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Theory Application Paper: The Case of Thomas

Thomas is a high school sophomore and is one of Ms. K's students in her counseling caseload. Having recently discovered that he is homosexual, Thomas begins to explore his quiet sexuality further by talking to other males on social media apps. Earlier in the school year, a male classmate looks through Thomas' phone and learns about the conversations he has with other males. Thomas' classmates, and most of the sophomore class begin taunting and harassing Thomas about his sexual orientation. Though the teasing has decreased over the progression of the school year, Thomas cannot shake off the anxiety and fears of being called a "homo" or "queer" on campus as he has not accepted fully that he is gay. Due to his anxiety and dealing with the stress of rejecting his homosexuality, Thomas' academic performance declines and his mental and physical states begin to suffer. Additionally, he has withdrawn from extracurricular activities such as playing hockey and attending weekly Debate Club meetings. Instead of learning to accept his homosexuality and come out publicly (a goal that he wants to eventually reach, but finds himself keep delaying), he falls into a state of depression. Thomas' mother and his teachers see the change in his behavior and both parties seek assistance from Ms. K, who begins to see Thomas once a week in her office.

Techniques from a reality therapist approach:

From a reality therapy approach, it is important that Ms. K establishes that she is skilled and knowledgeable in her counseling career, so Thomas can recognize her as a counselor, and not a friend. Furthermore, the reality therapist must possess qualities such as "warmth, sincerity, congruence, understanding, acceptance, concern, respect for the client, openness, and the willingness to be challenged by others" (Corey, 2017, p. 320).

An issue for Thomas is the decrease in his wellbeing after his classmates begin to taunt him about his homosexuality. He begins to develop the following behaviors: withdrawals from his extracurriculars, mental exhaustion or lack of motivation from school and other personal habits, states of depression and/or anxiety. Ms. K, using a reality therapist approach backed by choice theory, contends that all the behaviors Thomas experiences are due to a lack of choice and personal responsibility. The following statements describes choice theory:

The primary emphasis is on what the client is doing and how the doing component influences the other aspects of total behavior. Behavior is purposeful because it is designed to close the gap between what we want and what we perceive we are getting. Specific behaviors are always generated from this discrepancy. Our behaviors come from the inside, and thus we choose our destiny (Corey, 2017, p. 315).

Over the course of the next few counseling sessions, Ms. K works to create a trusting and open relationship with Thomas. Although she listens to Thomas describe the pain he has endured and the depression he has fallen into, she explains to him that he does not have to be a victim of his past. Eventually, Thomas learns that he can put the past behind him and move forward as long as he chooses to act on it. Through more sessions, Thomas confirms that his negative mindsets and behaviors are results of being unable to accept that he is gay. Reality therapy is built on the foundation of choice and personal responsibility. As noted in the case, Thomas shares his goal in a counseling session to come out publicly as a gay. In order to meet his goal, Ms. K teaches choice theory to Thomas.

She begins by explaining the five encoded needs that drive a person's life: survival, love and belonging, power, freedom, and fun (Corey, 2017, p. 314). Through these five needs, Ms. K helps Thomas build what reality therapists call a "quality world." The quality world is defined as a memory drive of our personal "wants and needs," consisting of specific images of "people, activities, events, beliefs, possessions, and situations that fulfill our needs" (Corey, 2017, p. 315). Thomas begins to accept personal responsibility for his negative behaviors by focusing on his quality world. He describes his quality world as a world where his parents, close friends, and people that know him as a publicly-out homosexual male. In his quality world, he is also succeeding in all his classes academically, winning hockey championships, and staying active in his Debate Club. Importantly, Thomas sees himself as a confident and unafraid homosexual male.

Ms. K asks Thomas questions such as, "What would you have in your life right now if you were to put the past and taunting behind you, and come to school tomorrow, happy – and accepting of yourself?" and "What do you have to do in order to not fall victim to your

unhappiness and reach your quality world?" The process of self-evaluation is crucial in reality therapy and allows clients such as Thomas to gauge what he needs to control in his life in order to obtain fulfillment. Lastly, in order for the counseling to work on Thomas, he needs to view Ms. K as his counselor, and not a guardian or friend.

During the last few meetings, Thomas works on practicing how he will open up to people in his life about his homosexuality, beginning with his mother. He shares with Ms. K that because she is woman, he sees her as his mother and has a hard time practicing what to say. Ms. K firmly tells Thomas that she is strictly his counselor, and not his mother, guardian or friend. This characteristic is what reality therapists use to reject transference projected from a client to a therapist. Through rejecting transference, the two will be able to build a professional and trusting counselor-student relationship.

Techniques from a feminist therapist approach:

An egalitarian relationship is necessary between the client and a therapist when using feminist therapy approaches. In order to maintain this principle, Ms. K uses techniques such as building empathy and empowerment, and using gender-role/social identity analysis, appropriate self-disclosure during their one-on-one meetings. The egalitarian relationship, to feminist therapists, is a way to "recognize that there is a power imbalance in the therapeutic relationship, so they strive to shift power and privilege to the voices and experiences of clients and away from themselves" (Corey, 2017, p. 344).

Although Ms. K is not homosexual or a male, a form of self-disclosure that she uses with Thomas is sharing her personal experience with friends of hers that have struggled with their sexual identity and orientation, as well as her own experiences being a woman. She discloses that she often feels like women are underappreciated in the workforce, and she has struggled in her early career as a counselor working multiple jobs simply because she wasn't granted the same

pay rate as male colleagues as her. In addition, Ms. K feels that it is important to mention that she, as a minority female, has experienced inequality due to her gender and race. She experiences frustration when her mother and other females demean her role and career, encouraging her to stay at home more and letting her husband work. The technique Ms. K is using with self-disclosure is called gender-role or social identity analysis:

Gender-role analysis assists clients in identifying the impact that their own gender-role socialization has played in shaping their values, thoughts, and behaviors. Social identity and gender-role analysis begins with clients identifying the societal messages they received about how women and men should be and act as well as how these messages interact with other important aspects of identity (Corey, p. 350).

During the meetings, Ms. K asks Thomas to describe what it means to be a gay male and how it makes him feel. He uses adjectives such as “insecure,” “unwanted,” “feminine” and “unloved.” Ms. K uses a technique called relabeling to encourage Thomas to talk about himself as a confident, secure, and important individual worthy of love. In addition, the two examine Thomas’ thinking and his internalized homophobia through internalized societal expectations.

In an effort to get Thomas back on track with his studies and hobbies, Ms. K chooses to empower him by asking him what might be hindering his performance. After sharing with Ms. K about his anxiety and fear of what others might think of him, she asks him to describe how he feels when he is in performing well in school and in hockey. Thomas responds with positive remarks, and Ms. K helps him identify the goals that will guide him in the therapeutic process in order to reach a state of resilience.

Ms. K uses appropriate self-disclosure and empowerment techniques to encourage Thomas to feel comfortable in his skin as well as help him build resilience. She shares a time in college where she joined a sorority in which their philanthropy was volunteering at battered

womens shelters. There, she was able to support other women who have suffered domestic abuse and violence, and the work she did empowered her to find a voice for women.

Before he leaves from his session, Ms. K recommends several movies and documentaries that celebrate gay culture and pride. In addition, she helps Thomas look up autobiographies written by homosexuals who share their personal experiences and challenges living in a “heterosexual” world. During the last few sessions, Ms. K asks Thomas if he has ever considered joining the LGBT Teen Association on campus. She urges him to consider attending a meeting with students who may be experiencing what he is going through. Thomas says that although he has no desire to make social change, he agrees that he would like to meet more homosexual students like himself and looks into attending the next meeting.

Limitations:

Three possible limitations that arise from Thomas’ case from the feminist therapy approach may be Thomas’ cultural background, Ms. K’s lack of personal experience, and Thomas’ lack of desire to make social change. In the possibility that Ms. K may be homosexual herself, an issue that may arise is whether or not that information would be appropriate or helpful for her to disclose. The scenario may also be different if Thomas was raised in a traditional, conservative and religious household. Ms. K should remain conscientious of the techniques of empowerment she might recommend for Thomas. Chrysalis Community Counseling Services for Women makes the following statement on working with cultural diversities and oppressions:

A feminist therapist is aware of the meaning and impact of her own ethnic and cultural background, gender, class, age, and sexual orientation, and actively attempts to become knowledgeable about alternatives from sources other than her clients. She is actively engaged in broadening her knowledge of ethnic and cultural experiences, non-dominant and dominant (Chrysalis Counseling Services for Women, 2000).

This code refers to Ms. K’s awareness of self and her ability to remain open-minded and transparent for her relationship with Thomas. Although Thomas is a male, feminist therapy is not

uncommon among men. In fact, the feminist perspective comes from a history of feminists believing that “gender cannot be considered apart from other identities related to race, ethnicity, socioeconomic class, age, and sexual orientation” (Corey, 2018, p. 340).

Two possible limitations from Thomas’ case from the reality therapy approach may be the pace that Ms. K asks Thomas to evaluate his life and change his behavior as well as the possibility of severe trauma. Perhaps there should be a different form of intervention that should be carefully considered before Ms. K helps him set up goals to publicly come out. Lisa Roundy states that the main weakness of reality therapy is “that it may not be successful with clients who have problems that are more complex, like severe mental illnesses or childhood trauma” (Roundy, 2018). For more positive significant changes in Thomas’ performance, he may need further assessment and additional support from a mental health professional in order to help cope with his anxiety.

References

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