Family Systems Therapy: of "Ordinary People"

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Family Systems Therapy is based on an individual being shaped and influenced by relationships and dynamics within a family context. Maladaptive behaviors are not typical symptoms but the role which one plays to maintain the family status quo, possibly on a multi-generational level. Murray Bowen and Virginia Satir emphasized the emotional aspect as a reactive pattern within the family system and an emphasis on "bring(ing) family patterns to life in the present through sculpting and family reconstructions" (Corey, 2015. P. 407). Salvador Minuchin and Jay Haley developed structural family therapy by emphasizing the boundaries set between the family members with the same basis of becoming one's true self differentiated from the familial framework. The key aspect of this therapy is the family unit is present for effective change to occur because interactions do not happen in isolation. Family therapists explore genograms as well as the cultural, socio-economic, and diversity of the individual in order to hypothesize the extent of effect it has on the client.

In the lens of this therapy, there is a perpetuation of perfect normalcy in the family and especially within the larger community of neighbors or school friends. Conrad exhibits tension by trying to move toward his mother by showing interest in whether she played golf (Redford, 1980, 0:28:09) to set the table (Redford, 1980, 0:43:45). There is a yearning to be close to her as much as possible indicated by trying to reminisce about a pigeon (Redford, 1980, 0:42:35) but the mention of Buck would have the mother visibly defensive and entirely avoidant. In direct contrast, Conrad is relatively more comfortable with his father in interaction but anxiously nervous to come off as if everything was fine. His father is described as "on the rack about (Conrad) long enough. Making it a habit" (Redford, 1980, 0:48:14). With this new family dynamic after the loss of Buck, Conrad's behavior becomes more erratic from the barking over his mother (Redford, 1980, 0:42:57) to cursing about a camera to his father (Redford, 1980,

0:56:36) and escalates into violence with his peers (Redford, 1980, 1:33:10). Within the larger community that also permeates upper-class perfection, Conrad can no longer conform to the unique culture of "okay-ness."

As Dr. Burger, initially, it would be important to join with the family members and validate how they are all in attendance. To establish openness, focused caring attention should be given to each client with the goal of bringing into awareness the power dynamics or assumptions. For instance, Conrad's assumption that his mother does not love him or that Connie finds Conrad to be walking all over Calvin. Since dialogue is difficult in the family context, perhaps sculpting and having the members reenact how they view the other members would be insightful and less painful than discussing too much with words. The final technique would be assigning tasks to undo the patterns of pull and push between the members and work together to come together.

Family Systems Therapy would be beneficial for Conrad's family because each member is suffering in their own manner due to a tragic loss. The conflicted interactions which have turned into patterns could potentially be undone by balancing, especially in the state of polarization and isolation from one another. The healing of Buck's loss could be dealt with as a unit and although the limitation of this framework is the lack of "emotional consideration" (Corey, 2015. P. 424), it could work to the advantage of a family that never exhibited such vulnerability.

References

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