

Reviews

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Book Review.

“Relational Family Therapy: The Systemic, Interpersonal, and Intrapsychic Experience”, Christian Gostečnik, New York, London 2017, Routledge, Language: English

We all long for relationships with others, because only in connecting with others we can develop our intrapsychic structure and become functional adults. Our deepest yearnings are therefore devoted to building solid dialogue as the means of becoming fully human. We, therefore, consciously or unconsciously, long for a relationship where we can experience happiness, satisfaction and, above all, redemption or salvation from our dreads, miseries and unhappiness. These are the foundations of *Relational Family Therapy*, a book by the Franciscan Dr. Christian Gostečnik, with PhD in clinical psychology, PhD in psychology, and PhD in theology, family and marital therapist, supervisor and professor of Psychology of Religion, Pastoral Psychology, Family Studies, and Marriage and Family Therapy at the Faculty of Theology, University of Ljubljana.

The book, which was published in 2017 by Routledge, consists of 5 chapters in 277 pages, and presents a relational family model, a synthesis and integration of relational theories, and integrates object relations theories with interpersonal psychoanalysis and specific trends of self psychology into the relational systemic

model. The basic premise is that the pursuit and maintenance of human relatedness is the fundamental motivational vector and not just the maturational process into which humans are inevitably engaged, but also the basic thrust in human experience. The relational family model considers disturbances in early relationships with caretakers as serious distortions to subsequent relatedness, not by freezing infantile needs in place, as some theories of self psychology might suggest, but by setting in motion a complex process through which the child, and later as an adult, builds an interpersonal and systemic world from what is available through the very powerful mechanism of projective and introjective identification, which further consolidates the affect regulation, and respectively affective psychic construct.

This dynamic process can be repeated from one generation to the other and can seriously distort and damage not only the individual in a system but also the most significant intimate relationships between partners and the entire system. It can also jeopardize whole generations because their members can be influenced by these damaging influences in all aspects of their psychic lives without really knowing why they suffer so much or why they experience the same traumatic relationships with others over and over again. They can be in perpetual conflicts all their lives, because they strive and seek compatible persons with whom they create similar relational experiences which can only promise them relatedness, so deeply embedded in their psychic life that this is the only model of relatedness they know, and, therefore, they strive for the same. Everything else is for them unfamiliar, and therefore, dangerous, because it is unknown. The family relational model is, first of all, concentrated on these powerful components of individual, couple, and systems life.

The relational family model does not take into account only the expansion of conscious awareness or of deprived or missed early experiences, but most of all, this model locates the central mechanism of therapeutic change, the correction of affect regulation, the dismantling of the affective psychic construct, and in an alteration of the basic structure of the individual interpersonal and relational systemic world. In other words, the relational family model tries to find sufficient resolution of the problem, or affect regulation and affective psychic construct, on a system's level, and if that does not work, the therapist tries to go deeper into interpersonal level and finally unravels the most basic intrapsychic ingredients. The family relational model can therefore approach intrapsychic components and processes from very different angles, focusing on different dimensions of the relational matrix – self organization, object ties,

or transactional patterns – and tries to make sense and understanding of these mental contents from the past in terms of their powerful influence which affects the present life of an individual or couple and/or system, specifically in his/their interpersonal and systemic components of his/their experience.

Object relational theories describe the same process in terms of altering internal object relational sets, which are formed in a complementary way with the character structure of significant others. On the same basis, the primary psychobiological states are created. Deprived individuals form the same object relations with others in later life with the purpose of maintaining a sense of attachment and connectedness, and on this basis, constitute the affect regulation and affective psychic construct. The internalization of the new experience can be, first of all, created on the basis of a relationship between an individual or couple and the therapist, mainly through the powerful mechanism of countertransference – this is the essential component of the family relational model of therapy – which enables an individual or couple to release their powerful links to the past forms of relatedness, and can now introduce new ways of relatedness to the self, others and to the whole family system.

From the subsystem of self psychology, or the self-organizational point of view, the therapist, through therapeutic interventions, tries to recover, reconnect, and fully experience aspects of himself previously disavowed but projected into the interpersonal and/or systemic world. The therapist, after exploring the individual distorted self and subsequent affect regulation and affective psychic construct, tries to insert new forms of interactions in a way that an individual or couple and/or system can experience new ways of relatedness unknown to him before. The therapist also has to bring an individual, or couple and/or system back to the old system by explaining why an individual previously relates in a certain way, in terms of the systems dynamics, and on this level a new set of interactions are also introduced and acted out.

Lastly, interpersonal analysis particularly focuses on the ways in which the therapeutic process facilitates changes in an individual, couple and/or systems transactional pattern. From this view, the repetitive patterns of relatedness define the experience of both self subsystem and object subsystem, because the repetition of ritualized, transactional patterns prevents different ways of relations. By discovering and articulating these patterns of affect regulation and affective psychic construct, the therapeutic process encourages an individual or couple and/or system to try something new, a new interpersonal experience where more functional patterns of behavior are possible.

We can say that the relational family model, in this respect, is deeply rooted in a faith in redemption, in the sacrality of family and relationships, because it presupposes the salvational psychic fact for Christians that Christ came to bring the gospel to the poor, to announce freedom to the prisoners and give sight to the blind (cf. Luke 4:18). Relational family therapy, when it sees in all these vicious circles not only a possibility of emotional and psychological redemption, but a time of grace intersecting with nature, is not far from the Kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus. Thus, when a person actively participates in the redemptive process, when he/she fully accepts responsibility for his/her psychic state, then, with the help of grace, redemption is also possible even in the case of ever so deep a trauma. Every trauma, every pain carries with it also a longing and hope that someday it will be different; i.e., a longing for salvation which is possible only in a relationship.