Developing a Conceptual Article for Publication in Counseling Journals

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This article seeks to help authors better understand the purpose, process, and procedures for developing a conceptual manuscript for publication in counseling journals. The author explains the basis of a conceptual article, discusses how authors may generate ideas for writing such articles, and describes a process for developing a conceptual article.

According to the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (6th ed.; American Psychological Association [APA], 2010), “Journal articles are usually reports of empirical studies, literature reviews, theoretical articles, methodological articles, or case studies” (p. 9). Journals published by various divisions of the American Counseling Association (ACA), as well as the flagship journal, the Journal of Counseling & Development (JCD), include these article categories and often contain more diversity regarding what constitutes inclusion in each designation. Although there is a trend in the academy to privilege empirical publications over theoretical or conceptual ones (Yadav, 2010), the scholarly importance of conceptual articles—ones that facilitate theory building and elucidate professional issues—has consistently been acknowledged in ACA journals, both by their inclusion in the “Guidelines for Authors” and, more importantly, by their consistent inclusion in the pages of the journals.

Although conceptual and empirical articles both constitute scholarly contributions, an empirical article, because of its standard formatting, may be easier to write (Salomone, 1993). Therefore, the purpose this article is to help authors better understand the purpose, process, and procedures for developing a conceptual manuscript for publication. The article explains the basis of a conceptual article, discusses how authors may generate ideas for writing, and then describes a process for developing a conceptual article that I have found helpful.

What Is A Conceptual Article?

Salomone (1993) noted that many writers, including academicians, do not appreciate the important differences between a literature review (even an integrated literature review) and a conceptual article. Many literature reviews are the clustering of ideas and authors, the recitation of information that could be found elsewhere. Although useful for establishing a context, these reviews typically do not provide a significant enough contribution to the literature to warrant publication. Good, integrated literature reviews attempt to go beyond merely reporting ideas and findings, by describing and synthesizing important results into a coherent review that highlights the main themes, strengths, and weaknesses of the work. According to the APA Publication Manual (APA, 2010), literature review articles are integrated reviews that critically evaluate “material that has already been published. . . . By organizing, integrating, and evaluating previous published material, authors of literature reviews consider the progress of research toward clarifying a problem” (p. 10). Thus, literature review authors should seek to “define and clarify the problem; summarize previous investigations and inform the reader of the state of research; identify relations, contradictions, gaps, and inconsistencies in the literature; and suggest the next step or steps in solving the problem” (APA, 2010, p. 10).

Literature reviews and theoretical articles are often similar in structure, and the sections of both can vary in the order of their content. Theoretical articles, however, present empirical information only as it is relevant to theory building or evaluation. “Authors of theoretical articles trace the development of theory to expand and refine theoretical constructs or present a new theory or analyze existing theory, pointing out flaws or demonstrating the advantage of one theory over another” (APA, 2010, p. 10). In theoretical articles, therefore, theory building and evaluation are the primary considerations.

ACA division journals have consistently published quality conceptual articles that include, but are not limited to, theoretical ones. Conceptual articles may be described, therefore, as articles that provide new theoretical perspectives or integrate existing theoretical views, address innovative—new or adapted—procedures or techniques, discuss current professional issues or professional development (position papers), or offer well-reasoned reactions or responses to previously published articles. Readers are directed to the “Guidelines for Authors” located inside each ACA division journal or online (e.g., Association for Counselor Education and Supervision [ACES], 2010) to see which types of conceptual articles are accepted by the various journals.

Generating Ideas for a Conceptual Article

In his book titled On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft, Stephen King (2000) provided excellent advice for authors, especially

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According to Balkin (2009), authors of conceptual manuscripts need to present a new way of conceptualizing or utilizing a theory, idea, technique, or position that has not been previously addressed in the literature. Authors need to include a thorough, albeit succinct, review of related literature and integrate this prior literature into the discussion of new conceptualizations or applications. From a journal editor's perspective, Balkin noted, "merely describing a new model, technique, or concept without drawing on [prior literature] is grounds for rejection" (p. 1).

Subsequent to presenting a strong theoretical foundation or rationale, authors of conceptual manuscripts should provide a discussion or implications section that helps readers understand or interpret (a) the new concepts or applications, (b) the implications for counseling practice or the counseling profession, and (c) possible avenues for future research. In addition, presenting a case study prior to the discussion section often helps readers better understand the new conceptualization or application (Balkin, 2009). Although the scope and structure of conceptual articles may vary, Balkin's format is a solid one that resonates with the process I follow for constructing such articles.

In developing a conceptual manuscript for publication, I recommend that authors begin with an annotated outline. An annotated outline, as I understand it, goes beyond a standard outline sketch and includes summary descriptions of contents and source citations. Developing the outline, and referring to it regularly, will help authors remain focused and on task. Authors should not feel bound to their outlines, however, and as the manuscript develops, there may be a need for outline revisions.

Below, I discuss a model outline for the contents of a conceptual article and embedded in each section are salient parts of an example annotated outline created for a conceptual article. The article, titled "Adlerian Encouragement and the Therapeutic Process of Solution-Focused Brief Therapy" (Watts & Pietrzak, 2000), was published in JCD. Unlike a regular annotated outline, however, I will not cite sources because of space limitations. Please note that this model is only one of many ways to format a conceptual article.

Model Outline: Introduction

The introduction of a conceptual manuscript should inform readers of the author's purpose or goal. It is useful to state the purpose or position of the manuscript very early, preferably in the first or second paragraph. Authors need to engage readers' interest but, more importantly, they need to inform readers of the manuscript's contents. The introduction from the annotated outline example is as follows.

I. Introduction
   A. General Introduction of the Influence of Alfred Adler's Work
      1. Note Corey's acknowledgment of Adler's influence.
      2. List approaches in which Adler's influence has been acknowledged or his vision noted and provide source citations.
   B. Constructivism and Adlerian Counseling
      1. Discuss common ground between Adlerian theory and various constructivist approaches to counseling and mention the lack of recognition of Adler in the constructivist literature, in general (cite sources).
      2. Note that although there are a surprising number of common ground areas between Adlerian counseling and solution-focused brief
therapy (SFBT; a specific constructivist approach), no acknowledgment of Adler or Adlerian counseling was found in the SFBT literature (cite sources).

C. Purpose Statement: Although there are many points of common ground between Adlerian counseling and SFBT, this article’s sole focus is to discuss remarkable similarities between Adlerian encouragement and the therapeutic process of SFBT.

Model Outline: Review of Literature

As Balkin (2009) noted, conceptual articles should have a solid review of literature to provide a “strong theoretical foundation or a synthesis of ideas” (p. 1). When authors discuss a new conceptual model, describe a new procedure or technique, or state a position regarding a professional issue without adequately attending to previous literature, they fail to provide readers with sufficient context for the development and understanding of the new ideas. Consequently, these authors fail to substantiate the case that their conceptualization or position is a new perspective or has merit.

In some conceptual articles, the literature review precedes the presentation of the new model or position. For example, in many articles describing new procedures or techniques (e.g., Juhnke, Coll, Sunich, & Kent, 2008; Watts & Garza, 2008; Watts, Peluso, & Lewis, 2005), the detailed description of the procedure or technique follows a theoretical rationale. In fact, this format is often required by journals that encourage submission of innovative procedures or techniques (e.g., ACES, 2010; Balkin, 2009; Watts, 2004).

Model Outline: Presentation of New Concepts, Procedures, or Positions

In this section of a conceptual manuscript, authors provide a detailed description of the new conceptual model or procedure or present the position for which they are making a case. Authors presenting a new procedure or technique should provide specific instruction and discuss it with such specificity that readers can both understand and replicate it (Kline & Farrell, 2005; Watts, 2004). With regard to position papers, Kline and Farrell (2005) noted that the most important aspect is “the presentation of a balanced discussion contrasting points of view” (p. 172) and not merely presenting literature in support of the position the author espouses. Furthermore, authors who fail to provide adequate literature support and/or do not provide contrasting perspectives “give readers the impression that the contents are no more than authors’ opinions. In these cases, the authors’ positions lose credibility as academic arguments” (Kline & Farrell, 2005, p. 172).

Although some conceptual articles clearly separate the literature and the presentation of the new concept, procedure, or position statement, other conceptual articles juxtapose discussion of the literature within the context of the presenta-

II. Adlerian Encouragement and SFBT

A. Section Overview

1. Define encouragement (provide citations).

2. Note key characteristics of SFBT process (provide citations).

3. Note parallels between encouragement and SFBT process: Perspective on maladjustment, counselor–client relationship, and facilitating change.

4. Transition: These areas provide the structure for discussion of the similarities between Adlerian encouragement and the SFBT therapeutic process.

B. Perspective on Maladjustment

1. Describe the SFBT position on maladjustment (provide citations).

2. Describe the Adlerian position on maladjustment and note parallels/similarities (provide citations).

C. Counselor–Client Relationship

1. Describe the SFBT understanding of the counselor–client relationship (provide citations).

2. Describe the Adlerian understanding of the counselor–client relationship and note parallels/similarities (provide citations).

D. Facilitating Change

1. Describe the SFBT process and understanding of helping clients change (provide citations).

2. Describe the Adlerian process and understanding of helping clients change and note parallels/similarities (provide citations).

Model Outline: Discussion and Implications

For theory- or position-focused articles, authors should include a discussion section that helps readers understand or interpret the information presented, discusses implications for counseling professionals, offers recommendations for the counseling profession, and provides suggestions for subsequent dialogue and research. Balkin (2009) noted that a case study that precedes the discussion section might be useful to help readers understand the implementation of the concepts discussed. For procedure- or intervention-focused articles, authors should, at minimum, provide a case study demonstrating the utility and effectiveness of the procedure or intervention after the presentation section of the article (Watts, 2004). Kline and Farrell (2005) indicated that authors of innovative methods articles should include the results of “systematic qualitative or quantitative evaluation procedures” (p. 171) in the discussion to demonstrate the merit of the new method.
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When I initially submitted the “Encouragement and SFBT” manuscript to JCD, the manuscript ended with a short conclusion following the three areas of similarity between Adlerian encouragement and the SFBT therapeutic process. The reviewers noted that my ideas were valid and well presented, but all stated that I did not offer any discussion of the importance or implications for counseling; in other words, “this is great, but so what?” Consequently, they asked that I revise and resubmit the manuscript with a section that included implications for readers. Therefore, regardless of the type of conceptual article an author submits, it should include a strong section addressing the implications for counseling and its constituents (e.g., counselors, counselor educators, policymakers).

III. Considerations for Counseling: What Implications or Conclusions May Be Drawn?

A. Multicultural Considerations

1. Note how postmodern approaches (e.g., SFBT) emphasize social justice and equality.
2. Discuss Adler’s and Adlerians’ emphasis on social embeddedness and social equality issues:
   a. Women’s rights, rights of minorities (provide citations).
   b. Adlerian theory and Brown v. Board of Education (provide citation).
3. Discuss Adlerian counseling’s relevance for working with culturally diverse populations (provide citations).

B. Managed Care Considerations: Discuss how Adlerian counseling strongly resonates with Prochaska and Norcross’s research on current clinical practice in managed care environments (provide citations).

C. Integrative Considerations: Discuss how Adlerian counseling is a very flexible, highly integrative, and technically eclectic approach (provide citations).

Model Outline: Conclusion

There is great variability in the length of conclusion sections of scholarly articles, including conceptual ones. Minimally, authors will want to briefly summarize the content of the manuscript. With theory- or position-focused manuscripts in particular, authors will want to reemphasize the foundational theoretical or position point they were attempting to demonstrate. This may be done by summarizing the article’s contents with a focus on the key premise, or authors may embed a final point of implication within the summary (a “closing argument” if you will) that seeks to more finely point the reader to the foundational premise and more strongly delineate the message the author wants to communicate. The example annotated outline follows the latter of the two ways to conclude a manuscript.

IV. Conclusion

A. Summarize previously discussed similarities between encouragement and SFBT.

B. Summarize previously discussed implications.

C. Discuss the question of why, given the remarkable similarities, Adlerian counseling has not been acknowledged in the SFBT literature. Two possibilities:
   1. Ellenberger’s argument for “widespread plagiarism.”
   2. Zeitgeist effect:
      a. Discuss how Adler’s ideas were ahead of his time and were ignored because they were considered unscientific or unworthy of note (provide citations).
      b. Note that there are many inaccurate secondary source presentations of Adler’s work and offer an example (provide citations).

D. Suggest it might be time to become better acquainted with a pioneering constructivist approach—Adlerian counseling.

Conclusion

This article attempted to help authors gain a better understanding of conceptual articles and a procedural structure for developing such manuscripts for publication. Articles addressing new theoretical perspectives or integration of existing ones, innovative—new or adapted—procedures or techniques, current professional issues or professional development, or well-reasoned reactions or responses to previously published articles are all considered conceptual articles.

In generating ideas for and developing skill in writing conceptual articles, authors should develop a regular and extensive reading regime that includes both research and conceptual article literature. Creating ideas and learning to write well is hard work, and reading well-written literature is useful for both goals. To facilitate the discovery of unique ideas for conceptual manuscripts, authors need to (a) develop an intimate knowledge of the literature on selected topics of interest, (b) engage in dialogue with others to create space for the emergence and expansion of ideas, and (c) develop greater understanding of ideas by reflecting on them through the writing process.

Authors often find it more difficult to develop conceptual articles than empirically based articles, which tend to have a more standard format. Although the scope and structure of conceptual articles vary, the process delineated in this article provides a useful framework for constructing such articles. Developing an annotated outline—including an Introduction, Review of Literature, Presentation of New Ideas, Discussion and Implications, and a Conclusion—and consistently referring to it may help authors with structure and focus.

Conceptual articles, like empirical ones, are important scholarly contributions to the literature. They help to facilitate development of counseling theory, practice, and professional issues in ways that are unique to the conceptual framework.
JCD and the division journals of the ACA have consistently published strong conceptual articles, and authors will find ample publication opportunities for publishing such articles in the journals of the counseling profession.

References


