



Experiential and Humanistic Theories: Approaches and Applications

Chapter 7

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Experiential and Humanistic Theories

Introduction

- The humanistic-existential movement of the 1960s, including gestalt therapy, psychodrama, client-centered therapy, and the encounter group movement, fostered the emergence of experiential and humanistic family approaches.
- These approaches emphasize the affective or emotional dimension of the family system.
- Experiential family approaches are clearly founded on fundamental humanistic tenets, including respect for clients' holism, dignity, freedom, right to construct meaning, and capacity for choosing goals.



Symbolic-Experiential Family Therapy (SEFT)

Carl Whitaker

- Trained as a psychiatrist, he focused on treating schizophrenia and observed that patients who appeared to have recovered experienced a reemergence of their symptoms after being reunited with their families. This observation led to his focus on treating the family system.
- He would join a family system and then adopt an unorthodox freewheeling style in order to assist family members in loosening up their rigid roles and adopting a healthier, authentic way of being.
- He developed symbolic-experiential family therapy (SEFT).



Symbolic-Experiential Family Therapy (SEFT)

Major Constructs

Symbolism and Metaphor

- As a result of his background in psychoanalysis, similar to Freud, Carl Whitaker believed a statement or behavior made by a family member could potentially have both a literal meaning and a latent or symbolic meaning.
- A primary aim of his was to uncover the unconscious meaning behind the literal meaning.
- He believed that metaphors were useful for understanding a family because metaphors highlight unstated assumptions of family members.



Symbolic-Experiential Family Therapy (SEFT)

Major Constructs

Symbolic Language

- Whitaker believed that symbolic language developed in most close family relationships.
- Whitaker would use such symbolic language as an opportunity to promote positive change by shifting from metaphor to reality and back again.
- Whitaker would engage a family in verbal play to enhance flexibility in the family behaviors and roles.



Symbolic-Experiential Family Therapy (SEFT)

Major Constructs

Battle for Structure

- Carl Whitaker used this term to refer to his belief that it was important for the therapist to establish authoritative control early in the process.

Freedom

- Consistent with the philosophy of existential humanistic counseling, Whitaker emphasized that once a workable structure had been established the family should be allowed to determine the course of therapy (sometimes referred to as a “battle for initiative”).



Symbolic-Experiential Family Therapy (SEFT)

Major Constructs

Craziness

- The ability of two or more family members to engage one another through “crazy” behavior and dialogue was, in Whitaker’s view, a primary characteristic of a healthy or functioning family.

Flight Into Health

- This is a tendency for families to terminate therapy prematurely once their anxiety has been reduced (Whitaker & Ryan, 1989). Although premature, this is a positive sign because it indicates that the family has become more autonomous and unified.



Symbolic-Experiential Family Therapy (SEFT)

Goals

- Goals are typically set at both the system and the individual levels.
- The goals are to simultaneously cultivate a sense of belonging among the family members and to also promote the individuality of each family member.
- The goal is also to foster the development of a new family culture that include an increased sense of unity.



Symbolic-Experiential Family Therapy (SEFT)

Techniques

- Redefine symptoms as efforts for growth.
- Model fantasy alternatives to real-life stress.
- Separate interpersonal stress and intrapersonal fantasy stress.
- Add practical bits of intervention.



Symbolic-Experiential Family Therapy (SEFT)

Techniques

- Augment the despair of a family member.
- Use affective confrontation.
- Treat children like children and not like peers.



Symbolic-Experiential Family Therapy (SEFT)

Diversity

Strengths of SEFT

- SEFT emphasizes the priority of establishing rapport with the family member who is the most influential with regard to the family's participation in therapy. A strength of this aspect is that it entails being responsive to cultural differences.
- SEFT places a high value on experiences and actions as opposed to primarily emphasizing cognitions.



Symbolic-Experiential Family Therapy (SEFT)

Diversity

Limitations of SEFT

- SEFT places a high value on individualism and this aspect might render it less effective with families from a collectivist culture that places more emphasis on a hierarchical system of decision making.
- There is also an inherent risk that the use of playful language related to family members exchanging roles might unintentionally offend family members from cultures where freely experimenting with family roles is unacceptable.



Gestalt Family Therapy

Walter Kempler

- Walter Kempler developed his own form of therapy called experiential family therapy in the 1970s.
- Experiential family therapy was grounded in creating experiential moments in session with families to help families increase awareness about their thoughts and feelings, take responsibility, obtain a sense of autonomy, and maintain authenticity to bring about change.



Gestalt Family Therapy

Walter Kempler

- Kempler focused on the thoughts and feelings underlying communication in order to obtain a holistic view of what one is communicating.
- Various humanistic-experiential approaches influenced Kempler's creation of experiential family therapy, particularly those of Carl Rogers, Fritz Perls, Stern, Yalom, Spinelli, and Schibbye.



Gestalt Family Therapy

Major Constructs

- Kempler stated that the family unit is important to each individual member and a vital source of life's meaning.
- Actively preserving and improving the family's communication and dynamics through experience-based therapy is the core emphasis.
- The dynamics in the family are also a focal point. More specifically, these dynamics include union and separation in the family.



Gestalt Family Therapy

Major Constructs

The following four concepts play various roles in resolving a family's struggle, and the family's progress toward healing:

- Agreement
- Compromise
- Giving up
- Winning



Gestalt Family Therapy

Goals

- When in session, the goal of experiential family therapy is to actively engage each family member in the counseling process so they can experience one another, increase awareness of themselves and the family dynamics, become more united, and practice communication.
- Another immediate goal is to increase awareness of different outcomes of healthy and unhealthy family dynamics and communication patterns.
- The overarching goal is to have the family become healthier.



Gestalt Family Therapy

Techniques

- To achieve the goals of experiential family therapy, the therapist must be an active participant in the therapy session and take on a directive role.
- The therapist must be genuine, be personable with the family, build trust, create a safe environment, and be comfortable with honest confrontation in order to deliver honest messages to help the family to gain awareness.



Gestalt Family Therapy

Techniques

The therapist is also responsible for the following:

- Helping the family talk directly about issues and keeping them in the here and now.
- Helping family members identify conflicting needs.
- Helping the family be open and vulnerable with each other.
- Encouraging the family to be emotional.
- Emphasizing the family taking action in order to become healthier.



Gestalt Family Therapy

Diversity

- Diversity is a core value that the therapist must recognize in the dynamics and communication of the family.
- Each family is unique, as is each of the individual family members.



Experiential Family Therapy

- Virginia Satir's childhood, which she often described in her teaching, was filled with tales of the roles that she felt her family had played in her own development.
- As the oldest of five children and the grandchild of German immigrants, family became a critical factor in Virginia's life and would later figure prominently in the development of her theories and her approach.
- Satir often incorporated personal perception and motive into her work, using her own family as both a guide and an example.



Experiential Family Therapy

Major Constructs

- **The Human Validation Model:** For Satir, a critical construct was a focus on the development of the potential of each human being in any relationship.
- **Family Focus:** Critical to Satir's approach was the relationship between married couples.



Experiential Family Therapy

Major Constructs

- **The Presenting Problem as a Myth...and a Guide:** A real innovation was Satir's assertion that the "presenting problem" was often not the real problem.
- **Self-Esteem:** Coping strategies were clues to an individual's self-esteem.



Experiential Family Therapy

Major Constructs

- **Communication and Maturation:** Satir argued that maturity is defined as a state in which an individual is able to clearly communicate his or her self-concept and is fully in charge of self.
- **Patterns of Communication:** The placator, the blamer, the computer, the distractor, the congruent communicator.
- **Family as a Microcosm:** Satir theorized that the complex relationships within a family resemble the world as a whole.



Experiential Family Therapy

Goals

- Elimination of pathological approaches to coping.
- Helping clients to redirect energy toward moving toward health, optimal functioning, and engaging in functional communication.
- Helping families expand awareness and growth.
- Development of self-esteem.



Experiential Family Therapy

Techniques

- Satir saw the role of the family therapist as one of guiding the family through the process of positive growth by investigating discrepancies and facilitating effective communication.
- Rather than focus on specific techniques, Satir felt that the therapist should focus on developing a genuine and congruent relationship with the family while facilitating and encouraging growth and change.



Experiential Family Therapy

Techniques

Additional therapist responsibilities include:

- Creating a setting in which clients can risk exploring themselves objectively.
- Assisting the family in building self-esteem by identifying past successes as well as present assets.
- Pointing out non verbal messages, gaps and discrepancies in communication, opportunities for accountability, and the ways in which past modes of communication have impacted the family dynamics.



Experiential Family Therapy

Techniques

- Interpreting messages that may not be clear.
- Reducing the need for defenses by establishing boundaries and helping families to agree upon healthy roles and functions.



Experiential Family Therapy

The Status Quo and the Foreign Element: The Satir Change Model

Satir (1988) identified a stage-based process that described the ways in which families make change.

- Status Quo
- Foreign Element
- Chaos
- Transformative Idea



Virginia Satir

Diversity

- Satir's approach has been valued by those averse to more traditional forms of family therapy that rely on issues of power.
- Her work has since been adapted in various cultural and organizational contexts, including work with Hispanic families.



Experiential and Humanistic Theories

Limitations

- The experiential and humanistic approaches to family therapy were strongly influenced by existential, gestalt, and person-centered approaches to therapy. Limitations of these approaches are closely related to the values and philosophy from these three sources.



Experiential and Humanistic Theories

Limitations

- The approaches of Whitaker, Kempler, and Satir all place a high degree of value on individualism and each family member's capacity for self-actualization (e.g., Satir's transformative idea).
- However, a limitation of these approaches is lack of acknowledgment that an individual's capacity for self-actualization or transcendence may be impeded by cultural influences such as oppression, racism, and discrimination.
- Experiential humanistic approaches encourage family members to be authentic in the face of social norms that potentially limit their authentic self-expression.



Experiential and Humanistic Theories

Limitations

- Another limitation is related to the gestalt and existential perspectives underlying the experiential humanistic approaches. These perspectives entail less formal structure and fewer concrete techniques for working with clients.
- The experiential humanistic approaches seem to be best suited for clients who are higher functioning with regard to cognitive abilities. Clients who are cognitively lower functioning, are less sophisticated, or have limited command of the counselor's native language may find experiential humanistic approaches less understandable.