

2021

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Recommended Citation

Wright, A. (2021). A Practical Application of Self Psychology in Counseling. *Journal of Counselor Preparation and Supervision*, 14(4). Retrieved from <https://digitalcommons.sacredheart.edu/jcps/vol14/iss4/13>

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A Practical Application of Self Psychology in Counseling

Abstract

Self psychology has undergone a significant evolution since it was initially developed and proposed by Heinz Kohut, including broadening conceptions of what purposes selfobjects can serve for individuals. Its application to counseling has been as an organizing framework and overarching theory of human development and psychopathology. The concept of selfobjects, however, has the potential to provide specific guidance and technique in micro-interactions within counseling. Individual moments within counseling present opportunities for a counselor to intervene, and self psychology can provide a deliberate decision-making tool for how to respond. Being deliberate in interventions throughout counseling has the potential to improve outcomes. Case examples are presented to illustrate the model.

Keywords

Self Psychology, Counseling Process, Counseling, Intervention, Counseling Education

Although self psychology has evolved and transformed, Heinz Kohut's original notion that other people (*selfobjects*) perform functions in life that individuals cannot perform for themselves has persisted (Basch, 1991; Goldberg, 1998; Kohut, 1991; 2009). The premise of the counselor serving selfobject functions, similarly, has persisted (Kaufman, 1996; Rohde & Roser, 2019). This is true, even though the term "selfobject" is often not used to describe the counselor serving a particular purpose that a client cannot accomplish themselves (Benson, 1992; Cooper, Norcross, Raymond-Barker, & Hogan, 2019; Fenchel & Flapan, 1986; Ullma, 2006).

Self psychology has the potential to offer counselors and counselors-in-training an explicit model for how to interact with clients moment-to-moment. Counselor education often focuses on the overall relationship, process, and 'stance' that counselors-in-training take with clients (Sommers-Flanagan, 2015; Swank, Lambie, & Witta, 2012). However, explicit models for the content of counselors' interactions is often either focused on microskills, which are problematic in their lack of theoretical basis and model for deciding when to employ which ones (Ridley, Kelly, & Mollen, 2011), or require advanced study beyond the master's degree, such as postgraduate psychoanalytic training. Counselors are often taught some skills for how to interact with clients globally, but they are often not given explicit models for deciding exactly when and how to employ these skills (e.g., domains of competence are most often evaluated in terms of overall abilities to build relationships, be facilitative of change, etc., rather than specific models applied in sessions; Swank, Lambie, & Witta, 2012). The model presented in this paper offers a straightforward, concrete model to help guide counselors and counselors-in-training in this decision making process.

Self Psychology

Self psychology is built upon the premise that people have needs—deep, intrinsic needs to be able to function properly in the world—that they cannot fulfill on their own (Basch, 1991; Goldberg, 1998; Kohut, 1991; 2009). In order to meet these needs, they interact with what are termed *selfobjects*, other people in their lives who help them fulfill these needs.

The original selfobjects delineated by Kohut (1991; Baker & Baker, 1987) consisted of three primary functions: mirroring, twinship, and idealizing. Mirroring selfobjects provide support and encouragement for the individual, especially when they cannot muster it themselves, mirroring back to the person value and self-worth. Twinship selfobjects provide a sense of sameness, likeness, and fitting in. They provide an empathic other throughout different journeys of an individual's life. Idealizing selfobjects provide calm and comfort, serving as a guide to individuals in times of need. They are more directive and help people through turmoil in a calm, measured, and experienced (or wise) way. Many have added other selfobject functions, from developmental functions to unbridled affection (of pets, for example) to music (Goldberg, 1998), but the three core, original selfobjects have permeated the literature on self psychology consistently.

Counselors as Selfobjects

Within a self psychology framework, counselors fulfill these selfobject needs for clients, who most often have not had these needs consistently enough fulfilled in their lives (and thus require reparative counseling). The idea that counselors fulfill psychological needs for clients is ubiquitous in the field, even when they are not referred to in self psychology terms (Benson, 1992; Cooper, Norcross, Raymond-Barker, & Hogan, 2019; Fenchel & Flapan, 1986; Ullma, 2006). The evolution of this thought, and the associated literature on it, has focused on what overall purpose a counselor can and does serve for an individual client. Across theories and literature, though, a

single counselor seems to serve many, varied purposes to each client, a complex tapestry of support and guidance (Enns, 1993; Fonagy & Allison, 2014; Pilette, Berck, & Achber, 1995). The counselor may serve multiple purposes at any given moment, may serve a consistent purpose throughout, or may fluctuate between serving different functions for clients in counseling.

The discussion within the self psychology literature is often focused on individual selfobjects (whether in counseling or in an individual's everyday life) and what purpose they serve for the individual that they cannot accomplish themselves. With the acknowledgement that counseling includes both an overarching feeling and moment-to-moment interactions that are driving change (Levitt, Butler, & Hill, 2006), counselors need to think about interventions and interactions at a micro level, not just in terms of the overarching purpose they want to serve for their clients.

When aligning the three traditional selfobject functions with interactions between counselor and client, there is a strong tie to Rogers' core components of effective counseling (Rogers, 1957; 1959), which have so permeated the field of counseling. The mirroring selfobject—again, a person who provides support and encouragement—aligns with unconditional positive regard, as it reflects back positive and reassuring feedback to clients. The twinship selfobject—again, a person who provides a sameness, likeness, and fitting in—aligns with Rogers' goal of the counselor being empathic, working toward joining with and normalizing the experience of the client. Finally, the idealizing selfobject—again, a person who offers advice and guidance from a place of expertise—aligns with the congruence ingredient in counseling, consisting of calm, genuine guidance and feedback in the moment. However, Rogers intended for counselors to embody all three of these relational traits consistently throughout the counseling relationship, from interaction to interaction. Some critics of Rogers' therapeutic stance have pointed to the

impossibility of holding all three of these necessary qualities throughout counseling, as well as them being so non-directive that, while they build a comfortable environment, they may not be sufficient for change in counseling (Kensit, 2000; Wachtel, 2007).

Reconciling the obvious utility of the three overarching Rogerian factors in establishing and maintaining a safe, healthy, and productive counseling relationship with the practical difficulties actually enacting them consistently (i.e., “being Rogers” in counseling, to which many of us aspire, and most of us fail) is no easy task. Some have posited that simply *striving for* these ideal traits is enough (Brooks & Cochran, 2016; Perlitiz, 2016; Rihacek & Danelova, 2015). However, counselors strive and fall flat. Counselors find moments within the counseling dyad when they feel they have not been congruent, have not been empathic, or have not been unconditionally positive. Further, there are moments when the three conditions contradict each other; when a genuine reaction is not unconditionally positive or empathic, counselors may feel inadequate at being fully Rogerian.

Selfobjects in Micro-Interactions

Moments in Counseling

Psychodynamic/interpersonal and cognitive-behavioral counselors (as well as everything in between and beyond these theoretical orientations) have a host of options of how to respond, ranging from questions to reflections, interpretations, acknowledgements, and guidance statements (Wiser & Goldfried, 1996). And these do not even include the use of nonverbals, all which can constitute interventions as well (Evans, 2008). How clients react to individual moments in counseling can affect the therapeutic relationship, bring about or restrict change, and alter the trajectory of a client’s life and functioning (Giorgi, 2011; Mahrer, 1988; Santos, Gonçalves, &

Matos, 2011). Each moment in counseling is an opportunity for the counselor to strengthen (or weaken) the relationship, to better (or worsen) outcomes, and ultimately to be helpful.

Every counseling moment holds the opportunity for deliberate, measured response from the counselor, and responses can be validating, invalidating, supportive, condescending, misaligned, empowering, or some mixture of all these and more. The general orientation and resulting relational stance of a counselor may be more aligned with one or two of the three selfobject functions, which may make the decision at any one moment somewhat easier or more likely. However, the flexibility afforded by at least considering alternative responses and interventions may be quite beneficial to clients (Owen & Hilsenroth, 2014). There is no way of knowing at this point which of the three choices will be the best, most useful, or most beneficial choice in any given moment; though it probably does not need citation, it has been said that “psychologists are not psychics” (Gyollai, 2020, para. 22) and cannot know definitively how different responses may differentially turn out. But a model for being deliberate about how to respond to clients in different given situations, such as applying a self-psychological framework, may prove useful.

Selfobject Choices in Counseling Moments

Reconceptualizing the three primary selfobject functions within counseling from relational stances and purposes served as entire objects, each of the three relational functions (i.e., mirroring, twinship, and idealizing selfobject behaviors) can be seen as therapeutic *choices* for any given moment in a counseling. That is, as counselors acknowledge that they intervene at multiple levels, including very small interactions throughout the counseling process (Kiesler, 2004), they can treat each opportunity to intervene as a choice that specifically addresses a client’s need at that very moment. Any time a client interacts with a counselor, they are prompting a relational interaction

that can affect the relationship and therapeutic outcomes (Dietzel & Abeles, 1975; Lichtemberg & Heck, 1986; Thomas et al., 2014; Tracey, 1985; Wampold & Kim, 1989). Counselors from all different theoretical orientations understand that there are different options for how to respond in any given moment, depending on how directive they want to be, how self-disclosing they choose to be, how they feel in the moment about what the client is saying or doing, and a host of other variables.

The decisions for counselors of how to respond in any given moment are largely unconscious, or at least “intuitive” (Betan & Binder, 2010; Hartman, 1971). Taken moment to moment, applying self-psychological principles to micro-level interactions, the counselor has a choice of how to respond to clients (in both verbal and nonverbal ways): as an affirming mirror, as an empathic twin, or as a guiding idealized object. These three options align with what a counselor feels a client needs in the moment: to feel better (via an affirming, mirroring selfobject intervention), to feel seen (via an empathic, twinship selfobject intervention), or to feel explicitly helped (via a guiding, idealizing selfobject intervention). The following case examples illustrate how selfobject decisions can guide counselor behavior in therapeutic moments.

Selfobject Decisions in Counseling: An Angry Moment

An adult client with a number of ambivalent feelings about his job came into his session quite angry. His ambivalence generally comes from the fact that he loves the work he does, but he does not feel valued in his current position, both from within (his boss and coworkers) and from outside (respect within his given field). This particular session he was extremely upset about his boss being “dismissive” toward him. While he generally allows his boss to be rude and even inappropriate with him, he reported that during this past week, he actually yelled at his boss, telling him to “go to hell!” From the client’s description of the situation, it did in fact sound like his boss

was inappropriately chastising him in front of colleagues, calling him names. Additionally, the client's response was confined to the boss's office, after the public meeting, without any other colleagues present. After reporting this interaction with his boss, he looked at the counselor, obviously awaiting a response, at which point the counselor has a deliberate choice to make.

Choosing a Mirroring Selfobject Response

From a mirroring selfobject perspective, the goal of the counselor's response in the moment in response to the report of the client shouting at his boss would need to be affirming and mirror back positive attributes of the client himself (Kohut, 2009). In this case, although the counselor may feel that the client's behavior was less than ideal, there are components that are positive. The counselor cannot praise the client's impulse control, or judgment, or cool-headedness. However, what the counselor can offer is a reflection of the change in how the client handled a situation that has occurred repeatedly and gone unaddressed.

From a mirroring selfobject perspective, the counselor said, "Wow! That took a lot of guts!" In this moment, the client's face shifted from somewhat apprehensive to seemingly relieved, and in that moment, his high-energy, negative-valence (anger) demeanor relaxed into a lower-energy, negative valence (frustration) one. This new demeanor allowed the counselor and client to next think through what the situation might mean for the client moving forward in the company. The mirroring, in that moment, allowed the client to calm himself and reflect, within the context of his ever more supportive relationship with his counselor. However, in the moment, it ran the risk of reinforcing what may be an unwise behavior pattern within his boss-employee relationship.

Choosing a Twinship Selfobject Response

From a twinship selfobject perspective, the goal of the counselor's response in this moment would be to empathize with the client and show the client that his situation and reaction are

understood (Kohut, 2009). A twinship response has the potential to be just as supportive as a mirroring response in this situation, possibly without the risk of reinforcing the actual behavior itself. The counselor would likely not have to work hard to generate a response that is empathic, given the fact that empathy is one of counseling's most widely used, deeply ingrained tools (Clark, 2010; Elliott, Bohart, Watson, & Greenberg, 2011).

In this case, the counselor said, "Wow, that situation sounds so tough." This is a simple statement, and for some may be too noncommittal, but it serves the purpose of conveying to the client that the counselor understands what it is like to be in a difficult position like the client described. The client's reaction to this response looked strikingly different from the response to the mirroring response: his high-energy, negative-valence (anger) demeanor actually heightened in energy, with an immediate elaboration on his experience. "Yeah! It sucks! He has pushed me and pushed me for so long, I just couldn't take it anymore!" While his state did not change to one that could reflect more soberly on the situation, his emotions in the moment did deepen and intensify, such that he was communicating clearly with the counselor just how difficult and untenable his situation with his boss is. The twinship, in that moment, validated his feelings and allowed him to deepen and elaborate on them without shame.

Choosing an Idealizing Selfobject Response

From an idealizing selfobject perspective, the goal of the counselor's response in this moment is to provide calm but genuine feedback, specifically about the appropriateness of the client's response to his boss (Kohut, 2009). The risk of providing such a response is obviously to engender shame in the client, conveying that his response was inappropriate in some way. However, it is very likely that the client already knows that his response was not ideal, which is why he brought it up and why he is looking pointedly at this moment for a response. Of course,

when delivering directive, challenging, or implicitly disapproving interventions, the counselor must find a way to do so empathically and gently (Vanaerschot, 1993). But the heart of an idealizing selfobject response should be calm and directive.

In this case, the counselor wondered aloud, “Ok...I wonder if there are other ways you could have handled the situation in the moment.” This response certainly conveyed disapproval for the client’s handling of the situation, but that disapproval may be entirely appropriate within the framework of this counseling (so as not to reinforce such volatile or ill-advised behaviors). When the client heard this, his apprehensive look turned to one of some resignation, and with a sigh he said, “Yes...of course I could have handled it better.” His high-energy, negative-valence (anger) demeanor turned to a low-energy, negative-valence (probably shame or embarrassment) one, and the client and counselor engaged in a strategy to enumerate possible alternative reactions in the situation and how they likely would have played out. Although this may not be appropriate in all forms of counseling, there may in fact be room for counselor disapproval (as a form of operant conditioning) toward ultimate therapeutic goals, and this is present across theoretical orientations (Zeig, 1987). Whether a counselor thinks this is appropriate and likely to be useful in the moment depends a great deal on the relationship with the client, as well as all the data the counselor has collected about the client to that point.

Selfobject Decisions in Counseling: A Self-Doubting Moment

A woman has struggled with depression and anxiety for much of her life, and she has had some recent difficulties in a romantic relationship, which ultimately ended recently. She has been working with her counselor for about a year, and they have been taking a primarily cognitive-behavioral approach to treatment, focusing a great deal on her symptoms, utilizing cognitive restructuring and behavioral activation, and challenging her maladaptive beliefs. She came into

the session just after the breakup and, after a little bit of time, said, “I keep failing in life. I’ll never be any good.” She did not look up at her counselor, though she did fall silent, looking down with a forlorn demeanor. The counselor, feeling compassion for her, had to decide how to intervene during this key moment.

Choosing a Mirroring Selfobject Response

From a mirroring selfobject perspective, the major priority for the counselor in this moment is to reassure the client that she is a good person and, despite some setbacks, does not “keep failing in life.” Although this moment is ripe for a cognitive intervention, the counselor may feel that such an intervention would be more effective if they, as Pine (1985) would say, strike when the iron is cold. That is, getting the client into a more stable, less emotionally-charged state may make her better equipped to employ a cognitive strategy in the moment.

The counselor thus offered, “You’re forgetting all the great things you’ve done and that have happened for you!” This is a purely supportive statement, and often counter to what would be considered therapeutic in a given moment. However, the counselor offered it deliberately and specifically for the purpose of interrupting the client’s active negative automatic thoughts (or her beating herself up in the moment). While it did not change much in the overall course of treatment, the client responded with a slight shrug and a softened facial expression, showing that she at least could consider this counter-evidence in the moment. The counselor continued by listing a few notable positive things that the client had accomplished recently, and once the client was back in a state in which she could tolerate looking at the counselor, they continued with some cognitive techniques to challenge the client’s reflexive way of thinking negatively.

Choosing a Twinship Selfobject Response

The counselor may determine that the goal in that moment was not, in fact, to turn down the intensity on the client's current negative feelings, but in fact to deepen her emotional state in order to help her regulate painful affect within a positive counseling relationship in service to consolidating her self-experience (Russell & Fosha, 2008). As such, the counselor may approach the moment from a twinship selfobject perspective, with the goal to empathize and normalize the client's experience in the moment. One common strategy in offering twinship interventions in the moment is for the counselor to access moments when they have felt similarly, or to affectively disclose in the moment, when their experience is similar to that of the client. However, another way is to offer a normative response.

In this case, the counselor offered, "Everyone has felt this way before at some point in their lives. It sucks." This intervention offers three things to the client. It validates that it is perfectly acceptable for her to be feeling this way in the moment. It also offers the implication that the counselor (in twinship fashion) has also felt this way. And, finally, it gives the client permission to deepen her feeling of sadness and smallness. Although their largely cognitive-behavioral frame is most often targeted toward decreasing negative emotional states, the counselor feels that it is also important for the client to be able to tolerate negative emotional states, as well as to learn in a deep, experiential way that they are ephemeral and will not last indefinitely. The client did in fact, in this moment, in response to the twinship intervention, begin to cry softly. The client and counselor sat together in the sadness and crying, knowing that the moment can deepen the empathic connection between them and also provide a safe environment that can improve therapeutic outcomes (Labott, 2001; Nelson, 2008; Van Heukelem, 1979).

Choosing an Idealizing Selfobject Response

Probably truer to a traditional cognitive-behavioral model, the counselor in this moment could employ a primarily idealizing selfobject response, calmly offering specific advice and guiding the client where the counselor thinks she should go. Specifically, the counselor offers the following response: “Let’s try one of our cognitive strategies to evaluate how accurate that statement is.” This intervention is not *unempathic*, nor does it convey to the client that her feeling is invalid. However, its primary goal is to guide the client to employ a specific strategy (which the “expert” has taught her previously and feels will work in the current situation) to address the underlying, problematic core belief. In a way, it is urging the client to be her own mirror and twin, weighing evidence for her assertion that she is “failing in life” (as an observing twin) against evidence that she in fact has positive experiences as well (as an observing mirror).

The premise of self psychology asserts that selfobjects serve purposes that individuals cannot accomplish themselves; however, this idealizing selfobject strategy is meant to teach the client to do just that, to be, in the moment, both a twin and a mirror. The client’s response to the intervention, true to their previous therapeutic experience, was to do just that. She began to list off her recent “failures,” followed by evidence against her assertion. Throughout this process, less mired in her emotional state, she engaged more and more with the task and with the counselor, until she had completed the suggested task and determined that, for now, she is not all bad.

Selfobject Decisions on a COVID-19 Helpline: A Frustrated Moment

Although the model presented is focused primarily on counseling, there is likely a place for its application in other, less traditional counseling modalities as well (or any helping relationship that involves a relationship between a helper and another person). Counselors work in a variety of settings beyond traditional, one-on-one counseling, including multifaceted work within agencies, mobile and other crisis intervention and hotlines, and a variety of other human service

positions (Cornelius et al., 2003; Harmon, 2017; Ulupinar et al., 2020; West, Hosie, & Mackie, 1987). This example comes from a counselor working on a COVID-19 helpline, which was marketed to first responders, frontline healthcare workers, and other essential workers, in order to provide emotional and other support (but specifically not counseling).

As part of the COVID-19 helpline, a man called presenting with a significant amount of frustration. This client was a truck driver, and he was calling “to vent” his frustration about his current circumstances, as well as the lack of recognition he and his fellow truck drivers were receiving. Specifically, he reported that he was working longer-than-normal shifts (often being expected to drive for 18 hours straight at a time), had very few rest stops open to either purchase food and coffee or even use the bathroom, and felt that nobody was valuing the work he was doing to keep the country running and safe (including delivering personal protective equipment across the country). The man said, “Not knocking doctors or nurses or anything, but I’m working my ass off and no one cares!” He then went silent on the phone, presumably awaiting a response. The counselor on the phone has many options for how to respond.

Choosing a Mirroring Selfobject Response

If the counselor in this moment chooses to utilize a mirroring selfobject perspective, the goal is to champion the client by mirroring back a positive and supportive view of his self. When working within the limitations of a helpline, specifically marketed not to be counseling, the counselor is already working from a different model. Goals may include helping individuals with resources, calming them down if they are in a heightened emotional state, linking them with mental health professionals who can provide actual counseling, or some other immediate and generally quite shallow goal (Labouliere et al., 2020; Rosenbaum & Calhoun, 1977). That is, the goal is not behavior change, deep insight, or any other typical goal one might expect from formal counseling.

So offering encouragement and championing someone who is doing good work makes a great deal of sense in this context.

The counselor offered the following mirroring-driven intervention: “You’re doing such important work! People should really recognize that.” This validating, supportive set of statements elicited a high-energy, positive response from the client. “Right?!” The client went on to affirm the important work he is doing and that he is benefitting society in “unsexy” ways. After a few minutes, during which his frustration had clearly transformed to pride, he thanked the counselor and hung up.

Choosing a Twinship Selfobject Response

The counselor wanting to employ a twinship selfobject orientation in this moment needs to convey to the client that they understand the frustration, and that it seems rational, logical, and warranted. This strategy is one of empathy, but also alignment with the client. Feeling misunderstood and especially unappreciated is something most counselors can identify with. The counselor offered, “I hear you. I’d be upset as well. In fact, I am!”

In this case, the twinship response served a similar purpose as did the mirroring response. “Right?!” was the client’s response. However, instead of affirming the important work he is doing (as in the mirroring situation), the client went on to focus on his frustration. He described that his wife does not understand how important his job is, and “just focuses on the fact that I’m home less.” It is hard not to be appreciated, especially when doing good work, and the counselor continued to affirm how frustrating that can be. After a few minutes, the client told the counselor that he felt “heard,” thanked the counselor, and hung up.

Choosing an Idealizing Selfobject Response

Within the context of a helpline, there are moments when it is difficult to figure out how to offer concrete advice, resources, or guidance. In this moment, though, the counselor taking an idealized selfobject perspective can offer specific guidance to the client for how to take some sort of action to mitigate his frustration. Certainly, there are options of guidance to be given, including urging the client to seek out mental healthcare of some sort. In this case, the counselor chose to suggest a strategy of channeling the client's frustration toward something positive, prosocial, and beneficial for both society and himself (Koellhoffer, 2009).

The counselor calmly asked, "Is there a union or advocacy group you could contact, not just for support, but also to see if there's a way you could get involved in raising awareness and improving your circumstances?" Although the client reported that he had "griped" with other truck drivers, he had not contacted his local Teamsters union to discuss the practical challenges. His demeanor changed immediately from heightened frustration to thoughtful "gears" turning in his mind about how he could advocate for himself and his colleagues. Taking positive action has two potential benefits: he could in fact change some of the circumstances (the long hours, not having rest stops, etc.), and he can feel that he is taking action to change his situation, which can lift mood (McKay, Davis, & Fanning, 2011). Sounding excited to take some action, he thanked the counselor and hung up.

Implications for Counselors and Counselor Educators

As a deliberate, moment-to-moment technique, applying selfobject-driven decisions in micro-interactions affords counselors conscious and mindful technique for meeting client needs. Additionally, it can serve as a post-mortem framework for evaluating counseling interactions that did not go well, or even led to alliance ruptures. That is, in deconstructing interactions that were problematic between counselor and client, one way of framing them is what selfobject need (if

any) was being met in that moment, and whether the client in fact needed one of the others. Certainly, repairing therapeutic alliance ruptures can benefit the counseling relationship and ultimately outcomes (Safran, Muran, & Eubanks-Carter, 2011). One way of doing so is addressing that an intervention moment was not what a client needed, and this framework can provide a language for understanding that.

Further, although rooted in psychoanalytic theory, this application of self psychology can also serve as a concrete and relatively straightforward model for counseling across theoretical orientations. While there are benefits and drawbacks of employing a microskills model in training novice counselors (Ridley, Kelly, & Mollen, 2011), finding ways to improve clinical skill that are easily understood and translated into practice can hold a great deal of value, especially when training counselors in shorter amounts of time, such as within master's programs. Although applying a decision-making model in the moment with any given client is actually quite complex and nuanced, the ability to be flexible and have deliberate, alternative potential responses within clinical micro-interactions may prove a valuable tool in the counselor's toolbox.

Conclusion

Counselors and counselors-in-training need tools to build their competence, and they receive a great many of them in their training programs. In the limited amount of time afforded to didactic training in programs, though, concrete and straightforward models for how to intervene psychotherapeutically can be extremely beneficial. The model presented in this paper can offer counselors-in-training a tool to use for in-the-moment decisions and counselor educators a tool to use to evaluate moments in their supervisees' clinical work.

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