Common Factors in MFT Master Session Videos: A Deductive Qualitative Analysis

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Common factors are the general mechanisms or variables associated with therapeutic change that are common across therapy models.

Broadly conceived, the common factors perspective can be understood as a theory about the fundamental aspects of therapeutic change.

Empirical support for common factors is grounded in studies of specific CF and meta-analyses of therapeutic effectiveness (e.g., Asay & Lambert, 1999; Frank & Frank, 1991; Wampold, 2001).
Background

- Attention to common factors in the MFT field has grown over the past 20 years.
  - First introduced by Sprenkle, Blow, & Dickey (1999)
  - Debated in 2004 JMFT articles (Sprenkle & Blow vs. Sexton & Ridley)
  - Compiled into a book by Sprenkle, Davis, & Lebow (2009).
- MFT CF can be understood as a **theory** about the fundamental aspects of change in MFT.
- However, this theory has not been empirically studied within the MFT field.
MFT CF Theoretical Framework

- **Relational Conceptualization**: conceptualizing difficulties in relational terms
- **Expanded Direct Treatment System**: Incorporating more than individual clients in treatment and considering all the stakeholders that may be affected by therapy.
- **Expanded Therapeutic Alliance**: Developing a therapeutic alliance with the client system
- **Disrupting Dysfunctional Relational Patterns**: Breaking up dysfunctional or pathological interaction cycles (through behavioral regulation, cognitive mastery, emotional experiencing)
- **Privileging of Clients Experiences**: Incorporating clients' perspectives into therapy.
  - Found only in postmodern approaches (Sprenkle, Blow, & Dickey, 1999).
  - Not found in most recent literature of MFT common factors.
Purpose

- The goal of this study is to evaluate the theory of common factors within marriage and family therapy using deductive qualitative analysis (QDA).

- Guiding Research Questions:
  - What are the common factors of MFT as exemplified in therapy sessions of master therapists using various MFT approaches?
  - Is there evidence in therapy sessions of MFT master therapists to support the theory of MFT common factors?
Method: Deductive Qualitative Analysis

- An approach to qualitative research that begins with theory and facilitates theory development.
- Uses specific cases in order to evaluate an existing theory or hypothesis.
- Utilizes negative case analysis.
  - Purposely seeking evidence refutes or refines the existing theory.
  - Helps researchers avoid finding only what the theory suggests they will find.
- The result is a better theory than the original.
Method: Purposeful Sampling

- MFT CF theory asserts that common factors cut across MFT models.
- Therefore, we analyzed therapy sessions conducted by master therapists using seven different MFT models.
- Two different therapists for each model.
### Method: Sample

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>Therapist 1</th>
<th>Video Name</th>
<th>Therapist 2</th>
<th>Video Name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Structural therapy</td>
<td>Harry Aponte</td>
<td>A House Divided</td>
<td>Salvador Minuchin</td>
<td>Unfolding the Laundry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotionally-Focused Therapy</td>
<td>Sue Johnson</td>
<td>EFT in Action</td>
<td>Leslie Greenberg</td>
<td>EFT with Couples</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Solution-Focused Brief Therapy</td>
<td>Insoo Kim Berg</td>
<td>Irreconcilable Differences</td>
<td>Bill O'Hanlon</td>
<td>Solution-Oriented Family Therapy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bowenian Family Therapy</td>
<td>Monica McGoldrick</td>
<td>The Legacy of Unresolved Loss</td>
<td>Philip Guerin</td>
<td>Bowenian Family Therapy with Philip Guerin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narrative Therapy</td>
<td>Michael White</td>
<td>Escape from Bickering</td>
<td>Stephen Madigan</td>
<td>Narrative Family Therapy with Stephen Madigan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiential Therapy</td>
<td>Carl Whitaker</td>
<td>Experiential Family Therapy with Carl Whitaker</td>
<td>Virginia Satir</td>
<td>A Step Along the Way</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategic Therapy</td>
<td>Cloe Madanes</td>
<td>Strategic Therapy with a Couple</td>
<td>James Coyne</td>
<td>Strategic Couples Therapy with James Coyne</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Method: Analysis Procedures

- We used open coding, theoretical coding, and analytic memos to analyze therapy videos and session transcripts.
- Each video and session transcript was analyzed by at least two researchers.
- Researchers use existing theory as a source of sensitizing concepts (i.e., broad common factors and MFT specific common factors).
- Open coding allowed us to develop new codes when the data warranted it (or modify existing codes from MFT CF theory).
Results: Three Key Overarching Findings

1. Empirical support for existing theory of common factors in marriage and family therapy.
   - The results demonstrated strong evidence of common factors in highly model-specific therapy sessions.

2. Empirical support for the moderate common factors perspective.
Results: Three Key Overarching Findings

3. A refined and expanded theory of common factors in marriage and family therapy.
   - The result of the analysis is a new conceptual framework of MFT common factors that supports, refines, and expands the existing theory.
   - **Refines** the fundamental tenets of MFT CF
   - **Expands** the existing theory by moving beyond broad concepts to specific operational tenets of MFT CF.
Results: Refinements

- **Facilitating Constructive Interactions**
  - Therapists help clients interact in a more constructive and positive manner, rather than only disrupting dysfunctional patterns.
  - Embodied by enactments and coaching
  - A refinement of *Disrupting Dysfunctional Relational Patterns*
Results: Refinements

- **Valuing Clients’ Perspective and Experience**
  - Emphasizes the importance of clients’ experience and point of view
  - Involves seeking clients’ input
- Refinement of *Privileging Clients’ Experiences*
Results: Refined MFT CF Theoretical Framework

- Relational Conceptualization
- Expanded Direct Treatment System
- Expanded Therapeutic Alliance
- Facilitating Constructive Interactions
  - Disrupting Dysfunctional Relational Patterns
- Valuing Clients’ Perspective and Experience
  - Privileging of Clients’ Experiences
Results: Common Factors Operationalized

- **Gathering Information** about the client system. Includes four sub-factors:
  - Individuals
  - Relationships
  - Goals/desired outcomes
  - Positive aspects of client system

- **Assessing interpersonal patterns/interactions**
  - Evaluating information about problems, patterns, and what works
Results: Common Factors Operationalized

- **Validating**: acknowledging the legitimacy of a client’s experience. Includes:
  - **Empathizing**: verbally recognizing the emotional experience of clients
  - **Complimenting**: pointing out what clients are doing well

- **Summarizing**: Paraphrasing what clients say
Results: Common Factors Operationalized

- **Therapist Characteristics:** Aspects of the therapist’s personality or style (such as using humor, touch, etc.)
- **Giving Directives:** providing suggestions for what clients could do to resolve problems
  - Includes in-session direction or homework
- **Facilitating Insight:** Using language to invite new understanding
  - Reframing: therapist rephrasing clients words or experiences to highlight alternative meanings
Results: Common Factors Operationalized

- **Maintaining Structure:** keeping therapy on track
  - Interrupting negative interaction
  - Asserting direction for the session

- **Providing Information about the Process of Therapy:** Telling clients what they can expect from treatment

- **Asking Permission from Clients:** Checking with clients to see if they are okay with the direction of therapy
  - Demonstrates an attitude of respect for clients
Results: Common Factors Operationalized

- **Challenging Clients:** Pushing back against client’s point of view
- **Facilitating Perspective taking:** Helping client’s see another’s point of view
  - Facilitating empathy for another
Discussion and Implications

- The researchers found that the existing model of common factors was sound, but incomplete.
- The results of the study refine and extend the previous theory of MFT common factors.
- Further research is needed to examine common factors in MFT to determine how these findings apply to therapy in natural settings.
Conclusion

- Overall, the refined theory of MFT CF fits well after examining sessions conducted by master therapists using different MFT modalities.

- Common factors are evident within different MFT models. This lends support to the moderate common factors perspective that they operate within models.

- The researchers conclude that common factors are an important framework for understanding the therapeutic process in relational therapy.