

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, Jungian Therapy, Adlerian Therapy, Behavior Therapy, Cognitive Behavior Therapy (CBT), Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (RET), Existential Therapy, Person-Centered Therapy, Gestalt Therapy, Reality Therapy, Family Systems Therapy, and Christian 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 twelve prominent theories of personality 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 does control mean to you? How important is having control 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). The author would encourage Conrad to talk about the experience of the death of his brother, Buck.

*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. By exploring the boating accident, the author would work with Conrad see that it was not in his control that his brother Buck let go. 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). Examples of Socratic questions would be "What would you say to a friend who has the same situation that you are in? What

evidence do you have that you are responsible for events like Buck's death and Karen's death?"

*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.

*Existential Therapy*

If the author was an existential therapist, he would try to get Conrad to look at himself-- not his family or friends, just him. According to Corey (2017), “a basic existential premise is that we are not victims of circumstance because, to a large extent, we are what we choose to be” (p. 133). Conrad needs to view his behavior and also take responsibility for his thought and actions.

- The author would ask Conrad “How do you see yourself?” Through the existential lens, Conrad needs to understand what his thoughts are about himself and how he sees the world. The aim of existential therapy is “to invite clients to explore their values and beliefs and take action that grows out of an honest appraisal of their life’s purpose” (Corey, 2017, p. 133).
- The author’s next question to Conrad would be “How do you cope with difficult situations?” Conrad will also need to face the recurring thought of his brother’s death being his fault. At this time, the author and Conrad can also discuss his suicide attempt and how he can deal with difficult situations differently in the future. Conrad will need to realize that his thoughts and feelings are his own and he is responsible for them. According to Corey (2017), “clients in existential therapy are clearly encouraged to assume responsibility for how they are currently choosing to be in their world” (p. 147).
- The author also will ask Conrad “How do you feel when you are alone?” In existential therapy, it is believed that we need to look at isolation: “the sense of isolation comes when we recognize that we cannot depend upon anyone else for our own confirmation” (Corey, 2017, p. 142). Here, the author is trying to let Conrad see that he can be alone and feel comfortable with himself. The author is also opening up possibility for Conrad to look at his own identity and not be influenced by what others think he should be.

- On the other hand, along with being comfortable by oneself, humans also need to have relationships. The author can see Conrad's need for friends and his desire to have a girlfriend. This is a time when the author would work with Conrad on the anxiety he may feel when talking to women. In existential therapy, anxiety is seen as a potential source of growth (Corey, 2017, p. 145). Here, the author will work with Conrad to review his experiences with anxiety and, as he faces his anxieties, they will be more comfortable to deal with.

*Person-Centered Therapy*

If the author was a Person-Centered therapist, he will always be prepared to discuss anything that Conrad brings to a session. The author would aim to continue to create a relationship with Conrad for him to see he is in a non-judgmental environment. Person-centered therapy is “especially applicable in crisis intervention;” besides grieving the loss of his brother, Conrad also recently attempted suicide (Corey, 2017, p. 179).

- To start, the author would welcome Conrad into the therapy session and ask, “What brings you here today?” At this point, the author will be sure to make clear that he is listening intently, providing unconditional positive regard, and making sure the client is heard and understood. According to Corey (2017), “being heard and understood helps ground people in crises” (p. 179).
- The next question the author would ask Conrad is “Can you tell me more about wanting control?” As a therapist, the author is aiming to establish trust with Conrad, by demonstrating support and ensuring that Conrad knows he is not being judged for his response; this can “go a long way in building bridges that can motivate people to do something to work through and resolve a crisis” (Conrad, 2017, p. 179).
- At the next session, the author would question Conrad about his current family situation: “Can you tell me more about what is bothering you?” The author can predict that Conrad will mention the issue he has with his parents and the death of his brother Buck. A follow up question would be “How do you think this has contributed to your current situation?” Conrad is trying to come to terms with the death of his brother Buck and also come to terms with the effects this has had on his parents and their relationship towards him.

- As the session continues, the author would ask Conrad “How can I support you in this journey you are taking?” The author also wants to continue to praise Conrad for his strength in facing his emotions and working on them. The thought here is to ensure that Conrad continues his therapy so he can continue the progress he is achieving.
- After a few sessions, the author will ask Conrad “What goals can we work on that you would like to achieve?” The author is establishing that Conrad can have an active role in his healing process.

*Gestalt Therapy*

If the author was a Gestalt therapist, the goal would be to work on the here and now. The author will aim to work with Conrad in order to become aware of his feelings and behaviors in the present moment. The therapist will also make clear that Conrad is in a non-judgmental environment.

- At the first session with Conrad, the author will ask Conrad: "How are you feeling at this moment?" Conrad is most likely unsure about coming to therapy and states that he wants more control. The therapist is attempting to get Conrad to become aware of his feelings and emotions in the present moment. A follow up question the author would ask Conrad is: "What do you need from me right now?" The author's goal here is to see how Conrad feels being in therapy.
- After a few sessions, when Conrad brings up the death of his brother Buck, the author would ask Conrad: "Can you tell me more about that emotion? How do you feel about this emotion in this moment?" The goal is to get Conrad to explore his feelings about the death of his brother Buck and to look at it from different ways of approaching this feeling.
- When Conrad brings up the relationship with his mother, the author would ask Conrad: "What would it be like if you tried a different approach with your mother, in how you interact with her?" The author notes that Conrad's relationship with his mother is strained and would try to get Conrad to think about other ways to approach and talk with his mother.
- Another approach the author would use with Conrad in a session is the empty chair technique. This is where Conrad would sit across from an empty chair and talk to his

brother, Buck. Here, Conrad can express all the emotions he is feeling towards that person. This is a very effective technique, but the therapist must be sure the client can handle this; otherwise, this experience can cause distress (Corey, 2017, p. 215).

*Reality Therapy*

If the author was a reality therapist, the goal would be to assist Conrad to take responsibility for his life and attempt to help him make positive changes in his life. Using reality therapy, the author would establish a relationship with Conrad where he feels safe to talk about his thoughts and feelings. Conrad and the author would then talk about his goals and establish a plan to see how he can accomplish them.

- During the first session with Conrad, the author would ask him: “What specific behaviors are causing problems in your life?” As Conrad mentions he wants more control in his life, the therapist and Conrad can review these behaviors and hold him responsible for these behaviors and their consequences (Corey, 2017, p. 316).
- Another question the author would ask Conrad is: “What do you think is the root cause of your current situation?” Here, the author is trying to get Conrad to reflect on his life but also take responsibility for his actions and behaviors.
- As the sessions continue and Conrad begins to explore his thoughts and emotions, another question the author would ask is: “What steps are you willing to take to make positive changes in your life?” The author is attempting to get Conrad to think about his actions and the steps he can take to make meaningful progress in his life.
- The author would also ask Conrad: “How do your relationships with your family and friends impact your life?” The author, after talking with Conrad, observes the strain Conrad has with his family (especially his mother). Together, Conrad and the author can explore these relationships, the effects they have on Conrad’s life, and what Conrad can do to change his behavior.

- As the sessions progress, the author would ask Conrad: “What are you doing in your current life to take responsibility for your behavior and actions?” The author is working with Conrad to let him see that only he can be responsible for his behavior and the outcomes from that.

*Family Systems Therapy*

If the author was a family therapist, he would ask to see Conrad, his mother, and his father together for counseling. One of the author's main goals for family therapy in this case would be to get each member to interact with each other in a positive way and be less judgmental towards each other.

- The author believes that one of the main issues facing Conrad, along with the death of his brother Buck, is that he needs to have acceptance and care from his family during this most stressful time. Family systems therapy proposes that changes in one member's behavior can affect the entire family (Corey, 2017, p. 404). In this case, the death of Conrad's brother Buck is affecting the entire family, especially the mother.
- When the author meets with the family for the first time, he would ask: "What brings you to family therapy today?" Here, the author wants to see how each family member answers the question. All three family members (Conrad, his mother, and his father) may have different views on why they are there.
- The next question the author would ask is "What are some of the challenges or conflicts that this family faces as a whole?" The author expects Conrad to bring up the death of his brother Buck and the distance he feels from his mother. Conrad's mother is very reluctant to be in therapy and it will take time for her to warm up to the idea. Conrad's father wants to help the family so the author expects that he will participate more.
- At the next session, the author would ask: "How do you feel about the level of support and connection you feel you each have within the family?" The author wants each family member to state their feelings and relationship to each other; by openly bringing this up,

the family can explore not only the support they each currently have, but how they can ask for more and how each member can support each other.

*Christian Therapy*

In order for the author to use Christian therapy, the individual (Conrad) must be willing to incorporate Christian therapy into the sessions. According to Tan (2011), “informed consent from the client must be obtained before using spiritual resources such as prayer and Scripture in counseling sessions” (p. 170). Christian therapy is based on the belief that God is the ultimate source of healing and that through prayer, scripture and faith-based practices, individuals can find the strength and courage to change (Tan, 2011, p. 170).

- As a Christian counselor, the author would begin each session with Conrad with prayer. In the prayer, the author would ask God for guidance and support in the session. Afterward, the author’s first question to Conrad would be: “What are your spiritual needs, and how can we work together to address them?” Conrad is experiencing guilt and remorse over the death of his brother Buck and is also having family issues. Together, Conrad and the author can work to strengthen his faith and reliance on God.
- The author will also ask Conrad: “What role do prayer and Scripture play in your life?” Through this question, the author is trying to see how faith and prayer currently help Conrad with his situation. A follow-up question would be to see if Conrad attends church with his family; if he does or if he is interested in attending, Conrad can also rely on his church community for support at this time. The author would ask Conrad if his church has a bereavement support group, which could help Conrad and his family as well. In addition to utilizing prayer in therapy sessions, the author would also ask Conrad’s family to come to therapy to talk about the family unit.
- Faith-based counseling is excellent as a tool but the author also believes that other therapeutic techniques should be used to move the progress of Conrad along. The author

is especially interested in “a Christian approach to therapy called integrative psychotherapy, which integrates behavioral, cognitive, and interpersonal models of therapy within a Christian theological framework” (Tan, 2011, p. 171). Providing Conrad with a free environment to express his faith and his feelings will give him the time he needs to explore his thoughts and the trauma he has gone through.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, there are multiple lenses that can be applied to Conrad's situation in *Ordinary People*. Through reviewing twelve prominent theories of counseling, 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 focus 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. Additional theories that can be applied to Conrad are Behavior Therapy, Cognitive Behavior Therapy, Existential Therapy, Person-Centered Therapy, Gestalt Therapy, Reality Therapy, Family Systems Therapy, and Christian Therapy. Depending upon the client's situation and personality, the therapist must be open minded to search for the therapy approach that would work best with the client. The author has found that, through talking with his classmates, the therapies that they would choose to use are based upon what they would feel most comfortable with and also what reflects some of their personalities. The author believes that a therapist must be eclectic and always meet the client where they are. The client may be working on issues at work but then come to the next session and want to talk about issues with their spouse. The therapist must be ready to change direction and meet the client where they are.

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