Critical Thinking Research Paper on:

“Relational Perspectives Regarding Countertransference in Group and Trauma”  
By Sy Rubenfeld, PH.D.

Michael Elias  
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Dr. Tovar-Murray
Summary

In Dr. Sy Rubenfeld’s study on countertransference in group counseling, in light of a relational/constructivist viewpoint, he makes the argument that though countertransference is often times referred to as a dangerous, unconscious practice, it can be in fact a “normalized” as a genuinely empathetic means of therapeutic treatment for clients (2005). Through a number of personal case examples, Rubenfeld drives home the point that while countertransference is often times an unconscious element of therapy that counselors tend to slip in and out of involuntarily, it is a force that must be reckoned with, especially when working with patients dealing with trauma. In such cases, it is impossible to avoid internal and unconscious feelings of depression or guilt towards clients, and by embracing countertransference, the counselor can easily and effectively use it as a means of personal development for these patients.

Purpose

The primary purpose that Rubenfeld addresses behind his study has to do specifically with working with clients in group therapy who are suffering some sort of trauma. Rubenfeld states “Work with trauma is among the sources of some of the most difficult and painful countertransferences,” and concludes that, for the therapist to consistently have to sit through expressions of grief and loss, it is inevitable for the counselor to “incur feelings of [survivor] guilt, feelings of recoiling and wanting to withdraw” along with “feelings of inadequacy” (2005). Furthermore, the problem arises when the therapist either delves too strongly into these feelings that he or she cannot focus on keeping the group together, or the counselor stifles his or her own personal feelings, which, in turn, can make him or her withdraw from fully honing in on the issues at hand relating to trauma. Thus, in order to effectively help those counselors who struggle with countertransference and, not to mention, the number of articles warning of the dangers and
consequences of this unconscious habit, Rubenfeld proposes that these negative perceptions be challenged and re-evaluated so to twist these feelings around in a way that can ultimately prove to be therapeutic.

**Method**

To help expand upon his argument, Rubenfeld structures his article by stating the problem, providing “clinical vignettes” to provide cases the reader can relate to, a description of relational/constructivist characteristics and ultimately their effects on trauma (2005). As stated above, the author begins with a detailed argument about the relevancy of working with one’s unconscious use of countertransference. With his clinical vignettes, Rubenfeld describes cases to provide examples of how countertransference can benefit the counseling relationship, including the story of a time when he felt pressured by other clients he was facilitating to hug a man who struggled with “holding back in relationships.” When this same client asks Rubenfeld if he hides his own personal feelings some of the time, Rubenfeld admits to the group that he does. He goes on to describe the characteristics of relational/constructivist counselors, and uses these as a method to question the actions of therapists during key moments of counseling; for example, he states that counselors are often times silent when they are not acting as facilitator of the group, and questions his own thought process during these silences. He concludes that he finds himself asking “what do I feel and recall about being like that,” which ultimately opens the door to countertransference and further proves Rubenfeld’s point that it is difficult to avoid. Finally, he uses more vignettes that directly relate to trauma, his primary concern at hand, and defends the use of countertransference as a tool that clients as well as the counselor in group can utilize to great therapeutic advancement. Thus, it is through methods of defining the problem, using case examples and explaining specific theories that Rubenfeld works through his argument.
Results

Through these methods, Rubenfeld comes to a number of conclusions that ultimately yield toward results that enhance his study. By utilizing his own personal case stories to address examples of countertransference as a positive means of therapy, he is not losing the human element of relating human experiences and people within his study, thus making his argument and reasoning easier to relate to. He also utilizes definitions, be it in the form of defining the initial hesitancy towards countertransference while at the same time admitting that it is an unconscious and inevitable trait that counselors must deal with in order to move further in therapy. He strives for readers to understand that counselors “fundamentally understand by empathy, but also by plumbing their own emotional and sometimes preconscious reactions,” thus effectively emphasizing that one can best be empathetic when he or she can walk a mile in another’s shoes, thus rationally explaining how countertransference can be manipulated as a means of making positive connections with patients when other methods of treatment fail to heal. If I were to find one quibble with the argument, it is that there is no hard data or figures that were used to come to Rubenfeld’s conclusion other than discussions of different theories and characteristics relating to relational/constructivism; however, on the flip side, there is presumably not a lot of numerical data that one can utilize to argue the consequences of countertransference.

Reaction

Overall, I have always felt that there are positive aspects of countertransference that can be used to better the counseling relationship in specific circumstances. The fact that I was able to stumble across an article that effectively and rationally strived to prove this point was greatly satisfying. While there are a number of ethical implications that should be considered regarding
countertransference, Rubenfeld makes it clear that these implications can be leveled as long as the counselor is able to hone in on his or her unconscious feelings by not withdrawing or giving in to them completely. I believe this is a more qualitative study in that it allows Rubenfeld and readers to immerse themselves in the data and vignettes due to the humanistic aspects, which in my opinion are always more reliable and effective in driving home a particular study.