Rational Emotive Behavior Theory vs. Solution Focused Theory

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Abstract

Theories of counseling provide counselors with a theoretical framework to guide them through understanding why clients behave the way they do. It is important to tailor the theory the counselor uses to the needs of the client. Rational Emotive Behavior Theory (REBT) and Solution Focused Theory (SFT) are just two of many theories available for counselors to use. Although they are two very different theories, they both offer many similarities as well. REBT strive to teach clients about their irrational beliefs and how to change and reframe their thoughts in order to control their behaviors and emotions. On the other hand, SFT focuses on finding a solution to the client’s complaint instead of focusing on changing the problem at hand. Each element of the theories such as nature of person, personality development, emotional maladjustment, counselor/client relationship, techniques, and therapeutic goals depict many differences between REBT and SFT but similarities as well.

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According to the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary (2012), a theory is a policy, procedure, or belief proposed or followed as the basis of action. In counseling, a theory provides a theoretical framework to help understand, predict, and explain a client’s behavior. This theoretical framework should also introduce various ways of helping clients in counseling. There are many different theories of counseling that explain the process of helping clients change. Each client has their individual needs so it is important to look at all the different theories of counseling and choose the best theory that is in the best interest of the client. Tailoring the theory to the client’s needs is essential for effective and beneficial counseling. This paper will provide a comparison of two theoretical frameworks that are often used in counseling, Rational Emotive Behavior Theory (REBT) and Solution-Focused Theory (SFT).

Rational Emotive Behavior Theory, also known as REBT was developed by Albert Ellis. According to Murdock (2013), REBT is considered one of the major approaches to counseling today. The basic assumption of REBT is that people are able to control their thoughts, feelings and behaviors but not the event that occurred. Solution-Focused Theory or SFT is drawn from many different contributors such as Steve de Shazer and Insoo Kim Berg, and Bill O’Hanlon and his colleagues. According to Murdock (2013), O’Hanlon and his colleagues developed a few basic assumptions of SFT, some of the principles include, clients have resources and strengths to resolve complaints, change is constant, the counselor’s job is to identify and amplify change, clients define the goals, there is no “right” way to view things, and focus on what is possible. As one can see, just in the basic assumption of each theory there are many differences and some similarities between REBT and SFT.
**Nature of person**

In Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy, Ellis views the nature of the person as a unique individual who can be both rational and irrational, and sensible or crazy, they are simply human beings. He believes that being both rational and irrational is biologically inherited. There is a little good and bad in everyone. Ellis identifies two human tendencies in REBT, the ability to take their strong desires and turn them into absolute musts, and the tendency to be motivated to constructively change for the better (Murdock, 2013). Absolute musts are a part of a group of terms known as psychological disturbances or irrational thoughts. These disturbances can be described as “musts,” “shoulds,” “needs,” “always,” and “never” thoughts (Bendersky, 2004). These tendencies explain how individuals are both irrational and rational. REBT also explains the nature of the individual as being able to control their thoughts, feelings, and actions. In order to control these aspects an individual should be able to recognize and change their irrational beliefs or thoughts.

Solution Focused Therapy has some underlying assumptions about the nature of the client. The client’s initial complaint is usually based on their view of the world. Counselors believe that clients are doing the best they can at any given time which is why they are able to instill optimism and hope that they will be able to change. One major view the counselor has of the client is that regardless of how severe the problem is, there is a time when this problem does not occur which the counselor calls the exception. According to Stalker, Levene & Coady (1999), there are always exceptions to client problem and almost immediately after the client states their problem, the counselor tries to figure out when the problem does not occur, the exception to the problem. Another assumption counselors make about the nature of the client is
that they have the resources necessary to change. The counselor tries to emphasize the strengths and resources a client has in order to encourage change and find solutions.

The nature of the person approach from both REBT and SFT are different from each other. REBT focuses on the good and bad of an individual and the irrational beliefs they encounter. On the other hand, SFT deals with the positives in each individual and how they can look at strictly solutions to be able to positively change their lives.

**Personality development**

Although many theories have some sort of developmental basis, Rational Emotive Behavior Theory does not discuss personality development. On the other hand, REBT suggests that individuals are mostly influenced by biological and environmental factors. Biological factors are usually described as an individual differences in the ability to think irrationally while environmental factors are the interpersonal relationships they get involved in. Although Ellis does not fully discuss developmental aspects of REBT he does explain the development of psychological health in an individual. After a client comes to terms with their irrational beliefs and is motivated to create change they are beginning to develop into a psychologically healthy individual. According to Ziegler (2003), a psychologically healthy person accepts reality as it is and continues to work to change it in the direction of their preferences. When a client continually strives to change and develop into a psychologically healthy person they will eventually display self-acceptance, other-acceptance, and world-acceptance. In REBT, self-acceptance means that the individual unconditionally accepts themselves for who they are, whether or not they misbehave and whether or not others approve, other-acceptance means that the individual displays unconditional acceptance of others, and world-acceptance can be describes as unconditional acceptance of life conditions as they exist (Ziegler, 2003). As one can see, Ellis
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does not discuss a lot about the developmental progression of the client. Instead he discusses the major influences on an individual in REBT and their psychological development.

Personality development in Solution Focused Therapy is not apparent in the theory. The counselor focuses on the present, future and positive change. Therefore, the counselor does not usually care where the problem came from, the client’s history or developmental factors expect in rare cases. These rare cases include when the client is on medication for a psychological dysfunction, then counselors know there is some biological basis (Murdock, 2013). All in all, personality development is not relevant in SFT because this theory is more of a theory of counseling than a theory of human nature.

Both REBT and SFT lack a developmental or personality basis. REBT at least discusses some biological factors and psychological development within the theory. In contrast, SFT does not offer and developmental support because it primarily focuses on the present and it is solution based.

**Emotional maladjustment**

Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy is all about emotional disturbances and how they affect the client. Clients who operate in the world on the basis of their irrational beliefs or emotional disturbances are considered to be dysfunctional (Murdock, 2013). It is the job of the counselor to help the client decipher between irrational beliefs (IBs) and rational beliefs (RBs) and figure out how to move from having IBs to having RBs. IBs stem from absolute musts, commands and demands. Bendersky (2004) offers examples of IBs such as awfulizing (e.g., "It is awful to be abandoned."), I-can't-standitis (e.g., "I can't stand being alone."), damnation of oneself and others (e.g., "He's rotten for leaving me. I must be worthless."). After a client begins having IBs, cognitive distortions like overgeneralizing (e.g., "Since my father raped me, all men
will."), jumping to conclusions (e.g., "Since he abused me, I must be a despicable person.")
), personalizing (e.g., "It's my fault my mother married a violent alcoholic.")
), and all-or-nothing thinking (e.g., "If you're at all like my father, then you're completely like him.") come about and take over an individual’s thought process (Daniel, Szentagotai, Kallay, & Macavei, 2005).
All in all, the emotional maladjustment of a client in REBT is a huge part of the theory in general. A client’s emotional disturbances or IBs are the whole reason they need to see a counselor. Therefore, it is important for the counselor to discuss with the client all of their IBs in order to effectively help the client.

Solutions-Focused Therapy does not really focus on the emotional maladjustment of the client. Although the client comes to therapy with an initial complaint, the counselor looks beyond the dysfunction or emotional disturbance to see a positive solution. Simply stated, the counselor does not notice health or dysfunction of the client they look for a compliant, discover exceptions, and create solutions for the client (Murdock, 2013). The only way SFT counselors look at emotional maladjustment is by look at it as if the client was stuck in their current position. Even in this case, the counselor moves past the problem straight to a solution.

Emotional maladjustment is where REBT and SFT completely differ. REBT primarily focuses on the IBs or the emotional disturbances/dysfunction of the client. On the other hand, Guterman & Rudes (2005), suggest that Solution Focused Therapy tends to emphasize clients’ existing strengths, rather than their deficits or emotional maladjustment. As one can see, the approach to emotional maladjustment of both REBT and SFT are completely different.

**Counselor/client relationship**

Unlike most theories, with Rational Emotive Behavior Theory, a warm relationship between a counselor and client is preferred but not essential to effectively counsel. Albert Ellis is
known for his honest, direct and often confrontational style of counseling (Murdock, 2013). With REBT it is essential that the counselor is direct and active in their teaching and correcting of client’s irrational thoughts. Therefore, the counselor has to be knowledgeable about what they are trying to teach the client, especially with how to help clients identify and dispute their IBs. The relationship has to be collaborative in order to be effective for both the counselor and client. Some characteristics of REBT counselors include active, genuine, teacher, role-model, motivator, empathetic and professional (Murdock, 2013). The client on the other hand is seen as a student. These students have to be active in the REBT process as well as hard workers. Working hard allows for change of IBs and keeping them changed.

Initially, Solution Focused Therapy counselors were thought of as experts that are in charge. Presently, SFT has become more of a collaborative therapy. The counselors are still the experts in figuring out solutions and suggesting them to clients but clients also have a role in being active and taking the suggestions into real consideration so they can complete the treatment process. Counselors are often seen as role-models and encouragers (Murdock, 2013).

Both the REBT and SFT counselors are directive and are seen as role-models. They are both also seen as educators, being experts in their field and focused on creating some kind of change in the client’s life. The REBT counselor is more confrontation than the SFT counselor. In the end, both theories involve a collaborative relationship between both client and counselor.

**Techniques**

There are many techniques when it comes to Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy. The major technique is the ‘D’ of the ABCDE model. The ABCDE model is used with clients to educate them on IBs and how they affect their behaviors. ‘A’ stands for activating event. The ‘A’ is divided into two parts, what happened, and what the client thinks happened. The ‘B’ is the
irrational belief the client developed because of the activating event. The ‘C’ refers to consequences of the irrational belief (Guterman & Rudes, 2005). Consequences can be anything from feelings to behaviors. It is important for a counselor to educate the client on the ABCDE model so they understand the process of thoughts and how they affect their feelings and behaviors. Once the client is educated on the matter they can learn to change the beliefs after the activating event because in the end changing beliefs, changes the consequences. After or while the client is experiencing the ‘B’ of the ABCDE model, the counselor comes in to use ‘D’ or the disputing technique. There are three types of disputing including realistic, logical, and pragmatic (Murdock, 2013). Realistic disputing is the truth or factual reality where the counselor would ask the client if they have evidence to back up their IBs. Logical disputing deals with the underlying rationale behind the IB the client is experiencing. The counselor might ask something about whether or not the client’s IB is logical. The third type of disputing is pragmatic which focuses on and examine the outcomes of the IB if the client continues to think that way. Disputing helps the client realize that their thoughts or IBs are truly irrational and if they just reframe the situation, they will be able to change their beliefs. In the end, counselors hope the client can reach the ‘E’ in the ABCDE model which means an effective new philosophy is developed and implemented.

There are many other techniques of REBT. Bibliotherapy is when clients are given assigned readings to learn more about REBT. Proselytizing and offering friends help to figure out their IBs which in the end can help the client become clearer about their own IBs. Reframing helps clients look at the ‘A’ differently so they see it more as a challenge that they can get over. Role playing can be used to problem solve and assess IBs. The counselor and client can also do rational role reversal where the client takes the counselor position and help dispute the
counselor’s IBs. Skills training can be used to teach the client assertive behavior, social, and interpersonal skills. Homework is often given in REBT. Finally, a self-help form is a frequently used homework assignment in REBT where the client fills the form out daily and then goes over it with the counselor weekly to try and figure out patterns and IBs (Murdock, 2013).

Solution Focused Therapy has many techniques or interventions to use with clients. Generally, while using SFT, there at seven stages of treatment. The first stage focuses on identifying a solvable complaint. A technique to use during this stage is to normalize the problem for the client (Murdock, 2013). It helps the client feel like they are not alone in the situation. Using positive language, empowering and stressing change to the client is also apparent in the first stage of intervention. One last technique used during stage one is scaling questions. An example of a scaling question would be, “On a scale of 1, 1 being not angry at all and 5, 5 being more than angry, how angry are you?” Using scaling questions in the beginning allows the counselor to get a baseline for intervention and figure out exactly where the client is at the moment (Guterman & Rudes, 2005).

The second stage of treatment in SFT is where the client and counselor establish goals that are concrete and measurable. One major technique used at this stage is the miracle question. The miracle question asks the client that if the problem they are currently having never happened because of some miracle, what would they see, what would be different and how would they feel. This question allows the counselor to see what the client wants and is striving for. The third stage of treatment focuses on designing an intervention. Encouraging change is really important in this stage because the counselor wants to see what change has already occurred and what has worked in the past to get the client to where they want to be. Strategic tasks are relevant in the fourth stage of SFT treatment. Tasks have to reasonable and agreed upon by both parties. There
are three types of clients that tasks are based upon. There are visitors who do not present a problem so as the counselor you do not offer a task, instead offer compliments to the client. The second clients are complaints. They are clients who have concerns with others. The tasks given here are observational so the client can become self-aware. The last type of client is customers which have clear problems. Counselors should give customers action tasks to encourage change in them (Castro & Guterman, 2008).

Stage five of treatment is where new behaviors and changes are identified. Clients will begin to see their problems as being external instead of internal. Counselors should praise the client on the work they have done thus far. Stage 6 of SFT treatment is the stabilization step. Clients begin to adjust to their new changes and positive behaviors and they will become self-aware of their success. Finally in the last stage, counseling is terminated which should always be client initiated in SFT (Castro & Guterman, 2008).

The techniques of REBT and SFT are both similar. They are similar in the way they instill autonomy within the client to become self-aware and be educated on how to make a change. They both have a step by step process in which many different techniques simultaneously occur in order to show positive change. REBT uses the ABCDE model while SFT uses the 7 stage treatment plan. The only different is that REBT focuses on fixing problematic thoughts while SFT deals with looking for positive solutions instead of problems.

**Therapeutic goals**

Ration Emotive Behavior Theory really focuses on two main goals. The first major goal is to dispute any IBs the client has developed which also entails disputing any behaviors or consequence that came along with the IBs (Guterman & Rudes, 2005). The second goal is to really educate the client on irrational thinking and how it affects their daily life so they can
continue disputing any IBs that may come up at any time. Other goals that may be relevant to the client’s needs include changing self-defeating behaviors, assessing acceptance of themselves, others and the world, and learning to control their thoughts, behavioral and emotional responses.

The initial therapeutic goal of Solution-Focused Theory is to figure out what it is the client wants. The counselor and client work together to define concrete goals that the client wants to accomplish (Castro & Guterman, 2008). Then there are three main goals of SFT. The first goal would be to change the doing that is problematic. The second goal includes changing the viewing of the situation. Finally, the third goal is to evoke strengths, resources, and solutions to the problematic situation. It is imperative that the goals are tailored to the client rather than the theory so they are attainable by the client (Dermer, Robey & Shea, 2012). It is also vital that in the end, the goals are agreed upon between the counselor and client as specific, attainable and concrete goals.

In comparing the two theories, one can see that the goals are completely different. REBT’s goals focus mainly on fixing the problem and changing the client’s thoughts, behaviors and emotions. On the other hand, SFT deals with figuring out what it is the client really wants and looking at the solution, not the problem. Yet, in the end, they both have to be agreed upon by both the client and counselor.

**Conclusion**

After conducting research on both Rational Emotive Behavior Theory and Solution Focused Theory, it is easy to see both theories have many differences and similarities. REBT counselors view their clients as both good and bad. They look to change the irrational beliefs that clients come to counseling with. On the other hand, SFT counselors focus on only positive aspects of their clients in order to create solutions. Neither REBT nor SFT show aspects of
personality development. Both theories lack a developmental basis because they focus on the present. REBT discusses some psychological development of the client while SFT does not discuss personality development at all. When it comes to emotional maladjustment, REBT and SFT completely differ. On one hand, REBT focuses primarily on the dysfunction of the client while SFT does not focus on any emotional maladjustment at all. The client/counselor relationship is not as important in REBT as it is in SFT. Yet, the relationships in both theories have to be collaborative and very involved. The techniques in both theories are step by step processes that are very similar. They both instill some kind of autonomy in the client and educate the client on change. Finally, the therapeutic goals of REBT and SFT are different. The goals of REBT focus on changing a client’s thoughts, behaviors and emotions in order to change their irrational thoughts. In contrast, SFT focuses on finding an exception to the complaint and a positive solution instead of fixing the problem. As one can see, although REBT and SFT and two different theories, they both have many similarities as well as differences.
References


