American Association of Marriage and Family Therapy Annual Conference

Raechel Russo, David Jenks, Austin Brunson

11/14/2019

Each year the American Association of Marriage and Family Therapy holds an annual conference where professions in the field from around the nation come together to learn from and network with other Marriage and Family Therapists. The 2019 AAMFT Annual Conference was held in Austin, Texas from August 29th to September 1st of this year. The Marriage and Family Therapy Program here at Utah State University was able to send several students to present on various research projects they are working on.

On the first night of the conference, Raechel Russo, Brooke Hemsley, both Master’s students in the MFT program and Dr. Ryan Seedall, MFT faculty, presented their research project entitled “Using Twitter to Understand the Lived Experience of Anxiety”. This study is one that Russo completed for her thesis requirement for her Master's degree in the HDFS department. This study looked at over 1300 Twitter posts, or “tweets” that used the hashtag “#ThisIsWhatAnxietyFeelsLike” and talked about interactions or relationships with others. A coding team consisting of two second-year Master's students in the Marriage and Family Therapy program (Raechel Russo and Brooke Hemsley) as well as a first-year student in the program (Jeremy Clark) were able to identify six main themes that emerged from the data using a thematic analysis. These themes were: deflated self in relation to others and their perceptions; negative emotional responses leading to feeling misunderstood, lonely, and a failure (self-fulfilling prophecy); fear, worry and avoidance behaviors that influence relationships; social triggers; anxiety management strategies; and things for others to avoid. This thematic analysis was able to provide data that elicits more understanding of people’s lived experience of anxiety within relationships and interactions with others, which helps inform clinical practice in Marriage and Family Therapy.

On the second day of the conference David Jenks, PhD student focusing in MFT, Ashley Bell, a second year Master’s student, Dr. Dave Robinson and Dr. Ryan Seedall, MFT Faculty, presented a project utilizing data collected in a couple and family therapy clinic examining how a couple’s attachment style impacts the outcomes of couples therapy. It has been identified that there is an ever-increasing literature within the field of systemic therapy examining attachment within a therapeutic context. In therapy, couples identify presenting problems that disrupt the functioning of their system and seek guidance on how to correct or once again reach homeostasis within the relationship. By understanding the attachment style, therapists can further identify what could be done to strengthen and improve a couple relationship. This will allow therapists to be better prepared when assessing and evaluating couples with specific attachment styles. Attachment theory is a useful framework for understanding what creates and strengthens relational bonds. This project examines the impact of a couple's attachment style on the ongoing progression of therapy. Intake and ongoing assessments of clients attending couples therapy are analyzed to identify if the couple’s attachment style promotes or hinders the successful completion of therapeutic services. More specifically, they are looking to identify significant differences in therapy outcomes for those who report higher levels of attachment anxiety and/or avoidance. As well as highlighting gender differences, partner effects (whether a person’s attachment is related to his/her partner’s therapy outcomes), and systemic interactions (e.g., one partner high in avoidance coupled with another high in anxiety). They believe these findings will help
systemic therapists use an understanding of attachment to improve therapy outcomes.

On the final day of the conference, Austin Brunson and Gregory Noel, both second year Master’s students, presented a project they worked on with Dr. Kay Bradford, which was a qualitative research study assessing themes in regard to what motivates couples to attend community relationship education courses.

While we know that community education is effective at improving relationships according to the literature on healthy long-term relationships, Austin wanted to know if the objectives of the Couple L.I.N.K.S. (LINKS) course matched the needs that the couples were trying to meet upon coming to a community relationship education course. Austin and Greg analyzed data from over 800 participants in the LINKS course. In particular, they looked at the responses to the pre-survey question that asked about their biggest relationship concern before attending the course, and the post-survey question which asked what their biggest gain was after attending the course. Both of the questions were open-ended questions that were filled out either on paper or online, depending on when they took the survey.

Upon coding the responses, the researchers found that there were four main themes that were consistent in both survey responses. The themes for the biggest relationship concerns in order of prevalence were unmet couple or individual needs (62.5%), poor communication (48.3%), seeking personal growth (20.4%), and resolving issues of commitment (5.6%). The themes for the greatest gain from the course were the same four themes, but in a different order, namely: increases in personal growth (65.2%), better communication (43.3%), addressing couple and individual needs (29.1%), and strengthened commitment (5.4%). The researchers concluded that the LINKS course does address couples’ concerns with varying levels of emphasis, and implications of the study were explored, including recommendations to further explore the connection between therapy and community relationship education, and increased collaboration between the two fields.

This opportunity to present research at a national conference is just one way that the students and faculty in the Marriage and Family Therapy program are working to advance the field of MFT and contribute scholarly research projects as a way to help therapists and research consumers learn more about the pivotal role that mental health plays in the lives of couples, individuals, and families. Not only did it provide an opportunity for current students to network with other professionals but it allowed students to gain experience that will help them in their future academic and professional endeavors.