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“My Life as a Family Therapist”: A Journaling Method for Teaching Systems-Based Family Therapy Theories to Undergraduates

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ABSTRACT. This paper describes *Process Journal: “My Life as a Family Therapist,”* an assignment used in an undergraduate marriage and family therapy survey course to facilitate learning of systems-based marriage and family therapy theories. After starting with brief discussion of the value of teaching systems-based marriage and family therapy theories to undergraduates, the authors share detailed information about course content and objectives, following with explication of assignment objectives, procedure, and rationale. The paper concludes with reflections on the assignment that include student thoughts about the task and excerpts from their journal entries.

Keywords: systems theory, marriage and family therapy, undergraduate, teaching, learning, socialization

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“My Life as a Family Therapist”: A Journaling Method for Teaching Systems-Based Family Therapy Theories to Undergraduates

Background

Family systems theory has become part of the core curriculum in educating Human Development and Family Science undergraduate students, particularly in family life education (Darling, Cassidy, & Powell, 2014; Hamon & Smith, 2014). This systemic paradigm has inspired myriad students along their journeys to becoming family scientists, including many who have gone on to become marriage and family therapists. Often treated as a metatheory within the marriage and family therapy field, systems theory has become the theoretical underpinning for various family therapy theories such as strategic, structural and experiential approaches (Nichols & Schwartz, 1998). Despite the extent to which systems theory has driven development of the marriage and family therapy field (MFT), undergraduate students may know little about this vast and rich realm of therapeutic application. While some institutions offer MFT-focused coursework or internships to undergraduate students (Belous, Topor, & Gorton, 2013; Prouty, Johnson, & Protinsky, 2000), the literature contains relatively little about teaching MFT theory at an undergraduate level. Educating students about MFT theories when they are making decisions about pursuing graduate degrees would not only be a logical extension of systems theory knowledge, but also a valuable step in socializing undergraduates to the MFT profession (Latty, Angera, & Burns-Jager, 2010; Smith & Allgood, 1991).

The Human Development and Family Science (HDFS) Department at Messiah College has been offering an introductory course to marriage and family therapy field for more than a decade. Open to majors in HDFS, psychology, social work, and other fields, the course fulfills an elective in a Pre-counseling and Therapy Minor for students wishing to expand their knowledge of marriage and family therapy. The most recent iteration of the course was designed in an effort (among other objectives) to help students make informed decisions about graduate school or to begin socializing them into the MFT profession. If a student has not made a decision to pursue a career in MFT, the course offers the opportunity to develop a more sophisticated application of systems theory to real-life scenarios. The course has the potential to increase a student’s cognitive complexity in preparation for various family science, psychology, or social work careers (e.g., working with foster families, parenting education, intimate-partner victim advocacy) (Seaman, 2011).

Regardless of what career path a student chooses, understanding how problems persist in systemic fashion, rather than simply how they originate, is critical to systemic analysis and intervention, (Rohrbaugh, 2014). Comprehending that individual and context define and are mutually constituted by each other (i.e., the identity of opposites), as explained in the relational development systems (RDS) metamodel, is also a critical systemic point of application for all

social science students (Lerner & Schmid Callina, 2013; Lerner, Johnson, & Buckingham, 2015). When students can conceptualize applications of systems theory, including MFT interventions, they gain deeper understanding of human development and relationship dynamics as a whole. In recent commentary on the RDS metamodel, Pauline Boss (2015) stated, “optimizing human development is not accomplished solely in theory but also in practice” (p. 106) and, “family therapy will also be needed to understand human development” (p. 105). As Boss suggests, any application of systems theory, including its application in marriage and family therapy, will only serve to solidify the paradigm shift necessary for family scientists and other practitioners to transform systems theory knowledge into a variety of practice modalities.

One primary objective of the MFT course at Messiah College is for students to become acquainted with major theoretical models and movements in family therapy, including contemporary MFT practice. With this objective in mind, portions of the course are devoted to reviewing classic schools of family therapy such as structural, strategic, Bowen family systems, object relations, and symbolic-experiential as well as more contemporary approaches such as narrative, solution-focused, and collaborative language. This overview transforms what is often a day or two in a counseling theories course into weeks of more in-depth coverage of systems-based theories: a profundity of systemic knowledge and application many students had never imagined existed. To put it in the words of a former psychology student who took the course during his senior year, “This course blew my mind.” And he is not alone.

Journal Assignment Objectives

A course assignment entitled *Process Journal: “My Life as a Family Therapist”* has been beneficial in helping students make the paradigmatic or epistemological shift that characterizes the movement from an individualistic focus to a systemic focus when conceptualizing individual, couple or family treatment. Objectives for this assignment are for the student to be able to

- Reflect on course reading and content, including MFT theories, by personalizing their application as if he or she were already working with families.
- Begin to view the world, including people and relationships, through a systemic lens.
- Review and synthesize reading and class activities for the purpose of increased recall of course material.
- Imagine incorporating a professional identity as a marriage and family therapist into his or her personal and vocational identity.
- Struggle with old and new ways of thinking in the private and confidential medium of journaling (create a “safe space” for processing).

The assignment’s ultimate goal is for the student to begin to think systemically while he or she evaluates his or her possible future place in the MFT profession or as a family scientist working alongside those in the MFT profession. By reading and responding to student journal entries, the instructor, ideally someone with extensive experience in the MFT field, has the opportunity to

act as a mock supervisor of sorts, facilitating growth in rudimentary facets of the field. The journals also provide a creative assessment alternative that allows for measurement of progress toward relevant course objectives.

Procedure

The basic requirement for journal entries is for each student to write as if he or she were already a family therapist working in the profession. Completed weekly, each journal entry should reflect thorough understanding of course content with appropriate references to reading assigned that particular week. In approximately two double-spaced pages, the student should answer some combination of these questions:

- In what ways are you more informed or have you grown as a family therapist as a result of the reading or class time?
- What new ways of thinking or techniques can you employ in your therapy as a result of the reading or class time?
- What questions do you have related to the material about which you would like to talk with other family therapists?

While this may not seem different from any other reflective journal, the key to student growth and development is in the instruction to *write as if he or she were already a family therapist working in the profession*. By writing *as if*, the student may begin to think *as if*, a tried and true intervention in the Adlerian, behavioral, and constructivist therapy traditions (Watts, 2003a; Watts, 2003b).

Rationale for the Assignment

Like any theory, systems theory is a way of thinking, a way of viewing families and the world. In a more fundamental sense, systems theory becomes a root of one's epistemology or way of knowing about reality, which contrasts with reduction-to-components thinking or a focus on individual parts (Laszo & Krippner, 1998). Students interested in discovering more about MFT need not only to learn about systems theory, but must also begin to think systemically. In a recent conversation with Dr. Kenneth Covelman, Director of the joint MFT program, Council on Relationships and Thomas Jefferson University, I (P. Johns) asked him how we at Messiah College could prepare undergraduate students for graduate programs such as his. Dr. Covelman stated, "teach them to think systemically, and we can take it from there" (K. Covelman, personal communication, 11/12/2014). Implicit within Dr. Covelman's comment seems to be the need to practice early and often this novel, and at times countercultural, systemic way of viewing people; it does not necessarily develop quickly or naturally. When a student begins to make this paradigm shift, it moves him or her beyond the simplistic notion that systemic therapy is about inviting more people into the therapy room. Learning concepts such as circular causality versus

linear causality begins to create richer understanding of client struggles. The concept of nonsummativity, or the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, begins to complement individualistic thinking in conceptualization of a presenting problem. And once one has gotten a taste of systems thinking, it is quite difficult to return to looking at clients through an individualistic lens.

A few years ago, I (P. Johns) visited with an old graduate school mentor of mine who had helped me learn the art and science of family therapy. Despite his many years of teaching and writing about systems thinking, my mentor confessed it was a couple of years after *I* received my MFT degree that *he* finally understood what it meant to think systemically. My disbelieving response notwithstanding, his confession fueled a passion in me for helping undergraduate students begin this journey long before they *must* sit with real clients, let alone long after they *begin* doing so. This journal assignment was designed to do just that.

Reflection

In and of itself, journaling can be a beneficial way to engage students, particularly in the area of intrapersonal intelligence (Hamon, Berke, & Smay, 2006). The *as if* component of this journal assignment adds the element of hypothetical thinking, which appears to facilitate increased assimilation of systems thinking. As a recent sophomore psychology student and second author of this paper (R. Kreiger) recounted,

During lectures and readings, students take the information at face value, logically understanding it and soaking up the concepts. However, by assigning students to put themselves in the position of the therapist, they are forced to conceptually understand the information and then take it one step further by applying it to a future life situation.

A Human Development and Family Science student and third author of this paper (C. Hurff) reported that,

The journal assignment provides the opportunity for students to constructively contemplate concepts, skills, and theories within marriage and family therapy, offering a sense of purpose for the student but eliminating any element of pressure that comes with legitimate interactions between a therapist and their client(s). It is the perfect preliminary step for students to openly grapple with concepts, applying what they have learned in class to hypothetical situations within their journal.

As these quotes indicate, students thought that the journal afforded them the opportunity to experiment with the idea of working as a marriage and family therapist, employing theoretical orientations without the risk or commitment required of those already pursuing graduate degrees.

Along with any perceived value the journaling may have in the student's mind, the assignment may also produce what has been referred to as a *generation effect* upon one's learning. A generation effect occurs when a student's self-generating of material versus rote memorization enhances his or her learning and recollection (Niezanski, 2012; Rosner, Elman, & Shimamura, 2013). When a student must take what he or she has learned and imagine applying it to clients or to their development as a hypothetical family therapist, he or she generates material requiring synthesis of the knowledge, a higher order of thinking within Bloom's Taxonomy (Seaman, 2011).

Journal Entry Examples

Perhaps a couple of excerpts from student journals will help the reader gain deeper understanding of and appreciation for the assignment's aforementioned benefits. A student in the course and the second author of this paper (R. Kreiger) wrote the following in her journal when reflecting on homeostasis and change:

Individual therapy can be a wonderful thing for many people, but once that person is placed back into his or her original context, breaking the pattern of behavior is very difficult. Roles and expected behaviors are strong assumptions and transforming those expectations can be unsettling for the system.

In a later entry, this same student (R. Kreiger) wrote the following *as-if* scenario when reflecting on experiential therapy, client affect, and interactions among family members:

In my practice, I often notice the physical positioning of my client to understand his or her mood. It is helpful, but the technique is much more effective when I am in a room with multiple people. At first, I was surprised by how I could notice tension between individuals, who teamed up with whom, and which parent was favored by the children. I take advantage of the opportunity to collect data from the family each time they reposition. I also like to make a note of their body language toward me as a therapist.

Another student in the course and the third author of this paper (C. Hurff) wrote the following about integrative approaches when reflecting on what she would want to ask other therapists:

My last question is whether it is hard for therapists to set specific goals for their client while using an integrative approach, due to its numerous components. I am unsure whether the therapist ever feels lost in trying to attend to their client holistically and if doing this makes the problem and treatment appear less clear.

As evidenced by these excerpts, students are allowed to dream responsibly, employing what they are learning to enter an imaginary future of serving others as a marriage and family therapist.

Conclusion

Helping undergraduate students learn about application of systems-based MFT theories before they make definitive decisions about their personal vocations is a great joy and privilege. Regardless of whether such students proceed to an MFT career, learning MFT theories can produce more sophisticated systemic analysis and help professionals of many kinds understand more about the practice of their MFT colleagues. Those already in the MFT profession, particularly those of us who teach, must approach teaching with the knowledge that we are beginning to socialize some students into a vital profession about which they may know very little. An assignment like *Process Journal: "My Life as a Family Therapist"* can help inspire the next generation of MFT professionals by allowing them to follow their hearts for people into a safe, imaginary world that is gently nurtured, corrected, and co-constructed by an instructor who was once inspired by others. And if a student continues into graduate school, others can, as Dr. Covelman conveyed, "take it from there" and transform dreams into reality.

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