

Applying Twelve Theories to *Ordinary People*

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Abstract

This paper will review the movie *Ordinary People* utilizing twelve theories learned during the semester. The twelve theories are Psychoanalytic Therapy (Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung), Adlerian Therapy, Behavior Therapy, Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT), Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (RET), Existential Therapy, Person-Centered therapy, Gestalt Therapy, Choice Theory, Feminist Therapy, Reality Therapy and Family Systems Therapy. The author will apply each counseling model to the characters in the movie based upon the story, integrating how each therapy model would be used by a counselor if they were to see the characters in practice. Some of the therapies mentioned may not be as effective as others. The main character Conrad is suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder, feelings of guilt, and coping issues in life. Conrad also tried to commit suicide and spent four months in a mental hospital. The therapies that the author would use when seeing Conrad are CBT, Behavior Therapy, RET, and Psychoanalytic therapy.

Ordinary People Paper

This paper will review the movie *Ordinary People*, which is the story of a family dealing with the death of a sibling, while applying three theories of personality to the case of Conrad, who is struggling with the loss of his brother. The family consists of the father (Calvin), who tries to have peace in his family; the wife/mother (Beth), who wants to have the perfect family; and the surviving son (Conrad), who attempted suicide and was present when his brother Buck died in a boating accident. Because of his grief and guilt, Conrad attempted to commit suicide and spent four months at a hospital in mental and physical recovery. As Conrad returns home from the hospital, the family tries to cope with the death of Buck and the attempted suicide of Conrad. Viewers can see how the family system copes with this event with its strengths and weaknesses. Conrad goes for therapy to try to come to terms with his attempt of suicide, the death of his brother, and his family and social issues. The therapy sessions, as well as the family and social interactions, will be reviewed and the author will apply six prominent theories of personality (Psychoanalytic, Jungian, Adlerian, Behavior Theory, CBT, and RET) to the therapy sessions.

Discussion

Psychoanalytic Therapy

If the author was a psychoanalyst, psychoanalytic therapy and techniques would be applied to the sessions with Conrad, specifically looking to discover any dreams, resistance, transference, and defense mechanisms being used to cope with the issues he is currently facing.

- During a session, Conrad brings up dreams. Although the counselor in the film does not explore this, the author would ask “Tell me about the dreams you are having. Are you having any recurrent ones?” The author believes that Conrad’s dreams will contain information about the death of Buck, as well as the struggles with his family and with his friends at school. The author believes that this will help bring the unconscious thoughts and feelings Conrad is having to the conscious so they can be worked on and resolved (Corey, 2017, p. 74).
- In one recollection, Conrad mentions that his father sat next to him and put his arm around his shoulder and they both just sat there. Conrad states he did not know how to feel and felt how uptight his father was. Conrad is using repression here, as he is trying not to confront his feeling. As an analyst, the author would share his interpretation interpreting Conrad’s reaction to his father. The author would ask Conrad “How did it feel when your father’s arm was around you?” The author is asking this question to have the patient explore his feelings for his father.
- The author also notices that Conrad always uses the defense mechanism rationalization when asked about interactions with his mother. Conrad makes up excuses for his mother’s behavior and states that it is because of him. The author

would explore this more and attempt to get Conrad to come to terms with his feelings about his mother (Corey, 2017, p. 62).

Jungian Therapy

If the author were a Jungian analyst, he would be concerned about the whole person, bringing the conscious and unconscious together. Dreams will be reviewed as they will help to explain why the client is feeling unbalanced.

- The author would ask Conrad “Tell me about the dreams you are having?”. As a Jungian, the author would believe that dreams will help explain what the client is feeling currently and what they need to work on to bring about balance in his life.
- The author will ask the client “Tell me about your relationship with your mother”. Conrad states that he has no connection with his mother and the author wants Conrad to explore these feelings more. In Jungian terms, unpleasant experiences are called the Shadow (Corey, 2017, p. 78).
- The author will ask “How do you see your relationship with your father?” The author is trying to have Conrad express his feelings toward his father. By getting all these thoughts/feelings expressed Conrad can become whole again. Jung believed that this was the closest someone could get to God (Tan, 2011, p. 99).
- Conrad blames himself for the suicide of a friend from the hospital, Karen. As a Jungian analyst, the author would ask Conrad to use active imagination to have him experience his relationship at the hospital with Karen, to try to understand what she was experiencing. The author’s goal here is to have Conrad see there are other ways to view a situation (GoodTherapy, 2018).

- Conrad is very afraid to have all the feelings he is experiencing, especially guilt; therefore, the author would ask Conrad to experience his feelings about the boating accident and discover it was not his fault.

Adlerian Therapy

If the author was an Adlerian therapist, he would ask about Conrad's family, birth order, social interests, and approach Conrad's concerns with a holistic point of view, with the goal of Conrad becoming whole again.

- The first stage of Adlerian therapy is establishing a relationship. In order to get to know Conrad, the author would ask him "What brings you to my office today?" (Corey, 2017, p. 108).
- During the therapy session, the author would discover that Conrad has difficulty expressing his feelings and is holding back his emotions concerning his brother's death and his relationship with his parents. Conrad would be questioned to explore his feelings and encouraged to express them in any way he can.
- The author would ask "Tell me about your family," and together they would draw a family tree. Conrad would say that he is distant from his mother, close to his father, and was close to Buck, but felt that Buck was favored over him. As the author would write down what Conrad is telling him, he would ask him to tell him some words that describe each member. The author would also ask him to describe himself (Sommers-Flanagan & Sommers-Flanagan, 2013).
- Conrad is the second child, and this demonstrates that he shared the attention with his brother Buck. The second child is "always in a race and is generally under full steam at all times" (Corey, 2017, p. 103).

- In order to encourage Conrad to become more socially active, the author would ask Conrad, “What social activities are you interested in?” in order to encourage him to contribute to his community.

Behavior Therapy

If the author was a Behavior Therapist, he would ask Conrad about his desire to have more control, discuss techniques to cope with the death of his brother Buck, and work with Conrad on improving his relationship with his family.

- The author would ask Conrad about his desire to have control in his life by asking, “What do you think would like control over in your life?”.
- Conrad has trouble communicating with his mother and the author would role play with him to give him more confidence to express his feelings with his mother without losing his temper.
- Conrad continues to blame himself for the death of his brother Buck due to a boating accident. The author would use imaginal exposure to help Conrad relive and come to terms that this accident was not his fault and to relive his guilt (Corey, 2017, p. 260).
- The author will teach/guide Conrad through mindfulness, which is a very effective technique in which “clients train themselves to intentionally focus on their ‘present experience with acceptance’ and develop an attitude of curiosity and compassion toward present experience” (Corey, 2017, p. 251; Siegel, 2010, p. 27).
- The author will also work with Conrad on acceptance of the death of his brother, Buck. “Acceptance is an alternative way of responding to our internal experience. By replacing judgment, criticism, and avoidance with acceptance” (Corey, 2017, p. 251).

Cognitive Behavior Therapy

If the author was a Cognitive Behavior Therapist, he would ask Conrad about his thoughts on the boating accident in which his brother Buck died. The author would have Conrad explore his thinking patterns on the guilt he is experiencing and also the feelings he has towards his mother and father.

- In the author's initial interview with Conrad, he would ask: "Why are you coming to therapy? What are some goals you would like to accomplish here?".
- Using a CBT lens, the author would recognize that Conrad is using "arbitrary inferences" to draw conclusions without supporting evidence (Corey, 2017, p. 283). Conrad blames himself for his brother's Buck death without evidence. Through recognizing that there is no evidence for him to feel guilty, the author and Conrad would aim to conclude that this was not his fault.
- Conrad's thoughts of guilt and blame need to be reviewed, as he is taking responsibility for events out of his control. The author would ask Conrad: "Why are you blaming yourself for your family's situation and Karen's death? Is this really your fault?".
- The author will teach Conrad how to challenge his self-defeating thoughts and how to construct them to be more realistic and positive.
- An excellent CBT tool is Socratic questioning, "which poses open ended questions to clients with the aim of getting clients to reflect on personal issues and arrive at their own conclusions" (Corey, 2017, p. 285).

Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy

If the author was a Rational Emotive Behavior Therapist, he would challenge Conrad on his thinking. Conrad has guilt, post-traumatic stress disorder, and is searching for a purpose in life.

- The first technique the author would use with Conrad is the A-B-C model. In this case the “A” (Activating Event) would be the boating accident in which Conrad’s brother Buck dies. The “B” (Belief) would be that Conrad’s brother’s death was his fault. The “C” (Emotional Consequence) is the guilt that Conrad experiences. Lastly, the “D” (Dispute) is where the irrational belief that Conrad has is challenged (Corey, 2017, p. 273).
- The author’s second approach to help Conrad with his guilt is to challenge his belief that he could have done more to save his brother. The author’s question to Conrad would be: “Do you feel that you did everything humanly possible to save Buck?” Here, the author will still encourage Conrad to express his emotions over this traumatic event but also invite him to see that there was nothing he could have done. Conrad may instead feel remorse, not guilt, and sadness instead of depression (Ellis, 1996).
- The author would assign homework to Conrad to challenge and dispute his irrational beliefs, and then the author and Conrad can discuss his work at the next therapy session.
- Humor is often used in REBT and I believe this keeps the therapist’s client relationship real. If Conrad is comfortable, I would try to incorporate this into our sessions.
- Role playing also is a very effective technique and the author would utilize this with Conrad in regards to him communicating with his family. The author would ask Conrad to have a conversation with his father or mother and then ask him: “How would they

respond?”. Together, the author and Conrad would reflect on the conversation. The author is asking Conrad to do this so he can gain more insight into the family dynamics.

- The author would recommend additional reading material to educate Conrad on grief.
- The author would encourage Conrad to attend an REBT group where he can observe and participate to see that his feelings are acceptable and others share the same concerns.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there are multiple lenses that can be applied to Conrad's situation in *Ordinary People*. Through reviewing the Psychoanalytic, Jungian, Adlerian, Behavior therapy, CBT, and REBT, the author has demonstrated multiple ways to approach Conrad's path to wholeness. By exploring these theories, the author has also found that he is most comfortable with the Adlerian approach and Rational Emotive Behavior approach, which focuses on achieving wholeness and working in the present moment. However, incorporating concepts such as defense mechanisms (Psychoanalytic) and dream analysis (Jungian), which are still used today, the author can combine methods to provide clients like Conrad with tools to both reflect on their past and immediately take action in their current struggles.

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