




Infertility – from a family therapy/systems therapy perspective

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Overview

1. Introduction to family systems theory
“you can’t have one without the other...”
2. Family systems therapy and infertility
“we are family – so what’s in a name?”
3. Navigating through clinical practice
“the land of ‘if’ and ‘maybe baby’...”






1. Family systems theory

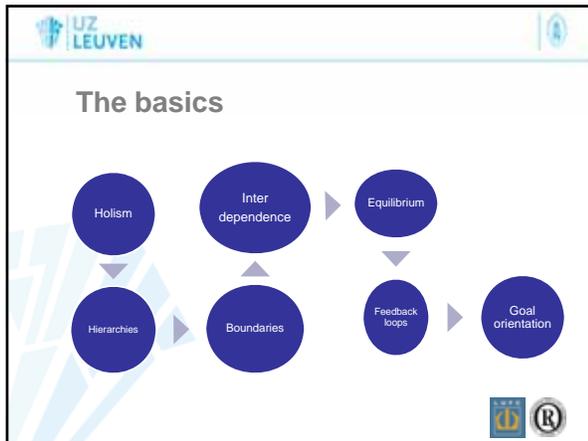
- “people are best understood in the context of their mutual interactions and systemic relationships” (Bertalanffy, 1968)

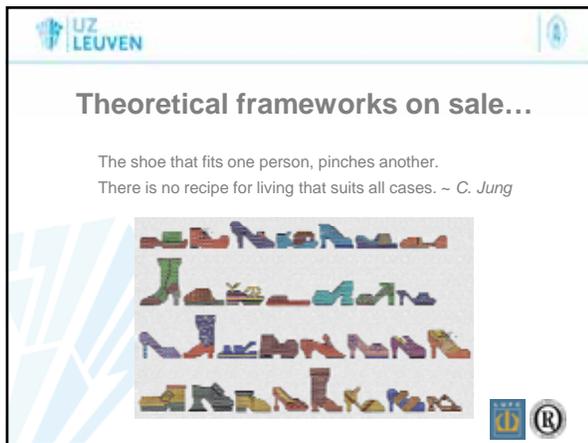
➔ connected, interdependent, interrelated families are dynamic

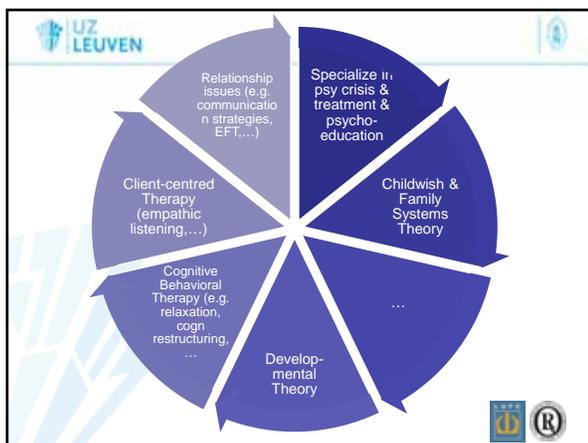
individual ≠ unit of analysis

“You can’t have one without the other...”









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2. Family systems therapy and infertility

- Infertility = “shared experience”
- Impact on:
 - Individual (men, women)
 - Couple relationship
 - Family of origin ('grandparents')
 - Friends and family
 - Greater context surrounding individual (work, hobby, community,...)



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*“No man is an Island, entire of itself;
every man is a piece of the Continent, a
part of the main.”*

John Donne



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From family systems theory

- Holism:
 - “The whole is greater than the sum of its parts” ~ Aristotle
 - Infertility as it is experienced through interaction between the members of a unit
 - To know the whole, we have to study the interaction and communication between the individual members!



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2. Family systems therapy and infertility

- Couple = unit of analysis
- Couple relationship =
 - Powerful system of mutual influence and interaction
 - Explains infertility experience (coping, emotional reactions) better than looking at men and women separately

(Peterson et al., 2006)

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From family systems theory

- 'hierarchy': families organize themselves into smaller subunits e.g. parents, siblings, couple,...
- 'interdependence': all members are influenced by each other
- 'boundaries': who is in or outside of the family system?

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2. Family systems therapy and infertility

- Understand **child wish**
- Insight into **couple dynamics** in infertility and its treatment
- Social and societal perspective**
 - insight into burden of treatment

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A. The wish for a child

- Child wish: a complex phenomenon
 - 'Biological parenthood'
 - = implicitly valued and primary role in western society
 - = 'script'
 - = developmental milestone

Multifactorial Motives:

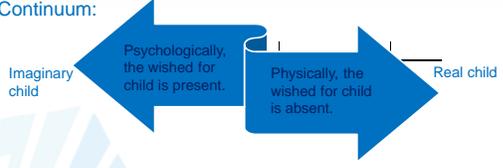
- = Individual
- = Relational
- = Transgenerational
- = Sociological/Society



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Infertility: unfulfilled wish for a child

Continuum:



- Wish for a child: process of attachment and growing towards an 'imaginary' baby and confronting reality
e.g. the 'wished' for child versus the 'actual child'
- Crisis of infertility as a transition to non-parenthood
- Boundary ambiguity



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B. Couple dynamics

- Infertility: "layers of meaning"
- "couple congruence" (McCubbin, 1993)
 - Adaptation to stressors
- "gender differences" (Jordan, 1999)
 - Social meaning and expectations, coping with,...
- Impact on marital relationship:
 - Positive or negative
 - Many stressors (sexual functioning, social family networks, quality of life,...)
 - Literature: conflicting findings



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C. Social and societal perspective

- **Fertility unit:** working with 'patients'
- Outside of the fertility unit:
not a vacuum for our patients
→ larger system
- We don't work with the system,
but we do have to deal with it.



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C. Social and societal perspective

- **FAMILY** = often overlooked
- **Unfulfilled wish for a child = family loss**
→ parents, grandparents, siblings, other relatives
- 'We inform our patients. They inform their family.'
- Dealing with social expectations, social desirability and taboo
- **Social support:**
 - For patients
 - For themselves



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C. Social and societal perspective

SOCIETY:
Infertility = 'invisible loss' + 'unrecognized loss'

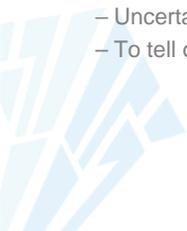
- Hospital ~ safe cocoon, initial shock, supportive environment, ...
- Home ~ facing reality, letting it sink in, emptiness, questions and no answers, ...
- **Communication with the environment**
 - Family, friends, co-workers, boss etc.: providing a script
 - Social stigma
 - Facing the facts and reality: 'life goes on'



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C. Social and societal perspective

- **Burden of treatment:**
 - ‘Life on hold’
 - Uncertainty and confrontations
 - To tell or not to tell (boundaries)


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3. Navigating through clinical practice

- *“the land of ‘if’ and ‘maybe baby’...”*

The Land of If got its name not only because IF is the abbreviation for “infertility” in the online world but also because there are so many ifs inherent in being here. There are what ifs and if onlys and if this, then that. If (there’s that word again!) you are accustomed to having a pretty tight rein on your life—accustomed to working hard and seeing the desired outcome, or being able to predict what comes next—the Land of If is going to be a particularly difficult stopover for you. Being here is all about living in uncertainty and doubt and wonder and hope: *If only I had gone to the doctor earlier. What if I hadn’t bought my husband that package of tight briefs from Costco? What if my wife hadn’t laid out our adoption profile to look like a scrapbooking-store explosion? If I go past the baby aisle at Target, then I will have a nervous breakdown between the onesies and binkies.*

~Melissa Ford: <http://thelandoff.blogspot.com/>

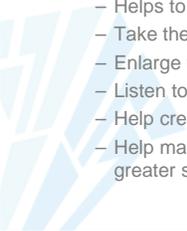




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3. Navigating through clinical practice

- **How can family systems theory help?**
 - Broad perspective on complex issues
 - Helps to understand the complexities
 - Take the system into account
 - Enlarge the system (couple dynamics!)
 - Listen to the narratives and the stories
 - Help create different stories
 - Help make sense and give meaning within the greater system


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3. Navigating through clinical practice

- Clinical techniques:
 - Emotionally focused couples therapy
 - Communication techniques
 - Creative techniques (non-verbal)
 - Narratives
 -



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Case illustration

- *"I've been in treatment for 2,5 years and I barely recognize myself. I get so angry and bitter – I blame all the world and myself with it. I don't understand why this is happening. Everything has changed; the way I look at myself, my husband but also my family. Their lives will go on; my sister will become grandma one day and we just won't. What will I be, who will I be once this is over? Will it ever really be over?"*



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For more information:
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THANK YOU FOR YOUR ATTENTION! QUESTIONS?



References

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