Teaching Counseling Using Video Excerpts

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Abstract

Feature films and television programs that have psychotherapists as main characters are examined as a way to add a new dimension to training counselors. Showing students short excerpts from certain movies and television programs can be useful for stimulating discussion of diagnosis, theoretical models, and professional and ethical issues. Several films and programs that are good for this purpose are described and recommendations are made for how to best incorporate excerpts into counseling courses. Feature films considered include *Spellbound*, *Ordinary People*, and *Good Will Hunting*, and the television programs considered are *The Sopranos* and *In Treatment*.
Teaching Counseling Using Film Excerpts

Using excerpts from feature films and television programs can stir interest and enliven discussion in many standard counseling courses (Conner, 1996; Lawson, 1994). Films about counselors or psychotherapists raise many issues pertinent to the practice of counseling, including when to use various theoretical models, the image of counselors presented in films, and professional and ethical issues (Hyler, 1996). Excerpts from feature films have also been used as illustrations in the training of mental health workers (Engstrom, 2004). This paper describes several examples of how excerpts from specific films and television programs can be used to provoke discussion and spur students to develop their own thinking about effective counseling.

While many video demonstrations of professional counseling by experts are available, watching excerpts from more popular sources can also be educational (Anderson, 1992; Hyler, 1988; Robinson, 2003). Feature films that have themes about counseling and psychotherapy present both positive and negative examples of counseling practice (Lehman, 2002). Before showing a film excerpt, it is helpful to provide students with a list of points to consider or questions to answer as they watch the excerpt. Examples of such points are included here for several of the films described. All the films mentioned are available on videotape or DVD. While students may want to watch whole films, and can be encouraged to do so on their own time, excerpts are perfectly adequate to provide stimuli for class discussion (Robinson, 2003). Showing short excerpts from sources either rented or owned by an instructor in a class is protected under fair use legislation (Paddock, Terranova, & Giles, 2001).
Feature films have been made with characters who are identified as psychoanalysts, psychiatrists, psychologists, psychotherapists, and counselors, but the occupational title used is often irrelevant to the way the character actually behaves in the film (Gabbard, 2001). Regarding terminology used in this paper, for the sake of simplicity the terms counselor or therapist will be used to refer to the character who is in the professional helping role. Most of the therapists in older films are psychiatrists or psychoanalysts, but therapist characters in more recent films are described variously as psychologists, psychiatrists, therapists, and counselors, and they practice a variety of approaches to counseling and psychotherapy. The theoretical model used by the therapist characters who are not psychoanalytic is usually not easy to identify. This may be because most scriptwriters seem to have very limited ideas about how therapy is practiced in the real world, and verisimilitude is usually sacrificed for drama. A common problem in movie depictions of therapy is that many such movies are melodramas, and therapy is often slow and untheatrical by its very nature; therapy is more like a meditative process than a drama (O. Sivan, quoted in Trebay, 2008).

Several lists of films that have either a therapist as a main character or people with psychological disorders as main characters are available (Nicosis, 2004; Robinson, 2003; Fleming, Piedmont, & Hiam, 1990). There are also some good references that list films and analyze in detail how psychotherapists are presented in them (Gabbard & Gabbard, 1999; Wedding & Boyd, 1999). This paper focuses on the popular feature films (and two television programs) that the author has found to work best as stimuli for discussion in counseling courses.

Occupational Stereotypes of Psychotherapists
Members of most occupations are probably not very happy about how their occupation is usually portrayed in popular films and television programs (Robinson, 2003). While there are plenty of heroic portrayals of firefighters and certain other occupations, counselors and therapists are often not presented in such a positive light (Lehmann, 2002). They are often portrayed as foolish and incompetent or even neurotic in comedies like *The Bob Newhart Show, Frasier, Dr. Katz, What About Bob?, Analyze This*, and *Deconstructing Harry*. Parodies of ineffectual psychoanalysts are presented in *A Couch in New York* and in many of Woody Allen's movies such as *Annie Hall* and the short film *Oedipus Wrecks* (a part of the anthology movie *New York Stories*).

Perhaps the most common stereotype of psychotherapists in movies is that they violate professional boundaries by having sex with their clients, as portrayed in *Spellbound, What's New Pussycat?, The Man Who Loved Women, Lovesick, Blindfold, Mr. Jones, Final Analysis, Color of Night, Basic Instinct, Twelve Monkeys, The First Wives Club, Prince of Tides*, and many others. In some films the therapist is homicidal (e.g., *Whispers in the Dark* and *Dressed to Kill*); in *Silence of the Lambs* and *Hannibal* the psychiatrist is a murderer and a cannibal. While it is true that about ten percent of male therapists acknowledge having had a sexual relationship with a current or former client (Sperry, 2007), viewers of feature films would probably think the percentage was more like 99%. Excerpts from these films can stimulate a discussion of the negative effects of boundary violations and particularly the reasons for the professional rule against therapists having romantic and sexual relationships with their clients. In addition, students can discuss why such stereotypes of counselors exist, and what, if anything, can be done to change them.
Another common stereotype has to do with the type of psychotherapy portrayed in feature films (Glasser, 2000). Usually the films that have a psychotherapist as a major character present the therapist as psychoanalytic or psychodynamic in orientation, even though such practitioners are a minority of the therapists in the United States (Dervin, 1985). It is as if, in the popular mind, the archetypal therapist is still Freudian (Gabbard, 2001). When cartoonists draw a cartoon about therapy, almost invariably an analytic couch is pictured to signal the idea that the cartoon is about psychotherapy. Similarly, in films the therapist almost always uses a couch, says little other than "What do you think it means?" or "How does that make you feel?" and is rarely actually helpful (Lebeau, 1995). This is an interesting and perhaps understandable occupational stereotype, but it makes the work of counselors more difficult. Based on what they see in most popular films, one would expect new clients to think that therapy or counseling will be deep, lengthy, and involve exploration of their childhood, analysis of their dreams, and the cathartic expression of deeply buried secrets and traumas. New clients might also be on guard against counselors who could behave unprofessionally, making building a therapeutic relationship more difficult. This necessitates that counselors provide new clients with an orientation to what counseling as they practice it is really like and clearly describe the limits of the relationship (Lehmann, 2002).

Psychoanalysis in the Movies of Alfred Hitchcock

Alfred Hitchcock was interested in psychoanalysis and made several films with specific plots and symbols based on Freudian theory (Bergstrom, 2000). Of his 1945 murder mystery Spellbound, Hitchcock said "It was the first attempt at psychiatry in films," although he also called it "just another manhunt story wrapped up in pseudo-
psychoanalysis" (quoted in Bogdanovich, 1997, p. 512). Hitchcock included many visual images in *Spellbound* that were deliberately meant to be Freudian symbols. For example, when the two main characters first kiss, there is an image of doors opening, which the writer had been told was the psychological symbol for the beginning of love. Hitchcock hired Salvador Dali to design the dream sequence in the film, which contained the key (in symbolic form) to the solution of the mystery (Brown, 1980). Hitchcock also used almost subliminal imagery near the end of the film; although the rest of the film is in black and white, he inserted two frames of bright red when a man shoots himself, in order to give the audience a bigger shock.

As a detective story, *Spellbound* likens the process of psychoanalysis to solving the mystery of how trauma causes neurosis, using dream symbols as clues (Brown, 1980). The Ingrid Bergman character is a love-smitten psychoanalyst playing dream detective on behalf of the character played by Gregory Peck. The murder is solved when she interprets his dream image of flying wings as an angel, which she decides refers to a Gabriel Valley ski resort, where the murder occurred. In addition to the focus on dream interpretation, the film contains the provocative line "Women make the best psychoanalysts until they fall in love; then they make the best patients" (quoted in Gabbard & Gabbard, 1999). Students may enjoy discussing what this comment means, and whether its sexism is inherent to Freud's theory of psychoanalysis.

Many of Hitchcock's other films had plots that made use of Freudian theories. In *Psycho* the main character has psychotic states when he dresses like his dead mother, and acts out in rage when he feels overcome with guilt about being attracted to a woman. In *Marnie* the main female character's neurotic symptoms are traced back to a childhood
trauma, and her boyfriend, played by Sean Connery, acts as her unofficial psychoanalyst. He puts the clues to her psychic distress together and pushes her to examine her childhood memories, resulting in a climactic cathartic resolution. In *Vertigo* Hitchcock highlights a sort of repetition compulsion of the main character, played by Jimmy Stewart, who is so obsessed with his dead wife that he tries to recreate her in someone he thinks is another woman. The story ends tragically, suggesting the futility of attempting to recover or recreate the intense emotion of lost love.

The alert viewer will have no difficulty finding many psychoanalytic themes and symbols throughout Hitchcock's films (Gabbard, 2000; Iaccino, 1998). According to Hitchcock, "the tunnel at the end of *North by Northwest* is a sexual symbol" and speaking of *To Catch a Thief* he said "the fireworks scene is pure orgasm" (quoted in Bogdanovich, 1997, p. 524). As a homework assignment students can be encouraged to watch *Spellbound*, *Marnie*, *North by Northwest*, or *Psycho*, and list the Freudian symbols they find, or describe the ways in which psychoanalytic idea is distorted.

Excerpts from any of these Hitchcock films can be used to stimulate a discussion of psychoanalysis (Gabbard, 2000). Examples of questions for consideration could include: What is the evidence that dream images are symbolic, and how would we know if our interpretation of a symbol is correct? Do neurotic symptoms result from childhood trauma, and if so can remembering the trauma relieve it? Do people typically repress memories of trauma? What are the dangers of a therapist encouraging a client to uncover "repressed" memories? Is psychoanalytic psychotherapy viable today in a managed care environment? For what disorders has it have been empirically supported?
Other films can, of course, be examined from a psychoanalytic point of view (Greenberg, 2000). The rather conventional western story of *Shane* (1953) becomes much more complex if examined through a Freudian lens. For example, if references to guns and shooting are seen as sexual symbols, the hidden message of the film becomes clear. In the movie the pre-pubescent boy Joey admires the gunfighter Shane's skill with his gun (symbol of the phallus) and Joey begs Shane to teach him how to shoot (have a sexual relationship). Shane is the boy’s model of the ideal man. Joey's mother is attracted to Shane and feels guilty for unconsciously betraying her husband, a decent but weak man. Showing a class excerpts from the film and revealing the "hidden" meaning can both illustrate Freudian symbolism and provide a humorous demonstration of the extreme lengths to which Freudian criticism can be taken.

Another film that can also be used to illustrate Freudian symbolism is *Still of the Night*, in which the main character, a Freudian psychiatrist, solves a crime by analyzing a patient's dream. The therapists in *Klute* and *Truly Madly Deeply* are psychoanalytic, and barely say a word in the therapy sessions shown in the films. The therapist in *Final Analysis* does psychoanalytic psychotherapy, and a client's Freudian slip provides a clue to the mystery (the client says “violence” instead of “violets.”) David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* is full of mysterious symbols such as a key and a box which lend themselves to Freudian interpretation, as did his television series *Twin Peaks*.

Positive Portrayals of Psychotherapists in Films

Although negative portrayals of counselors and psychotherapists are much more common than positive ones (Lehmann, 2002), a few films do present a likable and competent counselor or therapist as a main character. Examples include *I Never Promised*
You a Rose Garden, David and Lisa, The Three Faces of Eve, Splendor in the Grass, and As Good As It Gets.

The film Ordinary People, which won four Academy Awards in 1980 (including Best Picture), has possibly the most positive portrayal of a counselor in a popular film. Judd Hirsch played a warm and empathic, though sometimes tough counselor who was available to his clients around the clock. He showed that he was sincerely interested in helping his suicidal teenaged client, and forcefully encouraged the client to feel and express his feelings of guilt about possibly being responsible for his brother's death. This counselor's approach clearly owes a debt to Carl Rogers' core conditions, but he is much more directive and confrontational than is typical in Client-Centered Therapy. His theoretical foundation seems to be psychodynamic, but his technique is affective and expressive (Miller, 1999). A clip from the film can illustrate how a counselor can establish a safe therapeutic relationship while at the same time confronting a client's resistance and empathically challenging the client to deal with powerful emotions. Questions for students about this film could include: What theoretical model is the counselor practicing? How is what he does different from the nondirective approach of Carl Rogers? How would you diagnose the client? Does the counselor violate any ethical standards? Since the client is suicidal, what does the counselor do and not do that would be considered best practice today?

The film Good Will Hunting (1998) has been described as an effective tool for teaching counseling theories (Koch & Dollarhide, 2000). Since many students have seen this film, it is interesting to ask students their opinion of the counselor in the film (based on their memory of it) before showing an excerpt from it. Typically students comment
that the counselor, who was played by Robin Williams, was a genuine, wise, and caring
counselor. He does indeed portray a deeply empathic counselor who is effective in
helping his client resolve his deep-seated distress. But at one point in the film the
counselor also slams his client against a wall and almost strangles him (after the client
tries to provoke him). The counselor uses frequent profanity, meets with the client
outside the office, hugs him, and is overly self-disclosing (Lehmann, 2002). The
counselor's theoretical approach is vaguely psychodynamic, and focuses on getting the
client to express deeply buried emotions about childhood abuse, climaxing, as usual in
the movies, with a cathartic cure. This film provides a rich source of topics for discussion
in a counseling theories or ethics course, and Koch and Dollarhide (2000) provided a
detailed guide for how to use it, including questions for students. Another good film that
should be mentioned for its usefulness in stimulating students to talk about the ethical
issue of confidentiality is Mumford. In this film the main character is a therapist in a
small town who faces many temptations to break confidentiality.

Other Theoretical Approaches in Popular Films

Although most popular films about psychotherapy focus on psychodynamic
approaches, there are a few exceptions (Schneider, 1987). As described above, the
counselors in Ordinary People and Good Will Hunting appear to be generally
psychodynamic in theory but not necessarily in practice. Barbra Streisand, as the therapist
in Prince of Tides, takes a similar approach with her unofficial client (played by Nick
Nolte, he is actually the brother of her client, but she has therapy sessions with him in her
office). She does not charge the Nolte character for the sessions, but they do have a
romantic/sexual relationship.
No popular films were found that provide illustrations of Jungian or Adlerian therapy, behavior therapy, cognitive therapy, gestalt therapy, or most other approaches to counseling and psychotherapy. No representations of popular new approaches like Solution-Oriented Therapy, constructivist approaches, or family therapy were found. The therapist in *What About Bob?* behaves like a psychoanalyst in the film, but is the author of a behavior modification self-help book called *Baby Steps*. The counselor in *An Unmarried Woman* is mostly humanistic and client-centered but is also directive at times; she emphasizes the need to "feel your feelings" but she also offers her client specific advice. The movies *Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice* and *The Serial* are parodies of the humanistic encounter group approaches of the 1970s. The therapist in *Bliss* is an unconventional sex therapist.

The single most common problem of clients in feature films about psychotherapy is traumatic physical or sexual abuse in childhood, and the most common treatment approach portrayed is the encouragement of expressing repressed emotions (Gabbard, 2001). This form of therapy is presumably (and probably accurately) thought to be more interesting to watch than more realistic and more common therapy sessions. But the emphasis on child abuse is another unwarranted stereotype of counseling practice (Miller, 1999).

**Psychotherapists in Television Programs**

In recent years some of the most interesting portrayals of counselors and psychotherapists have appeared not in popular films, but in television programs like *The Sopranos* (Siegel, 2007) and *In Treatment*, both on HBO. Dr. Melfi, on *The Sopranos*, is a psychiatrist who prescribes medications but also practices psychoanalytic
psychotherapy. The American Psychoanalytic Association presented *The Sopranos* with an award for its depiction of psychoanalysis, and a book is available that details how psychology and psychotherapy is treated in *The Sopranos* (Gabbard, 2002). The program is a rich source of clips that can be used to stimulate discussion on diagnosis and treatment planning, how best to work with a resistant client, and numerous ethical issues, including confidentiality, duty to warn, and the limits of self-disclosure. Questions for students could include: Based on his symptoms, what is Tony’s diagnosis? Is it ethical for a therapist to treat a client for anxiety caused by committing criminal behavior? Does Dr. Melfi follow best practice guidelines in her treatment of Tony? How could Dr. Melfi have responded better to Tony’s attempted boundary violations? What appears to be the therapist’s theoretical model, and how well does it work?

The HBO miniseries *In Treatment*, which aired in early 2008, provided a more realistic portrayal of how psychotherapy is practiced today. Dr. Irvin Yalom called it “the first show I’ve seen on television which even begins to portray therapy in a real way” (quoted in Van Nuys, 2008). The show aired in half-hour episodes, five nights a week for nine weeks. The clients (a woman, a man, an adolescent girl, and a couple) each had their own night, and on the fifth night each week the program showed the therapist, Dr. Paul Weston, played by Gabriel Byrne, seeing his own therapist, played by Diane Wiest. Although some episodes had some fairly dramatic events, most were simply compressed therapy sessions, purely consisting of talk.

*In Treatment* explored transference in the Monday night episodes, in which the female client struggled with her attraction to the therapist, and he gradually fell in love with her. In the Tuesday episodes the client was a male fighter pilot who felt guilty for
deaths he caused in the Iraq War. The Wednesday client, Sophie, a precocious teenager, went to therapy after she tried to kill herself. On Thursdays an angry couple considering divorce sought help, and in the Friday episodes Dr. Weston explored his feeling about his clients with his own therapist. According to Gabbard (2008), “In Treatment splendidly demonstrates each patient’s uniqueness and complexity,” and “The writing, acting and directing are first-rate” (p. 29). Dr. Weston’s therapeutic approach in mainly psychodynamic; he listens intently, probes gently, points out inconsistencies, makes interpretations, and analyses the clients’ resistances and transferences. Dr. Weston is portrayed as a good therapist, although he certainly has his problems, particularly his attraction to his Monday client Laura, but it also shows him struggling with and analyzing his own issues in his sessions with his own therapist. In Treatment, which will be available on DVD, provides a wealth of potential excerpts for use in counseling classes. Questions that students can address include: What does the therapist do both verbally and nonverbally to establish rapport with new clients? What is the theoretical rationale for his interventions? What could he have done differently to improve the outcomes with his clients? Did the therapist violate any ethical or professional standards?

Limitations of Using Films to Teach Counseling

Using excerpts from feature films and television programs requires a significant amount of time on the part of the instructor to obtain, view, and note segments that are best for use in courses. It also takes time to prepare questions to guide the discussion of the excerpts. Only a few excerpts should be used over the length of a course, since the educational value of excerpts is limited, and they should not be used solely to excite student interest. Excerpts played in class should not exceed about ten minutes, which
typically is adequate to provoke a discussion. Since some students may object to the
frank language used in some R-rated films and television programs, they should be
warned in advance of the language issue; the instructor can mention that some clients talk
like that in real life, and counselors have to be able to deal with it. If time is limited the
best excerpts for most classroom discussions can probably be found in *Ordinary People*,
*Good Will Hunting*, *The Sopranos*, and *In Treatment*. If more time is available, excerpts
from *Marnie*, *Prince of Tides*, *An Unmarried Woman*, and (mainly for comic relief) *What
About Bob?* can be added.

**Conclusion**

Using brief segments from feature films and television programs can be an
effective way to stimulate the interest of counseling students and provoke discussion of
important issues. Questions about the excerpts can challenge students to think about what
makes for effective counseling and encourage them to consider the danger of violating
professional ethical standards. Students can be asked to speculate about the diagnosis of
the client in the film, and critique the approach of the counselor in the film. It has been
said that “Good therapy does not create very good drama” (Noveck, 2008). Although few
existing feature films and television programs provide excellent examples of how
counseling should be done, perhaps films and programs produced in the future will be
more accurate as well as interesting and dramatic.
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