

Article 29

A Psychodynamic Critique of the Modern Counseling Profession

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Abstract

This paper offers a critique of the field of counseling from a contemporary psychodynamic and classical psychoanalytical perspective. In particular, accreditation guidelines and mandates are examined. A review of the history of counseling reveals psychodynamic persuasions. Classical psychoanalysis serves as a forefather to counseling in the modern age. Contemporary psychodynamic thought provides insight into the system of counseling, motivational influences, and mechanisms of defense employed by the field of counseling.

One day, in retrospect, the years of struggle will strike you as the most beautiful.
-Sigmund Freud

Introduction

Counseling is a distinct field, separate from psychology, social work, and psychiatry as a behavioral science (Erford, 2013). As the field of counseling burgeons and its identity evolves, recognition of the traditions that shaped and influenced the field is in order. Under recognized but heavily instrumental in molding the field of counseling is psychodynamic theory. How psychodynamic thought aligns and contrasts with contemporary forces shaping the field has yet to be examined.

Many counselor education programs aspire to the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP; 2009) standards, and an examination of said standards reveals psychodynamic persuasions and contradictions alike. An elaboration of how the psychodynamic school of thought has helped shape the field of counseling by an analysis of some of the CACREP standards reveals not only psychoanalytical influence, but consistencies and discrepancies between psychoanalytical viewpoints and counseling philosophy. The purpose of this paper is to critique the field of counseling from a contemporary psychodynamic and classical psychoanalytical perspective. In particular, accreditation guidelines and mandates are examined. While individuals are often scrutinized, rarely is a system or a field, although systems theory contends that they exert large influence (Corey, 2012).

Psychoanalysis and Counseling History

Contemporary counseling owes a great deal to Sigmund Freud and classical psychoanalysis, as do all varieties of psychotherapies, for if not for the first psychotherapy, then counseling as we know it may not exist. Psychoanalysis was a wellspring. Freud intended his proposition to be an end, but history would show it to be a beginning (Mitchell & Black, 1995). Ushering in the new century with an ever increasing notoriety of talk therapy, psychoanalysis did something in addition: it paved the way for divergent therapeutic modalities to originate. Counseling traces its roots, in part, back to E. G. Williamson and the trait and factor approach to personality and vocational guidance (Gladding, 2013). The trait and factor (also known as the Minnesota Point of View) approach shares a few commonalities with psychoanalysis, including being a direct, therapist-centered approach that stresses the counselor's teaching and influencing skills (Guindon, 2011). Trait-factor counseling owes psychoanalysis the debt of following in its psychological footsteps as a little brother does with a big brother. Freud formulated a theory of personality formation, and it is little coincidence that other psychotherapies and theories of personality arose soon thereafter, including counseling.

Psychoanalysis and Phenomenology

Many counselors are apt to practice from a phenomenological position (Neukrug, 2011). Running contrary to phenomenology, psychoanalysis is sometimes criticized as being archaic and even outlandish (Lettieri, 2007). Of note is how psychoanalytical concepts often shunned by contemporary practitioners, such as anal fixation, serve as metaphors applicable to issues of control that practitioners see daily with their clientele. Modern counselors presume that by employing tactics such as validation, empathy, and capitulation they will locate one or more keys that unlock the door to client self-awareness, empowerment, and ultimately, liberation. It is logical to suggest the psychodynamic practitioner would condone these practices, especially for mild psychological obstructions. Indeed, research suggests that for short term psychological distress, modalities often employed by counselors such as the use of cognitive-behavioral techniques are effective (Rabung & Leichsenring, 2012). The same research, a meta-analysis, concludes that long-term psychodynamic therapy is effective for complex mental disorders, such as personality disorders. Additional research indicates that the psychodynamic approach is as effective as phenomenologically based person-centered therapy for routine care (Stiles, Barkham, Twigg, Mellor-Clark, & Cooper, 2006). While the philosophies of psychodynamic and phenomenological theory differ, it appears they sometimes aspire to the same goal and both can be proficient at achieving it. However, there exists some large disparities.

The phenomenological belief system can lead to pragmatic results, because while a presumably innocuous flesh wound is capable of worsening, sometimes it heals with minimal assistance. Conversely, sometimes serious psychological injury, the kind that changes the fabric, the very cells of the psyche itself to the point that a person's constitution is changed, ensues. Are reflecting statements, open-ended questions, and genuineness adequately equipped to handle this severity? Psychodynamic theorists suggest that techniques which explore the unconscious, such as analyzing defense

mechanisms and working through transference, are preferable (Maroda, 2010). They are persuaded that deep injuries require deep interventions, and psychoanalytic interventions are the best available. Psychoanalysis offers self-awareness the hard way, through an exploration of the unconscious. In this regard, psychodynamic theory is at odds with the practice of most contemporary counselors.

Analogy of a Repressed Memory

A repressed memory by its very nature is pernicious, a venomous snake in hiding waiting to strike. Repressed memories are said to dwell in the unconscious, away from awareness, but remain capable of wreaking havoc on daily life (Wedding & Stuber, 2010). Counselors typically attend to surface level inhabitants, also known as the waking consciousness, by way of techniques such as summarizing and reflecting that focus on the self-reports of clients. The waking consciousness is that which is of current awareness at any given time, while the pre-conscious represents those memories a person can summons into waking consciousness at will, such as what was eaten for breakfast or the color of one's car. The unconscious represents a giant storehouse of biological drives and repressed memories, powerful but hidden (Weiss Roberts, Hoop, & Heinrich, 2009). Basic counseling skills do not aspire to explore the unconscious. The unconscious, using an analogy, is the Mariana Trench (the deepest place in the ocean), the pre-conscious is under the water's surface, and waking conscious is above the surface. Psychodynamic followers contend that while skills like active listening may alleviate the troubles of the surface, only a specialized mechanism can explore the trench. Deep ocean trenches exist, as does the unconscious, but from a surface-level viewpoint, one may doubt its existence. Recognizing the existence of the trench is step one, reaching it is step two (i.e., through psychoanalysis), and the work has just begun. It is difficult to retrieve objects from the abyss and bring them to the safer surface. No one knows all the crevices and secrets of the trench, but some choose to explore and some to ignore them. Depositing objects into the trench is uncomplicated. Drop a knife into the waves of reality and it will plummet into ethereal depths. Psychodynamic thought suggests that all therapeutic modalities invest more time probing the unconscious mind (Summers & Barber, 2010). If underlying psychological problems are indeed unconscious, psychodynamic practitioners doubt the ability of often used counseling techniques to remedy the problems.

Psychodynamic approaches are covered in the text of most popular counselor education theories courses (Corey, 2012; Seligman & Reichenberg, 2009). However, these courses usually present general overviews of the theory. It is henceforth rational to conclude that counselors, as with most contemporary behavior science practitioners, are ill-equipped to psychoanalyze and may not recognize the role of the past in shaping personality or the pernicious effects of repressed memories.

Mechanisms of Defense Employed by the Field of Counseling

Is it possible for a field, or system, to use defense mechanisms? Most psychoanalytical theories include the notion that humans are akin to repeating machines that duplicate childhood behavioral patterns well into adulthood. Would this repetitive tendency follow for entire professional fields as well? If so, an explanation for the present

state-of-affairs and model for future initiatives from the counseling field is thus provided. It seems plausible that the profession of counseling may employ mechanisms of defense as it aspires to establish itself in the political, insurance, and licensure landscape. Arriving as the behavioral science new kid on the block, the counseling profession has had to advocate on its own behalf for a place at an already crowded table. The history of counseling shows that psychiatrists, psychologists, and social workers had already gained licensure status and identification by government and insurance companies in most states, for practitioner reimbursement, when counselors came along (Nystul, 2005). It is common for newcomers to feel anxiety and therefore evoke a mechanism of defense. After all, the field must protect its collective psyche from perceived threats, like those from the establishment. Psychoanalysis would take note of how the field defended its turf and generally coped with outsider stressors by employing introjection (taking features of psychology and incorporating them into counseling), rationalization (presenting a string of reasons for doing similar work that other behavioral scientists already do), and sublimation (channeling frustrations into constructive client advocacy). Many defense mechanisms are inherently neither good or bad, just useful to an extent. The danger comes from unawareness. Counseling would be well-served to recognize the collective mechanisms of defense it uses.

Helping Relationships

Contemporary counseling practice and research has witnessed the emergence of cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT). CBT is an empirically based treatment with plentiful support (Butler, Chapman, Forman, & Beck, 2006). CBT, in Freud's mind, would be the equivalent of his worst nightmare about Jung realized. CBT has usurped from psychoanalysis, as Jung, Freud believed, wanted to take his creation of psychoanalysis down divergent pathways. CBT holds power in the current zeitgeist, and Freud likely would have detested this. Freud in modern times would battle CBT in a contest featuring the surface of CBT versus the depths of psychoanalysis. History suggests that Freud would emphasize digging up roots while CBT would point out that cutting off large, pesky limbs can salvage the tree. Counselors, under the sway of CBT, snip and trim plenty of branches these days. Freud would disapprove, knowing that underneath there exists still, strong roots. Amongst the psychological community there are strong opinions on the validity of CBT research efficacy, with some contending that psychodynamic and other theories have been underfunded (Allen, 2011). The psychodynamic suggestion is that insight often trumps untangling distorted cognitions.

Group Counseling

In addition to individual counseling, the psychodynamic approach and modern counseling intertwine at the group level. The counselor educator is to impart knowledge of group theories, leadership qualities, and dynamics, according to CACREP standards (CACREP, 2009). Much has been written about psychoanalysis applied to groups, including work by Freud himself (Freud, 1922). Counselor education programs require that group leader qualities, styles, and characteristics be taught to aspiring counselors. What can be learned from Freud about leadership? In particular, can Freud's leadership

style as head of a new movement translate into group counseling leadership? Counselors in training are usually encouraged to know three general leadership styles, which are emphasized on national licensure exams (Rosenthal, 2007): authoritarian, authoritative, and laissez-faire. Freud appears to have been an authoritarian-authoritative leader, with a leaning towards authoritarian (Goethals, 2005). Maybe this is the optimal style, maybe it was ideal just for Freud, maybe Freud was wrong, or perhaps something else entirely. Either way, the actual doings of the Father of Psychoanalysis surely are ripe for analysis, application, and study. For although Freud himself remains controversial, his power and influence cannot be denied. With the democratic leadership style generally promoted (Corey, 2011), Freud may suggest a more direct, even authoritarian approach to group counseling.

Program Evaluation and Accreditation

Counseling programs self-assess and within the confines of program leadership and faculty member motivation and initiative, actively evaluate and improve their departments. This is similar to a phenomenon that economists and political scientists call spontaneous order (Samuels, 2013), only applied departmentally. Spontaneous order suggests that without intervention from above, be it government or accrediting body, order will ensue from the voluntary actions of individuals. Henceforth, progress and quality is attainable without mandates from authoritative bodies. It is reasonable to say this penchant for internal academic program evaluation is consistent across time periods and departmental theoretical leaning. Had the founding fathers of psychoanalysis headed academic departments, they likely would have evaluated their curriculums, for instance, and taken steps to overall improve them. But there is a distinction between contemporary departments and those that would have been directed by Freud and his contemporaries, and that difference is accreditation bodies.

Many university counseling departments are accredited or strive for accreditation. Achieving accreditation ostensibly increases program esteem and helps its graduates more readily obtain licensure and even employment. There are differences between classical psychoanalytical methodology, which employs in-depth analysis of single case studies, and a contemporary accreditation rubric, which ensures certain standards are met. Furthermore, classical psychoanalysts would likely express frustration at a fundamental drawback of contemporary accreditation protocol, namely the taking away of departmental autonomy and the narrowing of faculty creativity. One can imagine a young Freud having to conform to status quo standards and guidelines set forth by an accreditation council of his day. A logical case can be made that there is little room for innovation, let alone a paradigm shift, with modern accreditation standards as they stand. With greater autonomy, counseling departments and the entire profession may innovate and hence advance more rapidly. Every minute spent on meeting an accreditation requirement is a minute that might have been devoted to originality. Psychoanalysis, the first therapy, would have been restrained under the weight of contemporary restraints, all in the name of accreditation to meet pre-determined standards. Coincidentally, classical Freudian theory, which argues that humans have precious little freedom, their lives being largely governed by unseen forces, was able to thrive in and perhaps because of a more laissez-faire external environment.

Conclusion

Taken literally, psychoanalysis means the analysis of the soul, and in the case of counseling, the soul of the profession. To analyze a soul, the soul must be known. What is the composition of counseling's soul in this day and age? As a profession, it faces pressure from consumerism while trying to collaborate with government and insurance companies, all while trying to establish a sturdy professional identity for itself. The future of the profession looks bright, and as counseling aspires to a brighter tomorrow, it is worthwhile to recognize the forefathers of a movement. Contemporary psychodynamic approaches have a great deal to offer counseling. Often, the outdated notions of classical psychoanalysis are confused with modern psychodynamic practice, which serves to give the approach a negative connotation to professionals (Shedler, 2010). As counseling moves towards an increasing emphasis on evidence-based practices, it is of note that psychodynamic interventions have demonstrated effectiveness (Driessen et al., 2010). The analysis and insight that psychodynamic theories offer can be used in the profession to develop awareness about counseling's core principles, motivations, and strategies for future growth.

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