

You are encouraged to read the whole book, and please make a proper citation if needed.

O'Leary, C.J. (1999). *Counseling couples and families: A person-centered approach*. Sage.

1. Multi-directional partiality: being on everyone's side: Toward the participants the therapist does not adopt a stance of impartial contemplation of all competing interests. We hold that "impartiality" or "neutrality" if it can actually be achieved is an undesirable goal, and its pursuit can be deadening. The therapist is multi-directionally partial, i.e., directing empathy, endorsement, listening to one person, then in turn to that person's adversary.
2. Multi-directional partiality is an achievement of attitude more than a technique. The relational counselor learns to think: "What happened to each and all these people?" rather than: "What are these people doing to this one person?" Multi-directional partiality may be a way of being which is particularly nourished by the person-centered approach.
3. Creating person-centered relational counseling
 - One person seeks to become aware of, to symbolize accurately and to accept all parts of herself: The relational counselor trusts that his self-aware presence will be useful for a family. He must engage with them – observing, noticing reactions and needs so that he may facilitate their entering the counseling process.
 - There is less and less difference between her concept of herself and what she thinks she should be; therefore, she has less and less she has to defend against: In relation to family and couples work, the person-centered counselor does not have to be defensive of herself as expert, as someone who knows the answers; she does not have to be defensive of a theory that she is applying to the clients' situation; she does not have to be defensive because she is insistent on her agenda as the only path to change; she does not have to be defensive because she is on the side of one person against another.
 - And therefore she has the freedom to see and hear another person actively and objectively: Without an agenda she has nothing better to do than to seek to understand each person's point of view. Her clients may say of her that, more than other counselors they had seen, she seemed to listen to them and to be interested in what they thought was important.
 - An she is more able to receive people as they are with regard that is less and

less conditional because of her expectations: She will be less pressured, less anxious. She will not feel called upon to impose expectations on her clients. She will enjoy them and herself more.

- Another person is able to experience that his communication is received without judgment: Clients will feel less pressured and less anxious. They will be less likely to perceive the difficulties of relationship as the result of their own inadequacy.
- And that person feels the increasing possibility of being understood: Clients may be more likely to share of the truest parts of themselves when a counselor or other family members show understanding. Information and creativity that was formerly withheld can be shared. The clients may speak less out of role or their image of what they should be and share something closer to who they are.
- And feels positive regard that he experiences as unconditional: Members of a couple or family can feel the counselor's acceptance of them individually and as a group. A family member can feel valued without feeling disloyal or unfair because the counselor accepts her companions as well as her.
- Therefore they become increasingly able to become aware of, symbolize accurately and accept all parts of themselves, including those which have been previously rejected. Clients become congruent. Instead of making one another's faults or defects the object of their attention, they become more familiar with and accepting of their own ways of being. They project less; are less pessimistic; are more objective.
- There is less difference between clients' concepts of self and what they think they should be. Clients are released from the pressure of "conditions of worth" and are at home with themselves and with each other. They carry less baggage from their family of origins. They are less mystified and anxious.
- They have less need for defensiveness: The most sought-after condition is the state in which intimates can communicate without confusion about what things are really like.
- They become more and more able to see and hear one another actively and objectively. Family members can become less directed by anxiety-driven distortions of communication. Actions can be undertaken for their own sake rather than as covert ways to influence others. Children can become themselves rather than projections of their parents. Couples can see one another clearly rather than lives out battles based on introjected ideas about what males and females are supposed to be and do.

4. Themes in Family Therapy

- Systems thinking
 - i. The whole is bigger than the sum of its parts
 - ii. Therefore any change in one part of a system affects the whole system.
 - iii. Therefore causality is not linear, but circular.
 - iv. Therefore there is no identified patient to be cured in the midst of an otherwise healthy system.
 - v. Therefore the process of therapy may be seen as uncovering, bypassing, or redefining implicit rules not only of behavior, but also of perception.
- Key concepts in relational counseling
 - i. Family rules: These are the unconscious habits of social living: repetitive patterns of communication and implicit norms about what is attended to and what is ignored – what is spoken and what must not be spoken.
 - ii. Developmental tasks: This concept refers to the way the life cycle can change the entire relational world of a family.
 - iii. Environmental pressures: The counselor may seek to understand the way cultural norms, the wider economic climate, or events at work or school can affect a couple or family.
 - iv. Intergenerational patterns: The counselor stays aware of how ways of acting and thinking reflect learning or attempts to unlearn the ways of one's family of origin.
 - v. Boundary issues: The counselor is encouraged to notice the way individual family members instinctively or habitually act around closeness and distance, openness and privacy.
 - vi. Alliances: This term refers to how included and supported people feel with other family members or how excluded and disconnected they feel in relation to others' perceived closeness.
 - vii. Hierarchy: It is important who is in charge of whom and for what reason or under what conditions; and how or if change is permitted.
 - viii. Cross-cultural impasses: The counselor may listen to the way the meanings of words and events is shaped by each adult family member's historical experience.
 - ix. Unacknowledged loss: The counselor may be aware of the impact of illness, traumatic events, death, failures or disappointment on seemingly unrelated communications and underlying family morale.

5. Relational counselor are active

- The counselor structures the sessions, especially at the beginning.

- The counselor, in practicing multi-directional partiality, solicits and facilitates the stories of all the family members.
- The counselor meets the family in a way that comes naturally to her.
- The counselor reflects on the interactions of the family.

6. Relational counselors reframe

- This practice, which may be defined as offering a different perspective which changes the meaning of an event or process, is frequently used in family and couples therapy.
- The use of reframing derives from the assumption that the meaning a social group gives to an event or way of being helps create that event. Further, any change in the perceived meaning of an event or way of being can, for a family or individual in distress, offer liberation and a strong source of motivation for cooperation and change.
- In reference to reframing, person-centred counselors may ask some of the following questions:
 - i. If I were a client in couples or family therapy, what level of reframing would allow me to feel respected and trusted by the counselor?
 - ii. Are there circumstances or meetings with significant others in which this might change?
 - iii. When is a reframe the forcing of a perception rather than the revelation of another possibility?
 - iv. Does a counselor reframe because of an unconditional positive regard that instinctively sees the constructive in all client situations, or because of a lack of unconditional positive regard which leads to the assumption of responsibility for changing meanings for a client?
 - v. How can reframing become a skill that is modelled, shared, and otherwise learned by the client(s) as counseling progresses?

7. Relational counselors ask questions

- Housekeeping questions: Questions for the beginning and end of sessions; questions that clarify goals, that invite participation, that take care of the aspect of relational counseling that is a meeting.
- Facilitating questions: Questions that organize discussion; that focus persons' attention on the same issue; that link what is currently being said to earlier interaction; that clarify or reframe so that an issue does not carry the burden of one person's frame of reference directed against another.
- Mediating questions: Questions that invite accurate listening; that give order in chaotic argument; that focus attention on genuine feelings, opinions and wishes rather than accusations, projected fears and threats.

8. A client in couples and family counseling has at least four concerns that must be addressed whether or not they are articulated:
 - How can I get in the conversation, or how can my more withdrawn or reluctant partner or children get in?
 - How can I talk about our deepest conflicts and keep my self-respect and not diminish the self-respect of my significant others?
 - How can we have this conversation so that it is fair and feels fair?
 - How can we have this conversation safely so that our relationship grows rather than deteriorates?
9. The counselor is in psychological contact with the client
 - The counselor must, especially in the beginning of the relationship, make contact with clients, attending in such a way that they all feel received by someone who is potentially their own counselor rather than someone belonging to significant others. There is also a need for the counselor to be perceived as in contact with a family or a couple as a whole, in addition to his connection with each individual.
 - The counselor has the task of not only listening to that person, but also of connecting with the more silent members of a family or couple.
 - The relational counselor is sometimes like the facilitator in a training program. She accepts individuals as they are, but may take explicit certain structural expectations that go with the medium they enter.
10. The clients are in a state of incongruence
 - In family counseling, the presenting problem is frequently reflective of a split between family members' actual experience and the concept of the experience, which they maintain to themselves as well as to one another. A classic example of such incongruence is a parent or spouse maintaining that he loves a family member while showing physical and behavioral signs of dislike and disgust.
 - Incongruence is not caused directly by change in a family's structure, dynamics or developmental stage. Changes are inevitable and the adjustment to life events is a sign of family health and strength. Incongruence, rather, has to do with the inability of family members to talk about change and become aware of their reaction to it. It is also common even for loving and intelligent families to drift away from open and continuous acknowledgement of change. Some fortunate families have or create opportunities for non-defensive conversations that correct what seems a natural trend. For other couples and families, the presence of a counselor provides the safety and confidence to step back from an

incongruence that frustrates, confuses and ultimately divides a relationship.

11. The counselor is congruent

- Congruence as not being up to something: The counselor is certainly up to being helpful, being available and offering a way of doing things that has been helpful for others. However, the counselor is not up to being secretive, mystifying, having an agenda that is kept from the clients. The counselor does not “attempt to portray” a role of benevolence, confidence, sublime indifference or even of realness. He is transparent as much as possible, allowing the clients to feel safe and not having to defend themselves against manipulation.
- Congruence as awareness and openness: In family counseling, the counselor may get pulled into strong opinions about right or wrong that only his awareness and nondefensiveness will keep from becoming a presumptions interference.

12. The counselor experiences unconditional positive regard for the clients: The counselor’s job is to be so fully on each person’s side that the common-sense judging of what are good and bad behaviors is naturally suspended in the focus on getting into the client’s world.

- Unconditional positive regard as awareness of intentions: The counselor in relational counseling is aware always of hearing two messages – the first is the message of hurt or frustration which leads to anger and rejection; the other is the message of wanting something different – connection with the other or change in one’s own life.
- Unconditional positive regard is shown according to the style of the counselor.

13. The counselor experiences empathy for the clients’ internal frame of reference

- A person-centered counselor has learned to focus on the understanding of each client’s personal meanings. Explicitly or implicitly the effective counselor must always return to these questions: What do I know about what it is like for these clients? Am I getting it? Am I following them as they take their own direction?
- Empathy and relational context: Until a family or couple joins you or lets you join them, it is important to assume that your empathic listening for one family member can be understood by another as taking sides.
- Empathy and family members who are silent
- Empathy and respect for the family culture: Clients come in with a common culture, complex family structure and hierarchy; and the counselor’s role is facilitation, not correction.

14. Getting started

- Welcome each client: With some couples and families, it becomes important to give each person some time alone with the counselor. For others, it would be an interruption to separate the couple or family group. These people are able to be safe in conversation and are trying to go forward in it. When couples are so hostile that they can barely allow the other to speak, I ask for time alone with each of them. In addition to connecting with them and being able to listen to them without needing to protect another family member, I also challenge them with the problem of how they will handle my relating with equal respect to their partner.
- Find out why everyone has come
- Teach or model the basic skills of our work
- Explain, but do not overexplain: The counselor who explains too much will convey mistrust in the clients' own ability to make sense out of the counseling. The counselor who explains too little may discourage clients by failing to contribute her own answers to "Why are we here? What can we accomplish?"
- Bring up or encourage intellectual constructs to make sense out of the material of the session
- Be sensitive to the family member's fear of being judged
- Anticipate client concerns about inclusion and fairness
- Be hopeful
- Close the session so that its relationship to the clients' purpose in being there is acknowledged

15. In the middle of relational counseling

- More complexity develops around issues
- Strong feelings emerge – sometimes unexpectedly
- Clients have a crisis and get through it
- Some clients are threatened and withdraw in the middle of counseling
- The core conditions are expressed differently in the middle of relational counseling
 - i. Increased trust of the counselor and the counseling process by all participants
 - ii. The counselor more frequently in the background as family members are more able to talk directly with one another without the provocation that accompanies feelings of insecurity and fear of not being heard
 - iii. More ownership of the agenda by the clients
- Empathy in middle sessions: The counselor's empathic responses may

become more intuitive and responsive to the uniqueness of each client present. She may be able to make more contact with each individual without other family members feeling she is neglecting them or taking someone's side. Whereas in early counseling she focuses on careful attention to the clients' words or spoken intentions, in the middle of counseling she may be able to respond additionally to the clients' deeper, more complex meanings just on the edge of their own awareness.

- Congruence in the middle of counseling: Congruence, at this point, means that more of the unique qualities of the counselor become part of the clients' experience. Counselors for whom a sense of humor comes naturally may phrase things in eccentric or humorous ways and still remain true to their task of showing understanding of the uniqueness of the family.
- Unconditional positive regard is different in the middle of relational counseling: The longer the counseling lasts, the more tested the counselor's unconditional positive regard will be as clients reveal their limits, their frustrations with one another, the problems they cannot solve and the decisions they cannot make. In the middle of counseling, the counselor must also accept himself and the limits of his own power, as client progress becomes uncertain.

16. Ending relational counseling

- Relational counseling may end without a formal final session
- Frequently, last sessions represent an end of a struggle
- The educational aspect of counseling is made more explicit
- Final sessions sort out predicaments versus problems
 - i. Counseling is most helpful when people finish with a shared sense of what problems they need to solve and what predicaments they need to endure. Ending sessions often involve an acknowledgement of what in their lives they can change and what they must learn to live with. During counseling, clients become free to say what they want and expect even while learning to tolerate the very different wants and needs of their significant others.
 - ii. The final sessions of counseling may contain client expression of their side of a predicament along with acceptance of the integrity and good will of another who takes another side. They are able to realize that two things may be true at the same time.