

“Ordinary People”

Feminist Approach to Counseling Conrad Jarret

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Conrad Jarret, a high school sophomore, has been battling depression and social isolation, evidenced after the accidental death of his brother, Buck. Conrad is the second youngest son of his parent's two children. He seems to have lived in his brother's shadows and is now a semi-outcast as he discovers his identity outside his brother's existence. Conrad has difficulty regaining control of his life after a suicidal attempt and a four-month stay in the psychiatric hospital. He has been experiencing emotional turmoil from anger outbursts and confusion about his value and worth, primarily concerning his mother's view of him.

To help Conrad address the challenges he is facing and regain control of his life, the Feminist theory will be applied to counseling. The Feminist theory was founded by several feminist therapists who wanted to incorporate a woman center approach to improving mental health and social equality for women (Corey, 2015). Some dominant contemporary voices are Jean Baker Miller, Carolyn Zerger Enns, and Olva M. Espin. Miller played a vital role in developing the relational-cultural theory, while Enns focused on multicultural feminist therapy and pedagogies. Espin is considered a pioneer in the theory and practice of women from diverse cultural backgrounds (Corey, 2015).

The foundation of feminist therapy is highly influenced by the women's movement of 1960 when women collectively voiced their displeasure about the limitations and marginalization they were experiencing based on their gender (Corey, 2015). Feminist Therapy comprises four primary constructs—gender-fair approaches, flexible-multicultural perspective, interactionist perspective, and life-span perspective (Corey, 2015). These constructs examine the differences in the socialization processes of men and women assuming gender roles. Interpersonal attributes related to gender

are viewed within contextual and environmental factors rather than our inherent characteristics (Corey, 2015).

The Feminist theory will explore the different factors that contribute to Conrad feeling oppressed and powerless in his family and the social environment in which he exists. Great caution will be taken to diagnosing Conrad because diagnoses are viewed as being determined by the dominant culture's perception of normalcy, which is often oppressive. Conrad's depression and isolation are not symptoms of a psychological disorder or pathology but are coping skills he has developed to survive. Labeling Conrad with a pathological diagnosis will only dehumanize him, adding to his self-defeating thoughts (Corey, 2015).

According to feminist theory, Conrad's brother Buck would have been considered to have ascribed to the socially constructed behaviors defined as masculine. He was a jock—a consummate athlete, socially engaged and popular—a type of leader of the pack. After his death, his parents, specifically his mother, continued to impose social gender expectations on Conrad. However, Conrad, having a more sensitive and tender nature, is reluctant to assume this overtly masculine identity. Conrad is not this great athlete, with his room decorated with trophies and awards like Buck's. He preferred to join the choir and live a more introverted life, contrasting his brother's extroverted personality. Consequently, he has developed anger toward his parents and society for imposing these social restraints, causing him to feel conflicted, weak, and powerless. Hence, his desire to regain control over his life.

The goal of the feminist theory is to empower Conrad and to affirm and validate him. Conrad will be taught that he is an active agent of his own life and must recognize and embrace his power to be freed from the constraints of gender role socialization and internalized limitations (Corey, 2015). As a white male from an affluent family, the feminist theory would also want Conrad to explore how he has been privileged and that he has a role to play in the improvement of the lives of others (Corey, 2015).

Being present with Conrad and identifying with his sufferings are vital. His mother being emotionally distant from him could be that Conrad does not meet the gender socialization expectation she has embraced. She does not perceive him as a strong male and rejects him for his weakness. When he stated that if Buck were in the hospital, she would have visited him, she responded that Buck would have never been there (Redford, 1980). This indicated to Conrad that Buck would not have been emotionally frail to have wanted to commit suicide.

To help reduce the pain Conrad is experiencing from disconnectedness and isolation, mutual empathy and empowerment must be established. To accomplish this, an egalitarian relationship will be fostered based on mutuality, authenticity, and respect to create a balance of power between myself and Conrad (Corey, 2015). This technique will open the door for discussions about differential power imbalance. I will employ empowerment strategies suitable for Conrad to demonstrate how to remove barriers that obstruct the balance of power in his relationships.

An additional technique that will be used to help Conrad understand how his gender role socialization has impacted his identity is “social identity analysis.” Conrad will identify how societal messages he has received about being masculine were affirmed by parental messages

and how gender-role stereotypes have constrained him emotionally and socially (Corey, 2015). His mother especially did not consider Conrad's more sensitive attributes—being more creative, enjoying music, and being in the choir more than participating in athletic swimming or other competitive sports. Conrad will understand that he is not weak and survived the boating accident, demonstrating his strength. Bibliotherapy resources will also be provided to Conrad to help educate and empower him and facilitate growth (Corey, 2015).

Reference

Corey, Gerald. (2015) *Theory and Practice of Counseling and Psychotherapy, Enhanced*
10th Edition. Cengage Learning

Redford, R. (Director). (1980). *Ordinary People*. Wildwood Enterprises Production.