

application: theory to culturally competent practice

Solution-Focused Therapy as a Culturally Acknowledging Approach With American Indians

Dixie D. Meyer and R. Rocco Cottone

Limited literature is available applying specific theoretical orientations with American Indians. Solution-focused therapy may be appropriate, given the client-identified solutions, the egalitarian counselor/client relationship, the use of relationships, and the view that change is inevitable. However, adaption of scaling questions and the miracle question may be necessary.

Keywords: American Indians, solution-focused therapy

Hay una limitada cantidad de literatura disponible que aplique orientaciones teóricas específicas con indios americanos. La terapia centrada en soluciones puede ser apropiada, dadas las soluciones identificadas por los clientes, la relación igualitaria entre consejero y cliente, el uso de relaciones y la visión de que el cambio es inevitable. Sin embargo, puede que sea necesario adaptar las preguntas de escala y la pregunta del milagro.

Palabras Clave: indios americanos, terapia centrada en soluciones

To address the lack of culturally sensitive counseling approaches with American Indians, we describe solution-focused therapy (SFT; de Shazer, 1985) as a highly applicable approach with this population. American Indians have ancestry with the original peoples from North America or South America and maintain affiliation with the tribe or community (Office of Management and Budget, 1997). Many American Indians need mental health services, yet few counseling theories have been applied specifically with this population. LaFromboise, Trimble, and Mohatt (1990) suggested that some counseling theoretical orientations might not be culturally appropriate in work with American Indians. It is imperative to establish an efficacious counseling approach that respects American Indian traditions.

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SFT is a social constructivist theory, according to which an understanding of reality is socially construed. Thus, understood truths are not universal but are instead dependent upon perspective (Cottone, 2007; Ho, Tsui, Chu, & Chan, 2003). Reality is communicated through language and the counselor adopts the client's language (Berg & DeJong, 1996). The counselor understands the problem and solutions, based on the client's words (Berg & DeJong, 1996). The client's frame of reference is used throughout the counseling process. When conducting SFT, the counselor works with the client to define a mutually agreeable reality; therefore, they come to a consensus on reality. It is important that the American Indian cultural perspective be utilized in counseling (LaFromboise et al., 1990; Trimble & Gonzalez, 2008). For example, LaFromboise et al. (1990) suggested that many American Indian clients prefer that the issue that brought them into counseling be interpreted with an emphasis on American Indian values. The counselor and client work to redefine the situation so that it results in a healthier outlook for the client. Because the counselor uses the client's language and understanding of his or her situation, this approach can be culturally sensitive. Throughout the counseling process, the counselor considers the client's worldview when interpreting meaning in the client's language (Ho et al., 2003).

SFT has been established as a beneficial theoretical orientation with diverse populations (DeJong & Berg, 1998). It has been applied with Latinos, Asians/Asian Americans, White Americans, and African Americans with promising results (DeJong & Berg, 1998). This suggests that the theory is culturally sensitive and may prove applicable across other cultures. However, the future focus of this theory, the process of eliciting strengths, and the use of the miracle question and scaling questions may need to be adapted so that it can be effective with American Indians. The purpose of this article is to adapt and apply SFT to American Indians. This will be accomplished by providing a case that illustrates how SFT may be adapted to be more culturally sensitive with this population.

SFT

De Shazer (1985) and Berg and DeJong (1996) developed SFT and generated their ideas from Milton Erickson and the work conducted at the Mental Research Institute. Their ideas were contrary to popular talk therapy, which emphasized problem-based counseling. Instead of focusing on the problems, de Shazer and Berg began looking for moments when the problem was not affecting the client or when the problem was not a hindrance for the client. They posited that solutions were not necessarily or logically connected to problems, that a focus on nonproblematic behav-

ior (e.g., healthy behavior) could build and enhance the client's natural repertoire of acceptable responses to challenging circumstances. "Wrong" or unhealthy behavior is circumscribed by focusing on what individuals do "right" or in a healthy way.

principles of SFT

There are three main principles of SFT (de Shazer, 1985). First, the counselor does not look for problems where none exist; the counselor does not attempt to adjust or alter what already works for the client. Second, if the counselor has done something that is beneficial for the client, the counselor continues this and increases the amount of beneficial interactions. In this way, the counselor works to enhance what has been effective for the client. Last, if something the counselor has done does not work for the client, the counselor refrains from continuing it. The counselor only wants to perform the interventions that have proved to produce results with the client. With these principles, the counselor is looking for solutions that the client is already executing.

These principles outline the counseling process and reframe traditional counseling into an assessment of positive outcomes that are already occurring. It is important to note that these principles appear to be philosophically in line with the American Indian culture and should serve as a guideline. Specific to American Indians, counselors need to develop nonverbal behavior conducive to this culture (Herring, 1992; Lokken & Twohey, 2004; Rayle, Chee, & Sand, 2006). These nonverbal behaviors need to reflect the nonverbal behavior of the population, such as respect for silence, level of eye contact, and the pace of the counseling session.

Unique to SFT, counseling is focused on exception-finding. Much of what the counselor does can be summarized by the acronym EARS—elicits, amplifies, reinforces, start over (DeJong & Berg, 1998). The counselor elicits the exception. He or she amplifies the exception by seeking out what the client did differently and how he or she made the exception happen. The counselor reinforces the client's strengths and successes represented by the exception. Finally, this signals the counselor to start over, repeating the process that has been successful for the client. The exception can be anything. If an American Indian client wants to assess the presence of a spirit guide, this would be appropriate. Anything the client brings into counseling is accepted.

The client remains the guiding force for the counseling session. The client's frame of reference is viewed as the subjective reality throughout the therapeutic process. The client is considered to be the expert of his or her past, present, and future, including successes and the meaning attributed

to them (Berg & DeJong, 1996). The client is considered to be cognizant of the resources and strengths he or she brings into therapeutic sessions. In turn, the counselor facilitates the retrieval of this vital information. Because the client's perspective is incorporated throughout the counseling process, this orientation can be used across diverse groups.

techniques and interventions

Most techniques within SFT are based on categories of questions. When counseling begins, the counselor looks for pre-session change. Pre-session change refers to improvements that occur before the first session. The counselor specifically asks the client to identify the improvements that have occurred between the current time (now) and when the client initially decided to seek treatment (Lee, 2003). Usually, clients will experience some progress before the onset of counseling. Pre-session change questions are designed to help the counselor work to extract this information from the client. The counselor can then immediately tap into the "change is constant" ideology of many American Indians; thus, from the initial session, the counselor adheres to this American Indian principle.

The client is asked relationship questions to determine how significant individuals in his or her life will know that the client has changed (Lee, 2003). Essentially, the counselor questions the client about what differences others will observe in him or her when the problem that brought the client into counseling has subsided or is less noticeable. SFT is a systemic orientation, therefore, the client is not alone in his or her plight. When the counselor is encouraging the client to imagine what others' responses would be, the counselor is also identifying possible resources for the client. Asking how others will perceive the client fits with the value American Indians place on family and community (LaFromboise et al., 1990). Although family or community members may not be in the session, the counselor acknowledges their presence, and the client can recognize that the counselor understands the importance of others in his or her life.

Exception questions are used to identify when the issue that brought the client to counseling is less intense or absent from the client's life (Lee, 2003). During this phase, the client identifies what he or she is already doing to alleviate the stress of the problem. There are times in the client's life when he or she will not experience the problem, and exception questions extract and explore these occurrences. Exception questions indicate to the client that he or she is already capable of handling the problem. The counselor's primary task during this time is to determine what the client is doing successfully to mitigate the symptoms.

Coping questions are used to determine how the client is successfully managing his or her problem (Lee, 2003). The client is asked what he or she is doing to manage the problem or how the client has been able to survive it. When asking a coping question, the counselor may focus on how the client has been able to make it through each day considering all that the client has experienced. Coping questions are a unique form of exception-finding questions (DeJong & Berg, 1998). Any exception or coping mechanism may be included in counseling, thus allowing room for culture-specific content. In addition, the balance of harmony in body, mind, and spirit may be reflected in how the client is coping. To be sensitive to the holistic approach used by many American Indians, the counselor may want to inquire about how the client is considering his or her body, mind, and spirit through coping efforts.

Scaling questions rate the client's current level of functioning or progress (Berg & DeJong, 1996). The client is encouraged to rank performance on a scale that ranges from one to 10. The counselor will define the meaning of the first and last number, providing the client with a baseline and clear definition of the numbers. Thus, the counselor is in consensus with the client. Typically, within the course of therapy, the counselor will ask the client what needs to be done to improve one or more numbers on the scale. Through scaling questions, the counselor asks the client to be aware of how he or she is transforming and reflecting the circle of life. However, to honor the cultural value placed on humility, scaling questions may need to be altered. Suggestions for such alterations are provided with the case illustration that follows.

a case illustration: SFT approach in counseling with choctaw american indians

Anna (the client's name and identifying data have been changed to protect confidentiality) is a Choctaw individual who presented in counseling feeling depressed. She reported that she was not in harmony with herself and her social relationships. She said she was not living interdependently with her family. Anna and her family reside in a metropolitan area in the South. She is 26 years old, single, and lives with her cousins. Her parents' marriage is intact. Aside from her parents, when asked about her family, Anna reported that she has three older brothers, one younger sister, 14 nieces and nephews, 15 aunts and uncles, 30 first-degree cousins, and 50 more relatives of various relations. She reported having close relationships with her family.

Anna was the first in her family to go away to college. She reported that family members questioned her choice to attend college and suggested that she thought their way of life was not good enough for her. When counseling began, Anna was managing a retail store but had been offered the opportunity to open a new store in Chicago. Anna reported feeling pressure from her family to remain in the area. She said that if she accepted the position, she would be abandoning her family.

ROLE OF THE COUNSELOR

From the SFT perspective, the counselor works with the client to (a) elicit what is helping to reduce distressing symptoms, (b) amplify or highlight the beneficial behaviors that the client uses, and (c) reinforce the client's strengths and successes in counseling; this process is repeated until the desired outcome has been achieved. The process of highlighting behaviors that had been beneficial for Anna helped her to acknowledge her competence and decrease depressive symptoms.

However, reinforcement of client strengths was more difficult to implement. For many Choctaw individuals, the focus on strengths is contrary to the values of honoring humility and discouraging boasting. To focus on strengths within a culturally relevant SFT approach, the counselor worked with Anna to uncover available resources such as close family relationships and spiritual beliefs. Furthermore, it was difficult for Anna to hear compliments about her work and behavioral changes. To address this difficulty, the counselor elicited successful behaviors from Anna and restated them rather than use the counseling techniques of paraphrasing or complimenting. This process ensured that Anna's language was used in counseling to describe her strengths; it showed that her perspective was prominent in the therapy and within the context of the therapeutic relationship.

OUTLINE OF COUNSELING

Counseling began with the counselor explaining the counseling process to Anna and what she could expect from it. This helped to alleviate any trepidation Anna had about counseling. The counselor asked Anna if she wanted to share anything about herself so that she could expand the counselor's understanding. The counselor also encouraged Anna to ask any questions she needed the counselor to answer to feel more comfortable in counseling. This reciprocation of questioning supported the establishment of an egalitarian relationship. It also demonstrated, at the onset of counseling, that the therapeutic alliance was the most important part of the counseling process. This was also achieved through the restatement of Anna's wording. Use of nonverbal mirroring and displays of empathy also helped Anna to feel heard in counseling and increased her self-disclosure with the counselor.

Throughout the counseling process, many of the SFT techniques were easily executed, such as exception, relationship, and coping questions. However, the future focus of SFT was altered to reflect a present-time orientation. For example, the miracle question was altered to inquire about a time when the client felt in harmony and how she could continue to live in this way. Scaling questions were adjusted to address concerns of boasting and showing humility. A continuum was established with the client through which she rated her progress. One end of the continuum reflected a time when Anna felt worse about her current situation; at the other end of the continuum was a time when she had made a decision and had her family's support.

Anna reported difficulty deciding if she should accept the job that she had been offered. When processing her decision, Anna was contemplative. The counselor allowed Anna the time needed to process her thoughts and was careful not to disrupt the silence Anna initiated. Anna's thinking was dichotomous. She reported that with this decision, she had to choose between her career and her family and that if she accepted the position, it would mean that she was choosing herself over her family. The counselor worked with Anna to elicit exceptions to when she did not experience her choice as having to choose between her family and career.

To cleanse her thoughts and to help cope with the current situation, Anna and her cousins conducted a smudging ceremony, during which they burned tobacco and sage. During that ceremony, Anna walked through her house holding a bowl of smoldering herbs. She conducted the ceremony to remove the negative energy and extremeness in her life. This helped Anna to see that whether or not she accepted the position, it was neither an all good nor an all bad decision, that is, she was not choosing between herself and others. Instead, Anna began to view the decision as being about choosing the best option that was currently available to her. The counselor asked Anna to identify when individuals in her family noticed that she was feeling better. Anna revealed that when she removed the absoluteness from the context of the decision, her depressive symptoms were reduced. This helped Anna to see that the decision was relative: regardless of her choice, she could still live in harmony with herself and her family.

After Anna accepted the position, her family began to attend sessions to process her decision. These sessions included her parents and extended family members. To be respectful of the family hierarchy, the counselor spoke to Anna's father first. Ultimately, Anna's family was supportive of her decision and encouraged her to seek out other Choctaw community resources in Chicago. The final session involved a "giveaway," during which Anna gave presents to every family member. The giveaway ceremony signified the change happening in Anna's life. Anna brought each member of her family a personalized memento to demonstrate that she would always be with each person, even if she were not physically present.

implications for counselors

Each client is unique. Within the American Indian culture, individuals come from 564 federally recognized tribes, live in a variety of environments, and have varying experiences of acculturation to the dominant U.S. culture (Federal Registry, 2012). Continued education may help counselors when working with American Indians. For example, the counselor needs to educate himself or herself about the tribe from which the client comes. In addition, the counselor needs to listen to the client to ensure that the client's perspective and language are used.

SFT may be applicable to counseling American Indians because it uses the client's frame of reference, an approach that is culturally sensitive to diverse populations. The solution-focused assumption about change is compatible with American Indians' view of change, that is, change is continuous and unavoidable (Garrett & Carroll, 2000; Garrett & Myers, 1996). In addition, SFT is a wellness-based approach that corresponds with a focus on client competence. SFT allows clients to identify their own solutions. Many American Indians have alternative choices to healing and SFT allows these alternative methods to be adopted. Despite the theoretical support for using SFT with American Indians, empirical research needs to be conducted to support this claim.

There are some limitations to the application of SFT with American Indians. For example, the miracle question is focused on the future, which may be contrary to the present-time orientation of many American Indians (Garrett & Myers, 1996). The miracle question could be reworded to focus on a time when the client experienced harmony with all people and things. To work within the client's time orientation, the counselor can focus on the client's exceptions, coping skills, and potential resources. The counselor needs to be open to potential solutions suggested by the client. Counselors often interject as the client speaks in sessions. Although this may be necessary in counseling, it may not be culturally appropriate. For example, there is no word in the Lakota language for "excuse me" (Broken Nose, 1992). Counselors are encouraged to wait until the client has finished talking rather than interrupt him or her.

Maintaining a humble spirit is valued in the American Indian community (Garrett & Myers, 1996). This and the use of scaling questions may conflict with the focus in SFT on strengths. A more culturally relevant approach may be to focus on what the client describes as his or her resources. When eliciting strengths from the client, it is important to use the client's language. The counselor should carefully paraphrase or restate the client's responses. This will ensure that the counselor is respecting the humility exhibited by the client. Scaling questions may be adapted easily with the client to create a ranking system that does not include boastful numbers, but instead focuses on specific behaviors the client would like to accom-

plish. Together, the client and counselor may develop specific behaviors to document the client's progress.

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