

Psychoanalytic Therapy: of “Ordinary People”

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The psychoanalytic approach, founded by Sigmund Freud, characterizes behavior to be “deterministic” (Corey, 2015, p.59) shaped by sexual and aggressive drives during the stages of early childhood years. An image of an iceberg encapsulates the mental aspect of the conscious versus unconscious part. The aim of therapy is to delve into the unconscious containing “memories and experiences that have been repressed or pushed out of consciousness because they are too threatening” (Tan, 2011, p. 38). Freud states three components of the id which is our primal instinct for pleasure, the ego which regulates the id and the superego based on the societal aspects “to aim for perfection and moralistic ideals” (Corey, 2015, p.39).

Depending on how harmonious the psychosexual stages (oral, anal, phallic latency and genital) are experienced, the level of anxiety and shaping of personality is affected by how well the ego can manage the urges of the id and expectations of the superego. Defense mechanisms arise as the ego deals with the internalized unconsciousness. There have been offshoots of this methodology, such as Erikson’s psychosocial model, or shorter forms of treatment (brief psychodynamic therapy) and a differentiation of the client to therapist alliance where transference occurs in a more “collaborative working relationship” (Corey, 2015, p. 83).

In the case of Conrad, the theory could explain the repression and guilt of Bucky’s drowning which led him to attempt suicide by slitting his wrists. Conrad was admitted to a hospital for four months, but he was still not able to sleep, eat, or focus in his school and relationships were deteriorating to the point of curses at his parents or fist fights with his friend. With the inference of Conrad lacking maternal love, perhaps during the anal stage, he developed an inability to own his “personal power and learn to express negative feelings such as rage and aggression” (Corey, 2015, p. 65). In the movie, the vacant and numbness shows Conrad not to be able to feel anything at all and perhaps the culture he also lives in where the private lives are

never revealed continually compound indifference. To fill the void, Conrad seeks female companionship with emotive women that he can speak freely with, such as Karen from the hospital as opposed to strained superficialities and avoidance of his mother who he thinks hates him.

As Dr. Burger, free association with asking Conrad the first thing that comes to mind for words such as mother, swimming, and control could be explored to tackle the strained relationship with his mother and the need to keep his father from “quit worrying about me” (Redford, 1980, 18:18). After a significant progression in the therapeutic alliance and safe transference of Conrad onto Dr. Burger as a possible friend or even brother, dream analysis would be used to explore the nightmare of the sailing incident. If Conrad manages to keep a dream journal, it enables him to confront and “unlock the repression that has kept the material from consciousness and relate the new insight to their present struggle” (Corey, 2015, p.74).

The approach would be effective in the slow progression of waiting for Conrad to open up because he is facing relative difficult with basic living. It would be unwise to rush Conrad to confront such a debilitating situation and complicated relationship with his mother who did not even come to visit him at the hospital. Moreover, Conrad does want to talk about this as he mentions to Karen how he misses the hospital, but the difficulty might be how much he speaks with a nonfeeling and anonymous therapist that is unable to disclose anything. Since this therapy requires a significant consistency in time and financial resources, Conrad is able to afford both. However, the modern psychodynamic approach could better suit Conrad since it is not his personality that needs changing but the immediate symptoms of repression and resistance and the therapist taking on a more active role.

References

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