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Relational-Cultural Theory

- Relational Cultural Theory (RCT) proposes an alternative to traditional model of psychological development.
- According to RCT, individuals grow through their connections with others.
- We become more relationally competent as we represent ourselves authentically in our relationships and as we negotiate the relational ruptures that occur.
- These are natural and occur between client and counselor, student and professor, colleagues, family members, and friends.

Relational Cultural Theory Growth Through Connection

- A theoretical base on which ACC was founded
- Posits that we grow through our 'right' relationships with others
- Our relationships are influenced by our social contexts
- Unique in that it identifies the role of power and context in relationships

Jean Baker Miller Training Institute

jbmi.org

- Irrene Stiver, Jean Baker Miller, Judith Jordan, Janet Surrey, Maureen Walker, Linda Hartling, Amy Banks
- Pioneers in relational development
- Jean Baker Miller Training Institute, Wellesley College
- Introduced paradigm shift from the individual to the relational

“Five Good Things”

- According to RCT, we each have an essential need for connection with others.
- Connection involves five relational dynamics referred to by Jean Baker Miller as “five good things”.
 - Each person in a relationship experiences more “zest, vitality, and energy” because of a shared connection within a growth-fostering relationship.
 - Because the relationship is growth fostering and both parties actively participate, they each experience increased motivation toward action.

“More of the Five Good Things”

- Anticipated result:
 - people are able to see themselves and each other more clearly.
 - this clarity brings with it a mutually experienced sense of personal worth, and a desire to form and enjoy connections with others.

Disconnections as a Part of Life

- RCT also acknowledges that disconnections are a natural part of life.
- In fact, RCT posits that as much as we yearn for connection, we many times engage in behaviors that keep us from experiencing the connection we desire.
- We engage in Strategies of Disconnection.
- Chronic disconnections can lead to what RCT refers to as the “Condemned Isolation”

Mutual Empathy

- A basic tenet of RCT is the idea of Mutual Empathy. This results when we are able to “get” our impact on others. Counselors allow themselves to be moved by their clients and communicate this.
- This is different from one-way empathy that we often discuss in counseling.

Safety in Relationships can come from Respect and Appreciation

- Much of the work in counseling involves transforming painful “relational images” from our pasts since they largely determine our beliefs about our relationships and about ourselves.
- As we experience respect and appreciation, we experience a greater sense of safety and belonging.

Relational-Cultural Theory

- If our relational images are such that we expect our connections to be fruitful, we will embrace them as such.
- If, however, our relational images are hurtful, we may encounter what the model refers to as the Central Relational Paradox.
- Again, in spite of our yearning for connection, we develop strategies of relating that paradoxically keep us from the connection we desire.
- Painful, humiliating experiences can lead to isolation.

Power: Dismissive, Exploitive, and Controlling

- Further, when we feel exploited by someone who holds or has held a position of power in our lives, we tend to hide important aspects of ourselves in self-protection.
- Our need to self-protect removes us from our authentic experience and our sense of worth and significance is diminished as we come to see the ways in which we “do not matter”.

Authenticity

- Alternatively, when we are able to genuinely represent ourselves in these relationships and negotiate our needs, we experience a form of mutuality in our relationships and recognize our impact on our environment and on the people in our lives.
- This process positively increases our sense of worth and deepens our capacity for new learning.

Introducing Sarah

- 53 year-old female
- Vibrant, energetic, and eager to do her work.
- First attended therapy following a medical scare that reminded her of “how vulnerable we are, particularly as we age”.
- Described herself as a dreamer who found it difficult to leave the past behind and walk enthusiastically in the present.

Sarah’s Counseling Goals

- To revisit her experiences with a fresh perspective; release feelings of grief, and walk gratefully in the present, mindful of her opportunities.
- To become more connected to the important people in her life.
- To find positive meaning in her experiences.
- To feel peace.

Sarah’s History

- Although she had gained considerable insight into her patterns, Sarah did not appear to appreciate herself, nor did she feel much compassion for herself.
- She wanted to release old wounds and find more compassion for herself. Her own worst critic, she wanted to look at her life through a more caring lens.
- She also wanted to be realistic about her own contributions to problems.

Sarah’s Relationships

- Married for 15 years.
- Credits immaturity and lack of mutual understanding as catalysts for the divorce.
- Has many regrets about being spoiled while in her marriage.
- Feels shame over her behaviors while married (self-centered, too sensitive, reactive).
- Divorce was amicable. Still cares deeply for her husband.
- Felt like a fish out of water facing the world alone.

Sarah’s Recollections of Loss

- Post-marriage, entered one relationship she described as marginally abusive. Felt responsible for “not being good enough” in the relationship.
- Disclosed a number of painful memories that reflected lifelong themes of anticipation, yearning, and loss, including family deaths and divorces.
- Regretted lost friendships at different points in her life.

Sarah in Counseling

- Eager to start the process.
- Described wanting a counselor who would walk her through personal challenges related to aging and loss.
- Wanted to deal authentically with her feelings and to have a realistic perspective on her experiences.
- Wished to be free of second-guessing retrospection.
- Aware of her past-focused perspective and the way this interfered in her relationships and personal happiness.

Sarah's Hope

- To attribute meaning to her experiences and embrace them for the value that they had in her life.
- To release them as experiences that have served their purpose.
- To feel more genuine compassion for herself.
- To feel more connected with others.
- To be open to new experiences; to trust.

Sarah's Counseling Experience

- A good part of the first few sessions involved Sarah describing her life experiences and the important people in her life.
- Described the ways in which her previous counselors had conceptualized her as a case.
- Recalled painful memories, but also joyful and rewarding ones.
- Because of her love of music, we used it to help her connect with and tell her story.
- We also used it as a point of connection between us.
- Music also helped her set her counseling goals.



A Musical Chronology and the Emerging Life Song

Revisiting Life and Reframing Possibilities through Music



Musical Scrapbook



"Therapeutic Sharing Ritual"

"When a song or poem is shared between counselor and client in an intense way that demarcates the experience from usual business, that sharing process constitutes a "therapeutic sharing ritual."



Hodas, 1994

Chronology Rationale

- Many people connect music with their experiences.
- These experiences can result in stories that people tell themselves about their lives and about what life can look like.
- They also help shape our relational images.
- These stories and images strongly influence a person's perceptions about themselves and others.
- This influence either supports or impedes a person's freedom to invest in life and others.

Chronology Objectives

- To facilitate clients' access to their emotional responses to life experiences.
- To help them reflect on their relational images.
- To provide a forum for clients to identify and process important experiences. To help them feel "seen."
- To help clients and counselors connect with one another through this process.
- To help clients see their impact on others.
- To assist clients to deconstruct unproductive stories and re-author their lives through the use of music consciously selected and reinforced.

Chronology Process

STAGE ONE

- Counselor and client discuss the use of music to revisit past memories and associations.
- Counselor explains the chronology process.

STAGE TWO

- Client identifies musical selections that have been important to them or that trigger life events.
- Clients compile their selections chronologically and prepare a CD.
- The counselor can assist with any part of this process.

Chronology Process

STAGE THREE

- Client and counselor listen to the music together.
- Client and counselor engage in a client-led "revisiting" of historical events.
- The music is used to evoke feelings, thoughts, and memories.
- It also helps client and counselor connect with one another.

Chronology Process Stage Four

- Counselor and clients listen for themes.
- They work together to facilitate the client's awareness of these themes.
- This lays the groundwork for the client to
 - Experience his or her impact on the counselor (mutual empathy)
 - Revisit unproductive relational images.
 - Develop alternative stories and life choices.
 - Integrate these experiences and gain greater acceptance of life as it is.
 - Expand their possibilities and opportunities for choice in the future.

More of Stage Four

- Client identifies a song that reflects their current emotional state.
- This helps the client look realistically at where they are in life and what their relationships look like.
- It also helps the client reframe current responses to historical events.
- Client then identifies a song that represents their hopes, dreams, and goals for the future. This serves as a metaphor for counseling goals.

Sarah's Chronology Process

- Sarah was excited at the prospect of compiling music that had been important to her and invested in the process enthusiastically.
- She had long been a music lover and described how music had been her friend ever since she was a child.
- Some of her earliest recollections involve sitting on the floor next to the stereo speakers in her family home, playing her favorite records over and over.
- Now, as part of the chronology process, Sarah is bringing out old records to create a musical landscape of her life experiences.

Sarah's Chronology Process

- Through Sarah's music, she walked me through important historical life events.
- The music allowed Sarah to experience feelings and memories in a way that just "telling the story" couldn't.
- As she selected her musical selections, and as we listened to them together, she was able to select songs that represented the story she wanted to tell.
- It also allowed me to share in her story, and to experience it in the course of our work together.

Sarah's Story Using A Musical Chronology

Sarah's First Song

Anticipation – Carly Simon

We can never know about the days to come
But we think about them anyway
And I wonder if I'm really with you now
Or just chasing after some finer day.

Anticipation, Anticipation
Is making me late
Is keeping me waiting

And tomorrow we might not be together
I'm no prophet, I don't know nature's way
So I'll try to see into your eyes right now
And stay right here, 'cause these are the good old days.

Song #1 Anticipation

- Sarah discussed how her children and grandchildren have always been the bright spot in her life.
- She recalls the time in life when her children were young, and how her family was busy "building, becoming, and doing".
- Although that period is resoundingly powerful for her, she has regrets.
- According to Sarah, this song reflects how she has characteristically chased her dreams rather than appreciating life in the moment.

Song #1 Anticipation

- The song also makes her recall her marriage, and how she wanted it to be long-lasting.
- Although the decision to part was mutual, she recalls the guilt she has felt for being young, immature, stubborn, and shortsighted.
- Sarah recalls how difficult it was for her to be in love with the moment; how, despite the great moments before her, she would often look forward to something else; how she would *wait for more*.

Song #1 Anticipation

- Sarah no longer wants to wait, and like the song, she wants to see the present as the *good old days*.
- While conducting her chronology, Sarah was able to appreciate her role in people's lives.
- She began to see how her story was filled with many "good old days," complete with good times, bad times, challenges, and triumphs.
- She describes feeling grateful for them at the same time she regrets that her head and heart carried preoccupations while she lived those moments.

Song #1 Anticipation

- Sarah no longer wants to live with regret.
- She wants it to become second nature for her to recognize her great moments as they occur .
- The song “Anticipation” helped her put to words that desire.
- Further, it helped her communicate this value to her children and loved ones.
- It also helped her remember how grateful she is for life to be just as it is.

Sarah’s Second Song

Happiest Girl in the Whole USA- Donna Fargo

Shine on me sunshine
Walk with me world
It’s a skippidity do da day
I’m the happiest girl, in the whole U.S.A.

And thank you for letting life turn out the way
That I always thought it could be
There once was a time when I could not imagine
How it would feel to say
I’m happiest girl, in the whole U.S.A

Song #2 Happiest Girl in the Whole USA

- Sarah always enjoyed the song, and she enjoyed hearing how happy someone can be in a mutually satisfying relationship.
- In listing to this song in her chronology, Sarah is reminded of the part of her that is genuinely hopeful that she can enjoy mutuality even more in her relationships.

Song #2 Happiest Girl in the Whole USA

- Sarah is especially grateful that she is reminded of her desire to have a relationship with God.
- This challenge has been formidable.
- Happiness to Sarah is directly related to feeling connected in life.
- It is related to feeling connected to others.
- She relayed how she felt more connected to herself when she felt connected to others.

Song #2 Happiest Girl in the Whole USA

- There are times when Sarah feels very connected to the people she cares about and to God, but there are other times when she feels disconnected from everyone.
- During these times, she has historically lamented losses and shattered hopes.
- Sarah tries to remember that she is connected to others, to God, and even to deceased loved ones, even when feelings of loneliness come over her heart.

Song #3 Morning Has Broken

- Recalling the hope that she felt as a child, her trust in God, and her expectation that life would be good to her, Sarah uses these song lyrics.
- This song represents her belief that our lives have meaning; that there is a design to life; and that we are co-creators of this design.
- It was very powerful to be with Sarah as she would contemplate these thoughts.

Sarah's Fourth Song

Wild World – Cat Stevens

La la la la la...

Now that I've lost everything to you
You say that you want to start something new
And it's breaking my heart, you're leaving
Baby, I'm grieving
But if you want to leave, take good care
Hope you find a lot of nice things to wear
Then a lot of nice things turn bad out there

[CHORUS]

Oh, baby, baby, it's a wild world
It's hard to get by, just upon a smile
Oh, baby, baby, it's a wild world
I'll always remember you
Like a child, girl

Song #4 Wild World

- Sarah included this song because it reminded her of her excitement at the idea of new beginnings and her fears of separation and disconnection.
- These feelings have been age-old themes in her life.
- According to Sarah, she first recognized them when she was a senior in high school, attending an out-of-town field trip.
- It was on that exciting trip that she first heard the song and again later, played over the loud speaker when she visited her first shopping mall.

Song #4 Wild World

- This song represents both excitement and risk.
- Sarah describes the excitement she felt at being in another city- at seeing so many stores and so many people.
- Her boyfriend, a boy she loved and had tremendous respect for, did not participate in this school trip and she missed him. Sarah describes how close they were and how much they depended on one another.
- In hearing Steven's song, Sarah was put in touch with old feelings.

*You know I've seen a lot of what the world can do
And it's breaking my heart in two
Cause I never wanna see you sad, girl
Don't be a bad girl
Now if you wanna leave, take good care
Hope you make a lot of nice friends out there*

Song #4 Wild World

- Sarah now wants her own grown children and grandchildren to feel confident at the same time that she wants them to be safe.
- She understands that it is their turn to live in the world and make their own life choices.
- She wants to watch them soar with anticipation rather than fear; with great expectations rather than trepidation.
- Sarah no longer wants her childhood losses or the old Cat Stevens song about Wild World to affect her children's expectations of what the world can bring.

Sarah's Fifth Song

You've Got a Friend – James Taylor

When your down and troubled
And you need a helping hand
And nothing, whoa nothing is going
right,
Close your eyes and think of me
And soon I will be there
To brighten up even your darkest
nights.
You just call out my name,
And you know wherever I am
I'll come running, oh yeah baby
To see you again.
Winter, Spring, Summer, or Fall,
All you have to do is call
And I'll be there, yeah, yeah, yeah.
You've got a friend.

Hey, ain't it good to know that you've
got a friend?
People can be so cold.
They'll hurt you and desert you.
Well they'll take your soul if you let
them.
Oh yeah, but don't you let them.
Winter, Spring, Summer, or Fall,
Hey now, all you've got to do is call.
Lord, I'll be there, yes I will.
You've got a friend.

Sarah's Chronology Process, cont.

- Sarah realized she had been more of a friend to her husband than she had realized.
- They had, for the most part, been good to each other.
- Although with time they grew apart, she still remembers him for the friend he was, and can appreciate the friend she has been, as well.

Sarah's New Awareness

- Discovered her own contributions to others; ways that she provided her husband with a helping hand.
- These memories comforted her and reminded her of how important it is to treat *all people*, but especially those you love most, with consideration.
- She is also reminded of how important it is *to be treated with compassion and respect*, and of the value of friendship.
- These songs helped give Sarah context to the many experiences and feelings she has thus far encountered.

Sarah's for the Present

It Don't Come Easy – Ringo Starr

It don't come easy,
You know it don't come easy.
It don't come easy,
You know it don't come easy.
Got to pay your dues if you wanna
sing the blues,
And you know it don't come easy.
You don't have to shout or leap
about,
You can even play them easy.
Forget about the past and all your
sorrows,
The future won't last,
It will soon be over tomorrow.

I don't ask for much, I only want your
trust,
And you know it don't come easy.
And this love of mine keeps growing all
the time,
And you know it just ain't easy.
You don't have to shout or leap about,
You can even play them easy.
Peace, remember peace is how we make it,
Here within your reach
If you're big enough to take it.
I don't ask for much, I only want your
trust,
And you know it don't come easy.

Song #6 It Don't Come Easy

- Sarah began to understand the value of an open heart, risk, and the good fortune of good luck as depicted in this song choice.
- Here, she recognized her own power to take her freedom, to choose to see possibilities, and to anticipate the best in them.
- She also discovered that to do so requires that she regain trust and hope in her heart that ultimately, all would be well.
- Sarah needed to remember how she provided much comfort to others and that her own belief in others inspired them to risk in new and exciting ways also.

Sarah's Song for the Present 2

Let the River Run – Carly Simon

We're coming to the edge,
Running on the water,
Coming through the fog,
Your sons and daughters.

It's asking for the taking,
Trembling, shaking,
Oh, my heart is aching.

Let the river run,
Let all the dreamers
Wake the nation.
Come, the New Jerusalem.

Let the river run,
Let all the dreamers
Wake the nation.
Come, the New Jerusalem.

Silver cities rise,
The morning lights
The streets that meet them,
And sirens call them on
With a song.

Song #7 Let the River Run

- Here, Sarah was able to make meaning of her struggles with perfectionism and self-criticism. Although these are still challenges, she is better able to honor the dreamer within her.
- Historically, when difficult things occurred in her life or the lives of her loved ones, she blamed herself for not doing better and for not making it work.
- Sarah acknowledged the dreamer in her; she had been an adventurer in her own right without knowing it.
- As she recalled her many successes, she was humbly grateful.

Sarah's Progress

- Sarah still struggles when difficult situations occur.
- However, she no longer expects that she can control them or fix them.
- She is beginning to achieve a greater sense of acceptance that life happens in a full tapestry of color.
- She is also better able to 'take in' appreciation and support.

Chronology Process In a Nutshell

- Clients examine their own life stories.
- They share these stories with another person (the counselor).
- They work through grief issues related to the experiences.
- By using music as a catalyst, people can more easily access “stuck” places or unproductive stories and reconsider them.
- Music can also help clients and counselors connect with one another.

Sarah’s Song to “Live Into”

Amazing Grace

Amazing grace! How sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found;
Was blind, but now I see.

Through many dangers, toils and snares,
I have already come;
'Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.

Grace - What it Means to Sarah

- Sarah recognizes her fears but also has come to believe that grace can transform them.
- She gives context to her **experiences by her appreciation for her supportive relationships and by the power of grace.**
- While she acknowledges the dangers and difficulties that come with life, she better appreciates the ways in which she matters and her own place in the world.
- She sees this as “grace.”

Summary

- Accessing relevant music and working through the feelings and experiences elicited through the music can be a resourceful way for counselors and clients to form connections, for clients to experience their “mattering” in the world, and to revisit the contexts of their lives.

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