

Integration of Relational-Cultural Theory into social work practice in an interdisciplinary healthcare agency

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Research Question

How can a social work department in an interdisciplinary setting adopt Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT) as a common theoretical model?

Overview of Setting

LIFE UPenn/Mercy LIFE -West Philadelphia

- PACE model (Program of All-Inclusive care for the elderly)
- Social workers work with an interdisciplinary team to provide holistic support to clients and their families.
- 94% of members/clients are African American
- Program was owned by the University of Pennsylvania until April 2016.
- Care is provided to clients via interdisciplinary teams which include primary care, nursing, social work, physical and occupational therapy, homecare, and behavioral health staff.
- The vast majority of clients remain in the program from the time of enrollment until the time of death.
- Average length of time in program per client is 3.5 years.
- Program census ranges from 420-450 (2013-2016).

Social Work Department

- 8-12 social workers at any given time.
- Racial diversity within social work department.
- Average caseload of 70-85 clients.
- Social workers provide services and support to both older adults and their caregivers.

Theoretical Overview

What is RCT?

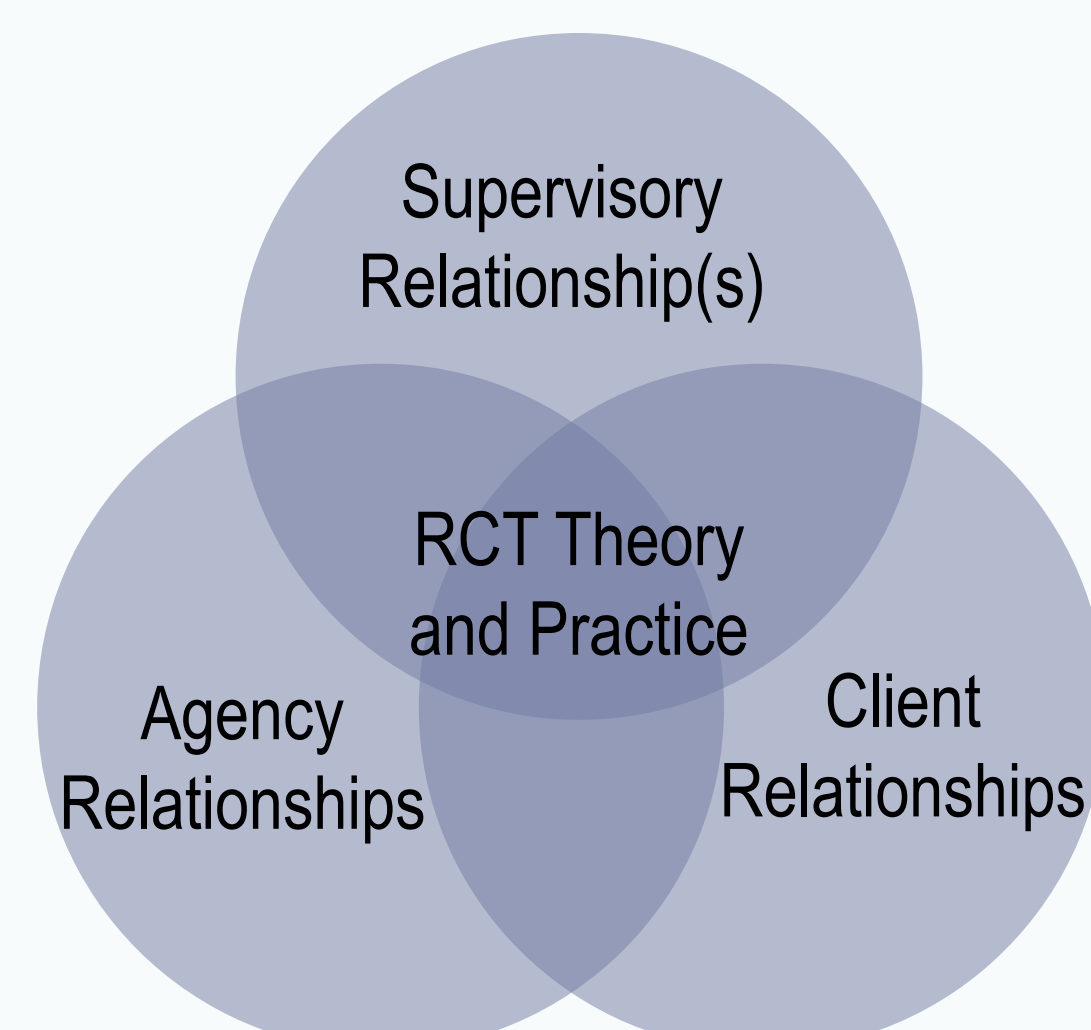
- Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT) is a theory that grew out of Attachment Theory.
- RCT is the idea that inter-human connection is essential to growth.
- Evidence supports that RCT is an effective way to foster growth in clients who have a trauma history
- Isolation is at the center of human suffering (JBMTI).
- **Understanding the intersections of race, diversity, and culture are an essential part of RCT practice.**

Core Concepts of RCT

1. People grow through and toward relationship in the life span.
2. Movement toward mutuality rather than separation characterizes mature functioning.
3. Relationship differentiation and elaboration characterize growth.
4. Mutual empathy and mutual empowerment are at the core of growth-fostering relationships.
5. Authenticity is necessary for real engagement and full participation in growth fostering relationships.
6. In growth fostering relationships, all people contribute and grow or benefit. Development is not a one way street.
7. Increased relational competence and capacities over the life span (Jordan, 2010).

Agency Social Work

Overlapping Obligations of Agency Social Work



Common Challenges in Contemporary Agencies

- Doing more with less. Again.
- Operating in crisis (Hartling and Sparks, 2008).
- Focus on measurable outcomes, evidence based practice.
- Teams, and challenges within.
- Variety of motivations related to work.
- Leadership may be out of touch with realities of front line work.
- Complicated issues of race and power are often unnamed and unacknowledged.
- Clinical supervision may not be available on site.
- Issues of burnout and staff stability (Hartling and Sparks, 2008)

Timeline and Method of Implementation

Over the course of 4 years, every social worker at the agency received training in RCT. The majority of RCT training occurred in-house, however, some external RCT trainings were also utilized by staff.

Year	Methodology
2012	Clinical supervision group with several sessions on RCT
2013	Explicit focus on RCT for 6 week supervision series. CEU opportunities via JBMTI readings. Discussions to dissect themes and ensure understanding.
2014	Clinical supervision group with RCT focus. Participation in Jean Baker Miller Training Institute offerings (national conference). CEU offerings.
2015	Clinical supervision group with RCT focus. Participation in Jean Baker Miller Training Institute offerings (national conference and webinars). CEU offerings.
2016	CEU trainings offered to social work and interdisciplinary staff

Continuing Education

Continuing Education Units (CEU) were offered on RCT 2014-2016.

- 15 social workers in total were trained
- Average course was worth 2 CEUs
- On average, an RCT training was offered every 2 months
- An average of 6 social work staff attended each training
- Department collectively earned 60 CEUs

RCT and Agency Social Work Practice: A Good Fit

Repair of relationships and overall well-being are often tied to agency mission.

Concepts of power are observed and experienced in agency hierarchy, and can be explained and understood with RCT.

RCT language and practice of naming experiences can be helpful in understanding agency complexity.

"Five good things" are possible in agency social work practice.

Multiple ways to experience relational repair: client to social worker, social worker to supervisor, organizational, and community.

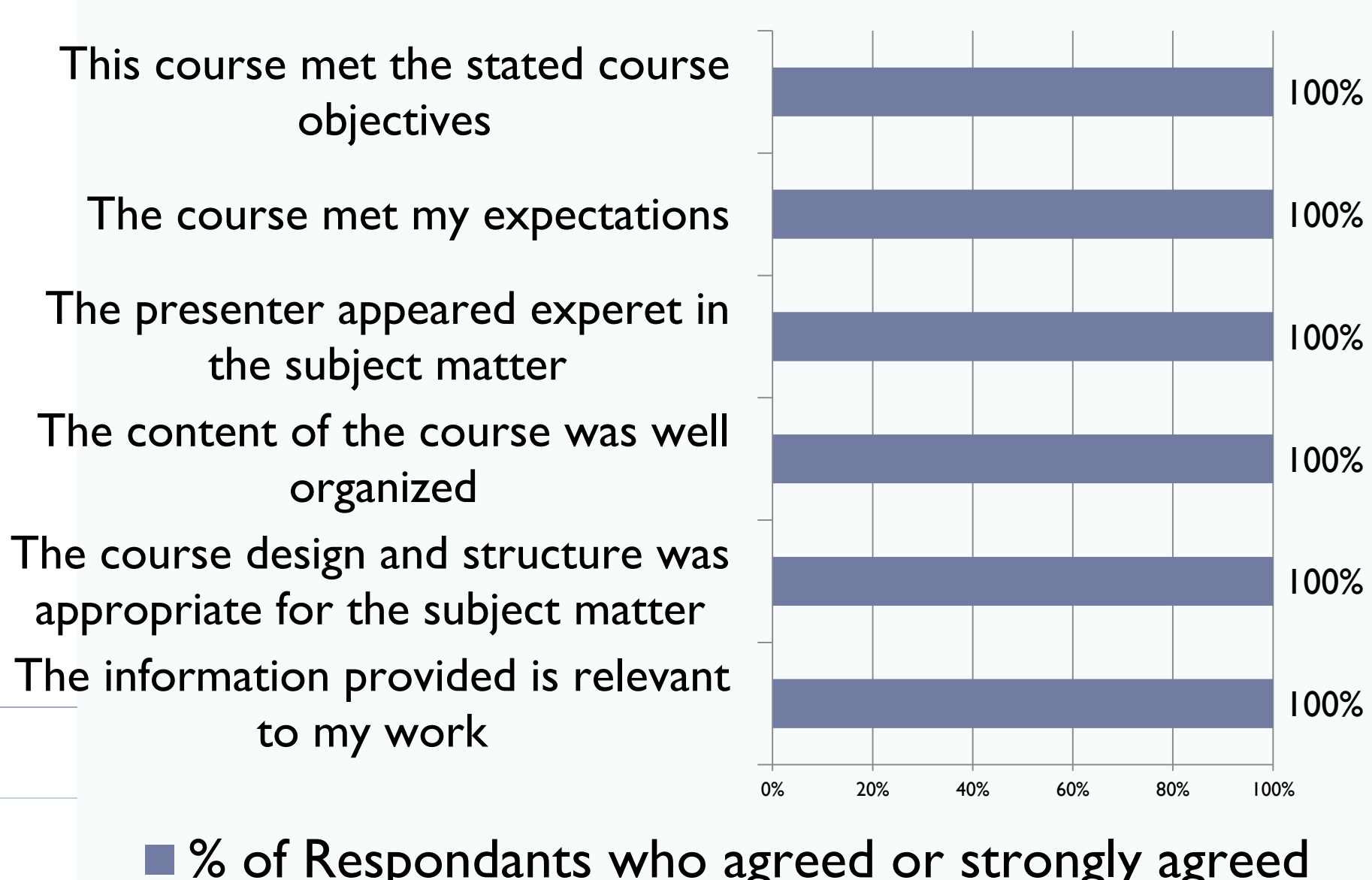
RCT acknowledges the central role that race and cultural have in relationships, including relationships with agency staff.

Supervisor and supervisee use of self and self disclosure can be different in agencies, leading to greater need and potential greater impact of RCT concepts.

Need and ability to work through disconnection is a feature of agency social work practice.

Quantitative Results

Quantitative Feedback from Relational-Cultural Theory CEU Sessions



Qualitative Feedback

"Very enriching."
 "Extremely informative in professional and personal life."
 "Will be more aware of the importance of relationship-building with client."
 "Very beneficial and thought-provoking."
 "Remembering the tenants of RCT is a good reminder of the healing power of this work and the opportunities. I will bring this theory into work".
 "I have heightened self awareness."
 "I will start to thing about relationships in terms of potential for growth."
 "I'm more willing to be my authentic self without feeling vulnerable."

Overall Observed Impact

1. Increased comfort in discussing race and cultural issues in supervision and in the department.
2. Naming race and culture as an issue in the agency, and working on it in the department, provided a "safe space" for feelings, struggles, frustrations of social workers.
3. Race and culture issue were more frequently brought and named in supervision.
4. A common language was used and further developed to name observations, experiences, and goals.
5. Social workers appeared to have increased sensitivity to the complex relational issues of very difficult clients. For example, the concept of "central relational paradox" offered a way to frame commonly seen and often frustrating behavior patterns
6. Cross-cultural contact and discussion between social workers.
7. Increased sense of unity and increased cohesion throughout the social work department.

Next Steps

1. Continued training of new social work staff
2. Continued expansion to other agency disciplines.
3. Formalize use of C.A.R.E. (Calm, Accepted, Resonant, Energetic) assessment (Banks, 2015).
4. Measure impact on clients.
5. Improve and expand quantitative measurements of training on practice after training is complete.
6. Develop model of RCT implementation in agencies.
7. Expand and create new RCT trainings related to other themes (i.e. geriatrics, substance use, supervision, etc.).

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