

Course Material (E-Content) of Psychology

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Family Systems Approach to Clinical Psychology

Human nature dictates that socializing is a distinguishing factor of being human, so searching for causes of behaviour, as seen in family systems theories also involves philosophical approaches. The family unit is a delicate balance, a collection of individuals that has deep ritualistic connotations that can help an individual to create their own unique identity through pulling from a variety of sources. A strong connection can be seen between philosophy and psychology when realizing that each serves to draw upon the knowledge and values that are relevant to the problem.

The family systems approach is a theory developed by psychiatrist Murray Bowen in the 1950s. According to Bowen, individuals in a family can never be understood when considered apart from each other but that instead, the whole family should be thought of as one emotional unit. He also states that a family is defined not only by the people making it up but also by their interaction with each other to create their unique family dynamic. Thus, family systems theory uncovers the network of relationships that define a family.

The family approach to clinical psychology identifies family relationships as the most important factor in psychological well-being. This approach tends to utilize the entire family in understanding and treating problematic feelings and behaviour. Rather than working with an individual patient who reports problematic symptoms, the family approaches generally work with the entire (or a subset of the) family. Prior to the 1950s, most psychological treatment focused on the identified patient defined as the person regarded within the family as manifesting problematic symptoms, behaviours, or attitudes. The

family members of the identified patient were generally left out of the treatment and not viewed as potentially active agents of dysfunction and potential recovery (plante, 2005). Because the focus of family therapies is on how one person's psychological issues affect the entire family, therapy sessions are held with all of the affected members of the family. The family therapist works to improve communication, point out negative behaviours and establish healthy family role

Family systems theory says that psychopathology does not reside in the individual, but rather in a disturbed system of family relations. All systemic schools of thought share this fundamental underlying assumption that where there is a patient, there is a troubled family system. Salvador Minuchin exemplifies this approach with his innovative argument that he did not treat youth with anorexia, but rather anorexic families. In Minuchin's conceptualization, called structural family theory, psychopathology arises as a function of poor boundaries among family members.

According to Minuchin, the idea of family structure is the basis for family therapy. "A family is a system that operates through transactional patterns. Repeated transactions establish patterns of how, when, and to whom, and these patterns underpin the system" (Minuchin, 1974).

Family Systems Therapy

Family systems therapy is derived from the Family systems approach. It is a form of psychotherapy that helps individuals resolve their problems in the context of their family units, where many issues are likely to begin. In this type of therapy, each member of the family works together with the others so that they can better understand their family dynamic and how each of their actions as individuals affects the rest of the family members individually and the family as a whole.

One of the most important premises of family systems therapy is that what happens to one member of a family happens to everyone in the family. Family systems therapy is based on the idea that individuals are best understood through assessing the entire family. Symptoms in individuals are seen as expressions of dysfunctions. The family is an interactional unit and a change in one member effects all members. Family therapists believe that an individuals

relations have more impact in their lives than any one therapist could. The family therapist uses the systemic perspective, it believes that individuals may carry a symptom for the entire family, and an individual's functioning is a manifestation of the way a family functions. Individuals can have symptoms existing independently from the family members but these symptoms always have ramifications for family members. Therefore, family therapists will change the system in order to change the individuals. They do so by changing dysfunctional patterns or relating and creating functional ways of interacting. Whenever families are experiencing conflict within the unit, seeking professional help to address those issues is advisable, and a family systems therapy approach may be the ideal solution.

The different schools of family systems therapy have in common a belief that, regardless of the origin of the problem, and regardless of whether the clients consider it an "individual" or "family" issue, involving families in solutions is often beneficial. This involvement of families is commonly accomplished by their direct participation in the therapy session. The skills of the family systems therapist thus include the ability to influence conversations in a way that catalyses the strengths, wisdom, and support of the wider system.

How Family Systems Therapy Works

During therapy, the family works together to resolve a problem that affects one or more members directly. They do this both individually and as a unit. Each person has the chance to express what they are thinking or feeling about the way the problem affects them, and the family works together to help the particular member in trouble which ultimately relieves the stress on the family.

There are a number of different exercises that can be utilized, including one where the family members examine each of the roles they play in the family (and if necessary, they even switch roles) in an effort to learn how to better support and help each other. The goal here is to restore family relationships and rebuild a healthier family system. In this type of therapy, each member of the family works together with the others so that they can better understand their family dynamic and how each of their actions as individuals affects the rest of the family members individually and the family as a whole.

Merits of Family Therapy

1. Families in conflict, couples, and individuals with problems related to their families of origin can all benefit from family systems therapy.
2. Family systems treatment can be helpful for a host of mental health conditions such as depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, schizophrenia, and addiction.
3. It is also effective in the treatment of behavioural and even physical health concerns and has been shown to assist individuals and family members in controlling and coping with physical disabilities and disorders.
4. Family systems therapy, has been shown to be effective in the treatment of teens. Consequently, mental health conditions like teen depression, teen substance use disorder, teen anxiety, and teen eating disorders often respond well to the family systems approach.
5. A randomised study revealed that family systems therapy was superior to other forms of intervention for adolescents with anorexia nervosa (Lock, Le Grange, Agras, Moye, Bryson & Jo, 2010).
6. Sexton and Turner (2010) study found that family systems therapy was more effective at reducing youth behavioural problems compared to outcomes from probation services.
7. Klann, Hahlweg, Baucom and Kroeger (2011) replication study found similar results when examining the effectiveness of family systems therapy on relationship issues where it alleviated both relationship distress and individual depression. Generally speaking, this is considered an effective approach for any concerns that seem to manifest within or relate to the family of origin.

Demerits of Family Therapy

1. Sexton and Turner (2010) study revealed that family systems therapy is ineffective when the treatment model is not fully adhered to, therefore indicating the importance of following the model.
2. Seponski, Bermudez and Lewis (2012) literature review revealed that family systems therapy is typically reflective of Western values and norms and even with cultural adaptation it still continues to be inappropriate or inadequate for use with non-western cultures. Therefore cultural considerations still need to be made.