

Part I

Using a Cognitive Orientation to Guide Reflection

Using a cognitive orientation to guide reflection, while intellectually interesting, remains just theory until it is translated into practice. The process of gathering student information, discerning what is important from what is not, and knowing what needs to be done to move the student from the “what is” to the “what is desired” requires more than knowledge of theory or the blind application of technique.

In Part I, the fundamental principles of a cognitive approach will be presented as a valuable, orienting framework to be used by the school counselor as he or she develops case conceptualization and treatment plans. In Chapter 1, the reader will be introduced to the concept and value of reflective practice. In essence, reflective practice is the ability of the counselor to think about a case before contact, after a session, and while in interaction with the student and to use the insights gained from such reflection to develop and adjust effective treatment plans. Reflective practice demands the counselors use of an orienting framework in order to make sense out of the student’s disclosures and allow those to give shape to the counselor’s response. As such, the guiding philosophy and principles underlying the specific strategies and techniques of cognitive therapy/counseling are presented in Chapter 2.

The School Counselor as Reflective Practitioner

1

“I’m going to kill him! He really pisses me off!”

—Charles, fourteen-years-old¹

Noting that Charles is upset and angry about something is certainly stating the obvious. However, what may be less apparent is the source of this anger and the steps needed to not only reduce the anger and perhaps resolve the situation, but also to empower Charles in such a way to prevent the likelihood of such anger being experienced again.

Perhaps as you read the above quote from Charles, you began to generate a number of “hypotheses” about what may be going on, as well as what you, as counselor, would need to do. While trained to be good listeners, school counselors understand that listening is but the vehicle to understanding and that understanding is the base from which we formulate our helping strategies.

COUNSELORS IN SEARCH OF MEANING

Charles’s declaration is actually an invitation to the counselor to engage in a process of reflection and search for meaning. This reflective process is one of discernment. It is a process through which the school counselor discerns what is important from what is not, understands the “what is” opposed to “what is hoped for,” and develops connections that will guide the student to this desired outcome.

6 • Using a Cognitive Orientation to Guide Reflection

For example, the counselor sitting with Charles may begin to wonder about the clues, the signals, and the information that would help discern the level of truth to Charles's stated intent to kill his counterpart. Is this one incident merely a tip of an iceberg indicating a history and projected future of violent reactions? Is there reason to suspect abuse or violent activity at home? Perhaps this is merely adolescent bravado, all performed for the benefit of the counselor or some imaginary audience. The effective school counselor certainly listens to a student's story—but does so with a discerning ear in search of meaning.

Listening to student disclosure and attempting to make meaning of those disclosures requires a school counselor to employ a model, a guide, and an orienting framework that places this disclosure into some meaningful context. The current text focuses upon the use of a cognitive-orienting framework to guide this discernment, this search for meaning.

In the chapters that follow, the reader will be introduced to the specific theoretical constructs, intervention strategies, and research supporting the efficacy of a cognitive approach to school counseling. However, prior to getting into the theory and application of a cognitive model of school counseling, it is important to first highlight the value of a reflective process and meaning making for all counselors, regardless of theoretical orientation.

COUNSELOR REFLECTIONS GUIDING PRACTICE DECISIONS

The counselor's ability to reflect on his or her counseling has been identified as an essential component to effective practice (Nelson & Neufeldt, 1998). This reflection provides the counselor the means to make sense of all the data presented by a student and to connect those data with a specific counselor response both at the macrolevel of treatment planning and at the microlevel of moment-to-moment interaction that occurs within a session.

Reflection at the Macrolevel: Case Conceptualization and Treatment Planning

It is clear that not all student information is of equal value or importance to the process and outcome of the counseling. The effective school counselor reflects on the student's disclosures and formulates these data into a coherent, yet tentative, conceptualization of what is, what is desired, and how to move from "A" to "B."

For example, consider the situation of the student who is unmotivated and as a result failing academically. Perhaps the school counselor has

worked with numerous students who present as “nonmotivated,” and as a result, have failing grades. While the problem is labeled with the same term, “nonmotivated,” the cause for this lack of motivation is idiosyncratic to that student and thus the intervention employed must similarly be shaped in response to the uniqueness of that individual. The effective school counselor reflects upon the data at his or her disposal to shape the best intervention possible for any one student, at any one time. This process of reflection effectively links the student’s presenting problem to an intervention plan.

This planning and reflective practice is not a static, one-time process; rather, it refers to the thinking that takes place following a session or an encounter that allows the counselor to review what he or she did, what he or she anticipated would happen, and what in fact did happen. From the initial meeting through the end of any one “contract,” the effective school counselor must gather and analyze case information, formulate new hypotheses, and develop and implement intervention decisions (Tillett, 1996).

Reflection at the Microlevel: Reflection “in” Process

While it is essential to use student data to develop case conceptualization and intervention plans, school counselors know that counseling is a dynamic process and cannot be staged in nice linear steps. School counselors appreciate that while they may be prepared with a well-thought plan and a well-stocked “intervention toolbox,” these cannot simply be applied in a one-size-fits-all approach. The subtleties of each relationship, the unique characteristics of both participants, and the context of time and place all contribute to the need for counselors to fine-tune and adjust these plans, and often devise strategies right at the moment of interaction.

Counseling as a reflective process is one in which the counselor is simultaneously involved in the design and implementation of action, “[. . .] while at the same time remaining detached enough to observe and feel the action that is occurring, and to respond” (Tremmel, 1993, p. 436). Consider the simple example of offering a tissue to a tearful student. What is the intent of such a gesture? While such a gesture appears perhaps caring and helpful, might it signal that tears are not allowed? Could offering the tissue highlight and thus sensitize a student who feels somewhat embarrassed by the tears? Is this the purpose of the activity?

The reflective counselor knows what he or she expected to achieve by this gesture and will rapidly process the student’s reactions, contrasting it to what was expected, and adjust accordingly. Therefore, the counselor

8 • Using a Cognitive Orientation to Guide Reflection

who is providing the tissue as invitation to share feelings may note the student's dismissal of that invitation and, in turn, simply state, "Ginny, you seem upset. Would you like to tell me what's going on?" Or, perhaps the counselor offers the tissues as a simple physical comfort, but notes that the client becomes embarrassed by the counselor's recognition of the apparent upset. Under these conditions, the counselor may simply lower the box and place it on the table, redirecting the student with the comment, "Ginny, I'm glad you are here. Have a seat (pointing to a chair) and make yourself comfortable." These are not actions that can be prescribed nor even anticipated, but require the rapid processing of data and comparison of *what is* to *what was hoped for*, with the end result being an adjustment of counselor action.

When "What Is" Fails to Match the "What Was Expected"

Essential to reflective practice is the counselor's awareness of a disparity between what is and what is expected. Understanding that the student's current situation is not the preferred scenario stimulates the counselor to reflect on the data at hand in order to generate intervention plans to facilitate the student's movement toward the desired outcome. This happens both at the macrolevel as the counselor develops a case conceptualization and treatment plan, and at the microlevel as the counselor adjusts his or her own actions in response to the student's reactions at any one moment within a session. But how does a counselor know what to expect? What are the standards—the measures—against which to contrast actual events to expected events and outcomes?

While there is no single set of universal markers of what should be expected at any one point in our counseling, expectations of what "should be" can be established as outgrowth of the counselor's model or orienting framework. Our counseling models not only place the student's issues within a meaningful context, but also establish what to expect when stimuli for change are introduced (Irving & Williams, 1995).

ORIENTING FRAMEWORKS GUIDING REFLECTION

Developing plans that reflect the needs and resources of the individual student, and then adjusting the processes of our counseling in response to the subtleties and nuances of the encounter are characteristics of the reflective practitioner. And while such reflective practice may be both intuitively appealing and empirically supported, it is not an easy process to implement.

Take a moment and reflect on your first experience as a counselor-in-training. For many of us this first encounter occurred in a fundamentals course or a helping-relationship lab where we met with a volunteer “client” or classmate. Whatever the nature and setting of this initial encounter, it is quite possible that you found yourself engulfed in an overabundance of specific information, having no real sense of how to organize it or how to employ it in order to move your “client” in any direction. To expect that you, as counselor-in-training, would employ reflective practice would be unrealistic. In our early stages of training, we lacked standards or guides to contrast that which “is” with that which was “desired.” We lacked an assimilated model or framework to guide our understanding and expectations of the counseling process.

So, prior to making any meaningful reflections and procedural decisions, the effective school counselor needs a framework—a schema—or a rough template to help make sense of the data being gathered. Without such an orienting framework or theory, we truly can become “directionless creatures bombarded with literally hundreds of impressions and pieces of information in a single session” (Prochaska & Norcross, 1994, p. 3).

A Process Needing Structure

Most of us can follow directions to assemble a toy or build a simple structure. Opening the package, we usually look for the directions for quick and easy assembly. The instructions sheets often identify all the parts included, the tools required, and even the steps to take (pictures help!). Even simple “problems” like putting a puzzle together, while not providing step-by-step instructions, make it easier by providing a picture of the finished product on the box top. Knowing the parts and having a concept of how they go together certainly makes assembly that much easier.

While many who work in a problem-solving capacity are presented with problems that are structured with linear steps leading to solutions, this is not true of the world of the school counselor. We in the counseling field are presented with situations that often have no clear beginning, ending, nor certainly predictable—linear—steps toward resolution.

The upset student standing in our door comes neither with easily identified parts nor clear step-by-step instructions. Using our attending and questioning skills allows us to quickly open our “student package.” However, unlike most projects that have clearly marked parts, our student provides many pieces—many items and many points of contact that come flowing out into our session, all without the benefit of a parts’ list or assembly instruction. Which parts are important and which are redundant or unnecessary? Where does one start? What comes next? How do we put

10 • Using a Cognitive Orientation to Guide Reflection

“a” to “b”? These questions are typically answered in the instructions provided by manufactures, but are clearly absent when the “project” is helping a student navigate his or her life crisis.

Reflecting on what the student has shared and how he or she shares it—all in the context of the complexity of the human experience, and within a specific time and place of the encounter—requires some guide, some format, or some structure, or else it will be simply overwhelming. If only one had the picture on the box or the detailed instructions of where to start and how to proceed!

While there is no one picture or set of detailed instructions to guide us with our counseling, the utilization of an organizational framework will help the counselor organize the data, make conceptual connections, find themes, and provide purposeful linkages to goals and interventions.

THE COGNITIVE THEORY: A VALUABLE ORIENTING FRAMEWORK

Cognitive theory provides a useful organizational framework for case conceptualization, intervention planning, and implementation. Case studies employing developmentally appropriate adjustment to cognitive intervention strategies have pointed to the utility of this approach, even with young students (e.g., Choate-Summers et al., 2008; Kendall et al., 2008; Stallard, 2002). While much of the current research joins behavioral and cognitive strategies into cognitive-behavioral therapy, the goal of this book is to present the cognitive model as a distinct, orienting framework. The position taken here, and that articulated by Judith Beck (1995), is that cognitive therapy is defined not by the types of techniques the therapist uses, but rather by the therapist’s planning and implementing treatment *according to a cognitive formulation and conceptualization*.

Thus—as is true for all of the books in this series—the current book will present specific techniques and intervention strategies, but will place primary emphasis on illustrating the value of a cognitive-orienting framework to guide school counselors’ reflective practice and their formulation of case conceptualizations and treatment plans. With this as the point of focus for the text, we turn to a presentation of the fundamental philosophy and core principles guiding cognitive practice (Chapter 2), prior to presenting specific strategies and intervention techniques for school counselors’ use with a cognitive-orienting framework.

SUMMARY

Counselors in Search of Meaning

- Listening to student disclosure, and attempting to make meaning of those disclosures, requires that a school counselor employ a model, a guide, and an orienting framework to place these disclosures into some meaningful context.

Counselor Reflections Guiding Practice Decisions

- The counselor's ability to reflect on his or her counseling has been identified as an essential component of effective practice.
- Reflection provides the counselor the means to make sense of all the data presented by a student and to connect those data with a counselor response and interventions.

Orienting Frameworks Guiding Reflection

- Counselors work with ill-structured problems; they are ill-structured in that they lack linear steps leading to solutions.
- A counselor's theory, model, or orienting framework provides the "structure" needed to begin to understand the large amount of information gathered in counseling and that understanding is used to formulate effective intervention plans.

Cognitive Approach: A Valuable Orienting Framework

- The position taken here is that cognitive therapy is defined not by the types of techniques the therapist uses, but rather by the therapist's planning and implementing treatment according to a cognitive formulation and conceptualization.
- Research has pointed to the utility of a cognitive approach to counseling even with younger students.

NOTE

1. All client names and reference materials reflect composite cases and not a single actual student.