

Ordinary People Application Paper: Family Systems Therapy

Wendy Hou

Alliance University Graduate School of Counseling

GCN 502 OA: Theories and Foundations

Professor George Ramos

April 11, 2023

Ordinary People Application Paper: Family Systems Therapy

Family systems therapy is an umbrella term that covers over twenty diverse therapeutic approaches that seek to help troubled families and couples (Tan, 2011). While different in some of their theories and applications, these approaches share the following beliefs and assumptions: First, all family systems therapists possess a “systems” perspective, acknowledging that humans are more than autonomous, unique individuals, but are also members of larger interpersonal “systems” within which they live and function. The emphasis is on the family unit because most are connected to one form of family or another throughout their lives (Corey, 2017). It is where people develop, learn, change, and discover who they are. Second, all family systems approaches assert that each family is unique, held together and kept functional by the members through its own set of rules and routines. Third, the family unit is assumed to operate on system dynamics—actions by one member influences all other members like a ripple effect and their reactions reciprocally affect the individual. The family is therefore an “interactional unit” where “the development and behavior of one family member is inextricably interconnected with others in the family” (p. 404). In other words, to best understand an individual, one must know the context of his or her family and evaluate the interactions among the family members.

Consequently, the blame for psychopathology is not cast on the individual alone (Tan, 2011). Instead, problematic behaviors and psychological symptoms in one family member are viewed systemically as a reflection of family dysfunction. The focus is on how unhealthy family relationships, habits, and patterns are contributing to the formation and maintenance of the client’s problems (Corey, 2017). Thus, treatment must address the whole family as well as the person seeking help; therapeutic change needs to happen both within the relationships and within the individual.

From the family system perspective, Conrad from the movie “Ordinary People” is a young man embedded in an unhealthy family system with dysfunctional patterns of interaction that worsened after two major stressors- the loss of his older brother Bucky and his own suicide attempt. His family is unhealthy in many ways- he and his parents do not communicate well (i.e., do not speak honestly or deeply about matters), they do not know how to express their love for one another (i.e., Mom says she loves Conrad but her actions and words do not show it) , they choose not to spend much time together (i.e., Mom and Dad go on vacation and attend parties without Conrad), and they don’t respond positively to crises (Jones and Butman, 1991, as cited in Tan, 2011; Redford, 1980). This maladaptive functioning is maintained mostly by Mom, the de facto leader of the family, who enforces unspoken rules such as “we don’t talk about our problems or express negative emotions” and forms alliances within the family (i.e., Mom-Bucky, Mom-Dad) that leave Conrad out. Mom is also particularly disengaged with him, showing him little interest and affection, if any at all (i.e., Mom did not visit him while he was hospitalized for months after suicide attempt; during a family reunion, she refused to take a photo of just the two of them) (Redford, 1980). In addition, his family system is influenced by the standards and expectations of a larger societal system- suburban white upper middle class; to belong, they need to uphold a certain image of success and perfection and accept the pressure that comes with it. As a result, the patterns of interaction within the family are strained, superficial, and full of misunderstandings. And Conrad is left feeling unloved, unwanted, not listened to, and not understood. These systemic relational problems are therefore largely to blame for his symptoms of depression and anxiety, as well as contributing to his desire to end his own life. His emotional and psychological distress may also be a reflection of the unexpressed pain and grief of the whole family over Bucky’s death.

I believe the family system approach should be an important part of Conrad's treatment because his psychopathology is intricately connected to the relationships and dynamics within his family. To bring about healing changes in him, one must address and change the dysfunctional ways of his family system too. His parents also need to see that Conrad's problems are not just his but the family's, and they need to band together to help each other, especially in dealing with the family crises of Bucky's death and Conrad's suicide attempt. Moreover, his parents' participation in family therapy would also reassure Conrad of their commitment to him and to each other as a unit.

As a family system therapist, I would first seek to enter and understand the world of Conrad's family through constructing a *genogram*. This three-generational family tree would give me some overview information about their family structure and the emotional relationships among various members (Corey, 2017). I would also use the technique of *enactment* and conduct a role-play of a recent argument, such as the one that began with Mom confronting Conrad about his quitting the swim team without telling her. This would help me to observe and understand the unhealthy and destructive patterns of interaction typical of their family (Tan, 2011). I would then provide some feedback to help them see the dysfunctional family system they have created and encourage them to explore how to interact more constructively. Furthermore, I would like to provide the space and opportunity for Conrad and his parents to process and grieve the loss of Bucky as a family. I would use *circular questioning* and ask each of them in a nonconfrontational way to share their perceptions and feelings about his accident and how his death has affected them. Hopefully, this would help the family to open up and be more honest with each other.

References

Corey, G. (2017). *Theory and practice of counseling and psychotherapy* (10th ed.). Cengage Learning.

Redford, R. (Director). (1980). *Ordinary people* [Film].

Tan, S.Y. (2011). *Counseling and psychotherapy: A Christian perspective*. Baker Academic.