Case Report

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Effectiveness of Free Association and Thematic Apperception Test in Identifying Antecedent Event: A Case Study

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Abstract

The aim of exploration of the study is to highlight the effectiveness of free association8, and thematic apperception test (TAT)7 in uncovering the antecedent event. This case study was about a 27-year-old male with presenting complaints of repetitive disturbed thought patterns, body shivering, and restlessness. Contrary to his complaints, an antecedent event associated with thoughts was repressed and disturbed his daily life functionality. Findings of assessment uncovered the event as he was being involved in a romantic relationship that led to an intense argument between the client and his brother. Based on bio-psycho-social model case was formulated in which history revealed cognitive inability to process grief and loss, unhealth coping behaviors and excessive rumination as maintaining factors of his problems. A brief intervention plan was devised to enhance daily life functioning of the client by reducing the intensity of thoughts and improve his unhealthy behavior. In the age of advancement where cognitive and behavioral therapies have gained importance, this case report holds its implication to shift the attention of clinical professionals regarding the effectiveness of these assessment modalities.

Keywords: Association, Psychological tests, Psychometrics, Projective Techniques, Thematic Apperception Tests

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Introduction

Self-report assessment inventories assess an individual's personality traits, behaviors, thought patterns, and inter/intra personal skills that are based on objective conscious experience. Besides self-report measures, projective inventories such as House-Tree-Person Test (HTP), Thematic Apperception Test (TAT), and Rorschach Inkblot Test (RIT) revealed hidden emotions and internal conflicts associated with the source of the problem projected by the person into the test.[1,2]

Furthermore, the Psychoanalytic approach also highlights the relationship between the conscious and unconscious mind by disseminating perceptions from fantasies, desires from needs, and speculation from truth to understand the reason behind maladaptive behavior. For this purpose, Freud (1913) used different approaches such as free association, dream interpretation, resistance, and transference analysis. He believed that the hot spot of the problem was associated with the severity of the symptoms which caused dysfunctionality.[3] Therefore, it required an in-depth assessment.[2]

Thus, clinical practitioners must have an insight into both conscious and unconscious desires, feelings, and thoughts of an individual for devising an effective therapeutic intervention plan to treat the problem. So, the objective of the current case study is to ensure the effectiveness of these two assessment modalities in identifying antecedent of an associated event.

Case Report

The client of the present case report was a 27-year-old male admitted on Sep 2022 in F.H., Lahore. The senior clinical psychologist referred him with the following presenting complaints such as repetitive disturbed thought patterns, body shivering and restlessness. Before pursuing the therapeutic process, ethical considerations were followed which involved consent for the implementation of therapeutic intervention and ensuring the confidentiality to the client. Following by clinical interview with the client, it was uncovered that he had been experiencing restlessness and body shivering as withdrawal symptoms of smoking for the past 3 months but disturbed thought patterns since 2019.

In the general appearance of the client, no distinguishing features were found except his body mass index as he seemed underweight and reported that he did not eat well due to constipation. Family history showcased that client belonged to a nuclear family system. He had 4 siblings, 3 sisters and 1 elder brother. Upon enquiring about the parents, he replied, "his father died in 2017 due to heart attack, and mother in 2019 due to natural cause." He had a close affiliation with them so, the loss was unbearable for him. After the parental demise he was dependent on his elder brother.

The underlying history of his problem revealed that it is started in 2019, when an unhealthy argument with his elder brother stuck in his mind in the form of verbatim (i.e., handed over tea, it's raining outside, don't sit here, and close the door) and later turned into unusual thought patterns. He reported that these thoughts were very distressing and disrupted his daily life functionality. According to him, he kept on thinking about their conversation but unable to recall the antecedent event (unhealthy argument) except these verbatims. Therefore, to get rid of it, he started smoking cigarettes and felt relax.

Later in 2021, his unusual thoughts triggered after the death of his elder brother and led to severity which badly affected his relations with siblings. Moreover, his smoking consumption also increased as he continued to smoke 40 cigarettes a day. After that incident, client's family concerned about his health and consulted with a general physician. According to his presenting complaints, he suggested his family to consult with a psychiatrist and for this purpose; they took the client to F.H., Lahore. The psychiatrist admitted him for complete clinical care and suggested weekly sessions for his smoking habit and unhealthy repetitive thought patterns. Since his admission there, he started taking care of himself and quit his smoking habit. Moreover, he attended sessions regularly but was unable to recall the event associated with unhealthy thought patterns. According to the client, there was no specific timing for the arousal of these thoughts but it triggered when he observed the conversation of two people.

Case Formulation

The case was formulated based on bio-psycho-social model which identified the 3Ps' as risk factors (Table 1).

Methodology

Assessments

Different assessment modalities were used according to the presenting complaints including; Behavioral Observation, Mental Status Examination, Clinical Interview with the client, Baseline Charts, Subjective Ratings of Problematic Behaviors, Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders Checklist[4], Free Association8, and Thematic Apperception Test.[1,3,4] The results of assessment revealed that he was suspected of being involved in a romantic relationship that led to an intense argument between the client and his brother. Later on, the chunks of unhealthy argument became his thought patterns whereas he repressed the antecedent event (a conversation about his romantic relationship upon which his brother disagreed).

The outcome was found to be satisfactory as both techniques translated the thoughts, emotions, and needs of the client behind the event. Moreover, with

the help of Cognitive Behavior Therapy the trainee clinical psychologist reframed his thoughts positively and learned to pay gratitude and manage his relationship in a healthier way. Based on the above-mentioned history, it was concluded that during adulthood individuals have been strongly influenced by their repressed thoughts, needs, and emotions which may negatively influence their personality and present, and led to dysfunctionality.

Discussion

In the current case, the effectiveness of Free Association and Thematic Apperception Test in identifying the activating event was discussed.[1,3] The therapeutic procedure comprised of 8 sessions was planned in which different causal factors were identified concerning Bio-Psycho-Social model to administer an effective assessment and management plan.

Every individual differs from one another, thus their coping strategies to cope with situational stressors also differs. Consequently, some people used positive coping strategies and others may repress their desires, emotions, and thoughts which caused dysfunctionality. In this regard, free association is an effective method for decoding vague perceptions and unusual thought content such as dreams, hallucinations, and delusions. Because Freud believed that mental events were meaningfully associated with one another, thus the hidden clues can be found in the ongoing stream of thoughts, memories and feelings. Therefore, an unidentified event may trigger negative thoughts and emotions which increased the vulnerability of the onset problem.[2]

Furthermore, Henry Murray and Christina Morgan in 1935 proposed a projective test known as the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) which was used to reveal the significant components of an individual's personality dependent on drives, emotions, complexes, and conflicts in relation to needs and presses.5 Therefore, whenever the subject was in denial either consciously or unconsciously, his story of TAT cards provided an

Table 1. Case Formulation based on Bio-Psychosocial Model

	Predisposing	Precipitating	Perpetuating
Biological	1.Gender.		1.Cognitive inability to process grief and loss.
	2.Age.		
	3.Temperament.		
Psychological	2.Emotional dependency on parents.		1.Excessive rumination.
			2.Unhealthy coping behavior (Smoking).
Social	1.Conflict with elder brother.	1.Death of his brother.	
	2.Socio-economic class.	2.Conflict due to relationship issues.	
	3.Home environment.		

Table 2. Interpretation of Thematic Apperception Test

Cards	Statements	Interpretation	Needs
1	The boy who was in his adolescence, and had wished to play guitar that was lying in front of him.	The theme was extracted as authoritarian parenting that led him towards adopting unhealthy habits such as romantic relationship and smoking.	Affiliation
3BM	The client had seen a girl in the picture, lying on the bed and had cut her wrist with the dagger lying beside her. She cut her wrist because someone cheated her.	The theme extracted his latent desire for sexuality and intra-aggression as the girl harmed herself. The client denied that he had no sexual attraction towards any gender and had no relationship.	Affiliation
13G	The client portrayed a story of a young boy, who was standing on first stair case, and trying to move upward.	Unable to take initiative in his life.	Achievement
14	A man was standing in front of the window, the man was healthy, had an appropriate stature and body weight. He was also beautiful by his looks.	Sense of fulfilment, besides client's beautiful appearance and height as he reported to the trainee, he had a bleak past.	Affiliation

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Table 3. Interpretation of Free Association

Repeating Thought Patterns:	
Verbatim	**Interpretation**
Standing in front of the castle. Swimming on the bank of ocean. Ocean, beautiful grass, blooming flowers, and walking in the park.	Need for Achievement Portraying the picture of a person who had fear of taking initiatives in life. Portrayed the picture of a person, striving for peace.
Symbols:	
Verbatim	Interpretation
Castle and grand shopping mall.	Power and materialistic needs.
Memories:	
Verbatim	Interpretation
Related to childhood; he went to castle along with his family members. Related to adult: went to park for walk and had seen a little boy of doing somersaults.	It seemed that, he was missing his old life.
Related to friends: they were four and went for eating biryani.	
Emotions:	
Verbatim	Interpretation
Running away and water.	Need for Achievement Disturbing emotions that depicted his inner fears of not being able to achieve something due to his current psychological condition.
Defense Mechanisms	
Verbatim	Interpretation
Denial and Resistant; “bad people running after him”.	Need for Affiliation During clinical interview he denied the presence of people in his life as “there were only good people in his life; not bad”; but the statement depicted that bad people running after him. And the word bad associated with unhealthy habits and his relationships.
Objects	
Verbatim	Interpretation
Bike and kite.	Need for achievement and freedom.

X-ray image of his personality.[3]

As evident in the above-mentioned case, followed by the significance of activating event, the client unconsciously repressed that painful memory “conversation with his brother about his romantic relationship and unable to express in front of anyone due to his guilt”. The results of the Thematic Apperception Test[7] the results depicted his need for affiliation because he had poor relationship with his family due to authoritarian parenting and involved in unhealthy behaviors (Table 2).[5]

Similarly, the results of free association portrayed his latent desires for power, peace, and freedom in decision-making and formed healthy relationships because the strict environment inculcated in him the fear of taking initiative in his life (Table 3).

The literature illustrated that parenting styles had a significant impact on individuals’ personal and mental growth.5 Furthermore, according to Erikson, during adolescence, every individual experience identity crisis due to which they are unable to endure any problematic situation which negatively affect their personalities and daily functioning as well. Thus, individuals who are more resilient, these adversities do not affect their cognitive, emotional and daily life functioning, but those

who do not, they experience worse outcomes.[6-10]

The therapeutic intervention plan of the present case was based thrice a week for 2 months that involved to psycho-educate the client about his problem and to enable him to manage his environmental stressors in order to function independently. Moreover, the techniques of Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy (biblio-therapy, role-playing), Cognitive Behavior Therapy (guided imagery, triple column, relaxation) Social Skills Training (assertiveness and vocational training), and Behavior Modification (positive reinforcement) to achieve the goals effectively.

Conclusion

It was concluded that Free Association and Thematic Apperception Test (TAT) provide an in-depth insight about an individual's personality by highlighting emotions, object relations, needs and drives. Because certain environmental factors may directly or indirectly influence mental and physical health of an individual. Therefore, in the age of advancement, clinical practitioners should know the significance of these assessment modalities in relation to uncover unconsciously repressed activating event in analyzing the problem that played an immense role for effective treatment.

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Authors' Contribution Statement

LJ contributed to the conception, design, acquisition, analysis, interpretation of data, drafting of the manuscript, critical review of the manuscript, and final approval of the version to be published. MA contributed to the design, acquisition, analysis, and interpretation of data. MZ contributed to the analysis, interpretation of data, and drafting of the manuscript. RM contributed to the analysis, interpretation of data, and drafting of the manuscript. All authors are accountable for their work and ensure the accuracy and integrity of the study.

Conflict of Interest

Authors declared no conflict on interest

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None

Data Sharing Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.