Mastering Competencies in Family Therapy

CHAPTER 2

Case Conceptualization

Map the Territory

- Case Conceptualization
  - Knowing where to focus your attention while listening and watching
  - Viewing the situation in new and different ways
  - Using theory-informed assessment

Elements of Case Conceptualization

1. Introduction of the client
   - Define the client
2. Presenting concern
   - Problem presented as described by client & others
3. Background information
   - Summary of pertinent background information
4. Systemic assessment
   - Assessment from major family therapy theories
5. Genogram
   - A visual assessment tool

Define the Client

- Determine who is the client
- Provide a basic sketch of the client
- Common demographics include
  - Age
  - Ethnicity
  - Gender
  - Sexual orientation/relationship status
  - Current occupation / work status or grade in school
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Background Information

- Relevant background
  - Life changes, precipitating events, first symptoms, other stressors
- Related Historical Background
  - Family history, related issues, past abuse, trauma, previous counseling, medical / mental health history, legal concerns, etc.

The Presenting Concern

- Clients’ / Family’s Description of Problem(s)
  - Each person who is involved with the problem has a different definition
  - Remain open to alternative descriptions of the problem, don’t look for the “real” or “right” one
- Broader System Problem Descriptions
  - Reasons client (or other) is seeking counseling
  - Descriptions of attempted solutions / outcomes
  - Broader systems involved (school, justice, etc.)

Previous Solutions

- What DID NOT work
  - With most clients, easier to assess failed attempted solutions
  - Identify patterns related to presenting problem
- What DID work
  - Harder - most clients are less aware of when their problem is not a problem
  - Answers to questions assessing for unique outcomes or exceptions provide clues for interventions

Systemic Assessment

- Personal / Individual
  - Identify abilities and personal qualities
- Relational / Social
  - Important others
  - Social support: physical, emotional, and community support
- Spiritual
  - Relationship to the universe, God, or something larger than the self - philosophy of life
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Systemic Assessment
Family Structure / Interaction Patterns

Couple Subsystem
- Couple boundaries
  - Internal and external
- Interactional patterns
- Complementary and symmetrical patterns
- Problem interaction pattern
- Theoretical indicators (e.g., Gottman’s Four Horsemen, Attachment Styles)

Parental Subsystem
- Parental / marital subsystem boundaries
- Family lifecycle stage
- Hierarchy between child / parents
- Emotional boundaries with children
- Problem interaction pattern
- Triangles / coalitions

Intergenerational Patterns
- Two ways to view patterns
  - Problem specific – content
  - Patterns of communication – process
- Use Genogram to assess content and process across generations
- Family patterns frequently include:
  - Substance and alcohol abuse and dependence
  - Relational abuse – sexual, physical, and emotional

Systemic Hypothesis
- Symptoms naturally fill “gaps” or systemic needs to maintain balance
- Develop working hypothesis about the problem
- A potential systemic function the symptom may be playing
- How does this serve to maintain the family homeostasis?
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Intergenerational Patterns

- Personal qualities/family roles/complementary roles
- Health issues
- Substance and alcohol abuse and dependence
- Relational abuse – sexual, physical, and emotional
- Triangles
- Anxiety management patterns: distance, conflict, triangling, symptom (physical, emotional, social)

Narrative Observations

- Assess dominant social discourses in which problems are embedded
- Creates a broader and new perspective
- Increases emotional attunement
- Identify Narratives
  - Identity narratives- What people tell themselves and others about who they are
  - Local discourses- A persons' personal truth

The Client Perspective

- Discuss key observations with the client
- Reflect on areas of disagreement and agreement
- If the client differs from the therapist, therapist may not understand key factors
- If ideas are similar, a treatment plan may be developed
- Remain open to changing perspective

Ethical Considerations

- Confidentiality
- Diversity
- Scope of practice
- Multiple relationships
- Defining the client
- Child rights to confidentiality
- Personal concerns
- Mandated reporting