

Affective-Experiential Strategies in Learning Psycho-Dynamically Oriented Family Counseling

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Abstract

In this report, a look is offered to consider some of the pressing implications involved in teaching psycho-dynamically oriented family counseling. The paper describes an experience which took place involving graduate students in a counseling program. A family counseling course was designed and carried out in which didactic (cognitive) and affective (experiential) dimensions were included. On the one hand, the fact that students had a working vision of the main theoretic concepts of dynamic family counseling was assured. On the other hand, affective-experiential strategies were introduced to help students recognize and use their emotional self-exploration and self-awareness when working with their family clients. The results of this experience show that students manifested an openness for taking into account their self-knowledge and self-consciousness when working with families. In addition, it was found that the participants reported an increase in the use of those feelings aroused in the sessions as an 'empathic thermometer' to closely monitor what emotionally happens in a given family case.

Key words: Affective-emotional strategies, psycho-dynamically oriented family counseling, self-awareness, self-exploration, empathic thermometer.

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Estrategias afectivo-experenciales en el aprendizaje de la orientación familiar de tipo psicodinámica Resumen

En este reporte se ofrece un panorama sobre los aspectos implicados en la enseñanza de la orientación familiar de tipo psicodinámica. El artículo describe la experiencia llevada a cabo con estudiantes de postgrado de un programa de Maestría en Orientación. Se diseñó y desarrolló un curso en el cual se consideraron las dimensiones didácticas (cognitivas) y afectivas (experenciales). Por un lado, se buscó que los cursantes manejaran los enfoques teóricos más importantes en la orientación familiar. Por el otro lado, se emplearon estrategias afectivo-experenciales para promover que los cursantes emplearan la auto-exploración y autoconciencia en el trabajo de orientación de casos familiares. Los resultados de esta experiencia muestran que los participantes manifestaron una apertura para utilizar el auto-conocimiento y los estados afectivos que se generan en ellos como producto del trabajo con una familia; así mismo, se encontró que pudieron concebir esta utilización de estados afectivos

como un termómetro empático para seguir de cerca lo que ocurra emocionalmente en el caso familiar que estaban orientando.

Palabras clave: Estrategias afectivo-experienciales, orientación familiar psicodinámica, autoconciencia, autoexploración, termómetro empático.

1. Presentation

Traditionally, in graduate courses the relevance of pursuing cognitive objectives has been emphasized and the importance of learning and comprehending the most 'important contents' has been stressed. However, during the last three decades, an important movement has emerged in the field of family counseling' that 1 Even though there are several differences between the terms 'therapy' (and therapist) and 'counseling' (and 'counselor') that the author of this paper acknowledges, in this article both terms are used indistinctively to refer to the process of helping people through the uses of psychological and emotional strategies points out to consider not only the cognitive and theoretic aspect of the process, but also to include the affective-experiential dimension.

The contact with the affective states that arise in a family counseling session is what has been called the affective experiential variable in family intervention (Box, 1994). To be a competent family counselor is not enough to have a good theoretical appreciation of family dynamics; it is also essential that counselors be trained in recognizing and using their own emotional reactions to the family as a guide to understanding what the family is experiencing when working in a session. In this tenor, many authors agree that there is a need for an experiential component in a family counseling group to assist students in acquiring the skills they need to function as effective family counselors (Herlihy and Corey, 1997).

In the field of counseling and behavior change, the affective experiential variable plays a very significant role. It has been demonstrated that the counselor acts as an important element in changing behavior patterns; his figure, his presence, his personality, and in general, the affective experience that the counselor experiments during the human interaction of a counseling session, are part of the empathy competencies that counselors need to be aware of and to develop to help people. One of the tools the counselor has in doing this task is that related to the awareness of his own reactions when interacting with people in the therapeutic relationship. This awareness plays a crucial role in family work, as it does in individual psychodynamic counseling.

In family work, it is essential to experience and engage with the affective states that are aroused by such a family group as part of the helping process. How counselors experience the family represents significant material about the themes of the family dynamics and informs the counselor about the therapeutic task.

All those who work psychodynamically as family counselors are well aware of the difficulties involved in teaching about the psychodynamic aspect of this work. One of the most difficult skills to acquire in learning family counseling is the ability to attend to the interactive and underlying process whilst also listening to the experiential content of the session.

It is well documented (e.g. Dagg & Evans, 1997) how difficult it is for new therapists to be engaged in using their own responses when working with families. Schooled in activity, particularly when trained first in medicine or education, new therapists tend to feel the need to teach something, to do something, to fix something and to know something about the family they are working with, when the need may be just to listen and, through valuing their own

experience of a session, use it to inform their practice. In this regard, counselors could dismiss information that can be considered as 'subjective' material, such as experiencing uncomfortable feelings toward one member of the family. If anxiety about experimenting with such feelings arises, trainees may engage in eliminating those 'subjective' reactions and then may act as a way of managing anxiety. Learning to use the valuable information of what the therapist is experiencing in the session can diminish this anxiety and enable trainees to attend more closely to their own experience and to use it to help the family.

In family dynamically oriented interventions the task is to uncover what underlies the more obvious manifestations of family stress or group disintegration. The role of the therapist is to draw on his or her own feelings and reactions in the situation to illuminate and share some of the difficulties, as they are felt in the session, in a less persecutory way.

Due to the complexity of transactions that family members can present, counselors need to be alert to all the emotions that are aroused when the family exposes its difficulties. Counselors are to pay attention to all communications displayed by the family and should consider his or her reactions to such information as a valuable source of non-verbal, affective communication. Chessick (1989) considers that therapists should learn to listen in order to heighten their understanding of the family. With a more sophisticated ability to listen, the therapist becomes more aware of the process and less pressured to change the behaviors of the family group. In this sense, as the therapist becomes more alert of his or her own blind spots and unconscious reactions to the dynamics of the family, he or she will increase the ability to immerse in the dynamic and allow the process to unfold. This will result in an increased ability to use and trust one's self to understand and facilitate the family process.

Using experiential strategies in addition to learning theoretical concepts can be a powerful tool in developing this ability to listen. Being part of a learning process and belonging to a class that pays attention to the feelings experienced as a result of working with any given family allows a unique level of experiential process and intimacy very similar to what is pursued in family work.

One area of family counseling that differs from individual counseling is the stronger tradition of exposure of the therapist in family counseling (Minuchin, 1993). The experiential tradition in family counseling, as clearly demonstrated by most major family counseling conferences, lays the ground work for reflecting on and understanding the impact of the therapist's self on a psychodynamic informed family counseling, an area that individual counseling has only begun to explore since the work on self psychology and intersubjectivity (Kirschner, 1994).

For the beginning therapist the exposure and reflection on his own feelings resulting from the interaction with the family may help to stimulate an optimal level of anxiety that can motivate and enhance learning more about this personally difficult area of family counseling. The use of the self and the ability to trust in the feelings aroused in a given family session without using theory as a barrier between ourselves and our family clients but rather as a bridge to greater understanding, can flow from the unique experience of leading a process of psychodynamic family intervention.

2. The Counter-Transference Concept

The field of psychodynamic family counseling has inherited elaborate notions of identification, important modifications of the idea of counter-transference and developments

about notions of container—contained. Due to the affective-experiential nature of these concepts, they are very difficult for new students to grasp.

The use of the counter-transference concept is a major tool and plays a central role in dynamically informed family counseling. Counter-transference includes not only the therapist's reactions to the family and their problems but also the feelings that belong in the individual or group but have been projected.

Containment is another concept closely related to that of counter-transference. Bion (1962) first used this concept. Containing relates to the capacity on the part of a parent or therapist to take in another's feelings for a time, thereby bringing relief and support and to use this experience to help them appreciate more accurately what the other is feeling in order to respond appropriately. An understanding of the importance and efficacy of this process has had a considerable influence on working with families.

When the counselor opens himself and uses the experience of containment, he feels and is more aware of his own reactions to the full impact of the communications coming from different family members, even those that are bizarre, incompatible and painful and makes an attempt to give them some space within himself; he is making use of the concept of containment.

The therapist, having borne and thought about such feelings and thoughts, can then relate them back again to the family in a more bearable form. Using the countertransference as a general technique and the concept of containment more specifically is a means to understand what is being projected during the session.

3. The Experience

The experience described here was based on the premise that counselors should learn to use their own selves to discover the dynamics of the family. To do so, a graduate family counseling course was designed, offering a wide variety of experiential activities.

On the one hand, it was assumed that students had a vision of the main concepts used in dynamically oriented family counseling. In this sense, 'traditional' objectives were followed like identifying and comprehending the genetic factors that might contribute to family dysfunction; the role played by unconscious factors; terms such as transference, counter-transference, projective identification and the range of techniques commonly used.

On the other hand, it was emphasized that students needed to recognize and use their own emotional states when working with their clients and also to be aware of the influence that their own family history and personal history might have on their work. Theoretically, the experiential strategies were based on the models of Virginia Satir (1983), Manuel Barroso (1997) and Sally Box (1994). These three models propose that counselors working with dysfunctional families should have a firm belief on the power their presence has on the family. Likewise, such authors propose the utilization of the counselor's reactions to the family as a working tool for empathic understanding of the affective states then family is experiencing.

For example, students were asked to bring in family photos of their family and draw their family geneograms and then discuss these with classmates; this was done with a view to analyzing the impact of their own family upon them.

Likewise, trainees observed their own family interactions and were encouraged to 'feel' what it means for them to be a member of that family. They were asked to keep a diary to

document such 'naturalistic' observations and heard discussions of their observations with fellow trainees and their instructor.

In addition, students were asked to 'monitor' their reactions when assessing families; they had to document their 'thinking' and 'experiencing' as the meetings with the family were being heard. This information was later used as the basis for clinical discussion.

All participants were also required to present a family case study. The format for the presentation included a section on counter-transference. Each student was encouraged to monitor and document his counter-transference; in addition, all students had the opportunity to discuss these 'intrusive,' 'subjective' feelings with their peers.

4. Ethical Aspects

Due to the experiential nature of this kind of learning, we had to deal with some important issues related to the ethical practices in the field of counseling. Many of the participants exposed their feelings and thoughts about the families they were working with to the group, and they had to approach subjective material that was very personal and intimate for them. In this sense, the instructor made significant efforts for creating an environment of confidence and intimacy that allowed the students to feel secure when sharing their most inner thoughts about their clients to their classmates. In addition, there were some ground rules the students had to comply with to participate in the learning group that were considered at the beginning of the semester. Issues such as confidentiality and confrontations were approached with ethical standards to prevent harming the self-esteem of the students.

On the other hand, the students were given information about what to expect before they entered the course; in addition, there was a checking round in which every week the participants had the opportunity to comment on the previous experiences. Even though there was a subpoint in the final report about countertransference, in no way the instructor evaluated the students on the basis of personal material they disclosed at the training. The instructor did not evaluate the students on their participation in the experiential activities. Although student's performance in this course was not graded, they had to attend regularly.

5. Final Thoughts

The results of this experience show that students manifested openness for contacting their emotional states when working with families. They reported an increased utilization of the feelings aroused in the session as an 'empathic thermometer' of what happens in the family case. In addition, they were 'desensitized' to the fact of being exposed to the class as they were in the family sessions.

This kind of experiential learning generated a highly supportive class environment in which students could use the class as a 'container' to ventilate and understand their doubts and 'weird' feelings about their family clients.

Using experiential strategies in addition to learning theoretical concepts served as a powerful tool in developing the ability to listen.

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