Family Systems Theory – Multigenerational Transmission 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 sixth core concept to FST is Multigenerational Transmission Process.

Why do parents so frequently raise children who are remarkably different? With a pair of siblings, one is often more highly differentiated than the parents, while the other is less so – one is the overachiever and the other a black sheep. Why is that? The multigenerational transmission process helps us understand this, and how over successive generations this trend becomes even more stark. We will look at how this works in our own families, as well as those among our care receivers, whether in the congregation, hospital or community. In addition, we will think about how to interrupt this process in our own lives by making conscious choices to function differently. In what ways can we help others to do the same, so that they are able to change generational patterns in the family and move toward healthier ways of living and relating?

“The family projection process continues through multiple generations.”


The multigenerational transmission process is the logical extension of the Family Projection Process, wherein the level of anxiety in parents is transferred to the children, depending on how connected parents and children are. The child who is most the focus of the family system will develop the lowest level of differentiation. The more independent and outside the system a child is, the higher level of differentiation will be attained.

![High focus – Low differentiation](image)

![Minimal focus – Same differentiation](image)

![No focus - Higher differentiation](image)

What we see in MTP is that these trends are magnified over succeeding generations – the child of focus of the child of focus will have even less differentiation, while the outside child of the outside child will have even greater differentiation.
Observing the Generations

One of the best tools to gain increased understanding of ourselves is to learn more about our heritage. A family diagram begins with a family tree developed through normal genealogy research, with the addition of greater detail. Beyond just birth and death dates and whose children are who, a family diagram adds some of the following:

- Longevity of family members
- Health
- Their location, including moves, with dates
- Their incomes and businesses or professions, including what positions they held
- Reproductive history including abortions, stillbirths and miscarriages
- Marriages and living-with arrangements
- Dates of births, deaths, and marriages
- Highest degree in education, or year in school
- Divorces and separations
- Addictions, criminal histories and other problem behaviors
- Conflict, distance, cutoff in relationships

Going back to visit with older generations is a great place to start. They often enjoy telling family stories and are glad that someone is interested. Ask the following questions:

- Who?
- What?
- Where?
- When?
- How?

Why is less helpful as it gets into interpretations rather than facts. Consider tracing the history of a particular theme such as conflict or addition and see what you learn about your own thoughts and behaviors that will enable you to grow.