

Psychological Foundations of Formation: A Case Analysis

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Abstract

A case analysis approach is used to illustrate how psychological theories can be used to explain the challenges faced in the formation. The psychological theories explaining the attachment styles, relationships, patterns in communication are used to understand the case of a formee who is facing the challenges that accompany the process of formation. The aspect of psycho-spiritual formation is reflected throughout the article and suggestions to formators about how to deal with similar issues are also discussed. In conclusion, the article reflects the need for formators to understand the interface between psychology and spirituality and its integration in the seminary to achieve a holistic approach for healing and personal growth of the formee.

Keywords: Case analysis, Psycho-spiritual formation, Spiritual direction, Counseling

Introduction

The article uses a case approach to explain development in formation using several psychological theories. Some recommendations and suggestions for formators to plan their spiritual direction sessions are illustrated with the help of the case given below.

Case. Eighteen-year-old Mr. B. J. joined seminary due to compulsion from his parents, especially his father who believed that at least one of the children in the family should be given to the Lord's service. B.J. who was close to his mother blames her for not being able to speak up for him to the father. He hasn't talked to his father since he has joined the seminary and his conversations with his mother are distant and short. He is the youngest child after two sisters. B.J. also used to blame his siblings and feel jealous after which he stopped communicating with them. B.J. came to the formator for spiritual direction and expressed his struggles to follow his superiors' instructions, especially with one of his superiors who had scolded him for not doing the assigned duty. He feels that nobody is appreciating him for what he has done so far. He is afraid that since he joined the seminary out of compulsion, he will not become a good priest, and though he was a good student in school, his academic performance is poor. He started becoming aware of his feelings of frustration. During one of the prayer times, he broke down and came to the realization that he needed help. He has come to the formator for guidance.

Analysis of the case

Of the strong and essential pillars – spiritual, intellectual, and pastoral – for a well-rounded priestly formation and identity, the first pillar of human formation is yet to gain momentum in the religious and seminary formation (Witherup, 2011). Every formee is a somatopsychospiritual being (Tisdale, Doehring, Lorraine-Poirier, 2004). The term psychospiritual implies that in the inner world there is no partition between spiritual and psychological aspects (Benner, 1998). As humans are essentially psychospiritual in nature, optimal human functioning requires one to understand how the two are integrated, and especially

in a vocation like seminary, there is a need to understand how formators can use this concept for effective formation. “The whole work of priestly formation would be deprived of its necessary foundation if it lacked a suitable human formation” (*PDV* 43). The purpose of this paper is to use different psychological theories to understand the case and how it can be used to help formators help their formees.

An infant comes into the world with a brain structure already equipped with the ability to survive as a separate being (Davis, 2011). Over the years, their life experiences, education, parenting styles, family system, and relationships mold the brain. As the family is the first network that the child is born into, the relationships that they form within the family are an important determinant in how their future relations are going to be built. However, constant negative experiences can lead to the perception that relationships are a burden. When a person with such a past joins the seminary, the formation community has the additional task of enabling the individual to meet their full potential by tapping into the psychological aspects of formation (*PDV* 43).

The growing-up years are essential in the psychological, social, emotional, cognitive and developmental aspects of the individual. B. J. in the above case illustrates how relationships, attachment styles, communication patterns and general psychological well-being that happen in the formees’ childhood is an essential estimate of their functioning in the seminary. The psychological aspects of formation have a deep connection with spirituality and how one will be able to behave in a manner that fulfills the duties of one’s vocation. Relationships provide the glue that holds together the complex networks in the society that humans have built to prosper and grow. To understand the nature of human relationships, one must start with the nature of the human brain. Throughout life the brain undergoes a series of changes caused by the various experiences and stimulation from the environment. The brain is capable of changes due to its capacity for neuroplasticity (Cozolino, 2014; Kolb & Muhammad, 2014) which indicates that with awareness, effort, and action, an individual can alter their neural pathways (Kirk, 2015). There is hope for B.J.’s vocation in the seminary as re-wiring of

his brain neural pathways are possible with the right psycho-spiritual guidance.

The primitive social instincts got shaped through evolution to promote bonding, attachment, and maternal caretaking. This emotional brain that came out of the reptilian brain helps form attachments. Also known as the limbic brain, the emotional brain understands the world through emotions and takes charge of the emotional responses to relationships and attachments (Ogden & Fisher, 2015). The early attachments can predict future attachments patterns where insecure initial major attachments may lead to negative expectations concerning future attachment figures (Eysenck, 2015). Bowlby (1969) defined attachment as a 'lasting psychological connectedness between human beings.' B. J. was carrying a lot of emotional baggage from his past which is detrimental to the relationships he is forming in the seminary. The insecure attachment style that B. J. is showing might be reflective of his earlier insecure attachment styles with his family members.

A dimensional model of attachment (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998) points to two important primary dimensions of adult attachment, namely anxiety, and avoidance. The degree of insecurity and extent of investment in seeking security from others corresponds to the anxiety dimension. The degree to which the individual steer clear of emotional vulnerability and focuses on self-reliance corresponds to the avoidance dimension. Based on how high or low an individual is on these dimensions, the attachment style can be classified into four: secure (low anxiety and low avoidance), preoccupied (high anxiety and low avoidance), dismissing (low anxiety and high avoidance), and fearful (high anxiety and high avoidance) (Maltzman, 2016). It might seem that the dismissing-avoidant attachment style of B. J. might reflect how he is less emotionally committed to resolving the issues. The formator who acts as the mentor needs to be aware of how formees with different attachment styles would respond to their offers of help. When the formees appear for spiritual direction sessions, the formators will be able to react and guide them better if they have an understanding of the formees previous attachment styles. While secure and preoccupied individuals show a rise-fall-rise

pattern of their alliance with the formator, a dismissing individual like B. J. will tend to show a stable alliance at the beginning which decreases as the guidance session progresses (Kanninen, Salo, & Punamaki, 2000). The formator needs to be patient, empathetic and understanding with B. J.

The evidence of the impact of religious practices on the brain is well documented (Maddix & Blevins, 2016). Christian formation includes the reciprocal dynamics of the relationship in community to ensure the healing, shaping, and forming of Christian character. The spiritual dimensions in our lives are both embodied in the human biological makeup and embedded in the experiences, beliefs, and practices in the community (Maddix & Blevins, 2016).

Apart from attachment styles, communication patterns are also an important element that determines the success of functional relationships. Satir focused her systems-oriented approach on the communications patterns within families. She assumed that there is a unique pattern of communication within troubled families and that there was a correlation between self-esteem and communications.

Every child born into this world literally comes into a different context and a different atmosphere from every other child, even if he is born to the same set of parents. These are what I call the atmospheric influences, and they refer to what is happening when the child is born (pp.225, Satir, 1972).

Her approach was to enhance self-esteem among family members and increase communication and problem-solving skills (Rasheed, Rasheed, & Marley, 2010). Five kinds of communication styles can be seen in the relationships: blamer, placate, computer, distractor, and leveler. The individual with blamer communication style finds faults in others and never accepts responsibility. The blamer tends to hide feelings of alienation and loneliness behind a tough and complacent mask, and are more likely to initiate conflict. The placate or non-assertive communication style people are out to please others, never disagreeing, and always seeking approval. They tend to avoid conflict, and their main concern is how other people perceive them. The computer behavior

in communication style portrays a very correct and proper behavior but displays no emotion, masking a feeling of vulnerability, and often appear cold or unfeeling. A computer can be a firework of emotions inside while appearing very calm and super-rational on the outside. They often say things that are value judgments without indicating who could have made the judgment, which implies that everyone would agree. The distractors seek attention to compensate for their feelings of loneliness or inadequacy. Rather than positive action, distractors use a range of emotions from anger to guilt to either avoid an issue or manipulate how others feel. Distractors use a range of behavior from Blamer, Computer and Distractor. Levelers or assertive communication style individuals have emotional balance and can relate to all kinds of people. The goal of leveling is mutual problem-solving. Levelers have few threats to their self-esteem. Words, voice tone, body movements, and facial expressions all give the same message. B. J. seems to have a blaming stance in his communication style and he blames his mother for not standing up to his father, his father for compelling him to join the seminary and his siblings for enjoying their lives. These forms of communication style are also present in his interactions with others around him.

The application of Satir's techniques while mentoring a formee includes seeking to model a healthy- clear, honest, open- communication pattern. The role of the formator would also be to help the formee realize their potential. The formators should be in touch with their feelings, attitudes and thoughts, become aware of their beliefs so that they could make conscious choices regarding their actions as a mentor. Satir also emphasized the focus on the growth potential of all individuals (Rasheed, Rasheed, & Marley, 2010). The challenge of the formator would be to maintain patience and help the formee channel their energy and resources to becoming a part of the seminary life.

Our attachment styles are perpetuated by our beliefs and thought patterns. Overgeneralization is when one or two isolated incidents are enough to make a statement or general rule about something. Extremism occurs when prescription lenses magnify everything. Individuals with the tendency for personalization will feel as if the world revolves around

us. This is when someone feels responsible for the mood or behavior of another person. Negative labeling is defining your partner in a generally negative way and giving everything a grade. It means identifying negative traits in every aspect of your partner's life. Emotional reasoning is looking for external causes for our feelings. They think that if they don't feel right, the situation is wrong and something or someone is responsible. B.J.'s belief that he is not where he is supposed to be might have lead him to behave in ways that complement his belief systems. B.J. was underperforming not because he was incapable; he underperformed from believing that he does not belong to the seminary. Beliefs have the power to change an individual mentally, physically, and spiritually (Jennings, 2017). The secure attachment bond with God is characterized by the longing to be personally intimate with the divine and the individuals' capacity to come to God for comfort, security, and provision. As a formee, developing a secure attachment bond with God as Father can be one of the goals of the formator.

The act of forgiveness consists of neurological activity, where the act of forgiveness is associated with neural changes in the right hemisphere with subsequent parasympathetic discharge. It leads to further changes in the limbic system that directs a positive feeling towards the imagined representation of the other person. These positive feelings have a beneficial effect on the individual as it decreases the negative impact of stress-induced changes that accompanied the event (McCullough, Pargament, & Thoresen, 2000). Decisional forgiveness that stems from one's own desire to move forward is an act of the will (Worthington, 2006). Desmond Tutu had stated clearly that there would be no future without forgiveness. Asking forgiveness and acknowledging the horrific nature of what happened is a crucial first step (Ferch, 2012). The different aspects of the unified concept of forgiveness are that God's forgiveness is proactive, freely given, sacramental, has a preferential option for those who are needed for receiving it. There is some reason to believe that when people go through an intervention aimed at promoting forgiveness, they will become more hopeful (Worthington, 2006) which might be because they see themselves able to overcome unforgiveness that they previously thought was hard to achieve.

Encouraging forgiveness might be a powerful therapeutic intervention with transforming consequences. A neuropsychological model suggests that forgiveness may ultimately have beneficial effects on the body, such as decreased levels of stress hormones and improvements in sleep patterns (McCullough, Pargament, & Thoresen, 2000). B. J. should be encouraged to forgive his family and those who he thinks did wrong to him. The act of forgiveness might help B. J. to move on and let go of his negative experiences in his past and start to develop new and functional relationships and healthy attachment with those around him.

A relationship is described as dynamic or interactive as it involves the individuals continually growing, improving, and maturing. All Christian believers should be growing while learning what it means to live by faith and follow Jesus Christ on a daily basis (Pettit, 2008). Small groups provide a context for deepening relationships and connectedness. They reflect the very nature of the relational Triune God. Humans are created as relational beings in need of acceptance, love, and care. Encouraging the formee to participate in small groups would provide a sense of well-being, connectedness, and ownership of the life and faith in Christian formation. These small groups can become another opportunity where the formee can develop good attachment styles and positive imitation takes place. Just like how attachment theory focuses on the need of a child to have secure relationships with adult caregivers, adults need attachment to other adults through significant interpersonal relationships (Maddix & Blevins, 2016). In addition to face-to-face sessions, the formator can use group sharing as an intervention tool.

There are already facilities in the seminary and formation but it is an interesting fact the educational system makes us study almost everything else before getting around to studying ourselves. Yet we must live with ourselves and our resources in order to be productive and find satisfaction. “Man is the only creature who finds his own existence a problem which he has to solve and from which he cannot escape” (Fromm 1955). Changing behavior requires changes in the neural circuits that underlie it (Kolb & Muhammad, 2014). The present challenge of the formators is to understand how the formees are facing new challenges

with the changing world and adapt their styles of interaction with the formee to enable their growth. The academic system of the formation seminary should include the segments that focus on the psychological or human formation of the formee. The realization that psychological formation is essential to hold up the strong foundation of a well-balanced, well-informed as well as well-formed religious and spiritual formation needs action that puts it into practice. In addition to this, formators need to be trained and be competent in integrating psychology and spirituality according to the need of the formee.

Conclusion

This case analysis was an attempt at how psychological theories can be used to understand how formees can be helped to transform during the process of formation. It underlines the importance of integrating psychological approaches to spiritual approaches to formation. The theories on relationship formation, attachment, and communication can be used in the context of seminaries for better development of formees.

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