

The Family System

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The history of psychology began with a focus on the individual and the discovery that early childhood experiences within the family shape, to a great extent, the personality and personality problems of adults. Over time psychology expanded to take into account not just the individual's experiences of the family but the family system itself. Psychology began with a study of sensation and perception, branched out to include the study of dreams and the unconscious, learning theory, cognitive functioning and so on. But in the 1940s and '50s psychologists began studying communications theory, mapping out interactive structures, formulating family systems, understanding psychological problems as a result of faulty communication and creating new therapies that involved the whole family in dealing with the psychological problems that initially appeared to belong to only one member of the family.

What is a Family?

Those who have studied and worked with families have discovered that the nuclear family of husband, wife and their own biological children is certainly one type of family but that this arrangement is altogether too narrow a definition for describing all families. Instead family systems theorists have described a family as a group of people, who live together and, as a unit, manage life's tasks. This definition of a family allows us to include single parent families, blended families, extended families, families with adopted children, families with homosexual parents, families headed by grandparents, committed communal living arrangements, and so on.

What is a Family System?

The family system is the way a family solves problems and gets things done. It is the way members of the family talk to each other and relate to each other to perform all the life tasks of the family including the care and management of the house, the raising of the children, the handling of finances, the satisfaction of basic needs, and the establishment and maintenance of structures that meet the members needs for sex and affection.

Family systems are made of and supported by family myths, family secrets, family structure, and family dynamics. *Family myths* are beliefs shared by all the family that are clearly not true but serve to cover family secrets. Family myths are beliefs such as 'We have a perfect family.' 'We don't have any problems.' 'In our family everyone is free to say whatever he or she wants to say.' 'We solve all of our problems through rational discussion.' 'No-one in our family has a drinking problem. We drink as a part of our cultural heritage.' 'Mom and Dad are just as in love as when they first met.' 'It's not that she doesn't love her father, it's just that daughters are always closer to their mothers.' 'It's no big deal, he just has a temper like his father.' 'Our son doesn't have a problem, he is unique.' 'It's not Mom and Dad's fault, she was born that way.'

Family secrets are those secrets that the family avoids discussing even though they are well known to at least some members of the family. Family secrets include shameful

events, old hurts, 'skeletons in the closet', held resentments, sexual indiscretions, domestic violence, substance abuse and so on. The family myths cover the family secrets but these secrets still exert an influence on the family and result in distortions in the family structure.

The *family structure* has to do with the hierarchy of family members in terms of position and power within the family, the emotional proximity of family members to one another and the nature of the alliances. For example, a father may be a partner to his wife and hierarchically above his children in terms of decision-making responsibilities, but if he has become impaired due to illness, addiction, irresponsibility, etc. he may move down in the decision making power structure of the family. This, in turn, may create a space for one of the children to move up in the family structure. A statement about the family structure is a statement about the position of each member in relation to the others in terms of power, influence, allegiance or emotional proximity. It includes special alliances between some members, schisms between others, the drawing in of a third person to mediate a conflict between two members, other triangular relations, and so forth.

Family dynamics pertain to the way the members interact: 'Mom no longer wants sexual relations with her husband so she has encouraged her son to develop a fear of the dark and as a result, he sleeps in the parental bed successfully warding off the threat of any possible sexual relations between the parents.' 'When little sister says something, big sister always interrupts her.' 'Mother is more aligned with her son from her first marriage than she is with her current husband. And he is reciprocally more aligned with his daughter from his first marriage than he is with his wife.' 'Father is the so-called head of the house but Mom makes all the decisions.' 'Everyone in the family laughs whenever Mom makes a suggestion.'

Much of the structure and dynamics of the family are built around the family's conceptions of the differences between children and adults and between males and females. These distinctions are reflected in roles, responsibilities, privileges, expectations, alliances, schisms, encouragement and discouragement. They also influence the manner in which the family negotiates its way throughout the family life cycle.

While the individual lifecycle passes from birth through childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, mid-life, old age and death, the family life cycle follows a somewhat different path from courtship, to coupling (marriage of one sort or another) to the raising of children through childhood and adolescence, to the launching of adult children into the world, to grandparenthood, old age and the loss of a spouse. The individual lifecycle is an abstraction - a pattern, a model, an ideal - and every real life is full of variations on that abstraction. Similarly, the family lifecycle is also an abstraction and every real family will diverge from the model in many ways. Nonetheless, the family lifecycle offers us a tool for thinking about a family and the way it manages the various life tasks of the individuals within the family and of the family as a whole.

The development of family systems theory and family therapy came largely as a result of some of the failures of individual therapy to successfully treat certain types of psychological problems. A boy, for example, might be brought to therapy because he is

disruptive at school, hitting other children and not paying attention to the teacher. After months of individual therapy nothing may have changed. After exploring the matter a little more deeply we might discover that the boy is routinely victimized by his older sister, who hits him and pinches him. It is then learned that the mother uses the daughter as a confidant to listen to all her complaints about her husband. Meanwhile Mom has distanced herself from her husband's sexual advances and the father-daughter relationship has become flirtatious. Thus, the daughter is being 'triangled' in, or brought in to manage the tension between the parents and feeling in the pinch. She then turns around and assaults her little brother just as she is feeling assaulted. She does to him what she feels is being done to her. She pinches him just as she feels she's in a pinch. Thus, we suddenly discover that while the little boy is the one identified as the 'patient' in the family, the patient is, in fact, the whole family! This is a demonstration of one of the central ideas in family systems theory and family therapy – *the identified patient*.

The identified patient is the one member of the family that typically comes to therapy first or is brought to therapy by the family. But this individual patient's problem is, often, found to be embedded in the family system. Family therapy then is a psychotherapeutic approach in which the whole family goes to the therapist's office and, in the course of the discussion, the therapist is able to see the family structure and family dynamics and begin to make interventions that shift the familiar communication patterns. The family therapist may discover that an excluded member of the family sits on the periphery of the group and the therapist may actually change the seating arrangement to bring him/her more into the family group. The family therapist may change a seating arrangement to break up a tense mother-son coalition and instead strengthen the husband-wife coalition. The therapist may make observations on the way a child may become a behavior problem to serve as a distraction from a focus on the parent's problem. The therapist may explore the family myths, stories of the parents' families of origin, unexpressed assumptions about family roles, etc. The therapist may direct the family to speak one at a time, listen to and repeat what the other had said or help a quiet member say what he/she wants to say. The therapist may 'reframe' the problematic behavior by saying, for example, "Your son is not a rebellious trouble-maker. He is a dutiful son trying to save his parents from having to confront each other. He does this by distracting them from their problems and uniting them in dealing with him as their shared problem." Sometimes the therapist may even make a seemingly strange remark that puzzles the family but gets them to think about their problem in a new way.

The family therapist does not take sides and say this one is right and that one is wrong. The family therapist demonstrates the way the behavior of the group influences the behavior of the individual and vice versa and helps to change the family system. The family creates identified patients, scapegoats, family myths, saviors, alliances, schisms, sabotage, and the rest. The therapist needs to see the family not simply as individuals but as a group, as a system that is capable of doing things that no individual member would want to do but that happen nonetheless. The therapist must orient the family to this notion of the family as a unit, as a whole, as a group, as a system, and then must direct the flow of communication in order to establish a new more effective system.

Family systems theory helps us to understand the interpersonal dynamics of domestic violence, drug abuse and sexual abuse. Without removing responsibility from the abusers or blaming the victims, the family systems approach helps each member to see his/her role in the problem and in doing so become empowered to do something about it. Family systems theory helps us to understand the familiar risk that single parent families run when a child is pulled in to fulfill a spousal role and make up for the absent parent in the emotional life of the custodial parent. It also helps us to understand the dynamics of blended families in which parent-child alliances may become barriers to family integration.

Thus, the individual is not an isolated independent island all by itself but is actually a member of a family system, embedded in alliances, schisms, triangles, roles and communication patterns. Furthermore, while those family dynamics may be lived out interpersonally in the lives of children and adults, adults also carry in their hearts many of the roles and communication patterns from the families in which they grew up. They then marry and reintroduce many of those dynamics into their new families.

After developing an appreciation for the notion that there is no individual independent of his/her familial system, we may then be ready to entertain the notions that there is no family system independent of the community, cultural, political, and economic systems within which it is embedded.

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