The Construction of Therapeutic Alliance and Application of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy and Structural Family Therapy

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Abstract

Through a case study, this paper employs social work theories to analyze the significant factors in the helping process including the effective verb and non-verbal communication and working in differences that finally successfully promote the construction of therapeutic alliance. This paper also explores the application of cognitive behavioural therapy and structural family therapy, and demonstrates the combination of the theories and practice. It argues that the further research might focus on the integration of different therapy forms for the best therapeutic outcome.

Key Words: communication; working in differences; therapeutic alliance; cognitive behavioural therapy; structural family therapy; application.

1. Construction of Therapeutic Alliance

"Simulation Dino" provides a good case for constructing the process of therapeutic alliance and employing cognitive behavioural therapy and structural family therapy for social workers [1]. In this case, Dino is the client for therapy. A beneficial outcome of therapy mostly depends on therapeutic alliance [2]. Learning about a client via his or her presentation, having insight in client's relationship style, understanding and working with differences, and keeping self-reflection of social location largely contribute to the building and development of therapeutic alliance. Modern regulation theory highlights observing the non-verbal communication and understanding the right brain mechanisms in therapy [3]. When Dino mentions the signed football from his father, his tone is full of disappointment. When Dino recalls Charles, his only friend, there is a sweet smile on his face.

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When Dino says his parents don't care about his voice, he sighs. The non-verbal presentation discloses the client's complex mind [4]. Interpersonal neurobiology claims that relationships are vital to neural functioning and brain development [5]. The client's verbal presentation demonstrates his emotions and relationships with other people as well. Some sentences such as "I've never really been able to be honest with him" [1] exposes the cold relationship between Dino and his father. Dino speaks "I don't know" [1] many times, which shows his confusion, distrust, struggle, and depression. Dino uses "that was the first time that I knew that I like guys" [1] to show his close relationship and strong attachment to Charles. Dino falls into the categories of a complicated relationship style that combines anxious attachment style and avoidant attachment style. One side, Dino demonstrates many characteristics of an anxious attachment style. Dino feels anxious because the fear of abandonment and insecurity go with him. This fear originally comes from his family. Grown up in his father's yells, Dino's heart is full of fear. The weak power of his mother in the family lets him lose the hope of being protected. The experience of being bullied at school deepens his unsafe feeling. Dino keeps the secret of his gay identification to his parents but worries about that it will be exposed and bring shame for them. After his football was grabbed, Dino wanted his father to stand up and get it back with him but his father said no. Feeling neglected or hurt by the individual who is expected to rely on often brings interpersonal trauma [6]. Dino plays video games to seek support and belonging from the group. Charles helps Dino escape from this fear. However, Dino's anxiousness resumes and he fails to focus on study with Charles' leaving. On the other hand, Dino shows some features of avoidant attachment style. He doesn't get close to his family in heart. He doesn't tell his father and mother about his thoughts. He has no interest in his parents' suggestion of making friends at school. The features of attachment offer a social and neurological background to start a real relationship [7]. The traumas that the client and a social worker experienced might be different. Also, there are power differences between the client and a social worker. A social worker needs to identify these differences and create opportunities to empower the client and mitigate the imbalance of power. During the helping process, a social worker needs to listen attentively to Dino's presentation to show his or her respect. All therapy may involve a cross-cultural engagement and a respectful stance and a nonjudgmental approach needs to be applied [8]. When Dino recognizes that the social worker sincerely respects him, his experience, and his problems, the trust between us will be initiated. Differences can be regarded as an interpersonal process instead of barriers [8]. Although a difference exists, a social worker can still give caring, empathy and warmth to Dino when he talks about his trauma including suffering from school bullies, friend departures, family stress, etc. A social worker will also use professional morals, ethics, and skills to mitigate the negative influence of his or her social location and control the interference from his or her internal voices. Collaboration can be fostered by learning about the client's needs and expectations and helping the client know what procedures will be included into the therapy [8]. Also, feeling secure and safe is the precondition of making therapy effective [9]. Providing useful ideas and helping the client find out the solutions can help reduce the client's anxiousness, increase safety and finally enhance therapeutic alliance [10]. By these ways, a therapeutic alliance that has a high quality and strong strength can be built between the client and a social worker.

2. Application of Cognitive Behavioural Therapy

Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) is appropriate for treating this client. CBT has a far-reaching impact because it changes brain functioning related to solving problems, regulating emotions, and processing

relationships [11]. An assessment for the client helps a social worker go beyond the symptoms of the problems and go in-depth to the roots of the problems. In the session, a social worker needs to go through the related factors, learn about the client, and focus on his current problems. Dino is 20 years old. He lives with his parents. He comes from a Catholic family and his original culture is Italian one. Being a student at Waterloo University for electrical engineering, he has recently withdrawn and spends much time playing video games. He is a gay. He grew up with his father's yelling and was the victim of school bullies. His relationship with family is tense and he seldom exhibits his thoughts to his parents. His soul partner is Charles. Lacking a feeling of safety, Dino is anxious. He doesn't want to live the way that his parents expect. He wants to be himself. However, he doesn't know how to handle the feeling of loneliness and helplessness. He has no idea if the therapy is helpful for him or not. Cognitive restructuring is the core part of the intervention to dismantle the client's dysfunctional thinking pattern [11]. The first step of intervention is to help the client identify his cognitive misunderstanding. Firstly, Dino may jump to conclusions that his father doesn't understand his depression. Dino concludes "I can't talk to my parents about why I feel this way" [1]. In fact, with his increased disappointment to his father, he hides his real thoughts and this may partly close the door of effective communication and mutual understanding with his father. Secondly, Dino may make an overgeneralization and have the all-or-nothing thinking that excludes the other possible change or opportunity. For example, he says "nobody's gonna ever understand me, like Charles did" [1]. Thirdly, Dino may do personalization and blame. He blames that his parents "feel better that I don't have anybody anymore" [1]. Fourthly, Dino may use emotional reasoning instead of reasonable analysis. He owes his distraction in study to missing Charles too much. "It got tough to care. I am, I don't know if I just missed him" [1]. Distinguishing the thoughts from feelings is helpful to make the client recognize his cognitive distortion [12]. The next step of intervention is to help Dino change the perspective to view the problems. Helping the client check the evidence to be for or against his ideas may modify his belief in thoughts [12]. For example, if Dino insists his father doesn't care about him, ask him to list some examples to prove this point. Then, ask if there is any contrary evidence to reverse this point. When Dino begins to realize that he may be too pessimistic, encourage him to try a cost-benefit analysis and lead him to consider the middle path: What are the advantages or disadvantages of thinking with this perspective? If things go beyond expectation, is there any other possibility? What is the worst outcome? By this way, the client can avoid being blindsided and plan to cross the barriers in advance [12]. The focus of the intervention will be put on helping change Dino's opinion and attitude to himself and his family, reconstructing his self-confidence and promoting his mental health. Some techniques can be used to achieve effective therapy: Firstly, adopt mindfulness and encourage the client to do an imaginary relaxation exercise. Mindfulness enables the client to enact mature thoughts and emotions [11]. A social worker can emphasize the role of self-care and help Dino imagine the moments when he feels relaxed such as walking in the seashore, visiting the arts exhibition, or playing in the band. This technique is an application of integrating neuroscience and it can help facilitate somatic attunement [5]. Secondly, suggest Dino to list all the possible factors that lead to anxiousness and keep mood or thought log. Putting feelings into words can help manage the negative emotions and promote mental health [13]. Additionally, helping the client identify the strengths is a good way to achieve the growth goals and reduce symptoms [14]. Help Dino improve his self-dialogue and encourage him to explore any possible inspiration or positive strengths from anxiousness. For example, understand that a signed football may express his father's love to him. Also, the reason why his father refuses to get the signed football with him may be that his father wants to foster his bravery and independence.

At the beginning, the change may be small. However, with repetitive exercises, some thinking patterns will change step by step.

3. Application of Structural Family Therapy

Structural family therapy can be used to assess the family. The purpose is to collect the information to learn about the disharmony of the family, find out the reasons, and direct the intervention. The key part of assessment is to examine the family's structure based and interaction mode based on its boundaries, hierarchy, alliance, and subsystems. The boundaries in this whole family are diffuse. The father has absolute power not only in the marital subsystem but also in the parental subsystem. The mother shows her acquiescence with the prime status of the father. The son seems to be the weakest side. He obeys the instructions of his parents although he disagrees with them in his mind. A typical example is that he pretends to love the signed football at his mother's request. There is no close emotional contact between family members. The father and the son make assumptions about each other. The mother and the son feel threatened by the father's scary yelling when disagreement exists. In the subsystem of the father and the son, there are more disengagement and rigid boundaries. The parental hierarchy is excessive. The father puts his own expectations on the son and ignores the son's individual interests and needs. These expectations are too unrealistic and much in the son's eyes. In the subsystem of the mother and the son, there is an alliance between the two non-dominant individuals of the family although the alliance is not very strong and not always. The son is not completely honest with the mother. The mother is usually on the side of the son. To the father's yelling, the mother keeps a tolerant attitude. She complains about the father to the son. At the same time, she requires the son to keep loyal to the father. Although the parents care about the son's "weird" mood and expects him to study a "good" major for better life, the problematic coalitions in this family contribute to emotional isolation between family members. The focus of intervention is to change the organization and structure of the family system. Firstly, build a relationship with the family, join them, be familiar with their cultural, emotion expression and living style. A social worker can discuss the family development such as the parental expectations with Dino' parents to build a therapeutic alliance with the family. Secondly, lead the family to change the definition of the problem. Client's problems often come from disorder family structure and interaction between the family members [14]. A social worker can also help the family understand the correlations between personal issues and the family system, turn their focus to the family system and lead the family to view the world and the existing problems from a new perspective. For example, a social worker can let them replay some key moments such as sending Christmas gifts or talking about university major choice. In replaying, a social worker can let the father take the son's role and the son take the father's role for helping them put themselves into the other shoes, recognizing their own mistaken assumptions, understanding how the interaction mode negatively influences relationships and causes problems, and promoting their mutual understanding. Thirdly, break the balance of the original family structure and reconstruct a new one. It includes the change of family rules, the clarification of boundaries, and reshaping the bonds. Most importantly, it is significant to give up the interaction mode that caused negative influence and problems. Differing from individual therapy, family therapy emphasizes not emotional expression but constructive communication [15]. A social worker can help the family members learn about constructive communication and social skills to help them rebuild clear boundaries and effective hierarchy. Creating new dialogues and interaction positions can promote emotional development in the marital subsystem [16]. Also, human's neural architecture decides

connections among people are necessary for keeping balance and development [17]. A social worker needs to stand with the son, the weak side in the family structure. Since the son has a relatively close relationship with the mother, a social worker may invite the mother and the son to discuss something together. Being close physically can promote the social bond and attachment relationship [18]. In the conversation with the father and the son, a social worker can create an opportunity to make boundaries and ask them to change the seats to narrow their emotional distance by shortening their physical distance. Additionally, the father's worldview that caused problems needs to be challenged and corrected as well such as that the son should get there if the father gets there. Dino has been an adult and he has a right to make his choice for his future. These interventions could help the client gain the safety and belonging from the family and eventually promote the individual and family growth and development.

4. Conclusion

It is limited to reflect the establishment of the relationships and employment of therapy via a critical analysis of simulation. However, this paper demonstrates that keeping sensitivity in working in differences and using the professional communication skills including observing the client's verbal and non-verbal language well helps a social worker learn about the client for bettering attentive engagement and promoting the therapeutic alliance. Besides the successful construction of therapeutic alliance, it is also significant to choose suitable therapy forms to serve the client. A social worker needs to apply the appropriate therapy form in helping process based on the client's individual scenarios and specific necessity. This paper discusses the advantages and practical techniques of cognitive behavioural therapy and structural family therapy. The further research might focus on the integration of different therapy forms for the best therapeutic outcome.

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