**Tape Analysis**

***Background of client***

James is an 18 year old male. In our first session, he told me about his prior gang involvement and showed me the scars that he gained by being “beat out” of the gang. He was very open with me in the first session and only continued his openness as our sessions went along. He always was genuine and always brought heavy stuff to our sessions, and he shared with me a lot of deep, emotional turmoil.

All of our sessions throughout the semester were centered on his gang involvement and the terrible things that he has endured during his life. Previously, he used and sold drugs, witnessed the murder of his best friend at the age of 12, has been passed around from his birth mom to several different foster families, witnessed various kinds of gang violence, and other horrific things. He had only talked to me about witnessing and participating in the violent acts of his gang, but this session was completely different than any other session that we had.

I felt like our sessions had mostly been focused on the events and his feelings about his gang activity. During our sessions, he would always talk about generic and somewhat trivial things before he would start to talk about his past traumatic experiences. By the time we would get to these events, our time would be up. I always felt like we left our sessions when he was in a dark place and was still resonant with his emotions from the events. With James, I had the sense that he had very few people and resources available to him to help him cope with such horrendous events. During our previous sessions, we mainly focused on just sharing the stories that he had and worked on uncovering the emotions that he had obviously been hiding for years. I could tell that James is definitely someone who could benefit from outside counseling, but the counselors had a hard time trying to work something out for him because of his lack of stability in his foster families as well as his age since he was no longer a minor.

Our sessions would always last at least 45 minutes, which is completely abnormal in a school. I would try to end them when I felt that he needed to get back to class and when I felt like we had reached a good stopping point for our session, but he always would continue talking and not want to end the session. I could tell that he didn’t have many people to talk to about such things, so I think that he was reluctant to leave without getting all he could from the session. Since he’s had a pretty unstable life, I felt that he was able to share all of this information with me because of his general lack of support.

In the first portion of the session, James revealed to me that he is bisexual. Prior to this session, he had never mentioned his sexuality. I was caught off guard at first by the way he came out to me. I went into the session assuming that we would talk about his gang activity, but I was surprised by the change of pace. It was interesting to go into the session with the assumption that we would talk about violent gang activity and then end up talking about a completely different topic.

***Intervention plan***

The intervention plan that I had for this session was to just explore James’s feelings about his sexuality and discover how his talks with others had gone. My goal for the session was to also try to get an idea about how he wanted to approach others, if he wanted to come out to others, and potentially set a goal for how to accomplish talking to them. It seemed as though James understandably had a hard time coming out to others but that he had received positive responses from them. I wanted to focus on the courage it took to tell others about his sexuality and how he “got himself to do that” as well as think about what it was like to receive positive responses when he mostly expected negative ones.

My intervention plan for the whole semester for James was completely different up until this session. Since I never knew that he was having issues about his sexuality and coming out to others until halfway through the semester, the focus of my intervention plan had been to help him start to better understand the emotions he felt about his gang activity, help him to focus on how he was able to survive the gang, and help him create a plan for after high school since he was graduating this year. After this session, my goal was to incorporate working on processing through his feelings about his sexuality and the reactions he received when he told others about his sexuality.

***Exploration of session’s process and outcome***

The dynamic of this session was very interesting. The entire session was actually 33 minutes long, and he bounced around a lot throughout the entire session. Something that I noticed during the session was how he bounced around from being vulnerable to talking about how tough he was. In the first part of the session, he was very open and talked about the difficulties that he had with coming out to others, experiencing the reactions etc. However, towards the end of the session, I noticed that he wanted to bring up different scenarios of him beating other people up and other violent behaviors.

The dynamic changed from vulnerable to tough when he started talking about other people’s perceptions of him in public (James 119). When one of his friends was called a faggot, he immediately jumped to violence and fought this person. Even though it wasn’t a personal attack on him, James instantly reacted violently. It seems as though he felt personally attacked since the person called his friend a derogatory term about his sexuality that relates directly to James’s own sexuality. Before this, he talked about how he was scared about his mother’s reaction and how he wanted to tell her only if she had dementia (James 66). The difference in reactions to the two events made me believe that his fears to tell his mother and others about his sexuality cause him to react violently when he feels vulnerable.

During the session, James told me about how he was worried to tell his friend Brian because he was worried what he may think (James 51). Once he started talking about his worries that he may be judged, my own stuff came into play. I didn’t realize that it was affecting me, but after listening to my response and how I directed this portion of the tape, I know that my issues with others’ sexuality affected my responses here (James 51-James 62). My dad is gay, and he didn’t come out until I was 12 years old. Since I lived in a small, close-minded town, everyone knew about my dad’s sexuality and didn’t make it easy for him to be open about his sexuality. One of the problems that I had in regards to my dad’s sexuality involved my boyfriends. When I would bring a boyfriend home to meet my family, all but one of my boyfriends acted differently around my dad than they did most males that I had seen them around. Some of them told me that they felt uncomfortable around my dad because of his sexuality and because they didn’t know many other gay males. It always infuriated me to hear that since he was gay, they automatically assumed that he would treat them differently than a heterosexual father would treat them.

After I listened to the tape, I heard myself being very invasive and fired up about the issue of other males feeling uncomfortable around James because of his sexuality. After I went on my rant about how other men shouldn’t feel uncomfortable, I noticed that our session kind of drifted subject wise. He had started out talking about his worries about telling his friend Brian (James 51), and I was so consumed with my own feelings that I forgot that’s what we were talking about. I then directed the conversation towards finding out what his goals were about telling others. I think I should have been aware more of my own stuff that was affecting me so that I wouldn’t have been so pushy with how our conversation went.

Another issue that I had during the session was my need to make James feel accepted and as though I wasn’t judging him by his sexuality. I was a little shocked to see the dynamic of our typical sessions switch from past gang violence to talks about his sexuality. In the midst of my shock, I just wanted to make sure that he understood that I was comfortable and accepting of his sexuality. I wanted him to know and understand that I wasn’t going to be someone who rejected him for this and that he should feel comfortable telling me such a deep and personal issue. Something that I’ve always worried with my tapes and something that I especially worried about in this tape is my ability to show my empathy. I worry that my voice isn’t empathetic enough or that my demeanor is too business-like and not more personal. I think that’s why I have such a difficulty with silence and feel a need to disrupt that silence with constant reassurances with phrases like “right” and “uh huh.” I was more conscious of my display of empathy than I normally am. I didn’t notice too many problems with this in our session directly. I think that James may have been more comfortable if I hadn’t been so pushy with my words.

The perception I had about the session was his conflict between feeling vulnerable to others’ reaction to his sexuality and his need to maintain his tough face. He somewhat went back and forth between being vulnerable and acting tough. An example of how he tried to act tough was when I asked him what it would look like to have a negative reaction about his sexuality (Counselor 112). He had only received positive reactions from his friends and family when he told them about his sexuality, but when I asked him how he would react to a negative reaction his response was that he would punch them in their face (James 113). Although this session didn’t involve a discussion about his gang activity or his emotions regarding his gang activity, he still reverted back to the violent ways that he had been exposed to.

Another example of his conflict between remaining tough and showing his vulnerability to others when revealing his sexuality is his fears about his peers’ reactions. He stated how he was scared that others wouldn’t want to hang out with him (James 109), and he immediately said that if that happened, he’d punch someone in the face (James 113). He even later remarks about how he’s able to act himself but still keeps his tough face on (James 115). Throughout the session as well as previous sessions that we have, he seems afraid of himself. He doesn’t really seem sure of who he really is. It seems as though he thinks that he has to fit into some sort of box of a typical, tough past gang member, and when something such as his sexuality has the potential to cause him to look weak, he wants to hide it and become the tough guy again.

I think the outcome of this tape was that it created a good starting point for our future sessions. The rest of the session that wasn’t on this tape went sort of like a curve. In the beginning of the session, he talked about his vulnerabilities and his fears of telling others about his sexuality. During the middle of the session, he mostly told stories in attempts to display how tough he was. Towards the end of the session, he began to talk more about his situation of telling others and how he planned on handling it. Since this session was different from the past, I think that this session sort of directed our relationship in another direction. It revealed to me a more vulnerable side of him in regards to his personality and allowed me to better understand how he tries to remain tough in order to keep himself from becoming vulnerable to others. To me, this session helped me better understand James and understand exactly how he interacts with others and how he perceives himself.

***Potential changes for the tape***

After listening and processing through my tape, there are several things I would have done differently. The most prominent issue for me that I’ve noticed not only with this tape but also in my other tapes is how I say “yeah” and “right” often and interrupt my clients’ stories and thoughts. When I was typing the transcript, I noticed how I kept having to dedicate an entire line just for my interruptions of “yeah” and “right.” I think that I’m not completely comfortable with silence yet, and I just want to ensure that my clients know that I’m listening and that I care about what they’re saying. My way of doing that in this tape was to repeatedly interject his story. It was definitely worse in the beginning of the tape, but I think that I caught on that I was doing it and it got slightly better as the tape went on. I think I should have been more comfortable with the silence and comfortable knowing that I didn’t have to speak every three seconds for James to know that I was listening.

Another thing I would have done differently was try to not impose my views onto him. I got so caught up in voicing my frustrations that a lot of males assume that if you’re gay you’re going to hit on them that I managed to overpower him and even changed the way the session was going (Counselor 56-James 62). I didn’t realize that my own stuff was coming into play at the time, but as soon as I listened to the tape, I knew that I should have tried to be more comfortable with the silence and let James tell me more about his relationship with his friend Brian and his fears that he would think that he was attracted to him (James 53).

Something I worried about after listening to the tape is that I may have forced him to try to create a goal of who he wanted to tell. I seemed to be pushing too hard for a goal and wanted him to establish who exactly he should tell. I was in the middle of my brief counseling class, and for a while I got so consumed with always wanting my clients to create a goal. I think that since this was the first time I was hearing about his sexuality, I probably shouldn’t have been so adamant about discovering who exactly he wanted to come out to.

The final, somewhat minor, thing I would have done differently is my professionalism. I slightly worried when I listened to the tape that I was coming off more as a friend than a counselor. I think we have a great relationship, and I’ve been surprised at just how much he’s opened up to me so quickly. I just worry that I try to come off as his friend instead of wanting to create a more professional, but still close, relationship with him. I think the problem is that we’re somewhat close in age, and I want him to feel as though he can open up to me and that I’m not someone who can’t understand what he’s going through.

***Ethical considerations***

The main ethical consideration that I have with this client would be his age. Since he is no longer a minor, if I was approached by his guardian, it could have caused a problem. I know that I’m not allowed to reveal any information that we shared together, but I think that a parent or guardian could potentially have a hard time understanding that since he is barely of legal age. Also, his teacher had many discussions with me and hinted around to know what we talked about in our sessions. I think she did this because he was having trouble in class, and she wanted to be able to help him the best that she could. It was a little uncomfortable dealing with a situation like this for the first time. However, I wanted to make sure that the teacher knew about the confidentiality between us so that she knew the importance of our relationship.

***Things learned from site supervision***

I was very lucky to have a wonderful site supervisor. I felt like we had a good relationship, and I felt like I learned a lot through her. She was very open with me, and I always felt comfortable coming to her with questions and concerns. When I told her about James’s sexuality, she told me that she didn’t know. I told her about my concern with my demeanor and also the change of pace in our sessions. One thing that she helped me with was reassure me that we had a strong relationship. We discussed how James revealing his sexuality wasn’t an easy thing to do. She helped me to see that something about our relationship was working because he had been very open with me about his gang activity and also felt comfortable sharing with me his sexuality, which is something he hadn’t shared with many people.

Another thing that my site supervisor helped me with in regards to this tape was her advice about keeping my own stuff as far away from my sessions as possible. When I went home and listened to the tape, I noticed my somewhat invasive tendency in regards to his fears about his sexuality, and I worried about the fact that I didn’t recognize it in the session. My site supervisor helped me to understand that keeping our own stuff in is something that we learn over time. I was very upset with myself for being somewhat invasive, but my supervision helped to show me that keeping our own lives and past histories separate from our counseling sessions and relationships with our clients is a constant struggle that will improve over time. One of the most important things I learned from my supervision not only with this tape but also with my other tapes is that I can’t expect myself to be perfect. I was in my first school as a practicum student, and my skills will develop and grow over time.

**Perceptions on Counseling**

Through my experiences this far, I think that people are brought to counseling because they’re stuck. I think that they’ve experienced some sort of traumatic or troublesome event that has caused them to react and adapt to the situation in some sort of unhealthy way. They then are brought to counseling because they’re enduring or have endured some sort of event that conflicts with the unhealthy patterns that they’ve been using for a while. The maladaptive patterns may have worked for a while, but something causes them struggle when they’re faced with a situation that is made worse by their maladaptive patterns.

I also think that a major reason that people are brought to counseling is relationships. Our families, as well as close friends and family friends, are the basis of our relationships, and the way that we interact with them and learn from them is what we use to create our future relationships. If our family relationships are unhealthy and cause us difficulties, sometimes we base our future relationships on the only relationships that we’ve known. They may not be easily recognized, but remnants of our old relationships have a part of our current and future relationships. If we have unhealthy relationships especially when we’re younger, we’re likely to form maladaptive patterns that we use to handle the hardships during our lives. Those maladaptive patterns may work for a while, but most likely they’re going to cause us emotional stress. These things are what bring people to counseling.

The difficult part of these maladaptive patterns is getting out of them. Throughout this past year, I’ve struggled personally and professionally with this question. I know what issues I’m having and the unhealthy tendencies I have. Now what am I supposed to do about it? And after my clients understand their own maladaptive patterns, how am I supposed to help them get unstuck? I think the biggest part of working our way out of maladaptive patterns is simply being aware of them. One of the most important pieces to counseling is knowing ourselves and being able to understand the events that have caused us to develop these maladaptive patterns. In order to be aware of our maladaptive patterns, we have to know the origin of them. We have to know and understand our past relationships and personal history in order to understand why we developed these patterns. Once we’ve recognized the origination of these patterns, we can then recognize the patterns themselves and how they affect our lives and current relationships.

For example with James, the first step with him would be to understand himself and understand the events that have caused him to handle himself and his relationships in the way that he does. Once he’s recognized this, he would need to recognize that he’s had extremely traumatic events in his life that have caused him to react to vulnerability with violence and maintaining his “tough face.” If he were to be able to recognize this tendency, the next process is applying the awareness of his tendency and using that to be able to react in a more healthy way. I think that changing your maladaptive patterns is a hard, slow process. As counselors, it’s not our job to directly hand over our interpretations of our clients and how we think their maladaptive patterns have developed. I think that our role is to be more of a guide to help them come to these conclusions.

The question then is how exactly do people change? Change truly is a hard process because these patterns are what have helped us to “survive” the various events and relationships in our lives. It’s hard to change how we’ve handled ourselves our entire lives. People are understandably resistant to change because it’s uncomfortable and scary to change. It’s hard to leave what is familiar even if you can recognize that these patterns are unhealthy. Change takes place once we’re able to recognize the maladaptive patterns and have the strength that it takes in order to initiate change. I don’t think that this initiative happens overnight. I think it takes time in order to realize that changing our patterns is what is best even if it feels hard to do.

When choosing an intervention, I assess where the client is in regards to the issues that they’re having. They may be fully aware of their issues but hesitant to change, or they may be unaware that they even have maladaptive patterns. As counselors, checking in with our clients is important to assess and understand what our role is as their counselor. If they can’t recognize the theme that they’ve created with their maladaptive patterns, then our role is to first help them better understand themselves. If they’re aware of themselves and are reluctant to change, our goal is to help them to identify and understand their fears and guide them to be able to take the initiative to change. The most important thing to maintain no matter where clients are is the relationship. The relationship is key to helping our clients so that they’re able to accept our help and be able to successfully apply it. In order to recognize when these interventions have been helpful, we must be constantly aware of their progress. If you can see them overall progressing in the stage of change that they’re in, you know that your method is working.

Ending the counseling relationship is a complicated issue. There can be outside factors such as limited sessions because of insurance, and for school counselors, they may not have the access to students because of a heavy workload, the students move, etc. Putting those factors aside, I think that the decision to end the relationship is ultimately the client and counselor’s decision. If the client feels comfortable enough to be able to handle their daily struggles, the end of the relationship is completely understandable. Also, if the counselor feels as though the client is able to handle their daily struggles, I think that a very strategic discussion with the client should be had in order to determine if the client really is ready and able to terminate the relationship.