Literature Review

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**Purpose of Study**

In this study, strategies of disconnection and suicidal behavior are explored through a conceptual framework of relational cultural theory. RCT is a progressive theory that emphasizes the significance of relationships and relational growth throughout the human life span. Contending that condemned isolation is a risk factor for individuals with suicidal behavior, it is suggested that RCT be applied in treatment for the aforementioned issues.

According to Paulson and Worth (2002) in a study that utilized concept mapping, two perilous errors within counseling treatment are the inadequacy of identifying a client’s support system and failure to confront and explore strong emotions and suicidal decisions with a client. Relational-cultural theory informs us of the central relational paradox which posits that individuals long for connection but in attempt to protect oneself from hurt and rejection, engage in strategies of disconnection (Frey, 2013). This can result in increased psychological distress such as feelings of depression and suicidal behavior are client concerns involving intense negative emotions and condemned isolation. Severe depression, defined as Major Depressive Disorder in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, fifth edition, can lead to high risk of suicidal behavior. David Jobes (2000) argued that suicidality is a *relational phenomenon* in that the presence or absence of close connection in relationships can paradoxically cause suicidal behavior or prevent suicidal behavior.

As it is known, suicidal behavior is preceded by a unique set of factors that lead to severe psychological distress. These factors can include chronic disconnections, feelings of fear, humiliation, and self-blame; all of which can lead an individual to condemned isolation (Comstock, 2008). Condemned isolation is defined by relational-cultural theorists as feelings of severe shame and a deep sense of unworthiness of connection, along with their ongoing awareness of their desire for true connection. This type of isolation may be caused by the belief that one’s relational or cultural disconnections cannot be transformed or reconnected (Comstock, 2008). Considering the relational aspects of RCT, we examine how connections and disconnections in the client’s world impact engaging in strategies of disconnection that have the potential to lead to suicidal behavior.

**Definitions**

Suicide is defined as taking one’s life through a self-inflicted act with conscious intent (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2017). It holds the idea that there is deliberate intent to die with the knowledge that death is irreversible (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2017; World Health Organization, 2017). The World Health Organization (2017) defines suicidal behavior as “a range of behaviors that include thinking about suicide (or ideation), planning for suicide, attempting suicide and suicide itself” (p. 18).

Disconnection is inexorable as relational beings. Disconnection can be experienced through break-ups, being disappointed by a loved one, being emotionally hurt, feeling misunderstood, or any type of disengagement from an already formed connection (Duffey and Somody, 2011). Disconnection can also occur in the counseling session if the counselor fails understand and acknowledge the relational or cultural factors that contribute to feelings of disconnection and fail to respond empathically. RCT posits that there is a central relational paradox that individuals experience when one longs for connection in key relationships but to protect themselves from hurt or rejection, engage in behaviors that promote disconnection within their relationships (Frey, 2013). So, strategies of disconnection can be viewed as behaviors that individuals partake in to protect themselves from relational injuries, that also enhances disconnection.

**Limitations**

Depression and suicidal ideation look differently in each individual and therefore may have many constructs that are challenging to address in treatment. RCT may not be sufficient for certain individuals or it may require use in conjunction with other therapeutic approaches, such as CBT. Future research still needs to be conducted as RCT is still an emerging approach that lacks concrete interventions that can be measured in outcome studies.

**Discussion**

Through research studies on depression and suicidal ideation, there is an underlying theme of requiring relational connection and accessing social support in a client’s world. RCT is a developing approach with limited, but emerging, empirical studies that needs operationalizing and outcome measures. However, conceptually, RCT addresses relational growth and relational resiliency which can promote healing with clients suffering from depression and engaging in suicidal behavior. If suicidal ideation can be prevented through growing toward mutual empathy in growth-fostering relationships, then the core tenets of RCT may be an intervention that is able to alleviate reduce suicidal behaviors and alleviate symptoms of depression.

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