Family Systems Theory – Family Projection Process

Family Systems Theory (FST) gives us a means to deepen our understanding of ourselves and the world around us. Through it we acknowledge that, like each individual, each group of people is a living organism or system that behaves in very predictable ways. We learn to “think systems – watch process”. Consider for a moment the last tense moment of conflict or misunderstanding you had with a family member, friend, or coworker. How much of that was about the actual content at issue, and how much was misunderstanding and reaction in place of appreciation, wonder, understanding, and response? In this instance we say, “It’s not about content – it’s about process.”

Family Systems theory is constructed with 8 core concepts: Nuclear Family Emotional System; Differentiation of Self; Triangles; Cutoff; Family Projection Process; Multigenerational Transmission Process; Sibling Position; and Emotional Process in Society. Central to our ability to make use of these concepts is our willingness to see, feel, and name the anxiety present in ourselves, others, and the larger system. Once we do, then we begin to gain some power to change, and the 8 concepts become the tools by which we can learn to construct a better self, and a better world.

The fifth core concept to FST is Family Projection Process

“Blame the mother.” Well, not exactly. The point in Family Projection Process is not to place blame, but to place focus. What happens is this: Anxious parents will focus a high level of attention on a child. This creates an unhealthy neediness in the child, the child/parent relationship becomes enmeshed. Initially this serves the parent “need to be needed,” so there is no problem. Over time, however, the parent becomes exhausted by this relationship, tries to encourage the child to differentiate, and yet feels fear over the loss of connection. Eventually the child will begin to show symptoms – irritability, poor choices, poor school performance, acting out, anger, etc. This cycle then feeds on itself, heightening the anxiety of the parent, which raises the symptom level of the child. What the parent needs to do is begin focusing on her/his own behavior, individually and in relationship to the system. By changing personal behavior, the environment in which the child is acting out will change, and thus the child’s behavior is likely to change, initially degrading, but eventually improving. The attention on symptoms in the child which were prompted by the anxiety of a parent is the key to the Family Projection Process.

“...The process through which parental undifferentiation impairs one or more children operates within the father-mother-child triangle...It exists in all gradations of intensity, from those in which impairment is minimal to those in which the child is seriously impaired for life. The process is so universal it is present to some degree in all families.” M. Bowen. Family Therapy in Clinical Practice. P383.

Family Projection Process is about the projection of anxiety from parent to child. With multiple children, often one receives greater attention (anxiety) leaving the others freer. “The greater the fusion, the lower the level of differentiation of self… Those with less focus on them develop a stronger basic self.” (Gilbert, 69)

Enmeshed => transfer of anxiety

Differentiated AND Connected

=> Lower anxiety
When we see symptoms in an individual, one thing for us to do is ask questions about the relationships with parents, and those parents’ relationships with the other children (if any).

- Who is closest to the parents?
- Who is connected but separate?
- Where are there disconnects – distancing or cutoff?
- Who manifests the greatest anxiety in each generation?
- What kind of ‘symptoms’ does each person exhibit?

More than likely, there can be something instructive in seeing how parents and children relate to one another, and where the levels of enmeshment of differentiation vary. The more enmeshed, the more anxiety is projected from parent to child.

**BLAME:** “Not only is the process automatic and out of awareness, it has to do with (the parents) connectedness into their generations. They, too, were the recipients of parental anxiety, and their parents before them. The process is too big in all of our families to leave room for blame.” (Gilbert, 71)

**WHAT TO DO?**
The hope in all of this is that any person in the system can impact the others by managing their own anxiety and ways of relating to the others. As we look at the system. And ask the above questions, we can decide what to do about the anxiety we see and experience.

- Do we acknowledge it?
- Do we respond to it?
- How do we relate to the parent(s) and the child(ren)?
- Who has the greatest capacity for change at this time?
- What options do we have for creative responses or initiatives?

“One way out of the family projection process is to work for a bigger picture of the family emotional process – that is, to look at the preceding generations to see what can be learned. Of course, if cutoffs get bridged in the bargain, that is all to the good.” (Gilbert, 73)