Using Music for Case Conceptualization: Looking Through an Adlerian Lens

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Abstract

Case conceptualization is a key aspect of providing appropriate and effective counseling interventions. Teaching and learning case conceptualization can be difficult given the complexity and scope of a multitude of theories. Creative pedagogy and training experiences can assist in making this process more understandable and personal. We provide an overview of the use of music as a creative and critical means for conceptualizing a case through an Adlerian lens.

Keywords: case conceptualization, creative pedagogy, music

Case conceptualization is key in evaluating a client's multitude of behaviors in order to develop more advanced and appropriate interventions and techniques (Hinkle & Dean, 2017; Hrovat & Luke, 2016; Minton, Morris, & Yaites, 2014). Considering that the development of students so that they become successful practitioners is the primary goal of most training programs, proper pedagogy and training are needed (Tang et al., 2004). To meet this need for properly trained practitioners, it is paramount that training programs provide relevant counseling theory education (Hansen, 2006; Nittoli & Guiffrida, 2018).

Case Conceptualization for Counseling Students

Case conceptualization is a strategy to identify and explain a client's presenting concerns that enables practitioners to design culturally sensitive and effective treatment and anticipate treatment challenges. A case conceptualization includes the following formulations: clinical formulation, treatment formulation, cultural formulation, and diagnostic formulation (Sperry & Sperry, 2012). Understanding and applying this strategy is crucial to effective and efficient interventions for clients. Linking case conceptualization to theory is also imperative in the treatment process.

According to the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs, training programs are charged with teaching "theories

and models of counseling" (CACREP, 2016, p. 12) to all students. Included in this knowledge is case conceptualization, which includes the ability to define and analyze a client's presenting problem with the goal of developing an appropriate counseling intervention (Hinkle & Dean, 2017). Through this process, practitioners can elicit and organize information, develop and test hypotheses, and work collaboratively with the client toward an integrated concept of the client's life (Zubernis, Snyder, & Neale-McFall, 2017). The ability to accurately conceptualize through a selected theoretical lens is a major aspect of effective training and application in the counseling environment.

Counseling theories are linked to the worldviews of students and can significantly influence the interventions they choose to employ in their clinical work (Cummings, Ivan, Carson, Stanley, & Pargament, 2014; Murdock, 2017). Provided that the practitioner's personal allegiance to his or her approach explains 30% of treatment-related variance in client outcome (Wampold & Imel, 2015), aligning the student's worldview to his or her counseling theory may be a critical task; however, this process can be a complex and lengthy one requiring the management of a large body of material (Halbur & Halbur, 2015; Luke, 2017; Petko, Kendrick, & Young, 2016). Theoretical training can also be difficult as a result of the abstract nature of conceptualization as well as the application of concepts to specific counseling-based situations (Dollarhide, Smith, & Lemberger, 2007; Sperry & Sperry, 2012).

Students may also be influenced by additional factors related to their case conceptualization training. Relationships between personality characteristics of students and preferred counseling theories have yielded mixed results, whereas experiences with professors, educators, supervisors, and specific class assignments have been identified as significant contributors in theory understanding and application (Hinkle, Schermer, & Beasley, 2015). For instance, Petko et al. (2016) found that students identified logic, clarity, and value congruence to be more influential in theory development than theory compatibility with religious or spiritual beliefs, past experiences in the field, or influence from professors and supervisors. Considering this emphasis on the appropriate application of counseling theory, it is essential for training programs to utilize effective pedagogy to train future practitioners in case conceptualization.

Creative Pedagogy in Practitioner Training

There has been a recent call for experiential means to explore the development of case conceptualization in practitioner training (Fazio-Griffith & Ballard, 2016; Lawrence, Foster, & Tieso, 2015; Nittoli & Guiffrida, 2018). Recent literature suggests that student competency is enhanced in

environments designed to further develop critical thinking and therapeutic skills that are related to real-world counseling activities (Buser, 2008; Iarussi, Tyler, Littlebear, & Hinkle, 2014; Tang et al., 2004). Specifically, there is a need for training experiences that challenge students to engage in abstract thought with the goal of developing more meaningful case conceptualization (Hinkle & Dean, 2017; Scholl, Gibson, Despres, & Boyarinova, 2014).

Creative training experiences have become a more common method, with the inclusion of such modalities as role play, case studies, play-based activities, art activities, gaming, and use of media (Smith, 2009; Swank, 2012; Taub & Forney, 2004; Villalba & Redmond, 2008). The use of such creative activities in practitioner training has shown improved student self-awareness, greater critical thinking, and more confident application of counseling skills (Bell, Limberg, Jacobson, & Super, 2014; Gladding, 2016; Luke, 2017). Further, this type of learning can result in improved student confidence as well as enhanced engagement (Dollarhide et al., 2007; Duffy, Guiffrida, Araneda, Tetenov, & Fitzgibbons, 2017). Activities such as improvisation (Bayne & Jangha, 2016), television media (Gary & Grady, 2015), and games (Swank, 2012) have all been utilized effectively in research studies. Recently, the use of music has gained recent attention and support in the literature.

Music has a wide application with diverse populations and can be utilized to explore topics such as oppression, depression, sexuality, and violence in a familiar and creative way for practitioners-in-training (Davis & Pereira, 2016; Lenes, Swank, & Nash, 2015; Minor, Moody, Tadlock-Marlo, Pender, & Person, 2013). The use of music as a training technique has also been shown to aid in increased engagement, more emotional investment, and richer opportunities to recognize and confront worldviews from a wide range of cultures (Gladding, 2016; Nittoli & Guiffrida, 2018; Tromski & Doston, 2003; Young & Hundley, 2012). This engagement from myriad cultural perspectives can increase awareness and insights from a holistic perspective while also aligning with CACREP's standards for gaining theory and multicultural knowledge and skills (Duffy et al., 2017; Lawrence et al., 2015; Minton et al., 2014). Music also has the power to allow students to engage the body and mind at deeper and more meaningful levels, which results in greater receptiveness and attention, and can lead to increased awareness of self and others (Lenes et al., 2015; Lloyd & Smith, 2006).

Using music as a practitioner training tool can help illustrate certain constructs being taught in the curriculum and can serve as a catalyst for more meaningful and personal discussion (Davis & Pereira, 2016; Taub & Forney, 2004). For instance, instructors can utilize a song that tells a story about cultural issues, exemplifies trauma scenarios, or addresses developmental issues that could occur with young clients. Additionally, music can assist with helping students understand steps or constructs in theoretical models and

the application of counseling skills (Taub & Forney, 2004). Music can also be employed to support deeper self-reflection while processing the movement from theory to practice (Baker & Krout, 2011). Such reflection is crucial as it supports the integration of theory, research from the field, and skills-based knowledge. The use of music can be applied to all theoretical approaches because of the rich and diverse amount of songs that exist. For the purpose of this article, we explore the utilization of music to conceptualize a case through an Adlerian lens.

Adlerian Therapy Concepts

For our case conceptualization, we selected eight Adlerian concepts. Included among these concepts are soft determinism, phenomenology, purposeful and goal-oriented behavior, striving for significance and superiority, lifestyle, social interest, life tasks, and basic mistakes—all based on a summary of Adlerian theory detailed in a popular textbook on counseling theory (Corey, 2017). These themes are also consistent with those highlighted in other theory texts (e.g., Murdock, 2017; Sommers-Flanagan & Sommers-Flanagan, 2004).

Soft Determinism

Adler has been described as a soft determinist, postulating that although both nature (i.e., genetic heredity) and nurture (i.e., the environment) play a role in shaping human behavior, a third force supplements this role, the creative power of the individual (Ansbacher, 1992; Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956). Choice exists, and humans are free to make various choices, albeit from a limited number of options (Sommers-Flanagan & Sommers-Flanagan, 2004). In this sense, human beings are conceptualized as neither slaves to circumstance nor free of influence from factors beyond their control.

Phenomenology

In Adlerian theory, reality is viewed not as an external and objective truth but as a phenomenon that is constructed by the individual (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956; Corey, 2017; Murdock, 2017; Sommers-Flanagan & Sommers-Flanagan, 2004). The individual's perceptions, thoughts, values, beliefs, convictions, and conclusions compose a subjective reality, which is of greater interest to the counselor than an external and objective reality (Corey, 2017).

Purposeful and Goal-Oriented Behavior

Adler believed that all human beings are striving toward a goal, and that the human psyche is therefore focused on preparation for future action

(Adler, 1927). In this sense, all human behavior is considered purposeful (Corey, 2017; Murdock, 2017). As children pursue developmental goals, including superiority and social interest, they are sometimes frustrated by an inability to fulfill their instinctual needs, and they respond either by attempting to duplicate the methods of adults or by displaying their weaknesses. The tendency of children to employ one strategy or the other becomes a basis for character development that often follows them into adulthood (Adler, 1927).

Striving for Significance and Superiority

Adler believed that all children experience feelings of insecurity, inadequacy, and inferiority, yet simultaneously grow up striving for social recognition, a sense of significance, and superiority, developing different means and methods to pursue these goals. A goal of superiority to one's environment is the manifestation of this underlying need for significance. Adler (1927) stressed the role of this goal in shaping memory: "It is this goal that gives value to our experiences. It links and coordinates our feelings, shapes our imagination, directs our creative powers and determines what we will remember and what we must forget" (loc. 1071). According to Corey (2017), Adlerians have used various terms, including *fictional finalism*, *guiding self-ideal*, and *goal of perfection* to describe this phenomenon, which can be expressed as "Only when I am perfect can I be secure" (p. 100), or "Only when I am important can I be accepted" (p. 100). Depending on complex interactions among genetic heredity, the environment, individual choice, and other factors, the perpetual inability to achieve a sense of security and superiority may result in an inferiority complex, defined as "the persistence of the consequences of the feeling of inferiority and the retention of that feeling" (Adler, 1938, loc. 1084) or a superiority complex, conceptualized as a lack of interest in others and an exaggerated sense of self-love.

Lifestyle

Adler proposed that in early childhood people develop life plans called lifestyles that guide them throughout their lives (Carlson, Watts, & Maniacci, 2006). In keeping with Adler's phenomenological philosophy, a life plan is based on subjective, individual interpretations of reality, and people are often not consciously aware of these plans (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956; Carlson et al., 2006). Nonetheless, lifestyle functions to help people adapt to their environments (Dreikurs, 1953).

Social Interest

Adler viewed human beings as interdependent, proposing that no individual can survive without others (Dreikurs, 1953). As social beings, humans possess a relatively innate social interest. This interest is defined as a

manifestation of a striving for social connections with both individuals and the larger community (Sommers-Flanagan & Sommers-Flanagan, 2004).

Life Tasks

Adler identified three major tasks that all humans pursue throughout life: the building of friendships (social task), the establishment of intimacy (love task), and contribution to society (occupational task) (Corey, 2017; Murdock, 2017). Avoidance of these life tasks can result in the development of mental disorders (Corey, 2017).

Basic Mistakes

Basic mistakes are embedded in the lifestyle and are defined as "habitual, self-defeating, cognitions that allow avoidance of life tasks or are reflective of low social interest or high needs for power" (Murdock, 2017, p. 118). Mosak (2005) identified five basic mistakes inherent in Adlerian theory: (a) there is no fairness in the world or one must take care of everything (overgeneralization); (b) one must have the most power or others should always take care of one's needs (false or impossible goals); (c) the world is against one or one can or should have anything in the world that one wants (misperceptions of life and life's demands); (d) one is globally worthless, inferior, or unlovable (denial of one's basic worth); and (e) one must win, conquer, or achieve superiority regardless of how much that conquest hurts others (faulty values).

Adlerian Therapeutic Concepts

Adlerian theory emphasizes the role of inferiority and superiority complexes and the avoidance of life tasks in the development of mental disorders. As a result, Adlerian therapy emphasizes therapeutic goals and techniques to help clients with the healthy pursuit of life tasks rooted in the drive toward both superiority and social interest. The practitioner's primary goal is to aid the client in developing insight into lifestyle, including the influence of the aforementioned five basic mistakes, and to replace selfish goals with ones that more effectively balance drives toward superiority and social interest (Adler, 1938; Corey, 2017; Dreikurs, 1953; Murdock, 2017). Dreikurs (1953) identified four phases of Adlerian therapy: (a) establish the proper therapeutic relationship, (b) explore the psychological dynamics operating in the client (assessment), (c) encourage the development of self-understanding (insight into purpose), and (d) help the client make new choices (reorientation and reeducation).

In the assessment phase of treatment, Adlerian practitioners conduct both formal and informal assessments, exploring various aspects of the client's life that are consistent with contemporary biopsychosocial assessments,

such as social relationships, family life, interests, early childhood memories, and biomedical conditions (Murdock, 2017). Practitioners may ask "the question," a forerunner of the contemporary miracle question in solution-focused therapy, in which a client may be asked a question such as "What would be different in your life if [the symptom disappeared]?" (Mosak & Maniacci, 1999, p. 135).

Adlerian Therapeutic Applications

Murdock (2017) summarized nine techniques employed by Adlerian practitioners beyond the assessment phase. The goal of interpretation is to aid clients in developing insight.

Practitioners may offer tentative interpretations—sometimes framed as hunches or guesses on the part of the counselor—of client recollections, dreams, thoughts, and motivations that illuminate lifestyle and basic mistakes. Next is encouragement. For this technique, the practitioner identifies and emphasizes client strengths and abilities that can be used to accomplish goals through choice. With natural and logical consequences, the practitioner allows clients to experience natural consequences of their actions without attempting to save them from those consequences. The fourth technique is acting "as if." For this, practitioners collaborate with clients to design behavioral experiments in which clients act as if they had already accomplished their goals (e.g., a depressed client acts as if she were happy; a client struggling with inferiority acts as though he were confident). The next technique is called pushing the button; in this, the practitioner aids the client in identifying the connection between intentional focus and experience of emotions by alternating between picturing pleasant scenes or events and troubling ones, exploring the emotions experienced with each recollection. In the technique called catching oneself, once a client has accepted a counselor interpretation, the client is encouraged to catch him- or herself engaging in the undesirable behavior with the goal of eventually doing so before engaging in the behavior. This is followed by the technique of creating images. Here, the practitioner and client co-construct imagery that the client can use to picture faulty goals, oftentimes with the use of humor. Next is pleasing someone. In this technique, the practitioner encourages the client to engage in a daily directive of intentionally pleasing someone else. The final technique is the paradoxical intention. For this technique, the practitioner asks the client to intensify engagement in target behaviors, aiding the client in increased awareness of the consequences of symptoms—this is also referred to as "spitting in the soup."

Addressing each of these aspects from the Adlerian perspective can be daunting for students; hence the recommendation of music as a potential training tool. A sample case conceptualization is provided in the

following section as an example of how to process certain portions of the Adlerian approach.

Adlerian Case Conceptualization

In case conceptualization, it is important to include a clinical formulation to explore causative factors of psychosocial difficulties while linking the case conceptualization to treatment plan goals. The Adlerian perspective specifically considers factors such as social and cultural identity as well as the client's cultural explanation and cultural expectations of the counseling process (Sperry & Sperry, 2012). We offer a brief case conceptualization of the protagonist in singer-songwriter Tracy Chapman's (1988) "Fast Car" from an Adlerian perspective. We selected this song because it mentions a variety of issues that can be addressed in an Adlerian case conceptualization, including alcoholism, socioeconomic status, and family dynamics. We structure our conceptualization as follows: (a) client background and presenting problem, (b) assessment, (c) goals, and (d) planned interventions. In doing so, we imagine that the song's protagonist is a client presenting for counseling with the goal of alleviating her distress.

Client Background and Presenting Problem

The client is an African American young woman who was raised by her father in a single-parent household. She reported that her mother left her father because she did not feel satisfied in their relationship. The client chose to drop out of school to take care of her father out of an obligation to assist him with his failing health and inability to work as a result of his alcoholism.

However, the client felt trapped in those circumstances, caring for an alcoholic father while working a low-paying job at a convenience store at the expense of completing her formal education. She reasoned that an escape from the situation would be better than where she was at that point in her life. As a result, she felt that if she did not do something quickly, she would be destined to live this life with little hope for change.

She found what she thought would be a way out of her circumstances, falling in love with a young man whom she dated. She enjoyed driving with him, relating that she finally felt like she was accepted and had a sense of freedom. She proposed that the two of them drive away from their hometown, move to the city, and try to build a life for themselves. She believed that they were starting with very little resources and support but also believed that they might one day be successful and finally have the life she always envisioned.

She and her boyfriend subsequently left town, living in a shelter in the nearby city, having very limited funds that she saved from her job at a convenience store prior to leaving. They struggled financially, but she worked hard at the local market, eventually moving into a small apartment with the hope of moving into a home. Eventually, they had children together.

However, despite years of opportunity, her boyfriend remained unemployed while she worked hard in a job that just met their financial responsibilities. Additionally, he developed a problem with alcohol, and he spent a great deal of time at the local bar, developing stronger ties to his friends than to his own children. The client has presented with a dilemma of whether to stay in her current relationship or to leave her alcoholic boyfriend and move on, as her mother did when she was a child.

Assessment

Developmentally, the client lacked an appropriate model for a healthy balance of seeking superiority over her environment while also pursuing social interest. Because of her father's alcoholism, physical problems, and inability and/or refusal to work, coupled with the circumstances of her mother leaving the family and the client's being an only child, she learned to take an executive role in her household, working to care for the immediate needs of her father and herself at the expense of continuing on with her education. Consequently, she struggled with inferiority, having been deprived of the opportunity to live her idealized phenomenological lifestyle in a suburban community with a loving, integrated family and a middle-class lifestyle made possible by education and related career opportunities.

In an effort to achieve a sense of adequacy and superiority over her environment, she devised a plan to leave her home, but she chose a partner with similar traits to those of her father, someone who developed an inferiority complex and has learned excessive dependence on others. She lacks a sense of community, purpose, and belonging, having only a detached and alcoholic partner as a source of emotional support, while she struggles to manage the household, finances, and parenting responsibilities.

A basic mistake, which was fed by her circumstances and interactions with caregivers while growing up, is likely now embedded in her lifestyle. This mistake is the idea that she is globally worthless, inferior, or unlovable. While struggling to keep her household together and caring for the alcoholic men who have been prominent in her life, she has struggled to achieve all three major life tasks; she has no strong social network (social task), intimacy (love-marriage task), or a strong sense of having made a contribution to society (occupational task). Consequently, she feels stuck. She may respond by either taking bold action to improve her circumstances through the creativity of choice, or she may embrace her inadequacies and learn to be dependent on others, which appears to be the least likely of the two possibilities given

her established lifestyle. Thus, the client is positioned to interrupt a trans-generational pattern.

Goals

Several goals can be developed to address the issues presented in this case. The initial goal is for the client to gain insight into her basic mistake and her lifestyle. Through this insight, the client will be able to move to the second goal, which is to identify her internal strengths and resources. Finally, the client will develop and implement a plan of behavioral action to counter her basic mistake (i.e., experiencing herself as significant, valuable, and lovable) and better accomplish life tasks by building a stronger support system, taking healthy action regarding her relationship, and developing a stronger sense of contributing to community.

Planned Interventions

The planned intervention based in an Adlerian perspective offers five specific steps. First is interpretation. Here the practitioner offers interpretations of the client's developmental story to see if she can identify her underlying basic mistake. Next, the practitioner offers encouragement to highlight the aspects of the client's story that illustrate her strengths (e.g., surviving financially with limited education through a strong work ethic). The next step involves natural and logical consequences. Here the practitioner aids the client in exploring her options regarding her relationship and the potential benefits and drawbacks of each option, honoring her autonomy and her choice to engage in any identified option and allowing her to experience consequences naturally. In the next stage, acting "as if," the practitioner would collaborate with the client to identify behaviors she would engage in were she to truly feel lovable and worthwhile and to support her in implementing related behavioral objectives (e.g., attending a support group such as Al-Anon, perhaps building a support network and obtaining a sponsor, engaging in appropriate self-assertion with partner, exploring options for enhancing her career). In the final technique for this case, the practitioner would employ catching oneself. If the client accepts the interpretation of her underlying basic mistake, the practitioner would coach her in identifying manifestations of that basic mistake in everyday experiences.

Conclusion

The development of case conceptualization skills can be daunting for counseling students. Utilizing a medium such as music can offer a familiar modality for process and discussion, resulting in enhanced personal and academic experiences for understanding and applying a variety of theoretical

perspectives, including the Adlerian conceptualization offered in this article. The use of music as an experiential exercise can be a modality for training programs to better prepare students for case conceptualization and application with a variety of approaches.

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