

Applying psychological perspective to a case study



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\n[[toc title="Table of Contents"](#)]\n

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1. [Case history/sequence of events](#) \n \t
2. [Psychodynamic explanations of human behaviour](#) \n \t
3. [Behaviourist Explanation for Human Behaviour](#) \n \t
4. [Social Learning Theory](#) \n \t
5. [Conclusion](#) \n \t
6. [Recommendations](#) \n

\n[/toc]\n \n

The aim of this report is to apply psychological perspectives of human growth and development to a specific case study. To demonstrate an understanding of psychological theories of human behaviour with regards to a specific stage in life and to identify ways in which these theories underpin the social work profession. This report will analyse the case of Tina with primarily giving the history and evidence of the case. The report will then explain the possible psychological explanations for Tina's behaviour, followed by a conclusion and the recommendations the social worker may advise in order to assist Tina.

Case history/sequence of events

It would appear from Tina's background she had a difficult upbringing and this appears to have stemmed from her mother leaving when she was three years old. She was left in the care of an abusive alcoholic father and there appears to be significant amount of neglect from her father and issues with

poor standards of hygiene. Although, this evidence is from a former friend, both Tina and her brother John were placed on the Child Protection register.

Tina was sexually active in early adolescence which then lead to her having a baby at fourteen years old but the baby was taken into emergency foster care as there was evidence of neglect and physical abuse.

When Tina was eight months pregnant her GP referred her and her boyfriend Tom to social services due to concerns about their ability to cope with the unborn child because of her previous history. When the social worker visited the family home she reported the conditions of the flat, which is on the fourteenth floor, were unacceptable due to poor standards of hygiene and no signs of preparation for the unborn child. Tom was extremely unreceptive towards the social worker.

The social worker received a call from the hospital two days after Tina and Tom had their baby as Tina was seen by staff at the hospital to smack the baby.

Psychodynamic explanations of human behaviour

Freud's psychodynamic theory is widely used in the social work profession and is extremely valuable when attempting to understand the relationship between feelings, emotions and behaviour.

From a Freudian perspective there appears to be significant evidence surrounding Tina's childhood experiences and the difficulties she experienced could relate to how her behaviour is affecting her capabilities in looking after her baby. According to Freud (1938) disturbances in the five

stages of psychosexual development in childhood could result in abnormal behaviour in adulthood. Perhaps the most important crisis point in these stages is the phallic stage which occurs around the age of three and therefore, does relate to the age when Tina's mother abandoned her.

Freud (1923) would suggest this may cause the child to repress the sexual and aggressive urges into the unconscious causing problems later in life. He suggests children will internalise aspects of their parent's standards and would follow what their parents do with regards to aggression and other forms of anti-social behaviour. From a Freudian point of view, it could be argued Tina is exhibiting the same behaviour as her father with being over sexualised and her aggressive behaviour is being displaced onto her newborn baby. Therefore, it would appear the social worker could use the Freudian view of Tina's behaviour, as it could relate to the disturbances she encountered in her childhood and more specifically the abuse and neglect from her father.

" For Freud it's not the sexual instinct itself that matters, but rather the reactions of significant others (especially parents) to the child's attempts to satisfy its sexual needs. Both excessive frustration and satisfaction can produce long term effects on a child's personality" (Gross, 2005, p. 902).

Defence mechanisms

Another aspect of the psychodynamic approach the social worker may use is Freud's ego defence mechanisms, although many of the defences were originally proposed by Freud, they were later elaborated by his daughter Anna Freud (1936). The main purpose of defence mechanisms is to shield

the conscious from anxiety and this unpleasant inner state people seek to avoid. Anxiety acts as a signal to the ego (reality part of our mind) things are not going right and therefore, protects it by using a defense mechanism.

It does appear Tina is using specific defence mechanisms when she displaces her aggression onto her newborn baby. Displacement of aggression derives from Freud as the aggression is an instinct which needs an outlet and can be displaced onto a substitute object. Therefore, it could be argued the displacement Tina has shown towards an innocent third party (her baby) she has targeted on the weaker, safer target and research has shown aggression towards others in this form is an attempt to gain control over someone in a weaker position.

Repression is another defence mechanism Tina displays when it appears she has repressed things into her unconscious from her past. Memories from the past can come out when something triggers later in life and then it is transferred onto a similar situation again this could relate to her previous history of childhood and her own behaviour towards her first child.

“ Symptoms are the way the unconscious mind transfers energy from the conflict into something that expresses the energy but hides the conflict from the suffering individual: ‘ Symptoms, as we know, are a substitute for something that is held back by repression” (Freud, 1966, p. 298 [cited in Magnavita, 2002, p. 89]).

Attachment theory

There are many theories of attachment which can provide explanations of the strong reciprocal emotional bond between individuals. These theories look at the importance of early childhood attachments to the primary caregiver and the role it plays in determining the kind of adult we become. The understanding of attachment theory is fundamental in social work, as it plays an important role in recognising the attachments people have in all stages of their lives.

The establishment of a trusting, secure attachment between children and parent appears to have demonstrable effects on a child's later attachments and development. According to John Bowlby (1965), maternal deprivation in childhood causes affectionless psychopathy, this means Tina could have the inability to care and have any deep feelings of guilt for her behaviour towards her first baby and then repeating the behaviour on her second child. It is clear the effects of Tina being separated from her mother in early childhood and furthermore, the lack of an emotional bond from her father due to his addiction, has all contributed to considerable attachment issues and failure to develop into a competent parent herself.

Tina displays significant traits of insecure attachment issues with regards to her behaviour, for example: anxious resistant and anxious avoidant towards her environment. This behaviour is evident as her mother or father were not there for her physically, mentally or emotionally and therefore, she has been rejected by her primary caregivers. Children who are rejected by parents or peers during childhood in this way could become aggressive later in life and may form unhealthy relationships in an attempt to feel secure.

“ Not only do threats of abandonment create intense anxiety but they also arouse anger, often also of intense degree, especially in older children and adolescence. This anger, the function of which is to dissuade the attachment figure from carrying out the threat, can easily become dysfunctional”

(Bowlby, 1988, p. 30)

Behaviourist Explanation for Human Behaviour

Whereas the psychodynamic perspective looks at the internal mechanisms to explain behaviour, the behaviourist approach is said to be formed by environmental influences we learn from the people and things around us. This nurture approach believes when a child is born their mind is blank and while growing up what we hear, see, touch, taste and smell will influence our behaviour. Behaviourists argue we have no free will and our environment determines what we learn and normal behaviour is the possession of these learned responses, through classical or operant conditioning. The behaviourist explanation for human behaviour is also widely used in the social work profession and one which can be applied to Tina’s case.

From a behavioural perspective this theory emphasises on the external events which may play an important role in forming our personality. Tina’s behaviour does appear to show significantly learnt behaviour from her father, with regards to standards of hygiene, neglect and physical abuse. It could be argued Tina’s unacceptable behaviour towards her babies is a direct result of this learnt behaviour.

According to Skinner (1953) a response which has taken place cannot be expected or managed, but what can be predicted is the likelihood of a similar

response occurring in the future. What this suggests is Tina's behaviour is operant as it operates on the environment which produces consequences and the possibility she will behaviour in this way again is significantly high.

Social Learning Theory

The Social Learning theory is another approach which analyses behaviour as well as cognitive processes, which is another psychological perspective, used widely in social work and can also be used to explain Tina's behaviour of aggression. According to this theory, aggressive behaviours are learned through reinforcement and imitation.

Bandura (1973) suggests imitation is the reproduction of learning through observation also known as 'observational learning'. What this suggests is Tina's behaviour is clearly an observation of her father's behaviour towards her and therefore she is imitating these aggressive tendencies. This theory also suggests aggression is affected by reinforcements and punishments, for example: if the person has gained from aggressive behaviour in the past, they are more likely to become more aggressive generally and particularly in situations similar to those of their previous successes. However, although it is unclear if Tina has gained from her past aggressive behaviour, it is clear the behaviour she is demonstrating could be linked to learnt behaviour from her childhood.

"Bandura's studies of aggression and how children learn to replicate acts of aggression have proven valuable for social workers, especially when working with families in which violence occurs" (Parrish, 2010, p. 122).

Conclusion

In conclusion it is clear from Tina's case history she had an extremely difficult upbringing, which may have started when her mother left the family home. Being left in the care of an abusive alcoholic father, Tina was physically and emotionally neglected. It would appear this has all contributed in the behaviour Tina is displaying towards her newborn baby. When analysing psychological theories of human behaviour, it is clear Freud's psychosexual stages provides a good explanation to the reason why Tina was over sexualised at a young age. When analysing Tina's behaviour towards her baby it does appear displacement and repression are present, as the anger towards her baby show signs of Freud's defence mechanisms.

It is also clear the Social Learning theory suggested by Bandura provides a possible explanation of Tina's aggression towards her own child because it seems evident Tina has learnt this behaviour by observing, encoding and imitating her father's behaviour.

It is extremely important in the social work profession to have the ability to recognise and to understand the possible reasons behind the behaviour of service users. Psychological explanations of human behaviour are an important tool for a social worker to have. Below is a list of recommendations for therapy, which could be helpful to Tina when trying to understand her reasons for her unacceptable behaviour.

Recommendations

Humanistic therapy (person-centred therapy-this will enable Tina to explore her former history in a safe and positive environment, to help her liberate from the barriers so her natural goodness can flow through)

Behavioural therapy (this kind therapy believe maladaptive behaviour can be unlearned and it may be possible this kind of therapy would be useful for Tina)

Psychodynamic therapy (this will enable Tina to go back to her turbulent childhood and help her understand the reasons behind her behaviour.

Although, this would be beneficial to Tina it is not recommended at the start of psychological treatment)