Family Systems Theory – Triangles

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 third core concept to FST is Triangles. Remember when you were a kid, and you were playing with friends. If there were just two of you, everything went smoothly, yet as soon as a third person was added, tensions arose and the choosing of sides began. You could negotiate with one other person on how to take turns choosing activities, yet when the third joins in, suddenly the power shifts and there is often an ‘odd man out’. This is our earliest experience of the concept known as triangles, and it continues throughout our lives. Triangles exist between individuals, groups, even nations. “The enemy of my enemy is my friend” illustrates a triangle – and one that often backfires in major ways. Just look at how the US relationship with Middle East, European and Asian nations has shifted over the last 50 years. The question is not whether triangles exist, but what to do, and how to think and act when we recognize them, whether we are participants or observers.

“The theory states that the triangle, a three-person emotional configuration, is the molecule or the basic building block of any emotional system, whether it is in the family or any other group. The triangle is the smallest stable relationship system. A two-person system may be stable as long as it is calm, but when anxiety increases, it immediately involves the most vulnerable other person to become a triangle. When tension in the triangle is too great for the threesome, it involves others to become a series of interlocking triangles.”


Triangle are neither good nor bad For Bowen and those who follow, there is no inherent value placed on triangles – they are simply ‘the way things are’. To differentiate further, some theorists add the word ‘triad’ to the theory. In this way of thinking, a triad is any group of three, where a triangle is inherently anxious. Mother, Father and Daughter as a family together are a triad. When daughter plays one parent against the other, then a triangle may be formed. It is probably unnecessary to prefer one approach to the other, but simply to recognize anxious triangles when they exist, and to realize that groups of three are the “smallest stable relationship system”. The key is for us to recognize when these dynamics shift in and around us, and how to manage our own anxiety and behavior. One common manifestation appears when one individual (Mary) has experienced a miscommunication or conflict with another (John). Mary then seeks out a third person (Allen) and the group of three is formed.
Getting “traingled” - what are you going to do?

Imagine that you are Allen, and Mary has approached you to talk about John and the conflict they have had. Mary is bringing anxiety with her into the conversation with you. We say that Mary is “trying to triangle you”. Your own ‘differentiation of self’ requires that you maintain your own sense of clarity about who you will be – what you will say and what you will – do in this situation. Some things to consider as we analyze this situation from Allen’s perspective:

1) What is Mary seeking by talking to me? Does she want to just get advice from a third party? Does she want me ‘on her side”? Does she want me to talk to John on her behalf and ‘try to work it out’?

2) What do I want in this situation? Do I even want to hear about the conflict? How am I feeling about being approached by Mary? How do I feel about Mary and John otherwise?

3) What is the pattern of functioning among the three of us in the past, and do I want to repeat those patterns or change them?

Don’t take on another’s anxiety… One common path is for Allen to internalize Mary’s anxiety about John, This then leaves Mary feeling much better about John, but now Allen is upset with John. If Allen does not resist this, he runs the further risk of either confronting John or forming a new triangle with yet a fourth person – Carol. Carol may then get upset with either John, Mary, or both. And the process continues. As a person seeking differentiation of self while remaining connected, I have several tasks:

1) Be non-anxious – when Mary initiates the discussion.

2) Be clear – with myself and Mary about what I want and need.

3) Be willing to listen – if I think that will be helpful and I can do so without receiving and internalizing Mary’s own anxiety – just giving her a safe space to speak may help her.

4) Support Mary – in her efforts to relate directly with John rather than going through myself or another as an intermediary.

5) Stay connected - work on my own direct relationship with both Mary and John.

I am response-able The anxious triangle is not actually formed until I engage in the anxiety. Thus, the entire system, and everyone in it, is impacted by my success or failure to remain differentiated and connected. In this, I am not ‘responsible’ for the health of the system or those in it. I am response-able for my own functioning and the energy I bring into the system.

Questions for reflection:

- What do I need in order to grow in self-differentiation and be less-anxious in my relationship systems?
- How might I engage in prayer, meditation, study, journaling and other spiritual practices?
- How might I maintain my physical healthy through diet, exercise and other positive habits?
- How can I increase my ability to stay connected with those around me?
- How might I engage wise counselors, coaches, therapists, mentors and others who can guide me toward further maturity?