

Ordinary People Application Paper: Family Systems Therapy

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GCN 502 OA: Theories and Foundations

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April 11, 2023

Family systems therapy began around the 1950s and is considered the "fourth force" after psychodynamic, behavioral, and humanistic approaches (Corey, 2017, p.404). This perspective assumes that the client's problematic behavior may:

- 1) serve a function or purpose for the family;
- 2) be unintentionally maintained by family processes;
- 3) be a function of the family's inability to operate productively, especially during developmental transitions; or
- 4) be a symptom of dysfunctional patterns handed down across generations (Corey, 2017, p. 404).

Systemic therapists believe that working with the whole family system has more power in a client's life than the effects of working with a single therapist.

Several family therapy models have been developed, such as multigenerational family therapy developed by Murray Bowen, which looks at a family system for at least three generations looking for relationship patterns, and a human validation process model developed by Virginia Satir, which emphasizes communication and emotional honesty (Corey, 2017). Finally, structural family therapy attempts to reduce dysfunction symptoms and examine structural changes to the family system rules and boundaries (Corey, 2017). The process used in family therapy includes four general tasks: forming a relationship, conducting an assessment, hypothesizing and sharing meaning, and facilitating change (Corey, 2017).

Looking at Conrad through the lens of the family systems perspective, each parent reacts differently to Conrad's symptoms of detachment, dissociation, anxiety, and subsequent return to "normal" life after his suicide attempt. His father tries to show care by checking in on Conrad and encouraging him to contact Dr. Berger. His mom seemingly ignores the suicide attempt and

perhaps considers Conrad's suicide attempt as selfish and a way to get attention. She was annoyed when she made Conrad's favorite breakfast, and he declined to eat it because he was not hungry. Conrad's dad seems to do things to appease his wife and not rock the boat, which Conrad has also learned to do. From Conrad's perspective, he could feel like his mom does not care for him, but from his mom's perspective, she could feel the same way about Conrad's care for her. Many unspoken rules and feelings are under the surface of this family unit that seemed to function well until the boating accident and subsequent suicide attempt from Conrad.

One technique with Conrad would be conducting an assessment by exploring several generations of his family tree and constructing a genogram to see what relational patterns exist. For example, by understanding some of his mother's family origin story, Conrad can better understand how his mom relates, which may differ from how his dad learned to relate. In other words, emotional problems stemming from attachment are passed down and repeated, so they must be dealt with effectively to break those cycles and heal (Corey, 2017). Another technique is to form a relationship with each member of Conrad's family as a therapist, particularly his mother, who might be against coming in for therapy. Helping to establish that all perspectives and feelings are valued and respected is essential to help quell the defensive responses that might arise from differing perspectives.

Family systems therapy would benefit Conrad and his family as it could have deterred the quick demise of his parent's relationship. For instance, his mother could feel misunderstood and triangulated as Conrad's dad seems to agree and take Conrad's side with how he perceives his mother's feelings toward Conrad. In addition, they all could have benefited from family therapy as two traumatic events have impacted each person differently. Communicating more honestly

and openly and allowing for differences would have helped each family member understand one another better.

References

- Corey, G. (2017). *Theory and Practice of Counseling and Psychotherapy* (10th ed.). Cengage Learning.
- Redford, R., Sargent, A., Schwary, R. L., Kanew, J., Hamlich, M., Pollack, B., Bennett, P., & Riva, J. M. (1980). *Ordinary People*.