

Ordinary People Application Paper: Psychodynamic Models

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Psychodynamic or psychoanalytic model is considered by many to be the most comprehensive theory on personality, psychopathology, and psychotherapy, with far reaching influence on most subsequent counseling theories (Tan, 2011). According to its founder, Sigmund Freud, there are two powerful forces at work in human nature: libido and death instincts (Corey, 2017). Understood as sexual and aggressive drives, these instincts are biological and unconscious, motivating and determining why people act as they do. They also contribute to the psychoanalytic view of personality, which consists of three systems functioning as a whole called the id, the ego, and the superego. The id refers to the innate unconscious drives and impulses that demand to be gratified with no concern for others, while the superego is the id's direct opposite- the judicial system of personality with an ideal moral code it strives to live by. Mediating between the two extreme forces is the ego, which comes up with realistic compromises through rational thinking so the person can interact with the real world and live a satisfactory life of love and work. Personality is also understood as something that evolves through normal stages of human development starting from infancy (Freud's five psychosexual stages and Erikson's psychosocial stages).

The psychodynamic model of understanding behavior and psychological problems begins with the concept of the unconscious (Corey, 2017). What a person is aware of, the conscious, is believed to be just "a thin

slice of the total mind” (p. 61). The larger and more important part of the mind that controls most of one’s psychological functioning is the unconscious- everything that one is unaware of, including repressed painful memories and experiences, hidden needs and motivations (Tan, 2011). Therefore, “unconscious processes are at the root of all forms of neurotic symptoms and behaviors” (Corey, 2017). For example, psychological issues arise when the id, the ego, and the superego are in conflict, creating anxiety that is experienced by the individual and relief is sought through various ego defense mechanisms (Tan, 2011). In addition, if traumatic events occur especially in the earlier psychosexual stages of development or if one fails to master a developmental task in one of the psychosocial stages, personality growth can arrest, resulting in abnormal psychological functioning later in life.

From a psychoanalytic viewpoint, Conrad from the movie “Ordinary People” is a young man who is psychologically tortured by repressed traumatic memories and painful feelings surrounding his brother’s accidental death and his relationship with his mother. As these experiences and emotions threaten to emerge to consciousness, he is filled with anxiety- fear that the aggressive instinct of the id would get out of control and cause him to do something he would regret or be punished for (neurotic anxiety) and fear of violating his superego- his own conscience or internalized parental standards (moral anxiety). These anxieties are expressed through Conrad’s general jumpiness and strained interactions with his mom and school friends,

his lack of confidence to make choices in his life, and the great effort he makes to contain all expression of feelings (Redford, 1980). Unable to control anxiety by rational and direct methods, Conrad's ego helps him cope through indirect defense mechanisms such as denial (he tells family and friends that he is okay when he knows he is not), regression (his father finds him lying in bed in a fetal position after fighting with his mom), projection (his self-blame and inability to forgive himself for his brother's death are projected onto his mother), rationalization (he tells Dr. Berger his mom has a right to be mad at him after their fight because of the hurtful things he said to her), and displacement (his anger and frustration towards his parents are displaced onto Dr. Berger during their sessions). Conrad's suicide attempt in the beginning of the movie, however, refers to a time right after his brother's death when his weakened ego's inability to cope gave way to the unconscious drive to die or to hurt himself (death instinct).

I think the psychoanalytically-oriented approach will be useful to treat Conrad. Since his psychological distress is mainly due to intrapsychic factors from unresolved trauma of his brother's death and his troubled relationship with his mom since childhood, he needs therapy that will help him process these "unfinished businesses." To do so, psychodynamic therapy brings to consciousness these painful past experiences along with buried feelings and fears, enabling Conrad to relive and explore them while gaining insight into how they affect his life now. Once he can work through them, his ego will be

strengthened to make better decisions about his current life and achieve different outcomes in relationships going forward.

I believe Dr. Berger in the movie is a psychiatrist trained in the psychoanalytic approach who effectively uses many of its techniques with Conrad. Like him, I will also use free association, encouraging Conrad to say whatever comes to mind without judgment or censorship, as a way to bring to surface unconscious material to analyze and understand. In addition, I will take note and analyze Conrad's resistances to talk about certain topics, interpreting them as the emotionally painful and anxiety-provoking experiences he has buried in the unconscious. Another psychoanalytic technique that I think will be useful with Conrad is analysis of transference. By maintaining neutrality with minimal self-disclosure as a therapist, I hope to facilitate a transference relationship in which he will unconsciously project onto me feelings he had or still has towards his parents. Then I will interpret its meaning to Conrad, helping him to have greater understanding of his conflicted relationships with them.

References

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