Psychodynamic Theories: Approaches and Applications

Chapter 6

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Psychodynamic Theories

Introduction

• Psychodynamic theory evolved from core concepts of psychoanalysis, and was based on the groundbreaking work of both Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung.

• Psychoanalysis was exclusively an individually oriented treatment approach, centered on enhancing personal awareness and revealing unconscious influences through extensive, time-consuming exploration of the inner self.

Psychodynamic Theories

Introduction

• While psychodynamic therapy focused on unconscious thought processes and their impacts on behavior, psychodynamic family therapy took this concept to a higher order, by centering on how these processes impact not only individual behavior but also relational dynamics and dysfunctional family patterns.

• Treatment under this model included goals of raising individual and system awareness, fostering insight, identifying systemic patterns, rebalancing system deficits, and enhancing relationships.

Psychodynamic Theories

Nathan Ackerman

- Nathan Ackerman is widely credited as being the founder of psychodynamic family therapy.

- In the mid-20th century, he offered a new construct of families as an emotional unit, and described the dynamic interrelationship of individual and family pathologies.

- Ackerman proposed a model for understanding family relationships through a psychodynamic framework, which included developing insights into influences on self identity and the self in a social context.

Psychodynamic Theories

Henry Dicks

- Dicks first hypothesized a relationship between constructs of ego identity and marital relationship quality.

- Dicks described marriage as a shared process of attribution and projection.

- He further asserted that mate selection itself was fueled by the drive to find an "ideal object" in a partner.

Psychodynamic Theories

James Framo

- Using a marital interaction framework and integrating object relations theory, Framo offered a family-of-origin-based intergenerational theory.

- He is credited with recognizing that the partner relationship tends to trigger unresolved attachment issues from childhood caregiver experiences, and conflicts often arise from projection of unconscious beliefs about the self.

Psychodynamic Theories

Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy

•Boszormenyi-Nagy is credited with introducing the concept of "relational reality."

•Boszormenyi-Nagy's approach is more complex and encompassing than other psychodynamic family theories, as it focuses not only on presenting family issues, but also on considering influences from the past and potential influences on an undefined future.

Psychodynamic Theories

Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy

•Boszormenyi-Nagy's contextual family therapy (CFT) model also included considerations for individual responsibility and accountability within a systemic context, and was founded on the premise that the self is dependent upon reflections of others.

Psychodynamic Theories

John (Elderkin) Bell

- Bell was the first to describe families as small groups, stressing the influences of tasks, practices and constructs on the families' abilities to respond to conflicts and stressors.

- A primary goal of his therapeutic approach was to facilitate awareness in families regarding how their roles in the system impact each other.

Psychodynamic Theories

Robin Skynner

• Skynner proposed the application of group analysis concepts to family treatment. His model included defined stages of the family group, influences of roles and constructs, and the impact of relational dynamics on the functionality of the family group.

• Skynner also stressed the importance of the clinician as an active participant in the therapeutic process, viewing transference and countertransference as critical parts of the therapeutic process, rather than pitfalls to be avoided.

Psychodynamic Theories

Major Constructs

• Psychodynamic family therapy has its roots in psychoanalytic and systems theories.

• Combined with a strong influence from object relations and group analysis, psychodynamic approaches seek to uncover unconscious contributors to thoughts and behaviors, dysfunctional defenses, and impacts of these on relationships.

• Psychodynamic family therapy holds that individuals interact in relationships based on expectations formed by earlier experiences.

Psychodynamic Theories

Major Constructs

• Past experiences create *introjects* —internalized constructs of self in relation to others resulting from those events and creating expectation in subsequent interaction.

• As the individual continues to develop, new experiences are processed based on these constructs, which may be modified or further validated over time.

• Melanie Klein (1946) was the first to propose the idea of *projective identification*, a mechanism by which constructs of self or of self-other are attributed to an external object.

Psychodynamic Theories

Contributions from Object Relations Theory

• *External objects* are most often people to whom the individual has an emotional attachment or with whom there is personal investment.

• External objects can be experienced as *ideal*, which contributes to gratification and fulfillment; *rejecting* which contributes to disappointment and anger; or *exciting*, which contributes to yearning and desire.

Psychodynamic Theories

Contributions from Object Relations Theory

• Foundations of projective identification begin in infancy, and are significantly developed throughout childhood experiences. This is the time most rich in *symbol formation*, which forms the framework for connecting and relating to the outside world.

• *Splitting* occurs when the ego seeks to keep positive and negative representations of external objects separated, and generally dissipates early in development as these become integrated.

Psychodynamic Theories

Contributions from Object Relations Theory

• As a child develops, experiences and meaning are internalized through *introjection* and *identification*, processes that define the self in relation to others, and comprise the earliest foundations of *ego identity*.

• These foundational concepts support attachment theory and solidify its place in psychodynamic family therapy. In simplest terms, this theory asserts that individuals require secure attachments to primary caregivers in order to develop into healthy adults.

Psychodynamic Theories

Contributions from Object Relations Theory

•From an object relations perspective, this means that children need object constancy and positive internalizations to develop secure attachments and a strong ego identity.

•Similarly, constructive internalizations support separation and individuation, two essential developmental tasks that support identity integration and differentiation.

Psychodynamic Theories

Couple and Family Application

- From an attachment perspective, it is important to recognize that the human drive for caregiver approval and acceptance has significant impact on identity development and relationships throughout the life span.

- In childhood, the subjective interpretations of caregiver–child interactions are internalized as identity constructs.

- In adulthood, these constructs as essential parts of the filter through which relationships are experienced.

Psychodynamic Theories

Couple and Family Application

- From a psychodynamic perspective, the life span development of a couple or family is substantially impacted by the early development of the individuals within the system.

- Hypothetically, if parents are psychologically healthy, the family will be well-adjusted.

- Conversely, fragile ego states and negative projections will adversely impact relational dynamics, as well as individual and systemic development.

Psychodynamic Theories

Couple and Family Application

• Dicks (1967) described the evidence of these issues in couple systems as *mutual projective identification* and *marital collusion*.

• As couples begin to conform to the inner roles models of the other, *marital bargaining* emerges; this is exemplified in role identities within the system.

• The degree of distress in the relationship is directly related to the functional adaptation of this dynamic.

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Couple and Family Application

• Projections often contribute to creation of roles within the family system, underscoring the *loyalties* associated with these roles.

• Loyalties arise from internalized expectations and the collusion of perpetuating the role within the system.

• The impact is considerable on the system as a whole, and helps to maintain what can often be very destructive interpersonal patterns.

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Couple and Family Application

•From a transgenerational view, counselors must understand the role of *entitlements* and *ledgers*.

•Ledgers (also called ledger of merits) are the system's history of what is provided and what is due—an unwritten record of give and take—and should reflect a general sense of balance.

•Ledger balances must be viewed intergenerationally, though conflicts arising from imbalances are often visible in a single generation.

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Couple and Family Application

- *Relational ethics* are also significant factors in the development of loyalties, ledgers, and legacies, and directly impact entitlements in a system.

- Relational ethics are concerned with the depth and quality of intra- and intergenerational moral constructs, and how these are expressed in a family.

- Relational ethics are experiential, and are based on needs fulfillment and reciprocity.

Psychodynamic Theories

Basic Assumptions

• Focus is not only on the individual, but also on the entire family system.

• Significant topics and events must be addressed during therapy.

• Additional conflicts may arise in the process of dealing with presenting issues.

• Counselors serve as facilitators, focusing on relationship enhancement over pathology.

Psychodynamic Theories

Basic Assumptions

• Systems tend toward homeostasis.

• Defined social roles exist.

• Role complementarity fosters mutual support, dependence, and intimacy.

• Conflicts affect the entire system.

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Goals

•Because psychodynamic therapy is awareness-oriented, the primary goal of treatment is insight, in most basic terms, the unconscious is brought into the conscious.

•A secondary emphasis is placed on working through issues by developing enhanced cognizance and mindfulness, and positive progression of the system's developmental phases and tasks.

•Goals at inception of treatment are broad and open-ended, and relate both to the members individually and to the system as a whole.

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Challenges

• One of the primary challenges to developing goals using a psychodynamic approach with couples or families is the desire for the system to have symptom relief.

• In addition, clients may be initially resistant to considering their roles in system dysfunction when the "problem" seems isolated to one member.

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Conceptualization

• The identification of goals may depend partially on presenting issues, but even more so, it depends upon the participants themselves and the relationships between them.

• Ideally, symptom relief is an almost secondary consideration, and develops from the improvements in awareness, insight, and dynamics that are part of the treatment process.

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Developing Treatment Goals

With this foundation for conceptualization, the guide map for treatment could be based on the following initial open-ended goals, which are evaluated and revised as treatment progresses:

1. Discover and understand presenting issues through a family-of-origin lens.

2. Recognize ways in which introjects influence behavioral patterns.

- Understand system coalitions and roles.

Psychodynamic Theories

Developing Treatment Goals

4. Identify new ways of relating by altering and adapting beliefs.

5. Practice awareness and mindfulness of developmentally supportive relational dynamics.

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Developing Treatment Goals

As participants demonstrate progress toward these goals, and as additional issues and considerations are revealed, the following secondary goals develop:

1. Improve system functioning and decrease system conflict.

2. Improve social function within system.

3. Improve responses to crises.

4. Improve system communication.

5. Improve relational dynamics across generations of system.

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Techniques

• Psychodynamic family therapy begins from a position that presenting issues and pathologies have three primary components—intrapsychic, interpersonal, and psychosocial.

• A comprehensive assessment of each member is essential, with attention paid to individual as well as relational considerations.

• Often, as part of the assessment process, a counselor will create a genogram of the family system.

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Techniques

•The current generation is the primary focus; however, multiple generations are noted to facilitate awareness of patterns and later to help identify potential introjects.

•Under ideal circumstances, psychodynamic family therapy involves two counselors, with one serving a more active role of facilitation and guidance, while the other primarily acts as an observer, offering insights as appropriate.

•In utilizing these techniques, the counselor also approaches the participants using an *investigative neutrality*, one of the most important features of the clinical process.

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Techniques

Other techniques include:

- Listening
- Empathy
- Observation
- Interpretation
- Integration and session structure
- Role of transference and countertransference

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Limitations

•There is a lack of understanding of contemporary psychodynamic models.

•Critics have asserted that psychodynamic models overemphasize influences of gender roles and gender differences and fail to fully integrate the cultural impacts on family dynamics.

•Psychodynamic couple and family work focuses on the system itself as the "client," which is generally not accepted by third-party payers.

Psychodynamic Theories

Limitations

- Stability of participants.

- Availability and cooperation of systems members.

- Intensity of the process.