

Family Therapy: A Prayer for Theoretical Impurity

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What is the problem with theory? You are the problem with theory! You have lost your perspective on theory's place in the great scheme of things. Once you stop conversing with it and start to believe in it, theory rapidly becomes dogma. Soon it is us against them; polarisation; the battle of the brands; religious wars! Blinded by unwavering faith, dangerous devotees generate home-grown messiahs. The babble of Babel has resulted in 400 theories and therapies — a cackling cacophony. If we could quieten these disparate voices, how much more might we hear?

Theories can seduce you and reduce you with bogus certainty. And, sadly, that can be attractive. It gives the twin illusions that you are firstly, expert; and secondly, in control. David Pilgrim said there are no experts in human misery, only experts at claiming expertise (1997). Offering certainties is about the soothing of anxieties. For me as a teacher this is 'soul murder'. Soul murder is where the passion for enquiry is suppressed; yearning for learning is repressed; and growth is canalised, then ossified. Told what to think and who to obey, you become a mere imitator, a ventriloquist's dummy mouthing another's lines, another's attitudes, and you lose your self in the process. Death for the soul as well as the mind!

Picasso once stated 'When I paint, my objective is to show what I find, not what I am looking for'. Theory-driven therapists risk only looking for what the theory asserts as significant, overlooking everything else before them. We are so hungry for answers we do not engage deeply enough with the questions. Subject theory to the test of common sense and practical wisdom, and be aware of all the problems and gaps, not only of what is said but of what is ignored or marginalised. Any one way of seeing is a way of not seeing something else. Despite the fact that the therapist's personal presence and emotional maturity are critical to therapy, theoretical knowledge and techniques are given centre stage in most of our training. As a result, personal growth is neglected.

Dogmatism is the antithesis of learning. Bizarrely, post-modernism, while promising a multiverse of approaches, has itself become the dogma of the day. Postmodernism is now the privileged voice in many circles, in many ways the grand theory it critiques. Today's radicals become tomorrow's despots.

There is no fun in fundamentalism! Theories are there to be played with, not believed in! Your job is to get to know them, wrestle with them, argue with them and, when you are ready, seduce them to your own ends. We need to be promiscuous with theories. We don't owe them loyalty. Flirt with

them, maybe even some serious dating, but don't marry them! We cannot afford the luxury of being monotheoretical amid the astounding complexity of individuals, families and our world.


Play with the power of ideas, the beauty of ideas, the practicality of ideas, the structure of ideas. If you do that then theory comes alive and pertinent; a means of transport, a map of the territory but never a destination; a resource to be used and not a refuge to hide in; at your service without making you servile. Develop curiosity, not cults; imagination, not imitation; creativity, not captivity; character not caricature.

Trust your senses, your perceptions, your intuitions, your presence with the client, trust your practice wisdom, and trust the relationship you build together with the client. Wake up and connect. Connect with the human person, the mystery in front of you and the mystery that is you, capable of living and being 'in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts' (Keats, 1817). Theory is so often presented as immutable facts and incontestable reason that we forget that it is just a theory.

Your challenge, should you accept it, is to battle the part of you that craves certainty; that hungers for the one true way; that lusts after a magic wand, a silver bullet, and a holy grail; the part that yearns for black and white in a world of rainbows.

Know your theories. Work with what appeals most to you and fits your style at this point in your development. But know your self better, and be aware of the mystery before you. At the same time, beware — insight is not action. Do not take yourself as a therapist too seriously either! I dream of the day when sectarianism is over, when we commit ourselves to an ecumenical world of family therapy theories, each shining its multicoloured light on the mystery of the intricate diorama of the human condition.

Reference

Pilgrim, D., 1997. *Psychotherapy and Society*, London, Sage. 

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This short piece grew from a lecture in a counselling theories course which attempted to put theory in its place, act as a counter to fundamentalist thinking, and to encourage openness to ambiguity and alternative perspectives.