The Sanchez Family Assessment and Plan

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SW405: Social Work Practice

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May 15, 2015

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Up until five years ago, Tony and his sister Maria lived a balanced life with their mother and father. An unfortunate automobile accident interrupted that balance; both mother and father died upon impact. Tony and Maria’s grandparents, Mr. and Mrs. Sanchez, ages 77 and 68, took on the responsibility of raising their grandchildren when no other family members were in a position to take on parenting responsibilities. This report will explore the Sanchez family system and apply a systems approach. This assessment will briefly describe the family dynamic, apply a systems approach, explain the Circumplex Model, and apply the Circumplex Model to the case. In addition, there will be a case plan with goals to assist the Sanchez family in regaining a more balanced system; balance provides efficiency to all the working parts of a system.

**Family Description**

Mr. and Mrs. Sanchez, immigrants from the Dominican Republic, lost their daughter and son-in-law to an automobile accident five years ago. Mr. Sanchez, whom is retired, was an employee of the post office for many years. Mrs. Sanchez was a homemaker and raised the couples three children. To supplement the family’s income, Mrs. Sanchez also cleaned apartments on the side. The Sanchez’s deceased daughter was survived by her daughter Maria (age 10) and son Tony (age 13). Not a lot is known about the Sanchez’s remaining two adult children, but they were in no position to take on the parenting responsibilities for their deceased sister’s children. Since the loss of their daughter, Mr. and Mrs. Sanchez have transitioned from grandparents into the “parent” role for their grandchildren. Recently Mr. Sanchez suffered a stroke, leaving him with serious impairments. It is expected that Mr. Sanchez will return home, but not without
challenges. The Sanchez’s live in a two-story home and there are concerns that with residual impairment it may be difficult for Mr. Sanchez to manage and navigate the home. Tony has been struggling in school for some time. Teachers have reported that Tony has been disrespectful and failing to complete assignments. Tony’s behavior has become increasingly worse since Mr. Sanchez’s recent stroke. Last week, Tony was involved in an altercation with one of his peers, therefore, suspended from school. Maria has not presented any problems at school; however, she has started to isolate herself from her friends. Many environmental stressors have affected the family’s harmony and balance. The family is struggling emotionally; it has become increasingly difficult for the Sanchez family to cope during this difficult time.

**Systems and Ecological Theories**

The Ecological model looks at the system and how the environmental stressors affect that system. The human body is a system made up of working parts, organs, and those organs operate within varied systems. If one organ is not functioning properly the whole system becomes out of balance. In quite the same way, the family system is made up of working parts that interact within multiple systems. When the system becomes unbalanced it is not directly related to one of those parts, but more so the impact of an environmental stressor on one of those parts. Charles Zastrow (2014), explains how the “ecological model views individuals, families, and small groups as having transitional problems and needs as they move from one life stage to another . . . . Families have a life cycle of events that also require adjustment for engagement, marriage, birth of children, parenting, children going to school, children leaving home, and loss of a parent” (p.51). The loss of the Sanchez’s daughter transferred Mr. and Mrs. Sanchez and their
grandchildren into a new family life cycle. Many environmental stressors have triggered the family system to become unbalanced; the loss of a daughter, the loss of a mother, Mr. Sanchez’s sudden stroke, the uncertainty of Mr. Sanchez being able to manage at home, Tony and Mary struggling emotionally and struggling at school, grief, and the lack of formal and informal support systems. The Sanchez family is interacting within many systems: family system, educational system, social service system, and medical system. By identifying the environmental stressors and systems, a focus can be placed on assisting the Sanchez family in seeking to develop problem-solving, coping, and developmental capacities. Secondly, focusing on the relationships between the family and the systems they interact within can assist in linking the Sanchez family with needed resources, services, and opportunities (Zastrow, 2014). Lastly, it will be important to focus on the systems and seek to improve them by setting goals to meet the needs of the family more effectively.

**Circumplex Model**

The Circumplex model is a system approach that focuses on the following three facets of a family system: Cohesion, Flexibility, and Communication (Olson, 1999). The model was created to assist in clinical assessment and treatment planning. In addition, the model has proven to be particularly useful as a “relational diagnosis” because of its integration of the three mentioned facets (Olson, 1999). The value of the model is that it holds firm to the goal of strengthening the system and making the system more functional. By making the system functional, the unit is better equipped to manage current and future family problems.
Cohesion

Family cohesion, the first facet of the model, has been defined as “[t]he emotional bonding that family members have toward one another” (Olson, 1999). Cohesion focuses on how the unit balances its time within the system (separateness versus togetherness). Cohesion has four dimensions; disengaged (very low score), separated (low to moderate score), connected (moderate to high score), and enmeshed (very high score) (Olson, 1999). According to the Circumflex Model, “very high levels of cohesion (enmeshed) and very low levels of cohesion (disengaged) tend to be problematic [to the family system] in the long run” (Olson, 1999). However, when family systems experience “moderate scores (separated and connected) [the unit is better able to function productively]” (Olson, 1999).

Flexibility

Family flexibility is the level of change that occurs in roles, rules, and leadership. Flexibility focuses on how well the family unit balances stability versus change. The four dimensions measured within flexibility range from rigid (very low score) to structured (low to moderate score) to flexible (moderate to high score to chaotic (very high score) (Olson, 1999). A rigid and chaotic score are problematic for families as they navigate current and future problems, but structured and flexible scores provide the unit with more balance and allow the system to function more efficiently. Olson (2012) suggests that family systems need both stability and change; it is the ability to adapt that distinguishes a balanced system from an unbalanced system.
Communication

Communication is the third and final facet of the Circumplex Model. This facet is of great value to the first two facets as it facilitates movement within cohesion and flexibility. Family communication observes a family unit in regards to their listening, speaking, problem solving, and self-disclosure skills; it observes clarity and the family units respect for one another. The difference between a balanced and unbalanced system depends heavily on the strength of the system’s communication skills. The ability to listen attentively, speak for oneself, express feelings about self and the system, stay on topic, and be respectful of the system are marks of a strong family system.

Application of Circumplex Model

Change in families is a continual process, a process that can take a family in many different directions. Over the past five years, the Sanchez family has experienced a tremendous amount of change. There has been loss, role change, and sudden illness. The Sanchez family members are processing the changes that have occurred in their system, they are experiencing the pull to adjust and adapt to the system’s needs and environmental stressors. The current stressors have taxed Mrs. Sanchez beyond her ability to cope. Mrs. Sanchez’s inability to cope has put pressure on the family system to change. Before the Sanchez’s daughter died, Mr. and Mrs. Sanchez had a flexibly connected relationship. The couple experienced emotional closeness, loyalty, and shared decision-making responsibilities. There was a strong sense of “togetherness,” a shared marital support system. Due to role reversal, the flexibility shifted to flexibly separated, an appropriate shift given the family cycle. After Mr. Sanchez’s stroke the family became chaotically disengaged. The family is divided emotionally; the members in the system
are unable to reach out to one another for support and problem solving. Mrs. Sanchez has
an *enmeshed relationship* with the system—energy is focused on the system and is absent
of outside individual friends or interests; there are no present outside support system’s
available to family members. The *chaotic relationship* in the family system is void of
clear roles and leadership resulting in the members acting out physically and emotionally.
Members are losing control and are in need of coping skills to address the environmental
stressors present in the system. Tony and Maria were too young to have lost their parents
in such a tragic way. It is only natural that they would begin to act out and withdraw.
During this life cycle, the grandchildren are *disengaged* from the family relationship.
*Disengagement* escalated as the children were faced with the potential loss and
uncertainty of their grandfather’s health. The lack of communication within the family
system makes it difficult to facilitate cohesion and flexibility and establish balance.

**Conclusion**

In summary, family systems change in response to crisis and shifts in family
cycles. Due to the loss of the Sanchez’s daughter and Tony and Maria’s parents, along
with Mr. Sanchez’s stroke, the family system has changed numerous times over the last
five years of crisis. The family started of as a balanced system (flexibly connected and
flexibly separated), and moved to an unbalanced system (chaotically disengaged).
Through treatment planning, the goal will be for the Sanchez family to return to a
balanced system that functions efficiently (structurally connected). In setting goals, the
family will be equipped with resources and skills to assist them in returning to a balanced
system.
References


Zastrow, H.C. (2014). Social work with groups: *A Comprehensive Worktext*