

Researching Two Theories

Narrative Theory:

When it comes down to it, narrative theory is where individuals are engaged in an ongoing process of constructing a life story, personal narrative, that determines their understanding of themselves and their position in the world. Social workers work with clients to construct this life story in an empowering way. By doing this we are helping clients to gain greater control over their lives.

Narrative theory is not a “step by step” assessment where an individual must reach a certain stage of development to hit a life goal. Rather, narrative theory is a continuous line of stories from our own personal experiences and the loved ones around this. Now, we must keep in mind that narrative theory is very biased and selected. This must be remembered when working with a client since we as humans tend to pick and choose parts of our story that we want to tell.

Some of the major concepts of narrative theory are that people’s lives and relationships are shaped by their life stories. Who you are today is looked at by what happened to you in your past. Some clients and individuals we work with may think they do not have a story worth telling, it is our job as social workers to understand the essence of someone’s life and help them create or discover new purposes for living. We must also recognize that everyone has their own unique personal story, but at the same time their story is shared to a certain degree with others in their communities.

Narrative theory can be used to help clients recognize the problematic pattern of living they have, help them write their own stories of dignity and competence, and provide them with supportive individuals as an audience to their new life story. We must also keep in mind that there are certain clients who are and are not appropriate for narrative theory. Those who are

appropriate include survivors of trauma, illness, and abuse, gay, lesbian, and transgender clients, members of oppressed groups, immigrant families, those experience life transitions, children in foster care, older adults, as well as many more. Those who are not suitable for narrative theory include individuals who have behavioral problems that need to be monitored, single-issue clients, individuals in immediate crisis, and when a client's problem interferes with the social workers values.

Another interesting fact about narrative theory is that the social workers role shifts from the expert to being a collaborator. We are there to work with the client on constructing their empowering life story.

When using narrative theory, the interviewer must first understand how the client views themselves and their problem. The social worker then moves into asking the client about their strengths, talents, and accomplishments in order to set the state for constructive emphasis. Clients are encouraged to look at themselves as the protagonist of their story, rather than as the victim. From here the social worker helps the client break down their problem while also separating it from the client. The client is not the problem, the problem is separate from them. The next stage of narrative theory is where the practitioner challenges the way the client views a problem or situation. This allows the client to broaden their horizon and see more than just what they had assumed. The practitioner then helps reconstruct the client's narrative with them.

This is something used by many social workers because it focusses on empowering the client and on social change. One of the biggest criticisms to this theory is that it is not suitable for those whose have basic needs problems. Someone coming in because they are underemployed and cannot pay rent may not be the best suited for narrative theory. Another caution when using narrative theory is to make sure that we are not imposing our idea of an

“ideal story” onto the client. Practitioners tend to have their biases on how a “good” life story should go, and sometimes this can come across in practice to the clients.

Structural Family Theory:

As given in the name, this theory is especially helpful when working with families. This theory breaks down a family into the structure on how it is formed and how it functions. The following few paragraphs will be summarizing the main concepts of structural family theory.

The first concept is subsystems. The family as a whole is considered a system. Inside of that though, there are subsystems of different groups. This could include siblings being their own subsystem in the family or the parents forming their own. Inside of the system, there is a subsystem.

Next, we have the concept of executive authority. This idea is that there is usually one person in the household who holds the majority of the power and decision making. In a lot of families, this role is usually taken by the “man of the house”.

Boundaries are an important part in the structure of a family. This book discusses internal and external boundaries. Internal boundaries are boundaries within a system. Boundaries established between parents and children or boundaries established between brother and sister. External boundaries are between two systems. The family system has boundaries with their community such as church, school, or another family system.

Rules are a crucial part in any family. Rules can be broken down as the behaviors and responsibilities that each member of the family is expected to abide by. When you think about a family, parents usually establish rules that the children must follow. Parents also (hopefully) establish rules such as not hitting or beating a child. When rules in the family system are followed, the family can function as a unit.

The next concept of family structure are the roles in a family, and these are crucial. Roles are the individual functions that family members have. Roles can include: daughter, mother, executive leader, scapegoat, student, breadwinner, hero, and many others. Roles give each family member a purpose and function when the role is positive.

Alliances are the next concept in this theory. Alliances are formed when two members or two subsystems work together. This can be positive when the alliance is contributing to the overall well-being of the family. But when this alliance is toxic, other members of the family can be excluded and many more problems can arise.

The concept of “Triangles” is something that I have never heard of before. This is when two family members turn their attention to a third member for relief or support when in conflict with each other. This makes me think of a mediator. Triangles can turn negative, for example, when two parents choose to blame a child for creating their problems.

Flexibility is being able to adjust well to changes whether they be predictable or unpredictable. Changes come whether we like them or not, the family structure needs to have enough flexibility to get through the change.

Communication is the last main concept of the structural family theory. Without clear and direct communication, the whole family structure can come crumbling down. Conveying messages to other members in the family is crucial in the family system.

One specific problem that arises with this theory is when there is a power imbalance. A power imbalance happens when the “wrong” member of the family holds the most power in the family system. For example, a young child throwing a temper tantrum because they want something and the parent always giving in. The child learns that they then have the power and can manipulate it to get what they want. This might not be the healthiest thing.

Structural family theory does not require a lengthy process of formal questions and information gathering, but the social worker “takes charge” and leads the family to finding a resolution. Two tools that are often used in family assessments and when looking at the structure of the family are genograms and ecomaps. These both can help a family see how they function within the context of the family and within their society.

A main criticism of this theory is that it does not focus on the emotional aspect of a family. It tends to focus on the structure of the family and how they function as a whole rather than the individual emotions and feelings. This is because it is thought that when the structure and overall function of a family is addressed and fixed, that the emotional will just fall into place. This is not always the case. Another criticism is that practitioners may hold a bias on what a proper structure for a family is. It must also be recognized that families will always come with different structures and that does not mean one family is better than the other. We must make assumptions about what we believe their family should look like.