Chapter 13
Systemic Financial Therapy

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Introduction

Imagine that you are a financial therapist who works with clients experiencing financial stressors. You have agreed to meet with a couple who is experiencing financial difficulties. You inquire about the difficulties and learn that the husband has accrued large debt and the couple has recently filed for bankruptcy. They are coming to you to work on a plan to move forward. You ask about goals, and the wife reveals that they need to build trust in the couple's relationship in order for any financial plan to work. She becomes tearful as she explains that her husband did not tell her about any of the debt he accrued until the debt became so overwhelming that the best option for them was to file for bankruptcy. The wife said she has had very little involvement in the family finances in their 10 years of marriage, but wants to be more involved now. The husband explains that he has been reluctant to let her be involved because he did not want to burden her with the stress he was feeling. The wife becomes angry at this notion and screams, "I am perfectly capable of handling our financial situation! Why don't you trust me?" You, the professional, are not sure what to do. How can you explain the relationship dynamics of this couple and how should you intervene?

This situation is not uncommon for any helper working with couples. Research has shown that one-third of couples seeking relationship therapy report some level of financial difficulty, and one-third of couples seeking financial counseling report a relationship problem (Aniol and Snyder 1997). Most therapists and family educators are not trained to work with finances and most financial advisors and counselors are not trained to work with emotions and relationship dynamics. However, all too often, the two co-occur. Furthermore, a theoretical gap in the literature exists to

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help practitioners and scholars address the phenomena of the relational dynamics of finances. This chapter explores how systems theory can be applied to financial situations in family relationships with a specific focus on couple relationships.

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Systems Theory

General systems theory (GST) was developed to explain complex phenomena not explained by mechanistic (i.e., focused on individual parts rather than the interactions or relationships among parts) or linear models (Whitchurch and Constantine 1993). Ludwig von Bertanflanffy, an Austrian biologist, first applied universal principles to all kinds of groups of phenomena termed as *systems* (Whitchurch and Constantine 1993). Gregory Bateson as well as Don Jackson, Jay Haley, Margaret Mead, and James Miller were among influential thinkers and therapists who began to consider how GST concepts apply to families (White and Klein 2008). Wedemeyer and Grotevant (1982) explained that systems theory, when applied to families, does not limit focus to isolated relationships between isolated variables. Instead, the focus is on complex networks of patterned interactions between definable units and their specific environmental contexts.

Family systems theory, along with cybernetics, has been a major influencing theory in the field of marriage and family therapy. Additionally, systems theory has been foundational in the development of family-focused therapy modalities, like Bowen family therapy, structural family therapy, cognitive-behavioral family therapy, strategic family therapy, narrative therapy, and solution-focused therapy. The usefulness of the application of systems theory with family relationships stems from the concept of systems and the major assumption of interdependency. A system can be thought of as “a group of interrelated parts plus the way they function together” (Nichols 2010, p. 104). Whitchurch and Constantine (1993) described systems thinking as a way of looking at the world in which objects are interrelated with one another. As a result, patterns of relationship dynamics among systems are developed. A change in one of those systems will produce a change in another system(s) in order for the systems to adapt to the new dynamic created as a result of the change. For example, imagine a mobile hanging above a baby’s crib with several objects dangling from it. If one of the objects on the mobile was to be moved, the mobile would become off-balanced. However, when one or more objects on the mobile are repositioned in reaction to the first object being moved, the mobile will become rebalanced. Maintaining this balance is known in systems theory as homeostasis, a central concept of family systems theory. The process by which the system rebalances itself to maintain homeostasis is known as feedback loops.

Concepts

Concepts of modern family systems theories stem from information theory, cybernetics, family process theory, and GST (Whitchurch and Constantine 1993; White and Klein 2008). In addition to homeostasis and feedback loops, other major family systems concepts derived from these theories include: boundaries, circularity, equifinality, subsystems, systems, and suprasystems, and levels of hierarchy (Jurich and Myers-Bowman 1998; Nichols 2010; Whitchurch and Constantine 1993; White and Klein 2008). Boundaries are "invisible barriers that regulate the amount of contact with others" (Nichols 2010, p. 102). Circularity refers to problems being maintained in the family through an ongoing series of actions and reactions, rather than by linear cause and effect. As discussed previously, feedback loops refer to how the system gets the information necessary to maintain a homeostatic state. Feedback loops can be negative or positive. A negative feedback loop maintains the equilibrium, also known as homeostasis. A positive feedback loop alters the homeostasis and the equilibrium from which the system deviates (Whitchurch and Constantine 1993), meaning change is introduced into the system and the system's equilibrium is offset. Equifinality is the idea that a goal can be met through more than one way.

In addition to homeostasis and feedback loops, other major family systems concepts derived from these theories include: boundaries, circularity, equifinality, subsystems, systems, and suprasystems, and levels of hierarchy (Jurich and Myers-Bowman 1998; Nichols 2010; Whitchurch and Constantine 1993; White and Klein 2008).

Nichols (2010) described the structure of families in terms of subsystems, which are determined by generation, gender, and function. Examples of generation subsystems are the grandparent subsystem, parent subsystem, and children subsystem. Gender subsystems refer to male and female subsystems within a family, while function subsystems refer to household roles (e.g., managing finances, cooking, cleaning, lawn care, child care) and careers (e.g., farmer, homemaker, attorney). Systems are arranged by levels of hierarchy. For example, a collection of subsystems make up a larger system (i.e., a higher-level hierarchy). Suprasystems (Whitchurch and Constantine 1993) encompass systems beyond the family system, such as extended family, racial and ethnic subcultures, community, geographic region, and national systems. Subsystems, systems, and suprasystems are seen as interconnected.

The major assumptions associated with systems theory are: (a) holism, (b) systems are hierarchically organized, (c) living systems are open, (d) nondetermined and active, (e) human systems are self-reflective, and (f) reality is constructed (Jurich and Myers-Bowman 1998).

Major Assumptions

The major assumptions associated with systems theory are: (a) holism, (b) systems are hierarchically organized, (c) living systems are open, (d) non-determined and active, (e) human systems are self-reflective, and (f) reality is constructed (Jurich and Myers-Bowman 1998). Holism refers to understanding the system as a whole, rather than the sum of its parts (Whitchurch and Constatine 1993). Holism assumes that all parts of the system are interconnected and, when one part of the system is impacted, the whole system is impacted (White and Klein 2008). The assumption that living systems are open, non-determined, and active, refers to the degree to which energy and information is exchanged within its environment (Jurich and Myers-Bowman 1998). Jurich and Myers-Bowman (1998) offered the example of an open system as a spouse who is employed to make money for the family and provide expertise to his employer. This opens the family system to exchange within the suprasystems, such as the work system. Living systems not only respond passively to stimuli from their environment but they also engage in transactions, which they initiate, so they are both active and reactive. Therefore, systems are, to some degree, self-determining and not solely determined by external forces. Whitchurch and Constantine (1993) explained that human systems are self-reflective because humans have the ability to reflect on their own behavior and interactions within the system. Jurich and Myers-Bowman (1998) described the final assumption that reality is constructed as a way of better understanding the world. They explained that "observations of the world are never independent of the knower, and reality is constructed rather than discovered" (p. 75).

Couples and Finance Theory

Some theory has been developed to help address financial stress and family dynamics. Most notably is the family stress model of economic hardship developed by Conger et al. (1992). The family stress model is a linear model and was originally developed to describe the impact of economic hardship and emotional distress on marital and parental behavior and the direct effects on early adolescent development. Conger et al. later adapted this model to test resiliency of couples facing economic hardship (Conger et al. 1999). Conger et al. (1999) found that high marital support reduced the association between economic stress and emotional distress.

As noted previously, systems thinking has been used to help explain both family and couple functioning. It also has been useful in explaining the financial process (Deacon and Firebaugh 1988). For example, Deacon and Firebaugh (1988) developed the family resource management theoretical model. Their model was the first to apply systems theory to family resource management as a way to understand the complexities of demands and resources of a family as related to personal finance issues (see Deacon and Firebaugh 1988, for a more detailed explanation).

Introduced by Archuleta (2008), couples and finances theory (CFT) integrates systems theory and financial processes and specifically applies it to couples.

Due to the circular nature of systems theory, it can be a useful lens for explaining the interdependency of the two subsystems: couple relationships and financial process. The couple relationship subsystem and the financial process subsystem function together within a larger system and the context in which they operate as described by the couples and finances framework (Archuleta 2008, 2013). Introduced by Archuleta (2008), CFT integrates systems theory and financial processes and specifically applies it to couples. CFT was inductively created to explain relational finances (i.e., the interconnectedness between the couple relationship and the financial process), as a circular phenomenon, using empirical evidence to establish propositions (see Archuleta 2008, for a more detailed of each of these propositions). As a result, CFT presents four general propositions:

1. General Proposition 1: Individual partner attributes influence each component of the couple relationship system and the financial process system.
2. General Proposition 2: Couple relationship characteristics (CRCs) and marital quality (MQ) are interrelated.
3. General Proposition 3: The financial process is interrelated with three components—financial inputs, financial management practices (FMPs), and financial satisfaction (FS).
4. General Proposition 4: The association between the couple relationship and the financial process is circular.

The goal of CFT is to help therapists, financial planners, financial counselors, and researchers understand how couples interact with each other in order to advance services and research.

Concepts

To understand CFT, its theoretical terms and concepts must first be clarified and defined in addition to its propositions. The first concept of CFT is individual partner attributes (see Fig. 13.1). This concept encompasses individual factors that each partner brings into the relationship, such as age, education level, gender, personality, attitudes, self-esteem, perceived quality of life, and social experiences. Individual financial attributes are also considered, like money scripts, money disorders, financial behaviors, financial knowledge, financial stress, and risk tolerance. The individual partner attributes that each partner brings to the couple system impact each component of the couple relationship system and the financial process system. Since 2008, the concept of individual partner attributes has evolved to encompass both of these systems rather than only affecting the couple relationship as originally presented (Archuleta 2008, 2012, 2013).

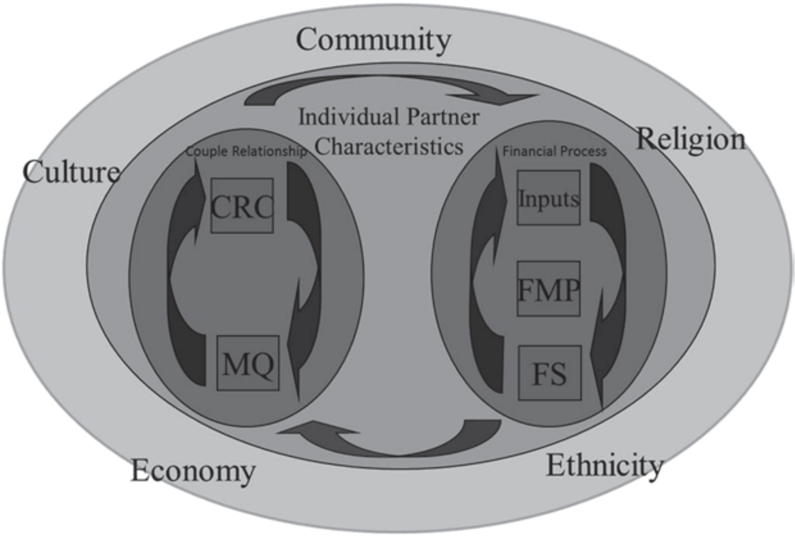

Fig. 13.1 Couple and relationships model (adapted from Archuleta 2008 and 2013)

> The individual partner attributes that each partner brings to the couple system impact each component of the couple relationship system and the financial process system.

The couple relationship system, for the purposes of this theory, is considered a system comprised of two components: (a) *CRCs* and (b) *MQ*. *CRCs* ("*CRC*" in Fig. 13.1) are defined as factors contributing to the interaction between the two partners in the couple relationship. The final component of the couple interactional system is *MQ*. MQ ("MQ" in Fig. 13.1) refers to self-reported marital satisfaction and overall self-reported quality of the couple's relationship. The CRCs and the financial process are dynamic. CFT proposes that when couples positively interact with each other, MQ improves. When MQ increases, couples are more likely to implement positive CRCs. Gottman et al.'s (1998) research provides support for this proposition. They discovered that the only variable predicting both marital stability and marital happiness among stable couples was the amount of positive affect during conflict. Couples who were stable and happy in their marriages showed a pattern of working through conflict.

> Britt et al. (2008) found that the relationship between household income and relationship satisfaction is, in fact, curvilinear where income predicts relationship satisfaction up to a certain point, then income becomes less significant.

Figure 13.1 is an adaption of the model presented by Archuleta (2008 and 2013). The current model recognizes that individual partner characteristics affect both the couple relationship and the financial processes and introduces the concept of relational finances as the interaction between the couple relationship and the financial process.

The *financial process* system consists of three components, including *financial inputs, financial management,* and *FS*. This process is loosely based on the systemic family resource management model created by Deacon and Firebaugh (1988) and empirical research using the model designed by Mugenda and Hira (1990). For the purposes of CFT, the financial process is similar to the systemic nature of Deacon and Firebaugh's model. Financial inputs (*Inputs* in Fig. 13.1) are elements entering into the financial process that influence how financial management is practiced, such as income level and savings level. FMPs (*FMP* in Fig. 13.1) refer to activities related to effective and efficient management of money and include accounting practices, record-keeping, financial solvency (e.g., ability to pay bills), financial decision making, and access to financial resources. CFT proposes that when financial inputs are positive, FMPs are increased. For example, if household income is increased (i.e., Input), an individual is more likely to be financially solvent (i.e., FMP) (Joo and Grable 2004). CFT also suggests that better financial practices will lead to couples experiencing higher FS. FS (*FS* in Fig. 13.1) refers to the satisfaction with one's current financial situation and overall financial well-being. Satisfaction with the current financial situation could refer to the achievement of financial goals. Research suggests that those who practice more desirable financial management tend to be more satisfied with their financial situation (Joo and Grable 2004). In addition, CFT also proposes that financial inputs are positively related to FS. This is similar to Bonke and Browning's (2009) findings that income is a significant predictor of FS.

The final concept is *relational finances* (see Fig. 13.1). The term relational finances refers to the interaction between the couple relationship and the financial process. Relational finances is demonstrated by General Proposition 4, which states that the association between the couple relationship and the financial process is circular. More specifically, CFT offers several propositions that reflect the reciprocal nature of the relationships between the couple relationship and financial process elements. For example, financial inputs are seen to impact CRC and MQ. This proposition is supported by research that suggests that having lower income is associated with decreased marital satisfaction (Dakin and Wampler 2008; Britt et al. 2008). Britt et al. (2008) found that the relationship between household income and relationship satisfaction is, in fact, curvilinear where income predicts relationship satisfaction up to a certain point, then income becomes less significant. In relationship to inputs and CRC, Britt et al. (2010) found that wives with the highest levels of income are least likely to be a part of a money-arguing couple. However, wives who earn more than their husbands are more likely to be in a money-arguing marriage. Furthermore, couples in a high-net-worth household are less likely than couples in a low-net-worth household to argue about money.

FMPs are seen to impact CRC and MQ. More specifically, the more positive FMPs are in the couple relationship, the more likely the couple will have positive

CRCs and higher MQ. Consider Kerkmann et al.'s (2000) research, which revealed financial problems and how finances were managed (FMPs), was significantly related to MQ. In addition, Dew (2008) discovered that couples who completely paid off all consumer debt (FMP), excluding mortgage and student loan debt, were likely to have increased MQ. The more debts that couples assumed (FMP), the more likely couples were to spend less time together, argue about their finances, and feel that their marriage was unfair (CRC) (Dew 2008).

Another proposition is that couples who have higher FS will have higher MQ. Likewise, due to the circular nature of the theory, CFT assumes that couples who have higher MQ will have higher FS. FS has been linked to MQ (Archuleta et al. 2011; Britt et al. 2008; Grable et al. 2007), in which FS was positively related to relationship satisfaction or MQ. Archuleta et al. (2011) found a significant relationship between marital satisfaction and the interaction of financial stressors and FS, indicating that when financial stressors are high and FS is low, partners are more likely to entertain the thought of leaving their spouse. Britt et al. (2008) explained that if a person perceives one of the largest areas of the relationship finances to be satisfactory, then it is likely that the overall relationship will also be seen as satisfactory. Likewise, Grable et al. (2007) found that FS was a significant factor in predicting who had and who had not thought about divorce (i.e., had higher MQ).

CRCs are seen to impact all three elements of the financial process (i.e., Inputs, FMP, and FS). For example, Megunda and Hira (1990) found that there was a positive relationship between communication (CRC) (i.e., "the frequency and nature of communication about money matters with spouse, friends, professionals and family members" (p. 350)) and FMPs; i.e., frequency of estimating household income and expenses, reviewing and evaluating the family's spending habits, or figure the family household's net worth. In addition, Archuleta (2013) discovered that having shared goals and values (CRC) were strongly associated with FS.

> …household finances impact the couple relationship and the couple relationship impacts the household financial domain in the relationship.

Although research has largely been conducted on specific relationships between elements of each subsystem—the couple relationship and the financial process—the findings support the interconnectedness of these subsystems. Elements of the couple relationship impact the financial process and elements of the financial process impact the couple relationship.

Major Assumptions

Building on the theoretical foundations of family systems theory and borrowing from social exchange theory, six major assumptions evolved for CFT. One assumption of CFT is that financial difficulties are linked to couple relationship problems in a circular fashion (Cano et al. 2002; Geiss and O'Leary 1981; Johnson and Booth 1990; Pittman and Lloyd 1988; Rosenblatt and Keller 1983). This means that the household finances impact the couple relationship and the couple relationship impacts the household financial domain in the relationship. Similar to systems theory's concept of holism, the three subsystems of individual partner attributes, couple relationship system, and financial process are interdependent—when one of the systems is impacted, the whole system is impacted.

A second assumption of CFT is that human systems are self-reflective. Whitchurch and Constantine (1993) explained that humans have the ability to reflect on their own behavior and interactions within the system. Empirical research supports the notion that individual partner attributes affect both the couple relationship system and the financial process system. However, CFT assumes that partners in the relationship can be reflective of their own behavior and change the way they interact or behave in order to produce different results for the couple relationship and the financial process.

A third assumption of CFT is borrowed from social exchange theory (SET) and assumes that the interactions among the individual partner attributes, couple relationship system, and the financial process are based on rewards and costs. According to White and Klein (2008), a reward is something that is viewed as beneficial, pleasurable, or satisfying to an individual. A cost is something that is perceived as negative or hindering to a person when making a decision. SET makes the case for profit, which is the ratio of rewards to costs for any decision. CFT assumes that individuals and/or the couple unit make decisions that will benefit the individual, relationship, and the financial process. CFT assumes that when couples make decisions together they will maximize their joint utility or weigh the rewards compared to the costs and base their decision on what will bring about the greatest rewards or the least costs.

Equity and social resources are both concepts borrowed from SET as assumptions for CFT. Equity refers to the fact that the rewards and costs are not exactly fair from an objective standpoint, but they can be perceived to be so (White and Klein 2008). Social resources give one person the ability to reward another through interpersonal behavior exchange of a thing (Foa and Foa 1980). Foa and Foa (1980) identified six types of resources, including love, status, services, goods, information, and money.

> CFT can be used as a lens for explaining the dynamics of the couple relationship in regards to their financial situation. At the heart of these strategies is focusing on process rather than content.

A final theoretical assumption in the development of CFT is that the couple relationship and the financial process operate within a larger context called an "ecosystem" (White and Klein 2008, p. 249). The ecosystem is similar to the suprasystem described in systems theory. This means that the elements of religion, economy, culture, community, and ethnicity impact individual partner attributes, the couple relationship system, and the financial process (see Fig. 13.1). Each element of the ecosystem as well as the three subsystems operates interdependently.

Principles and Strategies

CFT can be implemented using strategies of systemic family therapy as outlined by Nichols (2010). CFT can be used as a lens for explaining the dynamics of the couple relationship with regard to their financial situation. At the heart of these strategies is focusing on process rather than content. Process focuses on the underlying relationships of the members in the system. Content focuses on the facts and figures of a given situation. Process focused means that circular questions are used. Nichols (2010) identified three key questions that must be addressed: "What is keeping the family stuck? What is the force keeping them from adapting to the pressures of development and change? What is interfering with their natural problem-solving abilities?" (p. 88). Nichols (2010) pointed out that "process questions are designed to explore what's going on inside people and between them" (p. 126). Additionally, process questions asked by the counselor help to slow clients down, which allows for reduced anxiety and a clearer, less reactive thought process. Another goal of process questioning is to help individuals and couples look more deeply into the process of their issues, rather than being weighed down by the content (Nichols 2010).

Systemic therapy is implemented in four stages: (a) first interview, (b) early phase, (c) middle phase, and (d) termination (Nichols 2010). Drawing from Nichols (2010), the goal of the first interview is to establish rapport with the family members and develop hypotheses about what is going on to cause the problem. Joining or developing a working relationship with each individual of the family is key to successfully implementing a system theory approach. Providing compliments on positive actions and strengths as well as maintaining empathy for individuals and respect for the family's way of doing things are among the crucial tasks of this phase (Nichols 2010).

Once a working alliance has been established, therapeutic goals are developed, and hypotheses are formulated, the early phase of treatment is entered. The goal of the early phase is to figure out what is keeping the family or couple from changing. To understand how the problem is being maintained, systems therapy encourages having each member of the system be involved in the process by sharing his or her views about the problem. As hypotheses are further refined as to the relational dynamics in the family, the approach shifts to challenging the family to change (Nichols 2010). Challenging the family means that interpersonal conflicts must be addressed. When one person is identified as the problem, then a systems-oriented therapist must address how each person is involved in the conflict. Helping family members recognize their own role in the conflict versus blaming the other person can be a difficult task. Nichols (2010) also pointed out that assigning homework to help “address problems and the underlying conditions supporting them” is a helpful strategy in the early phase (p. 64).

> Throughout the phases of systems therapy, two major techniques are used, including genograms and process questions.

The middle phase focuses on developing skills to achieve individual responsibility and mutual understanding. The therapist challenges the family members in order to reduce resistance and increase empathy. In this phase, the therapist can begin taking a less active role as they encourage family members to increasingly interact with each other. Here, the family talks more to each other, and the therapist often observes the process. Nichols (2010) noted that families can get bogged down in their conversations, meaning that the dialogue can become unproductive for clients often, due to increased anxiety and reactivity. In this phase, the therapist can point out what the family members are doing wrong or encourage them to keep talking. Regardless, the therapist should intervene in conversations that become unhelpful and destructive.

The termination phase is primarily looking at the progress of the clients to see what improvements they have made towards the presenting problem (Nichols 2010). At this stage, it is important to create dialogue within the family about what they believe they have accomplished as well as thinking of ways to handle future difficulties. Once the termination phase has ended, it is customary for the therapist to check in a few weeks later to see how the family is doing. For more information on each phase of the systems therapy approach and helpful interventions, see Nichols (2010).

Throughout the phases of systems therapy, two major techniques are used, including genograms and process questions. According to Nichols (2010), a genogram is a “schematic diagram listing family members and their relationships to one another” (p. 124). Dates of important events, such as births, marriages, divorces, and deaths, are included in a genogram along with lines that indicate relationship dynamics among the family members. A money genogram as proposed by Mumford and Weeks (2003) facilitates a process-oriented discussion about how money plays a role in the family, both individually and relationally. Example questions include: Who earns income in the family? How income is allocated? Are family members spenders or savers? How are financial decisions made within the family? For more information about these types of questions, see Mumford and Weeks (2003). A sample money genogram is shown in the following case study. We propose that money related aspects should be added to the visual representation of the genogram. For example, money personalities (Mellan 1994), money scripts (Klontz et al. 2011), money disorders (Klontz et al. 2012), highest education level, and employment status should be added to the genogram. In addition, relationship dynamics specifically related to money should also be noted, such as conflict over a family member not paying another family member back for a loan.

Case Study

Background Information and Presenting Issue

Consider the case presented at the outset of this chapter. Now, let us take a closer look at them. Marcus (37) is a small business owner, living with his family in a small town in the Midwest. Angelique (35) is his wife and a stay-at-home mother. The couple has been married for 10 years and has three children, Jamel (7), Carter (5), and Ajali (4). They both hold bachelor's degrees. Eric's degree is in finance and Angelique's degree is in mass communications. The family considers themselves very traditional in terms of gender roles and a clear hierarchy has been established between the parent and child subsystems. The family describes themselves as close-knit because they like to spend time together especially doing outdoor recreational activities.

> To conceptualize the case through a CFT lens, the couple's ecological system, the individual partner attributes, couple relationship dynamics, and the financial process must be explored.

Although they are still engaging in activities, like camping as a family unit, Marcus and Angelique admit that there has been tension between them for the past 2 years, which escalated when Angelique found out about the extreme amount of debt Marcus incurred. Since filing for bankruptcy, Marcus has been working for a friend in an accounting firm. He is withdrawn and depressed because he feels like he has failed as a businessman, as a husband, and as a father. Angelique's anger has intensified because Marcus did not let her know about the financial situation. She often yells at Marcus and her children, is increasingly suspicious of Marcus's actions, and stays awake at night worrying about their financial future. She wants to take over the family finances and wants to know any purchase Marcus makes, but Marcus insists that he continue to be the financial manager of their finances. Angelique has also been looking for a job because she wants to contribute to the family financially, but is struggling to find a job that pays enough so that they can afford to put their youngest child, Ajali, in daycare. Marcus insists that Angelique stay at home until Ajali goes to kindergarten. As a result, Angelique and Marcus's arguments have increased in quantity and intensity. They recognize that they are growing apart, but want to make their marriage work. However, they are unsure what to do or where to seek help. A friend referred them to a financial therapist to help them with their relational issues and financial situation.

Case Conceptualization

To conceptualize the case through a CFT lens, the couple's ecological system, the individual partner attributes, couple relationship dynamics, and the financial process must be explored. As previously noted, the couple lives in a small community where traditional gender roles are the norm and everyone knows everyone else's business. Being a male, Marcus feels the pressure of his community's culture to be a successful businessman and provide financially for his family so Angelique can stay at home with the children.

Marcus's money script is that he is a money worshipper and his money personality is a spender. Angelique's money personality is that of a saver and often disagrees with Marcus on how money should be spent in the family. She believes he spends money on things that are unnecessary and blames him for their current financial situation. They both believe they are fairly knowledgeable about personal finance, but they both assume that Marcus has more knowledge about the subject than Angelique because of his background in finance. Both are suffering from financial anxiety as a result of the financial distress they have encountered. Using a CFT lens, all of these individual partner attributes have impacted both the couple relationship and the financial process.

Angelique has lost trust in Marcus; coupled with her blaming him about the debt that he has incurred, their marital satisfaction and FS has lowered. The only times they interact with one another is when they argue about their financial situation. When they are not arguing about their financial situation, they are emotionally distant from each other. These examples reflect the couple relationship and the financial process interacting with one another. These examples are also influenced by the individual partner attributes.

Intervention

There are many interventions that are available to a systems-oriented therapist. To apply the stages of treatment described earlier in this chapter, the first interview would focus on building a working alliance with both Marcus and Angelique. The financial therapist should compliment Marcus and Angelique on the things that are going well, such as the couple making an effort to not argue in front of their children about their financial situation and continuing to do activities together with their children. The financial therapist may note that arguing about their finances is a good sign towards progress because now they are talking about their situation with each other rather than avoiding it. In addition, the financial therapist will want to begin to understand how the couple has dealt with the problem, including ways they have tried to solve the problem, solutions that have worked well, and attempts that have not worked well.

To develop hypotheses about the unhelpful interactions in the relationship, the financial therapist may ask her/himself: "What is the function of the problem?" "What is keeping the couple from changing?" "What is interfering with the couple's natural problem-solving abilities?" "What is keeping the couple stuck in the pattern?" Using this approach, a financial therapist may hypothesize that traditional gender roles have given Marcus a sense of needing to protect and provide for his family, which resulted in him sharing minimal information about the finances. Angelique may feel that because she is female that Marcus does not see her as competent in regard to finances. Because she blames him for their current situation

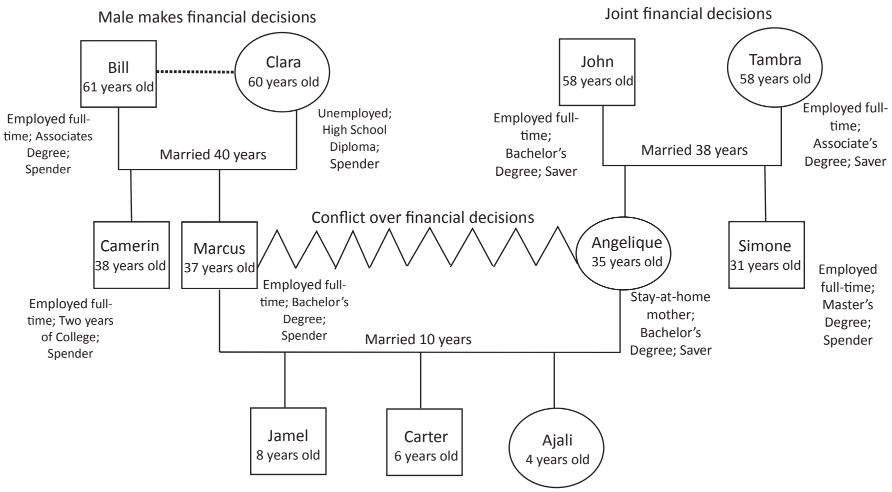

Fig. 13.2 Family genogram

and has lost trust in him, the couple is stuck in this situation and is unable to see each other's perspectives.

Remember Marcus and Angelique's dialogue at the outset of the chapter? Marcus explains that he has been reluctant to let Angelique be involved in the finances because he did not want to burden her with the stress he was feeling. She responded angrily by stating, "I am perfectly capable of handling our financial situation! Why don't you trust me?" This dialogue could have easily occurred when the financial therapist asked the couple what brought them to seek the financial therapist's help. The systems-oriented financial therapist could respond by saying that it seems like there are many factors at play and a genogram may be a useful tool for each of them to understand what is going on.

There are many interventions available to a systems-oriented therapist; a genogram is one of the hallmark assessments and intervention tools related to systems theory. The genogram in Fig. 13.2 represents both an assessment and an intervention in this case. A financial therapist can use a combination of a traditional genogram and a money genogram (described previously) to gain helpful information about the family's current relationship and history around finances. In this case, Marcus has an older brother, Camerin, and Angelique has a younger sister, Simone. Although we are highlighting Marcus and Angelique specifically, it is important to note important people in the couples' lives. In this case, Marcus and Angelique have noted their siblings who are single, work full-time, and are both considered spenders. Furthermore, the couple learns about each other's individual partner attributes and relationship dynamics among family members, especially in relation to money. For example, the genogram notes the conflict between Marcus and Angelique with a zigzag line. The genogram also shows differences in financial decision making and employment statuses between Marcus's parents (Bill and Clara) and Angelique's parents (John and Tambra). It was used as an intervention for the couple too see and begin to understand their partner's upbringing, specifically how money was handled. Throughout the exercise, Marcus begins to recognize that his parents' (Bill and Clara) emotionally distant marriage (indicated by the dotted line) was fueled by his father's insistence that he be in charge of the family finances. His mom did not argue with his father about her desire to be informed about the financial situation, but instead withdrew emotionally. He also begins to understand that making financial decisions jointly is important to Angelique, and that she wants to be a part of the financial decision making. Angelique begins to understand why Marcus has been insisting that he be in charge of the finances and take sole responsibility for financially providing for the family. She also learns why Marcus has made certain financial decisions without consulting her and did not want to burden her with their financial problems. Marcus and Angelique realize that they have different views about money. A financial therapist can continue to use process questions to elicit information from the couple, slow down the conversations between Marcus and Angelique, help the couple think about relationship patterns among family members, and gain insight into their own behaviors and relational dynamics.

The genogram can help create mutual understanding between Marcus and Angelique because they have both gained insight into their own behavior and how they each contribute to the situation. However, the insight may not lead to Marcus and Angelique making changes that will impact their relationship and their financial situation. At this point, what happens when Marcus explains he does not want to burden Angelique with the finances and insists that he continue to manage the family's financial situation alone? Because the couple has gained some mutual understanding of the problem, the financial therapist has moved the couple to the middle phase of treatment. Here, the financial therapist can help the couple deal with the problem on their own. One way is to help each partner identify ways they are both contributing to the problem and develop and implement strategies in order to change the interaction between the couple relationship and the financial process. One idea may be that Marcus and Angelique begin having weekly money conversations. They may limit the money conversation to 30 min or an hour in order to not overwhelm either of them. When Angelique begins to understand their financial situation better, her financial anxiety may go down, and her trust in Marcus may increase. Likewise, Marcus may experience decreased financial anxiety because he is not keeping their finances secret any longer. This strategy will help them work together in solving their financial problems. All of these outcomes will increase both marital satisfaction and FS. Strategies may not even be directly related to the financial situation itself. The couple may decide that they need to spend time with each other alone and not talk about their finances. They may choose to implement a weekly or monthly date night where they can reconnect with each other without the stress of talking about finances. By enjoying time with each other, Marcus and Angelique can rebuild trust and increase their ability to communicate more effectively. As a result, their marital satisfaction will rise, and they will be better able to work together on their financial situation, increasing their FS. Regardless of the strategies implemented, it is best that the couple come up with ideas that they believe will work for them.

Once Marcus and Angelique have reached their financial therapy goals, the termination phase is entered and maintenance plan is developed to help keep the couple on track. In this final phase, the financial therapist can help the couple anticipate potential barriers to the couple's progress and identify ways to counteract those roadblocks. Once the process is terminated, Marcus and Angelique may want to check in with the therapist several weeks or months later to follow-up with progress they have made or obstacles they have encountered.

As with any case where a facilitator is working with clients on issues, there is the chance that triangulation with the facilitator can occur. This means the facilitator could become another person triangulated within the family systems conflict.

Outcomes

Looking through the CFT lens and using the systems-oriented interventions, the couple was able to understand their own core beliefs about money management and begin to see into their partner's views as well. For Angelique, realizing that her husband kept the financial decisions away from her meant he was trying to protect the family like his father did. For Marcus, he was able to realize that in Angelique's family, joint decision making around finances was very important. They began the process of understanding each person's point of view and identified strategies that each could implement to help change their own behavior and make a difference both in their marriage and their financial situation.

Ethical Considerations

As with any case where a facilitator is working with clients on issues, there is the chance that triangulation with the facilitator can occur. This means the facilitator could become another person triangulated within the family systems conflict. From a systems theory perspective, the therapist does become part of the client(s)' system and is actively involved in the family (Nichols 2010). The danger of becoming part of the system is the notion of counter transference, in which the therapist overidentifies with a client(s). Counter transference can happen with any case, but when the counter transference is unconscious, the interactions between therapist and client(s) can become detrimental to the client because the therapist may give advice or make suggestions based on his or her own experience rather than what is in the best interest of the client (Nichols 2010).

Another ethical consideration is that of the facilitator staying within their boundaries of previous training and education. The boundaries that a financial therapist who has training in both personal finance and mental health may be vastly different from facilitators who, for example, may have backgrounds only in personal finance or only in mental health. The degree to which diagnoses can be made and the sophistication of a financial plan may vary as a result. Referrals to or consultations with professionals trained in the opposite field can be very helpful to provide clients the best and most holistic services possible.

Future Directions

CFT continues to develop as new research emerges. Various types of professionals (e.g., financial planners, mental health practitioners) can utilize CFT as a useful lens to conceptualize the dynamics among the ecological system, individual partner attributes, the couple relationship, and the financial process. These professionals can use a systems theory approach in working with their clients. Due to the circular nature of systems theory, conducting research on the theoretical framework is difficult. Regardless, research should be conducted to test the interdependency of the theory and clinical research should be conducted to test the effectiveness of systems theory interventions. Conducting a true experimental designed study, using a control group with a large and diverse sample that encompasses a broad population, would be ideal.

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