Utilizing Existential Meaning-Making as a Therapeutic Tool for Clients Affected by Poverty

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Abstract

The existential-humanistic therapeutic approach for working with clients affected by poverty is described. The role of status, love, suffering, and societal norms as part of identity development, as well as determining when and how to introduce this approach are discussed. Specific techniques of meaning-making are explained and a case example is provided.

Keywords: existentialism, meaning, meaning-making, poverty

Introduction

Numerous economic and statistical measurements document the existence of poverty and the criteria used for these measurements factor in family size, membership, age, and composition (Masters & Wickstrom, 2004). However, these statistics fail to reflect the pervasive, oppressive, and multifaceted effect of poverty on individuals (Hall, Zhao & Shafir, 2014; Sumner, 2007). Poverty, in its most general sense is a lack of resources (Bradshaw, 2009). Usually defined in economic terms, poverty also includes difficulties obtaining emotional, mental, spiritual, and physical resources (Payne, 1996). Of importance for mental health professionals, individuals living at or near the poverty threshold might experience greater exposure to chronic and acute stressors including depression, anxiety, violence, and substance abuse (Saegert et al., 2007). As such, individuals living in poverty may be at greater risk to experience stressors that can negatively affect their mental health and possess fewer resources to deal with those stressors. In addition, individuals affected by poverty may also lack the tools to actively escape aspects of their life situation relative to individuals with more financial affluence. Not to mention, individuals living in poverty are often stigmatized, perceived as incompetent and considered a drain on societal resources (Hall et al., 2014).

The rate of individuals living at or below the poverty threshold in the United States has steadily increased over the last decade (Trussell & Mair, 2010). In 2010, the estimated yearly income threshold for a family of four was $23,021 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2011, 15.0% of Americans lived below the poverty threshold (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor, & Smith, 2011). Although the threshold by the U.S. Census Bureau is widely used in providing resources to individuals with limited financial means, many individuals are highly critical of this standard (Blank, 2008). One criticism of the methods used to identify poverty is that incremental fluctuations in income (i.e., obtaining seasonal work) may impede the individual or family from qualifying consistently for the federal programming. Individuals who receive aid

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from these types of federal programs may find themselves in the predicament of qualifying for financial assistance in one month and not qualifying the following month due to a small financial gain. For some, the small economic gain does not offset the value of the lost aid.

The United States reports higher rates of individuals living in poverty than most other industrialized countries (Yunus, 2007). In particular, nearly two-thirds of Americans age 85 years and older have lived below the poverty threshold for at least one year during their lifetime (Rank & Hirschl, 1999). In 2011, there were 46.2 million people who met the criteria for poverty (DeNavas-Walt, Proctor & Smith, 2012). This drastic increase in individuals who met the criteria for poverty was a result of many socio-political factors, including a widespread 2.9% decrease in annual income for many individuals (DeNavas-Walt et al., 2012). This downturn contributed to an overwhelming increase in individuals seeking assistance from federally funded programs that offer benefits including food assistance, subsidized housing, and supported healthcare (Knuth, 2010). Due to the recent economic downturn, “programs that offer immediate gratification to low-income clients such as free food, help with utility bills to avoid disconnection, and help with rent to avoid eviction, are overwhelmed with applicants, and program managers are unable to serve all who apply” (Medina, Rivera, Rogers, & Shapiro, 2008, p. 2). Further complicating the current concerns regarding access to resources for individuals living in poverty is that as the poverty rates increase in the United States, the programs to offer aid tend to decrease proportionately (Knuth, 2010). Not to mention, many individuals who qualify for social service programs find the programs unhelpful and reported feelings of ambivalence (Sosin, George & Grossman, 2012). These results seem to suggest that poverty-focused programs are hard to fund and sustain, and they do not presently meet the needs of the specific clientele.

In the wake of the current economic climate and decrease in community resources, counselors must continue to seek out integrative interventions when working with clients who are affected by and/or living in poverty. In their study of 60 individuals living in poverty, Hall et al. (2014) found that a self-affirmation technique improved the subjects’ ability to perform on cognitive assessments and increased their willingness to learn about methods to combat poverty. In this specific study, the self-affirmation technique was an oral recollection of a time when the individual felt “successful and proud” (Hall et al., 2014, p. 2). In consideration of the available research, another such intervention that may prove helpful is the use of existential meaning-making in counseling sessions. Researchers argue that there is a relationship between meaning-making and psychosocial development and well-being (Varahrami, Arnau, Rosen & Mascaro, 2010; Zika & Chamberlain, 1992). For example, meaning-making has led to a decrease in depressive, anxious, and ambivalent symptomology (Mascaro & Rosen, 2005; Wong, 2012). It is possible that the use of meaning-making in session could provide clients who live in poverty with self-expression and empowerment.

In this article, the counseling technique of meaning-making is described in relation to individuals affected by poverty. In addition to describing an integrative theoretical framework for working with clients, conceptual examples are provided in which meaning-making is utilized as an appropriate supplemental therapeutic intervention. Finally, a case study example highlights the effective use of this approach.

Meaning-Making: Theoretical Foundations

The purpose of the meaning-making intervention described in this article is to help individuals affected by poverty develop a sense of empowerment and purpose in relation to their current
living conditions. As previously noted, many federal programs that offer services to individuals living in poverty are currently over-burdened due to limited funding (Knuth, 2010; Medina et al., 2008). Not to mention, some argue that merely providing housing or food to an individual living in poverty minimizes the pervasive and systemic problem of poverty in the United States (Patterson & Tweed, 2009). In their study of homeless individuals, Wolf, Burman, Koegel, Sullivan, and Morton (2001) found that the quality of life in homeless individuals who obtained housing only slightly improved in comparison to their homeless counterparts. These findings suggest that the problems of poverty and homelessness extend beyond the provision of resources. The effectiveness of the therapeutic interventions used when working with individuals living in poverty may be negatively affected due to constraints such as reduced funding and time-limited services (Medina et al., 2008). Therefore, the identification of additional effective therapeutic interventions is necessary to aid this marginalized population. For those living in poverty, oppression and discrimination (Foss, General, & Kress, 2011) as a result of classism, negative stereotypes, and attributions, which have historically placed blame on the individual, are often experienced (Feagin, 1975; Hall et al., 2014).

The use of meaning-making derives from existential philosophies. As a counseling approach, existentialism is grounded in humanism and perceives individuals as capable of achieving self-actualization. In addition, an existential theoretical framework rejects a determinist view of the human condition and instead favors the notion that each individual can choose what they make of their circumstances. Applying this philosophy and theoretical orientation, existential therapists believe that individuals are capable of establishing meaning in their lives, even when confronted with adversity. This approach conceptualizes individuals as free to discover their own truths, with an emphasis on meaning and meaning-making (Sharf, 2008). For our purpose of considering existential approaches to working with individuals affected by poverty, meaning will be defined as “an individually constructed cognitive system, that is grounded in values and is capable of endowing life with personal significance and satisfaction” (Wong, 1989, p. 517). Expanding on this definition, Wong (2012) proposed a model called PURE that defines meaning-making across four constructs: “purpose, understanding, responsible action, and evaluation” (p. 636). Considering this method, individuals explore meaning through self-analysis and inquiring whether they are achieving their purpose in life, whether they are experiencing the life they desire, whether they are responsible for their current life circumstances, and whether they are satisfied with their current life circumstances (p. 637). This conceptualization of meaning-making allows individuals to examine their subjective experiences, values, personal satisfaction, and life goals in determining whether they are living meaningfully. For a population such as individuals affected by poverty who are often stigmatized and judged, the PURE approach is multiculturally sensitive, positive, and affirming (Wong, 2012). In this instance, meaning-making can also function as a source of purpose in challenging or traumatic events that are often experienced by individuals affected by poverty (Park, 2010). In other words, meaning is an individual’s belief system or schema and meaning-making occurs when an individual applies this belief system to his or her environment or situation in an attempt to create order or derive purpose from the experience(s). If an individual is unable to establish a sense of meaning/purpose within his or her own life, he or she may present with negative feelings of dissociation, anger, or existential neurosis (Das, 1998), and/or apathy (Frankl, 1973; Langle, 2005; Wong, 1989). Some existentialists argue that meaning-making is only achieved once the individual has confronted his or her meaninglessness (van Deurzen & Adams, 2011). Jung (1996) argues that meaninglessness is directly correlated to psychological illness, and stated
that approximately one-third of all clients seeking psychotherapy will experience distress as a result of meaninglessness.

Existential-humanistic counselors are concerned with their client’s life rather than trying to overcome, “specific problems or focus on particular symptoms of discomfort and unease” (van Deurzen & Adams, 2011, p. 4). Taking into account the client’s perception of meaning and meaninglessness, an existential counselor’s objective may be to set the mind, body, and soul of an individual free (Yalom, 1981). Vontress (1988) stated that counselors who are culturally heterogeneous from their client may be unable to relate to their client’s worldview due to their differing perspectives, values, and cultural roles. In these cases, a therapeutic approach like existential meaning-making can reinforce the belief that meaning is unique to each individual’s personal views, cultural background, and subjective experiences (Wong, 1997). In other words, this approach acknowledges the unique perspective of all clients such that similar experiences do not result in similar subjective realities, making it necessary that the therapist work to understand the client’s subjective experiences, personal views, and background no matter how similar the therapist and client may or may not be. Thus, in the case of working with a client who is affected by poverty, the success or failure of treatment is determined by the client’s ability to overcome the internalized obstacles associated with poverty, although he or she may continue to live at or below the poverty threshold. In part, this may entail the client’s choice to discard societal ideals about the meaning of the situation (i.e., living with poverty). At the same time, the existentialist orientation recognizes the importance of having meaning in one’s life and can be used to help the client who rejects societal values and meaning of poverty to identify his or her own meaning for the situation. In essence, the primary goal of therapy is to assist the client in identifying a sense of satisfaction with the quality of his or her life in the present moment.

Integrated Meaning-Making Models: Utilizing Meaning in Counseling

Viktor Frankl developed logotherapy, a psychotherapeutic approach that focuses on meaning using a future orientation (Frankl, 2006). In this approach, the client is encouraged to explore his or her relationship with meaning and to establish a sense of purpose in life by examining who the client is in the present moment, and what the client has the potential to become in the future. Within the logotherapy framework, Frankl (2006) emphasized the importance of responsibility and how each individual defines meaning within his or her own life. Personal responsibility can be explored through the use of questions and explores how the individual balances responsibility in their life. Examples of responsibility process questions include: Who are you responsible to? What is responsibility? Do you hold yourself responsible? This line of questioning highlights how individuals can choose to perform for the sake of others, for themselves, or some combination in between. According to Frankl, a counselor who explores with a client his or her relationship with responsibility ultimately uncovers the various ways meaning is manifested within the client’s life. For Frankl, the manifestation of personal meaning-making can be exhibited in the following ways: (a) the meaning of producing (status), (b) the meaning of love (relationships), and (c) the meaning of suffering (loss). Applying Frankl’s work, Wong (2012) introduced the Meaning-Centered Counseling and Therapy (MCCT) approach that emphasized meaning for counselors to implement in their counseling sessions; MCCT “emphasizes the importance of understanding what it means to be fully alive and how to live vitally in spite of suffering and the finiteness of life” (p. 627). By incorporating MCCT into the counseling setting, clients who are affected by poverty can be introduced to a holistic, integrative, and educational
approach to meaning-making that values relationships, and individual subjective experiences (Wong, 2012). This MCCT approach is appropriate for clinicians representing various theoretical orientations and reflects current trends in the counseling field. Considering Frankl and Wong’s legacies regarding meaning-making in counseling practice, it is imperative that counseling professionals examine how to integrate meaning-making approaches into their practice especially with individuals affected by poverty who are often underserved and undervalued.

Another existential-humanistic framework, the Integrity Model (Nahon & Lander, 2008), perceives client distress as a result of internal, unresolved issues as opposed to external issues (e.g., faulting the self vs. faulting others). Originally based off the work of O. H. Mowrer (1954), who perceived client wellness as a result of respecting one’s own values with veracity, the Integrity Model approach promotes authentic living: “Individuals enter into emotional difficulties because they are violating the contracts and commitment that they themselves have made” (Lander & Nahon, 2008, p. 142). In order to achieve authentic living, Nahon and Lander (2008) proposed that the client resolves internal struggles through the close examination of their relationships with honesty, responsibility, and emotional closure. Through a closer examination of these three constructs, clients can identify instances for which they have violated their personal value system. According to Nahon and Lander (2008), the presentation of guilt can be an expression of disappointment for not living up to one’s expectations of self. Ultimately, the goal of treatment is to empower and engage the client to take personal responsibility for his or her own meaning and to promote authentic living.

Integrating the meaning-making approaches described above, this existential-humanistic approach explores meaning-making through the constructs of status, love, and suffering. Utilizing Wong’s (2012) emphasis on a future orientation and personal responsibility, the clinician can engage in a dialogue with the client that promotes the exploration of meaning-making. Through the examination of values and subjectivity experience, the client can assume control of the counseling session by retelling their personal narrative. Helping to structure this dialogue, Nahon and Lander’s Integrity Model can be integrated in a way that focuses exclusively on status (accomplishments), love (relationships), and suffering (meaning). The following intervention will be described more completely below.

**Status**

According to Park and Folkman’s (1997) Meaning-Making Model (as cited in Wortmann & Park, 2009), meaning is heavily influenced by global reinforcements, individual goals, and interpretations. For example, a client who is successful financially (e.g., global reinforcement) based on their occupational status (e.g., individual goal) and achieves community recognition, may find meaning in professional accomplishments (i.e., meaning-making). In this example, this success can be further integrated into one’s worldview and may encourage the individual to pursue additional occupational/financial endeavors or “produce” to maintain community recognition (e.g., his or her identity is established via career). However, if this individual suddenly is confronted with unemployment and/or the potential for bankruptcy and community rejection, his or her definition of meaning/purpose has been challenged, which may lead the individual to either (a) reframe the present circumstance and ascribe meaning (e.g., the belief that money or status does not define a person) or (b) experience meaninglessness (e.g., belief that this challenge is a reflection that he or she is a personal failure).
The concept of status, often established by societal norms, is associated with occupational success rather than life achievement. In the United States, occupational success is often associated with status; however, individuals who live at or below the poverty threshold may not have access to occupational opportunities. Thus, the financial gain that middle or upper class individuals and families often enjoy become exclusive to specific socioeconomic groups. This process then becomes inequitable and unequal. Historically, the emphasis in the Western world of occupational and financial success resulted from the Industrial Revolution and society’s preoccupation with achievement (Sharf, 2008). The values associated with achievement and status ultimately led to the discrimination of individuals living in poverty (Hanson, 1997). This has not always been the predominant view of individuals living with few resources. In fact, during the Middle Ages, society considered individuals who lived in poverty to be “morally superior” (p. 3) or successful in abandoning secular wealth (Hanson, 1997). Oftentimes, current society perceives individuals living in poverty as deficient or victims of a flawed societal system (Hall et al., 2014). This perception facilitates pity, discrimination, fear, and judgment (Kluegel & Smith, 1986). Crocker, Major, and Steele (1998) proposed that the process of stigmatization occurs when a person possesses (or is believed to possess) “some attribute or characteristic that conveys a social identity that is devalued in a particular social context” (p. 505). These attributes and characteristics can become a basis for excluding and/or avoiding members of the stereotyped group (Leary & Schreindorfer, 1998). Leary and Schreindorfer (1998) posited that stigmatization puts a person at risk of experiencing threats to his or her social identity. Individuals who experience stigmatization may face threats to their personal and collective self-esteem (Crocker et al., 1998) and may feel unsure as to whether outcomes are due to their own personal identity or their social identity (i.e., the sense of self vs. the sense of identifying as part of the larger community). Since stigma exists within social contexts and its effects are likely to unfold in processes which involve power (Link & Phelan, 2006), it is imperative that the impact of stigmatization and identity formation of oppressed groups be examined within the context of the traditional counseling relationship. It is essential that the counseling profession responds not only to individuals living at or below the poverty threshold from a service or resource perspective, but also attend to the client as a human being—an individual fully capable of constructing personal meaning out of his or her current distress.

The concepts of status and identity development could be expanded to include managing the multiple roles/identities that an individual must uphold to manage membership within the “culture of poverty.” The second construct of the Integrity Model, responsibility, examines the client’s multiple responsibilities or identities (Nahon & Lander, 2008). Clients maintain multiple roles in their lives (e.g., mother, sister, daughter, aunt, friend, partner). This suggests that, as clients live their day-to-day lives, they must constantly “perform” or “produce” in order to manage the responsibilities that result from engaging in multiple relationships, including their relationships with federal/community agencies. As noted by Trussell and Mair (2010), individuals who receive federal government assistance may feel added pressure to comply with federal and state policies in order continue receiving that assistance (e.g., participating in home visits, working with multiple service providers, participating in vocational/mental health counseling). Exploring and exposing these pressures can help the counselor learn more about the client’s relationship with responsibility and may help in acknowledging internal struggles.

One method to assist the client in balancing these multiple identities is the identification of the internalized construct of empowerment. According to the World Bank (2002), individuals affected by poverty often report disempowering experiences with social service agencies.
including (a) accessing information, (b) inclusion, (c) accountability, and (d) local support. In essence, these (often interrelated) components interfere with an individual’s sense of community when they feel judged, oppressed, or demeaned. In a therapeutic setting, counselors could assist clients in making well-informed decisions when seeking federal and community support and exhibiting responsibility in these decisions. Through exploring the client’s multiple identities or ways of behaving within the life systems, the counselor can become more aware of the client’s successes and strengths. This ability to navigate and manage the system is one example of the client’s demonstration of effectively managing their responsibilities and empowering or authenticating the individual’s experience.

According to van Deurzen and Adams (2011), meaning should be explored both globally and personally. Thus, counselors and clients can identify meaning themes using universal and individual frameworks (i.e., societal norms and personal preferences). Clients might identify positive meaning within their own personal relationship with the world, even if the society-at-large negatively interprets this purpose (i.e., purposeful living and not focusing on the accumulation of wealth). Building on this notion that there are both universal and individual frameworks, counselors must become and remain mindful of the client’s “implied and embedded” words (van Deurzen & Adams, 2011, p. 147). It is critical that counselors do not assume that their own understanding of the meaning within the client’s life is universal because clients may operate from different frameworks, and counselors who assume they understand a client’s meaning risk misunderstanding the client. Such assumptions among therapists can deter counseling progress and the accurate identification of meaning (van Deurzen & Adams, 2011).

Love

The third construct of the Integrity Model, emotional closure, examines the client’s sense of community and meaning found through loving others. Family resiliency has been defined as utilizing community support and resources to regain balance (McCubbin, Thompson, & McCubbin, 1996), and resilient families exhibit relationship satisfaction and agreeableness (McCubbin & McCubbin, 1988). Twenty-eight percent of mothers living in poverty who were asked to identify family strengths named both love and affection (Vandsburger, Harrigan, & Biggerstaff, 2008). Other mothers named family strengths that included openness, understanding, and working together, which also reflects how they place importance on community and meaning in love, since these responses are closely linked to a sense of community and are descriptive of investment in others. It is notable that

almost three quarters of these study participants identified their mutual love and affection for each other, their feelings of closeness, standing together for each other, and their ability to communicate openly with each other as resources they use their family strengths. (Vandsburger et al., 2008, p. 28)

The meaning of love, as defined by Frankl (2006), is the concept of investing in others in order to achieve happiness. This altruistic motive suggests that happiness is attained through helping others. Ruby Payne (1996), in her work on examining individuals who live in poverty, found that personal relationships were often more meaningful for individuals and families impacted by poverty than the acquisition of material items. Payne’s work is consistent with existential-humanistic approaches that examine the meaning or purpose of individual relationships and/or
community. This helps underscore the importance of viewing clients living with poverty globally, and treating the client rather than trying to treat the poverty at the neglect of the client’s other needs, such as making meaning of life.

**Suffering**

Frankl (2006) believed that due to an individual’s ability to change his or her self, the creation of meaning can take place even in “a hopeless situation,” in which the individual cannot change the circumstances of their physical situation (p. 112). Conceptualization of the client as “self” and reframing the client’s attitude can be a healing intervention. In order to examine suffering, the client and counselor must be willing to be honest with self. The first construct of the Integrity Model, honesty, prompts the counselor and client to examine the client’s relationship with truthfulness in past, present, and future orientations (Nahon & Lander, 2008). Experiencing honesty within one’s life can lead to a “sense of control and dignity in one’s own life and the freedom to share one’s ‘life events,’ on one’s own terms was instrumental to … overall emotional wellbeing” (Trussell & Mair, 2010, p. 529).

The therapeutic relationship is recognized as a key component to existential therapy, and counselor honesty and self-awareness are also extremely important. Silverman (2008) noted that in order to know others, one must know one’s self. A counselor must be able to recognize when sociopolitical, systemic, and environmental factors, as well as internalized oppression, are negatively affecting a client’s well-being (Toporek, Lewis, & Crethar, 2009). Examining one’s understanding of the culture of poverty, including the concepts of societal and/or personal barriers, can assist the counselor in reducing the interpretation of his or her own personal bias when making interpretations in the counseling session. This understanding will allow the client to engage more in personal therapeutic growth. As previously noted, poverty is multifaceted and multidimensional. Simply introducing a client to a social services program that can assist with immediate housing or safety needs is not enough. Resolving short-term obstacles, although important, is only one duty of a culturally competent counselor. Counselors must also learn about the client as a person, how the individual derives meaning from his or her existence, and whether the way in which the client derives meaning occurs through achievement, love, and/or suffering. Giving purpose to one’s existence empowers an individual and offers alternative possibilities rather than focusing on deficiencies.

**Challenges of Meaning-Making**

Although it is recommended that counselors integrate meaning-making approaches into their counseling practice, it is important to review several limitations associated with meaning-making. First and foremost, traditionally vulnerable populations (e.g., children, older adults, persons with a disability) may not be appropriate for meaning-making interventions. In fact, populations that are protected by mandated practices may not be appropriate for a meaning-making intervention (at least initially) until these protected populations are secure. Also, it is important that counselors assess the intellectual development of their client prior to implementing a meaning-making approach, as meaning-making requires abstract thought processes and may not be appropriate/preferred by all client populations. In fact, some client populations may prefer a more structured counseling approach.

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An individual who is struggling to meet his or her basic survival needs (e.g., food, shelter), may prefer that time in session be allocated to assisting them achieve stability. Additionally, counselors who have a client in crisis (e.g., suicidal, homicidal, delusional) should attend to the client’s immediate safety needs and respond within the appropriate legal and ethical guidelines. A focus on meaning requires the client to be capable of examining existential issues over meeting immediate needs.

Finally, counselors who integrate meaning-making approaches into their practice with individuals who are affected by poverty should remain mindful to discriminate the differences between identifying meaning-making purposefully and passively remaining in poverty. Individuals who practice meaning-making and identify purpose in their current situation are different than individuals who live in poverty and feel hopeless to rise above their situation. It is important that counselors are able to discriminate these differences and provide appropriate counseling services to these two different populations.

The concept of meaning-making as a counseling approach could be used as a supplement in the counseling process. This approach can assist the counselor in moving the client toward self-actualization and self-awareness, even if other approaches are also needed or current circumstances require prioritization of more basic needs or crisis management. It may serve a counselor well to conceptualize the client from a meaning-making viewpoint; recognizing that the client has strengths and the proclivity to succeed may very well be the first step in beginning to treat from a more concrete problem-solving or cognitive-based orientation.

Application: An Example of Meaning-Making in Session

The following case example demonstrates an integrated existential-humanistic approach that includes meaning-making as a therapeutic intervention. Meaning-making, as a therapeutic tool, will be applied to a client, who lives below the poverty threshold.

Introduction of the Counselor

The counselor, Connie, is a mental health counselor, serving individuals with limited financial means through an outpatient counseling agency in the southeast United States. Connie is a Caucasian woman in her thirties who holds her Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC) credential in the state where she resides. Currently, Connie is pursuing her PhD in Counselor Education and Supervision. The majority of Connie’s work is with men who currently identify as homeless. Connie provides individual counseling to clients who visit her agency to receive outreach services such as showering, food, and clothing.

Introduction of the Client

The client, Michael, is a 53-year-old African American widowed veteran. Michael has participated in the agency’s showering program (a program that provides hygiene resources to homeless men twice a week) for two years and recently approached Connie for individual counseling. Michael identified his presenting problem as “loneliness since my wife died.” He stated that he has been homeless for a year-and-a-half and that he was not seeking subsidized housing resources. Michael reported that he is closely connected to a group of men who identify

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as homeless and feels a strong sense of responsibility to protect these “old vets.” Despite his close connection to this community, Michael said that feels “sad” about his wife.

**Intervention and Case Conceptualization**

Michael approached Connie for counseling, and she wanted to be mindful of this client’s unique therapeutic needs. She focused on client-initiated discussions and maintained self-awareness on establishing a therapeutic space that promoted safety and self-exploration through meaning-making activities.

In counseling, Connie discussed with Michael his perception of responsibilities and meaning. This examination of perceptions emphasized the importance of empowering the client and promoted honest reflection (past, present, and future). Upon closer examination of Michael’s story, Connie focused on meaning and meaning-making with an emphasis on meaning of production, meaning of love, and meaning of suffering.

In this discourse, Connie became aware that Michael, who previously found meaning in his role as a soldier in the military, was injured in the line of duty and as result of this injury incurred a Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI). This experience forced Michael to reexamine his identity as a soldier. After being honorably discharged, Michael said that he was unable to maintain employment for long periods of time due to the injury. Michael reported that he met his wife several years after his injury and married shortly thereafter. He said that he has no children. Michael said that he lived with his wife in her trailer, which was foreclosed upon and subsequently repossessed after her death. After Michael’s wife’s passing, he became homeless.

Michael said that he did not mind living in the streets. This was, in part, to a social system he developed which included other aging veterans. Upon further inquiry, Michael identified with the meaning of love and meaning of suffering through his relationship with his wife and community of aging vets. He said that he enjoyed “taking care of people,” and although he was unable to maintain employment when married, found personal satisfaction in his role as caretaker. Furthermore, Michael stated that he enjoyed sacrificing (much like his time in the military) for the aging vets and said that he often advocated for his “brothers” by requesting and sharing additional bus passes and hygiene supplies from the showering program. Michael reported that since his wife’s passing, the aging vets have helped him to “not feel sad.” Michael shared that he chose not to pursue subsidized housing because, “Who would take care of those old guys if it wasn’t for me?”

After several weeks of counseling, Michael stated that, “I am not lonely anymore, now that I talk about it. I guess I wasn’t lonely before. I just didn’t think about what I had.” From an existential standpoint and drawing on the idea of meaning through productivity, relationship, and suffering, Michael’s feelings of loss of his wife might be seen as needed so that he could turn his caregiving ability to others needing his help. This caregiving allowed Michael to work in a way to better the lives of others, develop important relationships, and have a reason for the passing of his wife that allowed him to view his situation through a different, yet still fitting, lens.

Connie thanked Michael for his participation in counseling and shared that she too noticed that Michael appeared to value his present relationships and found meaning in these interactions. Michael reported an increased feeling of satisfaction and self-awareness. In this case, Michael occasionally attended counseling sessions thereafter to update Connie on his progress, living conditions, and to request assistance with completing paperwork for his disability claim.
Counseling Process and Relationship

Throughout their counseling sessions, Connie integrated a psycho-educational component to her work with Michael. As Michael continued to participate in sessions, she would review available community service programs with him, or resources that might assist his present lifestyle. At times, Connie would contact a shelter, the Veteran’s Administration, or other potential resources in her attempt to educate Michael on possible programs for which he might qualify. With Michael’s approval, he was added to the waitlist for several housing programs and began the paperwork for a partial disability claim.

In addition to focusing on community resources, Connie utilized existential meaning-making as a therapeutic tool with Michael to deepen her understanding of how Michael finds meaning. In session, Connie introduced the Integrity Model to Michael by addressing the constructs of honesty, responsibility, and emotional closure. She explained that these constructs were like a three-legged stool that balances authentic living (Lander & Nahon, 2008). Through therapy, Connie learned that Michael experienced some internal struggle related to status. As a military veteran, Michael described the challenges he experienced upon his honorable discharge. He shared that while in the military, the ideas of brotherhood, integrity, and strength were valued; however, upon returning to the civilian world, Michael felt judged by people for his service in an unfavorable war. Michael stated that he felt guilty for receiving harsh criticism from his community, and that these feelings were incongruent with his military training and personal values. Furthermore, Michael stated that he felt responsible to his wife, employer, community, and others, to the point he suppressed his feelings associated with military duty in order to manage his present responsibilities. Michael indicated that he felt more authentic visiting with his “old vets” and that he did not feel judged. He also stated that he experienced a feeling of responsibility to protect these men, similar to his military experience. Throughout these sessions, Connie became aware that Michael’s three-legged stool (Nahon & Lander, 2008) was unbalanced because he was not able to be honest with himself and remained emotionally closed to this pressure from his community.

Based on their work together, it seemed that Michael found meaning in love and suffering through his caretaker role and relationship with the aging vets. Connie explored with Michael the sense of purpose and satisfaction he receives as a result of his present relationships. In session, Michael’s humanness was incorporated into the session through the utilization of meaning-making. This integrative framework for counseling provided Michael the opportunity to identify a sense of purpose, regardless of societal expectations or stereotypes. Throughout their work together, Michael became more self-aware and empowered regarding his life choices. He identified purposeful living and gained a deeper understanding of himself. Although Michael deeply missed his wife, this was now an opportunity for him to reconcile his experiences and honor his own values.

Discussion

Engaging in a counseling relationship with a person affected by poverty can be challenging as the counselor may experience feelings of helplessness themselves as they evaluate the pervasive and stigmatizing issues associated with poverty in the United States. Oftentimes, counselors try to link clients living in poverty with community and social resources; however, due to the increasingly limited number of funded programs available to serve individuals in poverty,
counselors are called to evaluate new and innovative methods to provide services. One such approach is the meaning-making intervention outlined in this paper. Using this talk therapy intervention, counselors dialogue with their client about their subjective experience as a person in poverty. Adhering to Nahon and Lander’s Integrity Model, counselors assist the client in identifying how status, love, and suffering establish meaning within the client’s life. Through this exploration, a sense of purpose and intention is established into the counseling relationship whereby the client explores their humanness rather than a more traditional method to counseling whereby the client is linked to social services. Initially this meaning-making approach may appear simplistic and neglectful to the client’s basic needs; however, it is our belief that the helping profession undervalues personal accomplishment and purpose. Much like the research previously discussed, subjects performed better on cognitive assessments after utilizing self-affirmations (Hall et al., 2014). In addition, homeless individuals reported a slight increase in quality of life with the provision of housing (Patterson & Tweed, 2009). These findings seem to suggest that a sense of purpose overrides the provision of material items.

Conclusion

Americans continue to experience poverty at an alarming rate, and federal service programs are ill-equipped to manage the increasing numbers of unemployed, homeless, and hungry individuals and families seeking their services. In a country of haves and have-nots, where dominant culture determines self-worth through occupational success, wealth, and status, an individual’s experiences of poverty in the United States can directly impact individual meaning-making. Although some scholars argue that individuals who live in poverty should not be encouraged to find satisfaction while living in poverty (Wadesworth, 2012), meaning-making promotes psychological benefits and may be a powerful therapeutic tool (Mascaro & Rosen, 2005; Varahrami et al., 2010; Zika & Chamberlain, 1992). Meaning, an existential-humanistic paradigm, is a sense of purpose within one’s own life. Historical approaches to wealth reflect the possibility that people may still find meaning (other than lacking resources) even when living at or near poverty. Counselors are encouraged to incorporate meaning-making into their counseling practice as a possible intervention to assist individuals affected by poverty. Counselors must provide a nonjudgmental, genuine, and supportive environment despite current societal norms and possible counselor biases related to poverty. The occurrence of poverty is one example of an issue involving very large systems that has existed for decades. Counselors who work with individuals living in poverty may experience burnout if it is assumed that these issues are easily solved, unsolvable, or required to be solved for client improvement (Toporek et al., 2009).

Counselors should also maintain an awareness of opportunities to serve as an advocate for the oppressed. Ethical standards mandate that counselors serve as advocates at the individual, group, institutional, and societal level, in order to examine potential barriers and obstacles, which may prohibit the growth of clients (American Counseling Association, 2005). Although meaning-making, incorporated into counseling of clients affected by poverty, will not solve the overall social problems associated with poverty; it may contribute to a higher quality of life because the focus is on the humanness of the client. Meaning-making provides clients from all socio-economic backgrounds opportunities for empowerment and self-direction in seeking life-fulfillment from an intrinsic point of view and is not dependent on external standards. It gives clients agency. This may be particularly helpful when the client’s circumstances do not fit
societal standards. Meaning-making is one possible intervention that may help an individual establish order over chaos and identify inherent strengths, even in the face of adversity.

References


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