

Family Counseling Approach Research Paper Assignment

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Author Note

I have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

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Abstract

This assignment is split into three major parts. Part I is an in-depth analysis of Psychoanalytic Family Therapy. Using the existing academic literature, this section discusses leading figures, theory development and historical events, basic assumptions and key philosophies, key concepts, and therapeutic techniques. Similarities and dissimilarities to other leading theories- Cognitive Behavioral Family Therapy and Bowen Family Systems Therapy- are included. A reflection of new information concludes Part I. Part II of this assignment is an integration of Psychoanalytic Family Therapy and the Christian Faith, examining the role of human nature and the unconscious mind, the role of guilt and shame, and the role of the helping professional. Part III is a personal reflection of the author's SYMBIS assessment results.

Keywords: Psychoanalytic Family Therapy, personal reflection, faith integration, analysis

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Part I: Analysis of Psychoanalytic Family Therapy

Introduction

Theoretical frameworks have guided clinical professionals for generations. By utilizing a theoretical framework within the realm of marriage and family therapy (MFT), professionals position themselves to align with the core beliefs and practices of the chosen theory. Through the process of alignment with a theory, professionals can better understand various aspects of assessment and treatment- such as human behavior, cognitive processing, emotional processes, interpersonal relationships, conceptualizations, treatment plans, and intervention strategies (Fife, 2020). The use of a theoretical framework offers a baseline framework for professionals, rather than a rigid belief system. While one of the more controversial and polarized approaches, Psychoanalytic Family Therapy has been found to be a successful approach to resolving relational conflict through exploring each individual's unconscious longings, fears, and desires.

Leading Figures

Sigmund Freud is the backbone of psychoanalysis. He developed the psychoanalytic theory in the mid to late 1890's. Throughout the twentieth century, many well-known psychologists- including Ivan Boszormenyi-Nagy, Nathan Ackerman, Don Jackson, Carl Whitaker, Salvador Minuchin and Murray Bowen- studied psychoanalysis (Perera & Schmittle, 2023). Psychoanalytic Family Therapy, specifically, was heavily advocated by Nathan Ackerman in the 1930s (Perera & Schmittle, 2023). While he did not emphasize the psychosexual aspects of Freudian theory, Ackerman did maintain a focus on emotional experiences from childhood and their importance and impact in one's life (Hanna, 2018).

Theory Development & Historical Events

Between the 1950s and 1960s, the use of psychoanalytic principles was being used to treat relational and family issues in settings like Family Psychiatric Unit at Tavistock Relationships in England and the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) (Nichols & Davis, 2021). This was pioneered by David and Jill Scharff, Robert Cohen, Juliana Day, Lyman Wynne, Roger Shapiro, and John Zinner (Nichols & Davis, 2021). From there, other professionals- such as Helm Stierlin, Arnon Bentovim and Warren Kinston, Fred Sander, Nathan Epstein, Henry Grunebaum, and Clifford Sager- began to integrate psychoanalysis into family therapy (Nichols & Davis, 2021).

Psychoanalytic Family Therapy became its own distinct subset when Ackerman changed treatment focus from the individual to the family unit (Wanlass & Scharff, 2015). While Freud's focus was solely intrapersonal, Psychoanalytic Family Therapy has shifted the focus on how the intrapersonal affects the interpersonal. Psychoanalytic Family Therapy is based in the classic principles of psychoanalysis, however it combined other popular psychological theoretical approaches such as system theory and attachment theory (Wanlass & Scharff, 2015).

Basic Assumptions & Key Philosophy

One of the basic assumptions and key philosophies of Psychoanalytic Family Therapy is the belief that an event or occurrence that has previously happened still impacts the present because it yields to emotional experiences. Ackerman coined the term "live past" in reference to this phenomenon (Hanna, 2018). This may seem like a seemingly simple concept, but it is integral in Psychoanalytic Family Therapy, as it highlights why the focus is typically on past events rather than the future.

Another core basic assumption of Psychoanalytic Family Therapy is that one's mental structures are key players in the development and treatment of relational issues (Perkel, 2019).

These mental structures include both the conscious and unconscious mind and are universal to all humans. What sets each individual apart is the experiences that they have during development as well as throughout life. Even the trivial details of an experience matter, as this is how our personal defensive systems knowledge of the world are impacted and shaped (Perkel, 2019).

Key Concepts

The key concepts of Psychoanalytic Family Therapy are psychological drives, intrapsychic conflicts, defense mechanisms, self-psychology, object relationships, the holding environment, splitting, and projective identification (McAdams, 2015). Some of these concepts are derived directly from classical Freudian work, but others are a combination between classical Freudian notions and other subsets of interpersonal psychoanalytical theories (McAdams, 2015).

According to McAdams (2015), psychological drives can be defined as instinctual needs that drive secure attachments to others; intrapsychic conflicts are unconscious cognitive struggles that are of result of incongruent impulses and reality; defense mechanisms (like repression) refer to the unconscious strategies one learns to alleviate feelings of anxiety and misalignments; self-psychology highlights the significance of parental modeling and nurturing during childhood; object relationships refers to introjects (images) that an individual subjectively carries from childhood to adulthood in their subconscious mind, shaping their adult relationships; the holding environment can be defined as the safe, encouraging atmosphere created by parents to foster positive psychological development in children; splitting is a defense mechanism, typically utilized by children, when they experience cognitive dissonance around a parental figure; projective identification is a unconscious process in which our minds project undesirable feelings of anxiety onto others.

Therapeutic Techniques

Techniques used in Psychoanalytic Family Therapy include, but are not limited to, listening, analysis of resistance, transference, analytical neutrality, interpretation, working in the here-and-now, expanding the field of participation, and examining complementarity (McAdams, 2015). The art of active listening as a professional is one of the most vital skills in this theoretical orientation, as challenges the therapists to refrain from reassuring, advising, or confronting (McAdams, 2015).

McAdams (2015) describes each of these techniques, stating the process of analyzing resistance is identifying and attempting to understand unconscious opposition regarding relational processes and interactions; transference (commonly discussed within the field of counseling and psychology) is when a client projects their thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and desires onto the professional; analytical neutrality means the therapists stays involved, but impartial to all parties; interpretation is the procedure used to describe when the professional shares their understanding of the information gleaned within the session(s) regarding unconscious or problematic processes within the family unit; working in the here-and-now means professionals pay attention to emotional flareups that occur within the session and call them out in the moment; expanding the field of participation is when the professional works to have all members of the family unit engaged in the therapeutic process; and examining complementarity indicates the level of harmony that exist within the family unit and between its members.

Similarities and Dissimilarities to Other Leading Theories

Psychoanalytic Family Therapy and Cognitive Behavioral Family Therapy

When comparing Psychoanalytic Family Therapy to Cognitive Behavioral Family Therapy, another leading theory in the realm of counseling, there are both notable similarities

and differences. Most apparent are the differences in the basic assumptions and key beliefs.

Cognitive Behavioral Family Therapy assumes that behavior is reinforced by its consequences (whether positive or negative) (Nichols & Davis, 2021). Rather than the emphasis being placed on unconscious beliefs like Psychoanalytic Family Therapy, Cognitive Behavioral Family Therapy aims to explore and change the patterned cycle of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. Because of the key differences in foundational concepts, the treatment approaches are dissimilar as well. Psychoanalytic Family Therapy focuses on the past, while Cognitive Behavioral Family Therapy focuses on changes that can be made in the present.

While notably different, these approaches do share some similarities as well. Overall, they both share the same goals of improving the functionality of the family system. On top of sharing the same goal of improving family and marriage relationships within this context, both theories rely on the therapeutic relationship to foster positive change. In both theories, while still involved, the professional is seen as facilitator and/or educator (Nichols & Davis, 2021).

Psychoanalytic Family Therapy and Bowen Family Systems Therapy

Similar to the comparison above, there are some significant differences between Psychoanalytic Family Therapy and Bowen Family Systems Therapy, but there are also some existing similarities as well. The first major difference between these two theories is the emphasis on the individual versus the unit. As noted, Psychoanalytic Family Therapy tends to analyze an individual before addressing the family unit. Bowen Family Systems Therapy's core assumption is that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, making the family unit the ultimate focus through this theoretical lens (Baptist & Hamon, 2022). Another major difference between these two theoretical orientations is therapeutic techniques utilized. The techniques of Psychoanalytic Family Therapy have already been discussed but are a stark contrast to those of

Bowen Family Systems Therapy. Bowen Family Systems Therapy utilizes tools like genograms, as well coaching, differentiation strategies, and process questions (Nichols & Davis, 2021).

Similarities between these two theories include identifying and focusing on multigenerational patterns and emphasis on the emotional process. Familial relationships and family members themselves have been empirically found to transmit dysfunction across generations through assessing differentiation levels, a Bowen Family Systems Therapy key concept (Čepukienė & Neophytou, 2024). Both theories also understand that the behavior of individuals and of the unit must be discussed within the context of their family. Like the theories mentioned above as well, the ultimate goal is also to help improve family functioning and relationships.

New Knowledge Acquired

By completing this assignment, a number of new pieces of information were gleaned. First and foremost, the difference between Psychoanalytic therapy for individuals and for families was most interesting. While they operate under the same key concepts and core beliefs regarding assessment and techniques, the application of the theory is different. Individual psychoanalytic counseling seeks to uncover unconscious desires and help the client work through the experiences associated with them. Psychoanalytic Family Therapy takes the application a step further by taking the findings of an individual and applying the knowledge to their relationships. It makes sense as to why their slightly different, as the treatment population and goals are distinctive.

Another piece of information that was gained is the techniques specific to Psychoanalytic Family Therapy. As previously mentioned, while rooted in classic principles of the theory, there are some techniques specially for working with families. It was interesting to learn about how

this theory has evolved into its own classification. Gaining more clarity into what makes this theoretical orientation unique helps deepen the understanding of the therapeutic process, and it allows for deeper critical thinking and examination.

Part II: Integration of Psychoanalytic Family Therapy and Personal Faith

The Role of Human Nature and the Unconscious Mind

Through a Psychoanalytic Family Therapy lens, humans are shaped by their unconscious drives, wants, and desires, as well as early childhood experiences (Perkel, 2019). Freud believed that human nature is driven by life and death instincts (Zilbersheid, 2013). Through a Christian faith lens, humans are designed in the image of God. Genesis 1: 27 says, “So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them.”

Despite being made in the image of God, though, sin still impacts our lives, decisions, and feelings. It is easy to forget that we are created in the image of the Lord and be driven by earthly influences. This is depicted in Romans 6: 6-8. When aligning these two viewpoints, it can be seen how the role of our nature as humans drives our behavior, relationships, and deep internal emotional states. In both stances, the influence of hidden wounds, perceived narratives, and the world around us all shape who we become as people.

The Role of Guilt and Shame

Another integration and connection that could be made between Psychoanalytic Family Therapy and a Christian faith-based worldview are the roles that guilt and shame play in an individual's life, and the negative impacts they can yield in relationships. Shame has been found to be way more pervasive in Occidental cultures like the United States (Sauvagnat, 2018). In the lens of psychoanalytical analysis, these negative burdens could result from unsuccessful attachment in childhood and various negative relational experiences. Examples of shame and

guilt in the Bible typically are a result of sin, as showcased in the stories of Adam and Eve (after eating the forbidden fruit), King David (after committing adultery), and Peter (after his repeated denial of knowing and following Jesus).

While psychoanalytic treatment poses that uncovering unconscious cognitions will help combat these feelings, the Bible states that repentance and faith will bring you peace (Psalm 25:2). It is the basis of Christianity to know that Jesus forgives our sins if we choose to accept Him into our lives. The healing process of guilt and shame may be different, but both approaches recognize the control they can have over someone.

The Role of Helping Professional

As previously discussed, the psychoanalytic professional is viewed as the expert in the helping relationship. While their aim is to remain neutral, they are involved in the therapeutic process to foster an environment that can encourage reflection. In the Christian faith, the ultimate healer and help is Jesus. While we cannot schedule therapy appointments with Him, we have access to him on all days, at all times. Christ Jesus is the one person who we can turn to, knowing that he is never going to judge us or forsake us for whatever sins we have committed, or feelings were experiencing. Jesus lived a human life, which ended in betrayal, grief, anxiety, and death. He can relate to our sorrow and pain, making him able to both sympathize and empathize with us.

Part III: SYMBIS Results and Reflection

Marriage Mindset

When assessing the Marriage Mindset, I both agree and disagree. I was found to be in the romantic mindset, which is interesting. The SYMBIS report discusses how the person who falls into the romantic mindset category often has rose colored glasses on and the desire to live out a

romantic script with my soulmate (spouse). While I do believe that love has the power to conquer differences between two people, I am not naïve enough to know that marriage does take work and commitment on both sides. Without meaningful effort, love may not be enough to rekindle the detailed “unending bliss.”

I do think that I tend to romanticize the small things in life, so it does not surprise me that I fell into this category. I try to look at the positive side of all things, which helps me create a more optimistic personality and outlook overall. Despite this, though, I have witnessed my parental figures go through multiple divorces growing up- rooting my hesitation. I have seen firsthand that love may not conquer all in life, making me a bit more rational when it comes to marriage.

Five Issues in Real Relationships

Love

When assessing the information provided about the dynamics of love in the SYMBIS report, I learned that my spouse and I define love in different ways. As the deliberating spouse, I tend to lean towards fostering a positive and kind environment, while my husband defines love as being passionate and adventurous together (energetic spouse). Between the two of us, he is definitely the risk taker. While he values more of the spontaneity and boldness, I value intentionality and feeling sought after. The greatest insight from this section is that while we have different definitions and needs when it comes to love and the physical aspects that marriage entails, I think we can both work towards speaking each other’s language. For me, I can work towards becoming bolder and trying new things, while my husband can work on providing positive words of affirmation and fostering a sensual environment.

Attitude

The attitude portion of the SYMBIS report is one that I can see the most reflective truth in. Personally, I would like to think that I have an overall positive attitude. Of course, I have my moments of frustration, weakness, annoyance, etc. SYMBIS reported that I am optimistic, resilient, and adaptable to challenges 72% of the time. My husband received a 75%. I think these percentages are an accurate representation because, yes, we both struggle occasionally when an unforeseen circumstance becomes a challenge. Especially for me, worry can be an issue. Despite this though, I think the biggest take away for me in this section was my strengths when facing a challenge. As the deliberating spouse, I tend to be a good listener, thoughtful, good-natured, considerate, and a team-player. When I am having a difficult time, I think it is important to really home in on these strengths to solve the problem.

Communication

For the communication section of the SYMBIS report, I found most of it to be true. As the deliberating spouse, I tend to be a careful communicator. This, I completely agree with. I am the person that needs to take time to process and draft my response for difficult conversations. I definitely try to avoid large, emotional reactions. The SYMBIS report details how the deliberating spouse may have difficulty showing emotion, but I am quick to cry and often shut down in hard conversations. The biggest takeaway from this section was actions for how my spouse can best communicate with me and vice versa. I think these clear measures could really help improve the quality of conversation and communication in my marriage.

Gender Differences

This is another section within the SYMBIS report that really captured what I feel to be the truth. When my husband and I feel like we were facing some marital disconnect, it's usually because we feel our deepest needs and personalities are not being considered. For me, I crave the

feeling of being cherished. While, on the contrary, my husband craves more quality time and shared activities together. Often times, we are trying to give each other the things we want (i.e., treat other how you want to be treated). My biggest takeaway from this section is that's not always helpful. Rather than modeling the behavior we want, we should focus more on serving the other person in the correct way. These actions will go hand in hand, quickly becoming interconnected.

Conflict

As the deliberating spouse, I tend to be very careful when it comes to conflict. I definitely am steady and systematic, like the SYMBIS report says. It is never my goal to make waves, cause hostility, or say hurtful things in the moment. For me personally, saying heated remarks in the middle of an argument only causes harm. This can be detrimental for me too, though, as I tend to keep all of my thoughts inside to avoid hurting someone's feelings. The greatest insight gained from this topic are the personal conflict challenges and the hot topics for conflict within a marriage. I will admit that I am resistant to new ways of doing things, especially ways that aren't my own or what I grew up with. It has been a challenge to broaden my horizons and allow new suggestions to play a role in my life, especially because my spouse will describe me as "hyper-independent." I think the hot topics have been very useful in knowing too, as they open doors for meaningful conversations. Schedules was the number one hot topic for both my husband and I, so I think I need to reevaluate where my time is going and why.

Walking Together with God

Based on the information provided on our marriage and walking together with God as a couple within the SYMBIS report, I have come up with an action plan to do to ensure that my marriage is God-honoring. This action plan includes three tasks (1) joining a small group, (2),

participating in serving others (e.g., mission trips, annual serve days, volunteering, etc.) and (3) complete a daily devotion and worship through music. These should be done by both my husband and me. By engaging in these activities together, we are both actively working towards becoming more involved members of the church, deepening our marital and personal relationship with God, and practicing speaking each other's language.

Theory and Spiritual Integration

At a glance, the SYMBIS Assessment and Psychoanalytic Family Therapy don't much in common. To integrate the two, the SYMBIS Assessment could be completed by the clients. The generated report includes so much information regarding cognitive patterns, common cognitions, various approaches, and includes discussion question. For example, the SYMBIS report will classify each person as a specific personality dynamic. Using this information, a professional in the Psychoanalytic Family Therapy realm could take it a step further and explore why the person was classified in that specific umbrella. What unconscious beliefs, desires, and deep-rooted childhood experiences led to where the person is now?

Through a Christian faith-based lens, the SYMBIS Assessment is a great tool to use for couples. The SYMBIS Assessment and report highlights the differences in two people that should be both recognized and celebrated. We are all uniquely made (Matthew 10: 29-31) on purpose and for a purpose. By helping users learn to understand their differences, work together to integrate various expectations and beliefs, and discover more foundational information about a potential life partner, the SYBMIS Assessment fosters an environment to create deep relationships and meaningful conversation with a faith-based focus.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Psychoanalytic Family Therapy is a very distinguished theoretical lens. While psychoanalysis can be controversial at times, the influence of combining other popular psychological theoretical approaches into Psychoanalytic Family Therapy sets it apart. Psychoanalytic Family Therapy can be integrated with faith-based beliefs and other therapeutic tools like the SYMBIS Assessment. When used alone or in conjunction with other theoretical lens and tools, Psychoanalytic Family Therapy is a successful approach to resolving relational conflict through exploring each individual's unconscious desires, cognitions, and needs.

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