

The Impact of Creativity in Counseling

Samuel T. Gladding

ABSTRACT. Creativity is a crucial component in the advancement of all major cultural entities, including effective counseling. It is through creativity that major theories of counseling and skills in counseling have been developed. Creativity is longitudinal in its impact. If counseling is to progress in the future, it is essential that counselors be rewarded for creative innovations and that they help themselves become more creative by studying the expressive arts, reading widely, traveling, and observing human nature from multiple perspectives.

KEYWORDS. Counseling theories, counseling skills, creativity, enhancing creativity, expressive arts

In 1970, Edwin Starr had a number one *Billboard* release. It was entitled "War." It was an anti-Vietnam war song and began with the lines:

War, huh, yeah

What is it good for?

Absolutely nothing! (Whitfield & Strong, 1970)

Samuel T. Gladding is Professor and Chair, Department of Counseling at Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, North Carolina.

Address correspondence to: Samuel T. Gladding, Department of Counseling, 7406 Reynolda Station, Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, North Carolina 27109 (E-mail: stg@wfu.edu).

Journal of Creativity in Mental Health, Vol. 3(2) 2008

Available online at <http://jcmh.haworthpress.com>

© 2008 by The Haworth Press. All rights reserved.

doi:10.1080/15401380802226679

Although the words were not poetic, the sentiment and passion behind the recording were strong. The direct nature of the lyrics and the emotional force from the singer made the song a huge hit.

Interestingly enough, the template on which this music was built is one that could also be used in promoting the concept of creativity, if the lyrics were changed to:

Creativity, huh, yeah

What is it good for?

Absolutely everything!

Whereas this modified version of Edwin Starr's hit single may be skewed in the direction of the positive—just the opposite of the original—the words make a point like the initial forceful lyric. The concept of creativity, as opposed to war, is judged by its value. It is good for everything just as war is good for nothing.

Although this conceptual analysis of creativity may be an overstatement, it contains much truth. After all, creativity, “the ability to produce work that is both novel (i.e., original or unexpected) and appropriate (i.e., useful or meets task constraints)” (Sternberg & Lubart, 1995), is the force behind not only the counseling profession but almost all successful entities. Creativity is what makes human beings different from other animals. It is everyday creativity that has allowed human beings to survive and thrive in the world (Richards, 2007). Everyday creativity includes figuring out how to solve problems. In the earliest of human creations—the cultivation of fire and the invention of the wheel—this type of creativity was essential. It still is, especially in domains such as counseling.

Examples abound as to how creativity has led to the advancement of people and cultures. Four great inventions that originated in China and Europe (the compass, gunpowder, movable type printing, and papermaking) are sometimes taken for granted. Yet these creations not only changed the world but accelerated the evolution of human history. They were new and useful. They allowed people to do things they had never done before. In short, they solved problems inherent in society and changed the way people related to each other and to nature. More recent inventions, including the combustible engine, the telephone, and electronic media, have been built on this type of problem-solving innovation.

In essence, creativity “is a central source of meaning in [people’s] lives. Most of the things that are interesting, important, and human are the results of creativity” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, p. 1).

CREATIVITY AND COUNSELING: THEORIES

Creativity has contributed to counseling theories as well as to other areas of society. In fact, without creativity, there would not be counseling, and it is likely there would not be other helping professions either.

For starters, take Sigmund Freud (1936) and psychoanalysis. The physician from Vienna would be a footnote in the annals of history had he not had the courage to make observations, be innovative (if controversial) in his interpretations, and stand by his convictions. He noticed that the “healing” that took place in the lives and the minds of his clientele often came through what is now described as “talk therapy.”

Freud’s observation of what made people mentally better—emotional release and insight—led to his focus on a process that enabled the procedure to take place. Techniques and terms that we now take for granted, such as *catharsis*, *ego*, *repression*, *projection*, and *the unconscious*, came into his theory and into our everyday common vocabulary over time (Sharf, 2008). The talents and techniques Freud developed led to his facilitation of better mental health in his clients, helping them adjust to society and their circumstances.

Another illustrative case of creativity and counseling is found in the growth and development of Carl Rogers’ theory (Rogers, 1951). Rogers was a relatively unknown therapist in Rochester, New York, until he listened to the voice within himself and the words of his clients and realized that, although psychoanalysis might work for some people, it did not work for him or most of those he was trying to help. Therefore, out of his experience and his interactions with clients, he developed person-centered therapy (Sharf, 2008). Thus came the Rogerian Revolution in counseling and terms such as *unconditional positive regard*, *congruence*, *empathy*, and *genuineness* (Gladding, 2009).

It could be argued that Rogers uncovered, rather than discovered, the processes he developed and the terms he emphasized. However, the essence of what Rogers did was creative. He realized that when a counselor listens, reflects, and totally accepts people for who they are, these individuals are empowered to become themselves more fully. His work, especially his emphasis on relationships, is the bedrock on which many

counseling approaches are now built. His approach, when employed, requires involvement and new and practical (i.e., creative) responses to clients.

In the cognitive-behavioral realm, there is Albert Ellis. A failure as a psychoanalytical therapist (and also as a romantic role model), Ellis was creative in realizing that how people think makes a significant difference in how they feel and how they behave. Therefore, Ellis developed a therapeutic process where people could learn to think and act differently. He created *shame attacks*, *disputation exercises*, and even *rational humorous songs* as well as other tools to help individuals think more rationally and behave more sanely (Ellis, 2004). His cleverness and creative spirit kept Ellis' theory on the forefront of therapeutic interventions, even when he as a person was sometimes avoided because of his crusty and cranky nature.

Finally, in the area of family counseling, the power of creativity is well represented in Murray Bowen (1978). It was Bowen, struggling with his own difficulties in his family of origin, who came up with the idea that "there is chronic anxiety in all of life that comes with the territory of living" (Friedman, 1991, p. 139). Therefore, he initiated ways to address the anxiety and emotional processes in families through engaging people in a variety of experiences such as drawing an intergenerational genogram and going home again. He also devised concepts and procedures such as the *differentiation of self* and *detriangulation* that helped people understand themselves better. The initiatives he undertook from the unique circumstances he brought to therapy have become universal.

THE LONGITUDINAL NATURE OF CREATIVITY

The longitudinal nature of creativity is probably one of the most important reasons why it is vital to individuals and professionals. That is the reason songs, such as Sarah McLachan's (McLachan & Egan, 1995) "I will remember you," hauntingly plays in people's minds and has meaning for them even after the music ends. It reminds individuals that what they do makes a difference in the world, for better or worse, and is often remembered. McLachan's composition, and others like it, inform people of what they know intuitively.

In counseling that is effective, the long-term benefits that creativity can bring are numerous. The legacy that counselors leave behind consists of helping people at various ages and stages of life including:

the troubled adolescent who is clueless,
the broken-hearted woman who needs support,
the middle-aged man who is suddenly jobless,
the geriatric resident who is lonely,
the schoolchild who is struggling to form friendships,
the college student who lacks motivation, and
the angry couple who are estranged from each other.

All of these people and their situations are ones in which creativity, time, talent, and intentionality play a part. Research verifies that through counseling, lives in these circumstances and others like them can be and are changed for the better. People overcome obstacles and progress towards a more actualized existence because of creativity in counseling. As Frey (1975) noted decades ago, "In the broadest sense, counseling is actually a creative enterprise within which client and counselor combine their resources to generate a new plan, develop a different outlook, formulate alternative behaviors, [and] begin a new life" (p. 23).

THE FUTURE OF CREATIVITY IN COUNSELING

Creativity is a quality in counseling that should be celebrated, cultivated, and encouraged. It is an aspect of counseling that must be emulated, for creativity in counseling makes an impact.

Like other aspects of life, counseling is moving forward with new challenges cropping up like crab grass in spring. If counseling is complacent and relies on past creations it will invite disaster and ultimately oblivion because professions, just like people, evolve. What is relevant at one time may become historical with time.

That is why creativity is so crucial to the future of the profession. Without it, counseling will become dated and the same fate will await it as that of clipper ships. Whereas these magnificent vessels once plowed through the world's oceans, they became obsolete when wind and sail power gave way to the new inventions of the steam-driven and then the diesel-driven engine.

If counseling does not keep an eye on what is next in the way of effective treatment, it will become a page of prosaic history or the next subject area for a documentary movie about the past. It will be shunned and spurned and, in essence, serve no purpose, except as an example of what a profession should not do.

However, the future is bright for counseling, if it does the following:

1. Rewards innovation that is backed up by research: Societies that flourish expect their citizens to be involved in making life better. They encourage the exchange of ideas and reasonable risk taking. One need only think of Florence during the Renaissance or the Silicon Valley today to find examples of vibrant and creative communities. Counseling should focus on providing the same kind of research awards on as many levels as possible.
2. Encourages reading in a wide range of areas such as creativity, philosophy, communication, and psychology, as well as counseling: Ideas from other disciplines, such as writing, often translate well into counseling. Those entering the profession, as well as seasoned veterans, often get insights into what they can contribute to counseling through cross-disciplinary reading.
3. Studies the emphases and techniques of major expressive arts therapies: music, art, drama, dance/movement, and poetry: These expressive arts approaches are often innovative and on the cutting edge of treatment. The expressive arts and expressive arts association have a long history in helping people. Ancient cultures around the world, as well as contemporary organizations, need to be examined for the lessons counselors can take away from them, such as the fact that there is an inverse relationship between movement and depression.
4. Encourages travel: There is nothing like travel to learn life lessons on creativity. How do people from other cultures cope with stress? How do they stay well? What do they emphasize in staying healthy? How do they stay balanced? Visiting other cultures and interacting with other people can open up vistas not otherwise possible for seeing the potential in those mired in difficulties.
5. Studies human nature: Sometimes books and articles contain research ideas about people that individuals are not familiar with or that they would like to explore. It is vital to study the professional, as well as the popular, literature for thoughts regarding human health, happiness, and well-being. Through such study counselors gain insight into areas that would be worth exploring further.

CONCLUSION

Creativity is a major force in human life. It is necessary for survival and for the advancement of civilization. Human beings are naturally creative. Nature has ensured that. Our ancestors who were not able to solve everyday problems or adapt to different environments and circumstances did not survive to pass their DNA onto the next generation.

In most professions today, including counseling, creativity is a necessity. Environments and the needs of individuals and groups change. Society evolves. The helping strategies of yesterday are not always appropriate today. A clear example is the use of lobotomies to quiet mentally disturbed individuals. Used frequently in the early part of the 20th century, lobotomies are eschewed today because of the secondary damage they do such as making someone virtually a vegetable. At the same time, other procedures and theories, such as cognitive-behavioral procedures, for working with people having problems have come forth. These newer ways of working are based in creativity and research. They are prominent because of their ability to assist counselors in bringing about change in a new, therapeutic, practical, and ethical way.

If counseling is to continue to be on the forefront of the helping professions, it must continue to promote creativity. As professionals, counselors can do that by rewarding innovation backed by research, encouraging reading in a wide range of areas, studying the expressive arts therapies, traveling and interacting with people in different cultures, and learning more about human nature in the popular as well as scholarly domains.

Overall, counseling has grown and is growing because of the creative people who have nourished it and contributed to it. Their actions should be celebrated and held up to persons entering the field as models to emulate. At the same time, counseling must move forward, realizing that there are many ways to continue being creative. If future breakthroughs are going to occur, creativity will need to be harnessed in the service of the profession. With that focus, the profession should flourish.

REFERENCES

- Bowen, M. (1978). *Family therapy in clinical practice*. New York: Jason Aronson.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1996). *Creativity*. New York: Harper.
- Ellis, A. (2004). *Rational emotive behavior therapy: It Works for me - it can work for you*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books.

- Freud, A. (1936). *The ego and the mechanisms of defense*. New York: International Universities Press.
- Frey, D. H. (1975). The anatomy of an idea: Creativity in counseling. *Personnel and Guidance Journal*, 54, 23-27.
- Friedman, E. H. (1991). Bowen theory and therapy. In A. S. Gurman & D. P. Kniskern (Eds.), *Handbook of family therapy* (Volume II, pp. 134-170). New York: Brunner/Mazel.
- Gladding, S. T. (2009). *Counseling: A comprehensive profession* (6th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.
- McLachlan, S., & Egan, S. (1995). I will remember you [Recorded by Sarah McLachlan]. On *The Brothers McMullen* [Movie Soundtrack]. USA: Arista.
- Richards, R. (2007). *Everyday creativity*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Rogers, C. R. (1951). *Client-centered therapy*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Sharf, R. S. (2008). *Theories of psychotherapy and counseling: Concepts and cases* (4th ed). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Sternberg, R. J., & Lubart, T. I. (1995). *Defying the crowd: Cultivating creativity in a culture of conformity*. New York: The Free Press.
- Whitfield, N., & Strong, B. (1969). War [Recorded by Edwin Starr]. On *War and Peace* [Record Album]. Detroit: Gordy.

Copyright of *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health* is the property of Haworth Press and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.