkins, 2009, a quoted in Corey, 2020, p. 166).

This approach provided a stark counterpoint to methods that previously had relied upon counselor-initiated advice, direction, diagnosis, and interpretation. Rogers instead proposed that therapists demonstrate congruence (authenticity), unconditional positive regard, as well as accurate empathic understanding to foster a climate of growth in which individuals can realize their full potential. Rogers believed that if therapists adopted these attitudes and listened to their clients in an accepting way, their clients would become less defensive and more motivated to further explore and develop their inherent worth (Corey, 2020).

One of Rogers’s chief contributions to the field of counseling is the concept that a caring therapeutic relationship between two equals - as opposed to applying techniques - is the primary driver of change in the client.

Application

The person-centered approach has been applied to individuals and groups who suffer from various disorders including anxiety, alcoholism, agoraphobia, interpersonal difficulties, depression, cancer, and personality disorders (Bozrath, Zimring, and Tausch, 2002 as cited in Corey, 2020).

Another useful area of application has been for people in crisis, as “being heard and understood helps ground people in crises, helps to calm them in the midst of turmoil, and enables them to think more clearly and make better decisions” (Corey, 2020, p. 179).

In addition to individual and group counseling, other areas of application are considered to be organizational development, education, health care, cross-cultural and interracial activity, as well as international relations, and others. Some cross-cultural considerations may lead to an adjustment in approach, as clients from some countries value social and family relationships more than those from Western countries (Tan, 2011).

Emotion-focused therapy (eFt) is another person-centered approach that helps clients make productive use of their emotions, whether they have been under or over-emoting. And yet another area of evolution for person-centered therapy is in the expressive arts. This specific form of counseling offers clients the chance to express themselves through art, music, and/or journaling as a way to gain insight into their feelings.

Person-centered therapy has evolved to include even directive forms of counseling, such as Motivational Interviewing. The difference, however, versus previous direct approach therapy, is that a counselor stays within a client’s frame of reference and does not become defensive.

Techniques

To apply the person-centered approach to Conrad in Ordinary people, I would fully engage in his trauma's visceral experience, be authentic and transparent, and focus on Conrad’s immediate experience.

I would show unconditional positive regard, and roll with any resistance, allowing Conrad to tap into what he truly desires in life.

You can see that the counselor in the movie did this in some areas, by allowing Conrad to feel how he felt and not judge or condemn him for it. He also permitted Conrad the freedom to question if he really wanted to be on the swim team.

The counselor made use of Motivational Interviewing by asking Conrad questions to prompt him to answer from his own frame of reference. He asks Conrad, "You have to get off the hook for what? And "That wasn't fair, was it?", when Conrad is in crisis over the suicide of his friend and feels it must be someone's fault for his brother's accident.

Benefits

Through the therapist's authentic caring, acceptance, and understanding, clients are able to revisit their stoic perceptions and move to a higher level of functioning in the world. When these therapist attitudes are present, it enables clients to be able to explore areas of their life that were either distorted or buried. "Because they feel safer and are less vulnerable, they become more realistic, perceive others with greater accuracy, and become better able to understand and accept others. They become less concerned about meeting others' expectations and thus begin to behave in ways that are truer to themselves" (Corey, 2020).

References

Tan, S. (2011). Counseling and Psychotherapy, A Christian Perspective, Baker Academic

Redford, R. (1980), Ordinary People. Wildwood Enterprises Inc.

Corey G., (2020). *Theory and Practice of Counseling and Psychotherapy*, (10th ed.). Cengage Learning