

BRIEF COUNSELING SCENARIOS FROM FICTIONAL CHARACTERS FOR COUNSELORS IN TRAINING

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ABSTRACT

To develop confidence and competence, student counselors need opportunities to practice applying their counseling skills. However, practicing on actual clients before counseling students are developmentally prepared not only can provoke anxiety within students but is also unethical. Counselor educators must find ways to help students practice their skills without the possibility of causing harm to potential clients. Some counselor educators utilize fictional characters to enhance student counselors' understanding of case conceptualization and treatment in a non-threatening environment. Most often, counselor educators apply a semester long approach of using fictional characters. Although the benefits of using fictional characters in counseling education are identified, the semester long approach encroaches on valuable instructional time. The concept of using brief counseling scenarios from fictional characters is introduced and examples of possible cases are provided.

Keywords: Counselor Supervision, Counselor Education, Creative Instruction, Fictional Characters.

INTRODUCTION

Counselor educators provide learning experiences designed to guide counselors in training through a process of developing knowledge and skills for effective practice as counselors. The American Counseling Association's (ACA) Code of Ethics stresses the importance of counselor educators being "skilled as teachers" (ACA, F.7.a., 2014). Samuel Gladding (1994) identifies effective teaching processes as multidimensional, involving a variety of activities, such as discussion, reading, application, role play, enactment, lecture, and presentation. Experiential learning can assist students as they apply their academic knowledge to practice situations (Granello, 2000).

One approach counselor educators can use to integrate academic study with experiential practice is to introduce fictional characters as potential clients. Using fictional characters in counselor education coursework can provide students opportunities to explore and practice their emerging counseling skills in a nonthreatening environment (Gladding, 1994). Counselor educators have used fictional characters through screen plays (Shepard, 2002) film

(Higgins and Dermer, 2001) and Greek mythology (Sommer and Cox, 2003) as an adjunct to teaching about a variety of counseling concepts, such as social justice (Chung and Bemack, 2013), family counseling (Gladding, 1994), empathy development (Gibson, 2007), and Reality Therapy (Cook, 2009). Benefits of using fictional characters when teaching counseling students include providing students with opportunities to increase awareness of how they relate to others (Wilkins, 1995), and of their own thoughts and emotions (Gladding, 2005). Students engaged in experiential learning utilizing fictional characters benefit from experiencing and processing academic knowledge from an emotional level (Gladding, 1994, 2005), which assists students in developing empathic understanding of others and themselves, a skill that cannot be taught from a textbook (Gibson, 2007). In addition to developing empathy for the fictional characters, students have the opportunity to practice evaluating objective information (Gibson, 2007). Working together as a group on the same fictional case study promotes cohesion and group communication for the students, modeling the

importance of consultation with other professionals (Gibson, 2007; Newsome, Henderson, and Veach, 2005). Additionally, practicing with fictional clients provokes less anxiety than working with actual clients through practicum and internship (Gibson, 2007).

Most available examples of using fictional characters with counseling students involve semester long role plays or discussions, in addition to the already full class curriculum. This approach demands a large investment of instructor and student time above and beyond the regular course curriculum (Gibson, 2007). For example, Gladding (1994) used fictional characters through an approach referred to as bibliotherapy, during a semester course on family therapy. His goals for adding bibliotherapy to his coursework were to increase student awareness of affect, family dynamics, insight, and compassion. Students chose a fictional family and created and presented a genogram for this family to the class, wrote a paper and provided a class presentation describing how they would use a theory introduced in class to treat this family. Finally, students acted out therapeutic scenes related to their selected fictional families. In addition to student enjoyment of the activity, other benefits identified by Gladding (1994) included providing students with opportunities to recognize family dynamics and apply and refine newly learned family theories, skills, and knowledge to a fictional family. Perhaps one of the primary benefits is that students were able to practice their skills initially with an imaginary family instead of a real family. Making a mistake with a fictional family does not carry the same potential repercussions that making a mistake with a real family does. Students were able to explore and practice their new skills without fear of causing harm (Gladding, 1994). A major limitation that Gladding identified with the use of bibliotherapy was the amount of time both the instructor and the students had to invest in this adjunct activity. This activity in addition to other course assignments may have overwhelmed some students (Gladding, 1994).

Another example of using fictional characters to teach counseling, provided by Chung and Bemak (2013) utilized an approach originally developed in anthropology called ethnographic fiction, which involves students creating a narrative of a fictional character that is based on historical

data about people and events. The instructor created fictional characters that are impacted by current social issues. Each student was assigned a character and researched the issues confronting this imaginary client, writing a paper and presenting to the class as if he or she were this client, which allowed for development of a more personal perspective of the client's experience. Counseling students reported personal and professional growth, and a greater awareness of social justice issues. Similar to Gladding's (1994) teaching activity, the ethnographic fiction teaching experience lasted throughout an entire semester course requiring a time investment from both students and professor.

Gibson (2007) required students to read *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (Rowling, 1997) in addition to the textbook and other assignments. Throughout the semester, students analyzed the character of Harry Potter and reported gaining a better understanding of his motives. Students reportedly developed empathy for the character of Harry Potter. However, they complained that class time spent processing the book could have been better used to discuss actual client issues students experienced at their practicum sites (Gibson, 2007). Once again, the amount of time required to use a fictional character hindered the benefits of the activity.

Schwitzer et al. (2005) proposed using the fictional characters of Scarlett O'Hara, Maya Angelou's Marguerite Johnson, Hansel, and Snow White's Wicked Queen as practice cases in classroom settings, clinical supervision, and training workshops. The authors indicated five benefits from using fictional characters as cases. First, there are an unlimited number of fictional characters available for use in supervision. Second, supervisors can work beyond the limits of their existing competencies with the fictional characters without concern that their practice may harm an actual client. Third, supervisors can explore their own attitudes regarding their roles as counselors without being concerned about how their self-exploration may impact their clients. Fourth, fictional character cases can be freely discussed within classroom or supervisory sessions without concern for protecting client confidentiality and fifth, client information and data is more readily accessible for fictional characters. The practice case method Schwitzer et al.

(2005) used included a basic case summary, case conceptualization applying theory to practice, a multi-axial diagnosis, a problem solving solution focused treatment plan, and a theory driven treatment plan. Students presented the case to a peer group and facilitated group discussion regarding allowing for differing perspectives. Identified benefits included confronting cultural assumptions, developing cultural competency skills, promoting clinical thinking skills, and developing emerging group process skills.

While the benefits of using fictional characters include increasing empathy for self and others, as well as group cohesion, the shortage of time to truly invest in the fictional characters is a limitation listed in all the examples provided above. Gladding and Newsome (2003) indicate that if there is not enough time to adequately participate and process the activity, the learning objectives may not be met. All the examples provided in this article describe using a fictional character throughout an entire semester. However, the amount of time and energy required for both the instructor and the students to complete the additional course requirements appear to be daunting during an already packed semester. Additionally, many of the examples listed above occurred during the counseling practicum which for most counseling programs occurs at the end of the student's course of study. While practicum may be an appropriate time to introduce fictional clients, they can also be used in earlier counseling training courses such as theories and techniques (Gibson, 2007).

1. Brief Fictional Cases

To overcome the limitations of time constraints, brief fictional cases were presented to students in a variety of courses in two separate southern Texas universities. The cases included minimal descriptions printed and laminated on cards. Students were divided into groups of three or four and drew one of the cards. Within their groups, they discussed the case based on questions related to case conceptualization, problem identification, treatment planning, and theoretical orientation. After answering all the questions within their group, the students then presented their case for discussion and consultation with the larger class group. Typically, no more than a single class meeting was devoted to this activity. Sample cases are

presented below along with key points that can be utilized during the discussion. Each of the cases listed below could be appropriate activities for introductory courses, human growth and development courses, counseling diverse populations courses, practicum or internship.

1.1 *Pinocchio*

A five year old boy from the town of Collodi, in Tuscan Italy. He is an only child and his father is a single parent. His father works as a carpenter, but has difficulty meeting financial obligations.

Presenting Problem: Compulsive lying, low-self-esteem, and an imaginary friend named Jiminy.

The case of Pinocchio is designed to encourage students to identify developmental milestones.

Often, students, particularly those that are new to the counseling program are quick to suggest confronting Pinocchio regarding his lying behavior. This leads to a discussion regarding his development and what would be more appropriate approaches for a five year old such as play therapy. Students also discuss the benefits of providing psychoeducation for Pinocchio's father.

1.2 *Leo, the Cowardly Lion*

A 15 year old adolescent who has just moved to this area from a land called Oz, (somewhere near Kansas).

Presenting Problem: Bullying behavior, difficulty making friends, low self-esteem, spends most of his time playing fantasy computer games about witches and wizards, and sexual identity confusion.

The case of Leo is designed to help students identify implicit or explicit bias related to sexual orientation as well as working directly with bullies. Students often identify increasing self-esteem as their primary goal with Leo. This leads to discussion about how to define and measure self-esteem. How will they know when Leo's self-esteem has improved?

1.3 *Jan Brady*

An 11 year old White girl who lives in suburban United States. She is the 2nd of three girls. Her father died and her mother married a man with three sons, creating a blended family. Her step-father is an architect, her mother does not work, and they have a live-in maid,

Alice.

Presenting Problem: Low self esteem. Jealously of her older sister. Perfectionism.

The case of Jan is used to help students identify bias related to a privileged adolescent. Often students may express that clients such as Jan do not have any real complaints and dismiss her concerns as trivial. Most often, students have suggested using cognitive behavioral therapy to challenge irrational thoughts Jan may have when she negatively compares herself to Marcia. Adlerian Therapy, with its focus on birth order, is another theoretical approach that could be appropriate with Jan.

1.4 Fat Albert

Fat Albert, an obese African American teen from a low socio-economic, urban home. Albert has a large social network of friends and wants to be a musician. He enjoys playing bagpipes and wants to learn other instruments as well. Fat Albert makes good grades in all his classes except PE, which he is failing.

Presenting problem: Fat Albert has been offered a partial scholarship to attend a prestigious music school. He really wants to attend, but fears the additional college expenses not covered by the scholarship will create financial hardship for his family.

The case of Fat Albert is designed to identify potential biases students may have related to overweight clients. Albert's weight is not the presenting concern, but often students will begin the session by addressing this. Also, the case of Albert helps students identify how their values may differ from his, especially related to individualistic vs. collectivistic cultural differences. Many students will place a higher value on attending the school than Albert's concern about his family's needs and will try to sway Albert towards that decision rather than listening to what Albert wants.

1.5 Dr. Jekyll

A wealthy middle-aged doctor from England. Dr. Jekyll is very intelligent and comes from a life of privilege related to his status as a doctor and humanitarian. He often donates time and money for philanthropic causes.

Presenting Problems: Social isolation. Substance abuse

often resulting in black outs when he does not recall what he has said or done. A history of violent behavior when he is under the influence of drugs which has led to court mandated counseling.

The case of Dr. Jekyll is designed to help students identify bias related to wealth and privilege, as well as identifying their own comfort in working with substance abuse issues. Some students are able to identify that they would feel somewhat intimidated of Dr. Jekyll as a client, and some express a fearfulness of working with a potentially aggressive, violent male client. Working with court mandated clients also presents challenges for students and this case allows opportunities to become aware of these feelings before they work with actual court mandated clients.

1.6 La Llorona

A 30 year old native Mexican woman. She had four children with a wealthy United States citizen, who suddenly abandoned her and the children for a younger woman. With no way to support herself or her children, she tried to cross into the United States. All four of her children drowned in the Rio Grande River as she attempted to cross the border.

Presenting Problem: Extreme grief, uncontrollable sobbing, no means of support in the United States or Mexico, no social support, suicidal ideation.

The case of La Llorona is designed to help students identify biases they may have related to working with illegal aliens. Additionally, students are able to identify and practice their suicide assessment skills with this client.

2. Multicultural Considerations

Instructors may use any fictional clients they believe will provide the most learning opportunities for their students. Students do not need to recognize the fictional character to develop a case conceptualization. In fact, having previous knowledge of the characters may create preconceived notions that might not actively reflect their character's experience. It is also important as an instructor that the characters and the student's perceptions of the characters do not reinforce common stereotypes or inappropriate characterizations of cultural groups (Schwitzer et al., 2005, p. 77).

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For example, on several occasions students have commented to me that they did not know who Jan Brady was and did not understand the sudden outbursts of "Marcia, Marcia, Marcia" from their peers. In another class, a student commented that she did not know who La Llorona is and a Latino student was able to explain the story of La Llorona to her. Later, in the same class, a student commented that he did not know who Dr. Jekyll is. The initial student commented disbelievingly "You've never heard of Dr. Jekyll?", but then she caught herself and added, "Oh, but then, I didn't know who La Llorona is." This exchange opened up the opportunity to discuss cultural differences and identify preconceived notions about clients based on their ethnicity or race. Another way to include diversity in the activity is to request that students introduce fictional characters they know from their own experiences and cultures.

Conclusion

The introduction of introducing fictional characters as potential clients for counseling students has many identified benefits such as developing empathy, practicing with a fictional client in a way that prevents the potential of causing harm to actual clients, developing group process skills and case conceptualization skills, and identifying potential cultural biases. A major limitation related to the use of fictional characters that has been identified has been the semester long utilization of the activity that requires extensive additional time commitments from students and instructors. The possibility of using brief fictional cases allows the opportunity to experience the benefits of using fictional characters without the same time commitments. These cases can be provided during a single course class meeting and can be appropriate for use in a variety of counseling classes.

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