

“Ordinary People”

Psychodynamic Approach to Counseling Conrad Jarret

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GCN502: Theories and Foundation: OA

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February 7, 2023

The Jarret family, an upper-middle-class family, is grieving the recent loss of their oldest son Buck and struggling to save their other son Conrad who had gone sailing with Buck the night of the boating accident that took Buck's life. Conrad had witnessed Buck being pulled in by the current despite him trying to hold on tight to Buck's hand. After Buck's death, Conrad suffered from extreme bouts of depression and suicidal ideation stemming from survivor's guilt and his belief that he was somehow responsible for the death of his brother.

Conrad is back home from a psychiatric hospital, where he was admitted for four months after he attempted suicide at home in the bathroom. While in the hospital, he received electric shock treatment and group therapy and was encouraged to follow up with counseling when he returned home.

Conrad has been home for about a month and a half and is trying to get back to ordinary life by returning to school, rejoining the swimming team, and being home with his family. However, Conrad's relationship with his mother is extremely fractured. Their interaction is rare, and when they communicate, there is an apparent disconnection and much deflection from his mother. The emotional distance is also evident as Conrad's mother seems unable to give him the love and assurance he needs. Her coldness, it seems, did not begin with the death of Buck, but apparently, she always had difficulty emotionally connecting to Conrad. Perhaps the only person she found it easy to love and display her affection towards was Buck, the star athlete of the school's swimming team and the perceived golden child of the family.

From this, one can assume that Conrad lived in the shadows of his older brother and may have harbored jealousy and anger toward him and may even, at times, wished his brother wasn't around so that he could be the object of their mother's love and affection. Conrad, however,

would have suppressed these feelings in the unconscious realm of his mind, believing they were unacceptable and fearing that expressing them would only cause further rejection from his mother and feelings of shame.

When the brothers went sailing, Conrad was responsible for managing the sails but could not because of the harsh weather. After the boat capsized, the two brothers held on tight to each other's hands to prevent the other from drowning. However, as the current pulled Buck under, it became harder for Conrad to maintain his grip on his brother's hand. The force of the water, which Conrad had no control over, caused the brothers, it seems, to lose their grip on each other.

Conrad subconsciously believes that he may have purposely released his brother's hand because of his repressed anger and jealousy for his brother. Hence, Conrad is struggling with guilt, believing that somehow, he wanted his brother, maybe not dead but gone. The depression, survival guilt, and attempted suicide are Conrad's anger turning inward to possibly punish himself for the negative feelings he harbored for his brother and for 'causing his brother's death.'

As Conrad's licensed mental health counselor, this is the assessment I have made of Conrad from a psychodynamic perspective, and I will apply several psychodynamic techniques to our counseling session. Using the psychodynamic theory will help Conrad confront unresolved conflicts and overcome guilt.

The psychodynamic theory was founded by Sigmund Freud, who significantly focused on the unconscious. Freud believed that at the root of human behavior lies the unconscious—where we store our memories, feelings, thoughts, and desires, specifically those deemed socially unacceptable or unpleasant. According to Freud, we are unaware of the innate impulses that drive our behavior. Freud believed that the human psyche was composed of three elements: the id, ego, and superego, and that intrapsychic conflicts between the three occur when there are

clashes with the principles that govern them (Corey, 2015). The pleasure principle governs the id, representing our most innate instincts, and impulsive desires, regardless of whether our actions are appropriate or socially acceptable. The id also consists of death (Thanos) desires or drive and self-destructive behavior. The ego, however, is governed by the reality principle and seeks to do what is socially acceptable.

The third element is the superego which is driven by the morality principle. It operates as a judge. The superego is partly conscious and reflects the social standards we have learned from our parents.

Freud believes that most human behavior—drives and intent—is not readily accessible to the conscious mind. However, the unconscious processes can be brought to the conscious through psychodynamic techniques such as free association, dream analysis, interpretation, and transference. The therapeutic goal for applying these techniques is to enhance Conrad's adaptive behavior—increase his competency to deal with the loss of his brother, his fractured relationship with his mother, and environmental demands. This involves the resolution of unresolved conflicts (Corey, 2015).

The free association will allow Conrad to express himself verbally or through writing without interruption or suggestions from me, the counselor. An atmosphere of acceptance and nonjudgment will be created for Conrad to disclose his thoughts without censorship. This will reduce the operation of the defense mechanism, enabling Conrad to regress safely (Corey, 2015), specifically in his early childhood. Since central to psychodynamic theory is the belief that the origin of our behavior can be traced back to childhood, we want to explore the intrapsychic world of Conrad's childhood and his relationship with his parents, especially his mother.

Through this counseling technique, Conrad will be able to access, while awake and in a conscious state, what he previously was not able to access because of fear—hidden feelings or beliefs that he was unaware of, such as his anger and jealousy toward his brother, feelings of rejection from his mother as well as anger toward his mother. During this process, I expect Conrad to have “Freudian slips.” These slips are linked to the unconscious mind and reveal private or hidden feelings and desires that Conrad ordinarily would not be willing to express about life, himself, or his family.

In addition, because Conrad wants to talk about his dreams and initiated the conversation about me analyzing his dreams, he will be open to talking about his dreams. He will be more attentive to recalling his dreams. Our defenses are lowered during sleep, which makes it easier to uncover unconscious material and gain insight into unresolved issues.

Conrad has been having dreams about the boating accident, so we will examine the latent and manifest contents of his dreams to understand the hidden symbols and how the dream appears to Conrad. First, we will look at the literal meaning—both brothers holding on to each other’s hands over the capsized boat and releasing their grasp of each other. We will also explore the underlying meaning of the dream, such as the boat, which was one of the proud possessions of their father.

The other two techniques that I will be incorporating are transference and interpretation. Conrad can transfer his feelings for his mother and brother toward me through transference. Through our therapeutic relationship, Conrad will shift his reactions to me of situations in the past. By doing this, we are bringing the past into the present and providing a safe environment for Conrad to get unconscious thoughts that he has repressed to the conscious realm.

Careful consideration will be given to assess if Conrad is mentally and emotionally ready to receive the interpretations to ensure that Conrad is open to my interpretation. Through these techniques, we will be able to comprehend Conrad's intrapsychic world better, thereby helping Conrad to understand all the dynamics—conscious and unconscious—that relate to his guilt over his brother's death, rejection from his mother, and how he can overcome them to gain control over his.

As the unconscious material comes closer to consciousness, I will help Conrad interpret his relationship with his mother to help him understand that his mother's lack of love and affection toward him has more to do with his mother than with him and that her actions do not determine his value and worth. Still, her actions are only definitive of her and her abilities and defects. In addition, Conrad will be guided in understanding that his jealousy and anger did not cause his brother's death and are, in fact, normal.

As Conrad resolves these internal conflicts, he will understand that he cannot get back to what was once thought of as an ordinary life because too much about him and his family dynamics have already changed. Conrad will also learn that he is not responsible for his brother's death—that he held on to Buck's hand for as long as he could and that all the other elements involved that caused Buck's death were entirely out of his control and that all he could do to survive after the current pulled Buck under was to hang on to the boat.

Reference

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