

Mapping and Understanding Family Dynamics: The Contribution of Family Systems Theory

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Plan for Today's Presentation

- Review clinical, theoretical and scientific genesis of Family Systems Theory
- Explain key concepts in Family Systems Theory
- Discuss practical relevance and applications of the theory
 - Using genograms to understand family history
- Review warning signals of trouble when working with families
- Open discussion

What's a family?

A typical definition:

A family consists of a domestic group of people (or a number of domestic groups), typically affiliated by birth or marriage, or by analogous or comparable relationships — including domestic partnership, cohabitation, adoption, surname and (in some cases) ownership (as occurred in the Roman Empire).

The Family Is Never Static

- A family is ever-changing
- It has a life-cycle with predictable events that constantly change its composition
- It is highly structured—it has hierarchies, rules, prohibitions
- Its structure changes constantly with regularly occurring changes in power and affiliation
- Emotions and attachment are key to the process
- Pathology is usually caused to an inability or unwillingness to adapt to new family configuration

Basic Family Systems Concepts

- Family of origin
 - The family who raised you
- Biological family
 - The family whose genes you carry within you
- Family of procreation
 - The family you created through reproduction
- Adoptive family
 - The family that took you in

The Progressive Rise of Family Systems Thinking

- In the 1960's a growing widespread dissatisfaction arises in clinical circles with the inefficacy of the psychoanalytic treatments individuals, couples and children receive
- Realization that children and couples remained highly symptomatic even after long treatments
- Insight that there must be something about the home environment that maintains the illness despite valiant efforts at treatment
- Something must be stuck and prevent change and growth

Intellectual Forerunners of Family Systems Theory (FST)

- FST evolved out of the cybernetics revolution of the 1950's and 1960's (e.g., Gregory Bateson)
- Represents a moving away from prior linear causative explanations to phenomena (e.g., Quantum physics versus Newtonian physics)
- A close relative of chaos theory and complexity theory
- Key Developer of FST: Murray Bowen (The Georgetown School)

Solution to the Individual Therapy Conundrum: Cybernetics

- **Cybernetics** is the study of feedback and derived concepts such as communication and control in living organisms, machines and organizations. The term *cybernetics* stems from the Greek Κυβερνήτης (*kybernetes*, steersman, governor, pilot, or rudder — the same root as government). It is an earlier but still-used generic term for many of the subject matters that, in specialization, fall under the headings of: adaptive systems, artificial intelligence, complex systems, complexity theory, control systems, decision support systems, dynamical systems, information theory, learning organizations, mathematical systems theory, operations research, simulation, and systems engineering.

Key Family Systems Concepts

- Family is an emotional system that should be considered in its entirety
- The dynamic of families, like other systems, is to return to homeostatis.
 - Homeostasis: The notion that systems tend to aim at maintaining themselves as they are (in a state of pleasant equilibrium)
 - Aims to ward off the anxiety that come with potential change
- Boundaries
 - The psychological distance and or proximity between two or more people
 - rigid versus loose
 - Fusion (complete loss of boundary between self and other)

More Concepts

- Alliances
 - A coming together of two parties against third
- Triangulation
 - a third party is “hijacked” in order to avoid something painful
- Conflicted relationship
- Cutoff
 - A deliberate loss of contact between two or more members of a family

And Yet More Concepts

- Identified patient
 - The symptomatic person being brought to treatment or attention – may not be the one that actually has the problem!
- Family secrets
 - Shameful or painful past actions or events that are hidden from or by members of the family
- Intergenerational family patterns
 - Traumas that repeat themselves over the generation (e.g., sexual abuse)
- The “Schizogenic Family” and its “double bind”

Typical Events that Upset Homeostasis: Events in the family life-cycle

- Addition of new family member through marriage, birth or adoption
- Death of family member
- Significant change in economic or monetary configuration
- Child(ren) moving out of the home
- A divorce and/or a separation
- The anticipation of any of the above (like death)

Key Findings about Families

- Every family system is rule-governed
- Rules are often not consciously known or spoken about
 - Family members often do not even know they exist and may at times even deny their very existence
- A frontal challenge to the unspoken rules will often result in the family attacking the rule-breaking family member or consultant
- Must find ways to unearth the unspoken rules and use them creatively to reach explicit goals

Helpful Tools

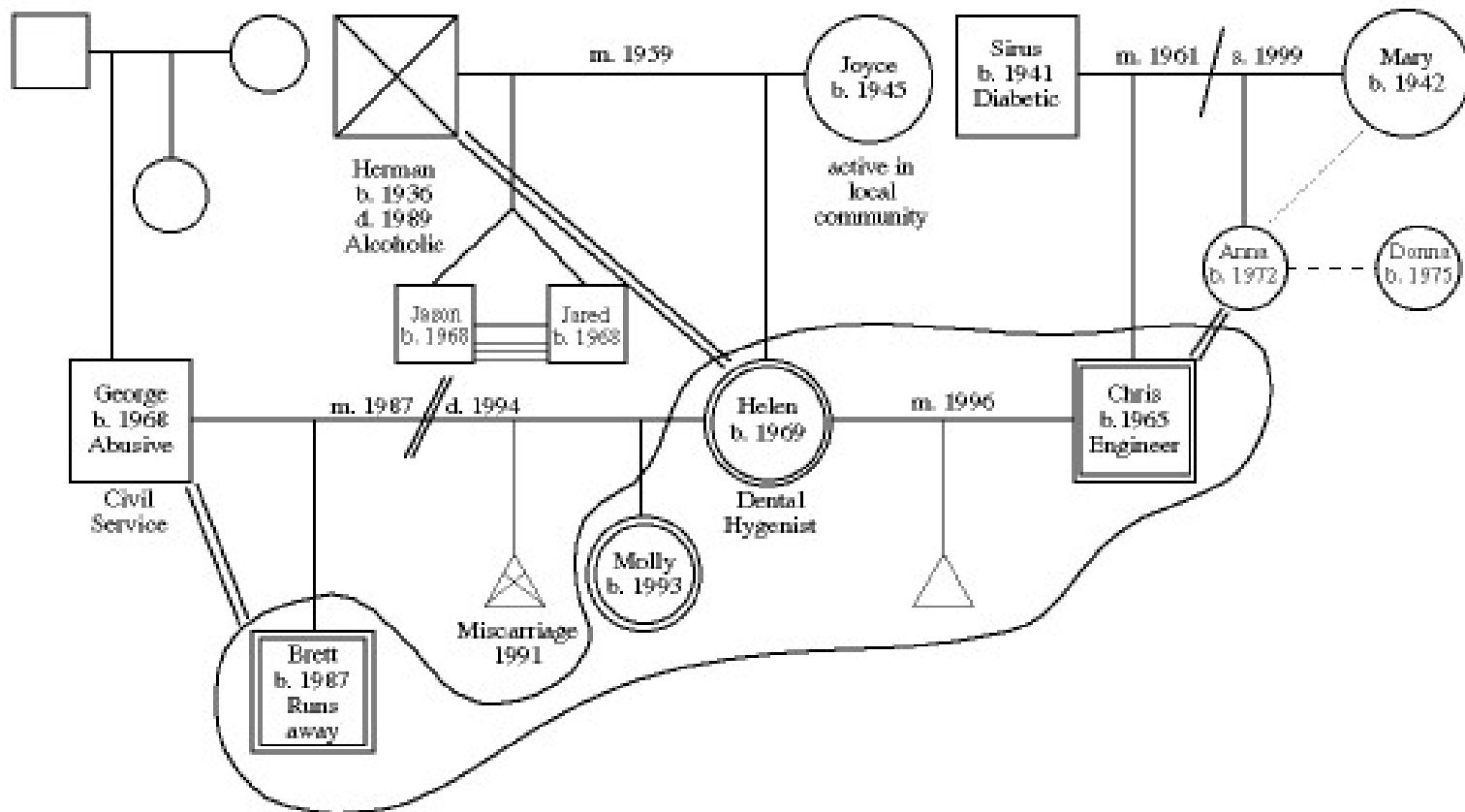
- Genograms
 - Definition: A genogram is a pictorial representation of family relationships across several generations. It can be a convenient organizing device to help you identify patterns or develop hypotheses about family functioning

Why Do Genograms?

- Because intergenerational family patterns are otherwise invisible
- They only become apparent, or even obvious, once a picture of the family history is drawn

Example

Sample Genogram Family



Reading and Interpreting a Genogram

Genogram Symbols

Family Members		
Male	Female	Central Person
Pregnancy	Deceased	
Abortion Miscarriage	Foster/Adopted Child	
Fraternal Twins		Identical Twins
Unions		
m. 1952 Married	m. 1975 // d. 1980 Divorced	
m. 1952 / s. 1961 Separated	Unmarried Couple	
m. 1975 // d. 1980 m. 1984 Multiple Marriages		
Relationships		
Very close, fused	People within shape are within same household	
Close		
Conflictual	Fused & Conflictual	
Distant	Cut off, estranged	

The Family Dynamics Iceberg

First Order: What's Explicit

- Information/Facts
- Behavioral Expectations
- Goals/Objectives

Second Order: What's implicit

- Values
- Alliances
- Taboos
- Secrets
- Morals
- Finances

Implications and Applications

- Every individual is understood as part and parcel of the family system in which he or she operates
 - There is no such thing as a lone individual (even if all his or her relatives are deceased)
 - All important decisions are made using values and beliefs that are likely those of the system
 - **There is no such thing as an individual donor**
- Consultant must try to uncover the dynamics that block change or progress
- In order to work effectively with individuals and families, the consultant must develop an in-depth understanding of the specific family system's particular dynamics

An Unfortunate (yet common) Misconception

- Most people think that family systems is only used or useful when working with families
 - The family systems framework is *just as important* when working with individuals
 - And, failing to understand the system in which each individual operates, in effect, result in a failure to understand the individual

Common Warning Signals Consultants Should Watch Out For

- Member of family that has been cut off (family black sheep)
- Triangulated communications
- Rigid hierarchies
- Prodigal or favored child
- Family secrets: especially abuse and traumas
- Avoidance of any and all conflicts

Things Consultants Often Worry about but Probably Shouldn't

- Expressions of anger or open conflict
 - Families differ greatly in their toleration for conflict (conflict can be a good thing)
- Family members' attempts to have consultant take sides
- Intergenerational disagreements on family's priorities

The Family Motivation System

- Motivation for individual philanthropic behavior is heavily influenced by the family motivational system
 - Desire to honor the family matriarch or patriarch
 - Desire to remember a deceased child
 - Wish to preserve the memory of a heroic act by a beloved and admired ancestor
 - Wish to propagate the good name of the family
 - Desire to spread the values of the clan
 - Desire to help others as a value of the family
 - Desire to give back in gratitude for gifts received

Conclusion

- Working with families requires extreme sensitivity to unspoken & invisible dynamics
- Only close observation and pattern analysis can reveal what is going on underneath the surface
- It is crucial to uncover what family dynamics are blocking growth processes
- Necessary to find ways to work with families that use the dynamics in a productive way
- Know when it is appropriate to consult with clinical expert

References

Books:

Foundations of family therapy by Lynn Hoffman

The Changing family cycle by Betty Carter and
Monica Mc Goldrick

You can go home again by Monica Mc Goldrick

Online Resources:

www.familytiesproject.org

Wikipedia Online Encyclopedia

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