

***Family System Approach in Promoting Family Security: Perspectives on
Family's Emotional Relationship and Family Therapy***

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Abstract

The study was based on the theoretical aspect of a family as a system otherwise known as family system theory. The family system reflects a component part of the larger social system. The theoretical and psychological aspects of the family, which are based on the emotional, psychopathology, communication and interaction of members, were discussed. The study considered Bowenian's approach of the family system focusing on four interlocking concepts propounded by Bowen. The theory reveals that families are experiencing security problems because of inadequate and ineffective communication system. The inability of members to differentiate themselves from their families of origin may result, most of the time, to emotional illness and pathological problems. This made some family members to use an emotional cut-off to cope with their unresolved attachments to their families of origin so as to feel secure in life. Effective family therapy which reveals how emotional problems in families could be resolved was also discussed.

Keywords: Family System, Security, Relationship, Psychopathology, Counselling.

Introduction

A nation comprises so many families, and families are the major segments in a society. Also, the major components of the social system of the nation are the families. All forms of behaviours that are observed in our society today emanate from members of various families constituting a nation. The contributions of members of families to the national development of a nation cannot be overemphasized; because of many factors such as genetic heritage, cultural belief, ethnicity and many other variables which were passed down from parents to their children.

The trend in changes in the family as a system and the emotional attachment of its members pose some interesting challenges. According to Mcleod (2013), it is becoming more difficult to live in the present world due to modernization and technological advancement. The changes in the society have direct impacts on families in most cases. According to Goldberg and Goldberg (2004), families can be

described as a complex organization with emotional attachment system which may involve three generations. Members in a family are expected to have cordial, loving and amicable ways of relating in order to promote the well-being of all family members. In reality, most of the time, this may not be achieved. Rule of relating is so important in a family to the extent that if the rules are ambiguous, members may find it difficult to relate well. According to Prochaska and Norcross (2007), if the family system becomes disorganized then emotional symptoms are likely to develop. In order to restore order to the family, the cause of emotional problems must be addressed. For instance, if the rules in a family are clearly stated like “whenever we are observing family prayers in the morning, no child is expected to make any side talks”. The rule is so clear that a child will not develop negative symptoms if he or she is corrected when the rule is violated.

Willi (1999) is of the view that a person exists within a social system of which family is part. Therefore any change taking place in the family affects every member. Effective communication enhances the cordial interactions of family members. Children in the family will know whom to communicate with and how to communicate; there could be rules like the following: Don't be rude to your elderly brothers and sisters; when visitors are around, children should keep off and allow daddy and mummy to receive the visitors. The rules are clear enough for any child to understand. When communication patterns in families are unclear, then the rules become more ambiguous and psychopathology may likely develop. For example, a mother went out to buy foodstuffs for the family and when she was approaching the house, her son saw her and quickly went closer to her to help her with what she bought. The mother shouted on him and said, who asked you to come out? And she still gave the items to the boy to take to the house. The boy was confused because he was blamed for coming out and at the same time, he still assisted the mother. Another time the boy may be confused about what to do. Carr (2006) asserts that all systems are based on set of rules.

Also, communication in the family could lead to disharmony and pathology if the verbal and non-verbal patterns of communication are not effective. The clearest part of verbal communication is based on the content it addresses while non-verbal communication is based on the use of signs and symbols. When children in a family are not used to nonverbal messages it can produce more ambiguous situations that can lead to more emotional problems in the family.

According to McGoldrick, Cater and Garcia-Preto (2012), communication in the family can also be affected by the family socialization process, the powerful influence of culture, class, gender roles, sexual orientation and marital relationship. Marital relationships that are not well managed can result to marital schism. Marital

schism in families can occur as a result of ambiguous rules which can lead to a condition of severe chronic disequilibrium, discord and threats of separation. The communication in such family will be dominated by mutual distrust, anger, unhealthy competition and disunity. The end result of all these actions is fear and insecurity.

Bowenian Family System Theory

The review of the theoretical impact of family as an ecological system and the perspective of emotional attachment will be based on the purpose of identifying the central dimensions of family relationship and the emotional attachment that could pose security problems. According to Corey (2010), Murray Bowen was one of the proponents of family system theory. Bowen family system is based on theoretical and clinical models that came out of psychoanalytic principles which he referred to as multigenerational family therapy. According to Bowen (1966), the original theorist, the family is seen as an emotional unit containing many interlocking relationships. Bowen was of the view that the forces behind individual actions and inactions emanate from the circumstances that surround individual families. If the family situations are not well handled, they may result to emotional problems that may affect the person's entire family and the society at large.

According to Lamanna and Riedmann (2003), systems theory framework looks at the family as a whole. Family system theory according to Friedman (1991) was coined out of the theory that was based on life generally, that is 'human phenomenon'. To him, human family too can be conceived and be born to experience growth. This implies that human family can emerge through an evolutionary process. There are eight interlocking concepts according to Goldberg and Goldberg (2004) as proposed by Bowen on family system as follows: Differentiation Self, Triangulation, Nuclear Family Emotional System, Family Projection Process, Emotional Cutoff, Multigenerational Transmission process, Sibling position and Societal regress. This paper would only consider four interlocking concepts which are:

- Differentiation Self
- Triangulation
- Nuclear family emotional system.
- Emotional Cutoff.

The paper made use of four interlocking concepts because it focused on security of members which if not adequately taken care of may result to emotional problems that would require family therapy intervention. Differentiation self is basically on thinking and emotional feeling of a member to be himself or herself and also still remain as a member of the family. So, when there are issues in the family, third

party may be brought in and this lead to triangulation depending on whether or not the third party is taking side. The outcome of the family emotional system if negative could result to emotional cutoff.

Differentiation self is based on two strong forces guiding the members of a family: the intrapsychic and interpersonal forces. These forces are also known as feeling (emotion) and thinking (intellect). According to Carr (2006) a highly differentiated person is well organized to recognize his or her opinion and who he or she is. When there are conflicts in the family that resulted to emotional issues, members who are able to remain themselves and who are not being dominated by the feelings of others are properly differentiated. Those who are not able to differentiate themselves properly will have their thoughts fused and they may experience pseudo self rather than their own values or opinions. For example, in a family of eight members, the mother died when she was 48 years old and their father promised not to remarry but he could not fulfill his promise. After seven years of his wife's death, he decided to marry. This decision did not go well with other children. It was only the first born of the family that was in support of what their father had decided to do. The only son of the man and other children in the family were not really in support of their father's action. This generated conflict in the family and the first born insisted that their father was right in taking the decision.

In the story narrated above, the first born was able to differentiate herself by distinguishing her thought from her feelings, while other children were fused in their feelings and thoughts. They were expressing a pseudo self rather than their true values or opinions. It is possible that they were expressing feelings for their dead mother. This theory can be applied to the situations of many families in the world today. There are lots of people who cannot differentiate themselves from families' emotional problems. And this poses insecurity to members of the family who are bold enough to distinguish their thoughts from their feelings. Many of such people are seen as enemies of other members of the family.

A strong sense of self can help one to know what one wants, who one is, what one can do, how one can express conviction on issues and how one can clearly define one's beliefs. A person like this can express solid self, and will never compromise 'self' for the case of pleasing family members for the purpose of marital bliss or to make one's family members happy.

In a situation whereby the emotions and intellect of family members are fused, their lives may be dominated by the feelings of those around them and they can easily be stressed into dysfunction, fearful and emotional problems. They can deny themselves in order to be accepted by others. The case is not the same with the

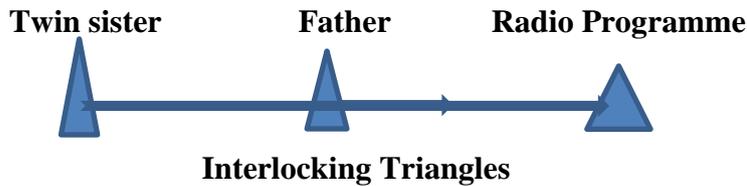
individuals who have differentiated themselves; they are emotionally mature, they can think and act independently without depending on others regardless of any emotional turmoil around them. Prochaska and Norcross (2007) observe that the extent to which an individual can differentiate himself will reflect how objectively the individual can think on emotionally loaded issues in the family.

The second interlocking concept to be considered in this paper is what Bowen called triangulation. Triangulation occurs in families when two members who are having issues together bring another member in to dilute the anxiety or tension. Bowen believes that when there is stress in the family, the least-differentiated person is likely to be drawn into the conflict to reduce tension.

This situation is common in our society today. Many family situations had resulted to the insecurity of lives and properties when the least differentiated persons in the family were always brought in as the third party to dilute anxiety or tension. Some may bring in their church pastors into the matter or even children into the matter. Introducing the third party is not the problem but when the third party takes sides, it may increase the stress between the two people who are having issues together. McLeod (2013) opines that the larger the family, the greater the possibility of having many different interlocking triangles that can exist, it implies that number of people in a family determine the number of interlocking triangles.

There was a case of a woman who had a twin sister. She got married earlier than her twin sister because she was not educated. By the time her twin sister finished her education she had already got five children. She was very unfortunate to marry an uncaring husband, but her twin sister got married to a caring husband after her education. She reported what she was experiencing with her husband to her sister and she decided to help her by asking her to bring two of her children to stay with her in order to lessen her financial burden. Despite all the assistance rendered to her by her twin sister she was still not satisfied. One day she decided to visit a herbalist to find out what was wrong with her destiny. She was told by the herbalist that her twin sister was the one using her glory with hers to shine. She became so furious and reported the matter to their father; her father was not convinced and consoled her to take heart that all would be well. But she was not placated with what her daddy said. She, therefore, proceeded to the radio station and reported the matter on a radio programme titled 'Iri-aye'. The matter was narrated and broadcast on the air and many people were allowed to comment on the matter.

The story revealed that many people were involved in the matter to form many interlocking triangles.



Bringing a third party (police, family members, neighbour, pastor etc.) into a conflict does not always reduce the stress in the family. Stress reduction depends on the differentiation level of the members involved. Triangulation can also be explained considering the intervention of parents between their children if siblings conflict occurs and parents are not taking sides with their children at the moment of quarrelling with each other, the emotional intensity will diminish. McGoldrick, Carter and Garcia-Preto (2012) observe that interlocking triangles can be transmitted from one generation to another.

Nuclear family emotional system is the third concept which is based on the fact that people choose mates with equivalent levels of differentiation to their own. If two undifferentiated persons get married, they will become highly fused and will produce a family with the same characteristics. According to Kerr and Bowen (1998), the nuclear family emotional system will be unstable and the member may seek various ways to reduce tension and maintain stability. If the fusion in the family is great, the anxiety and potential instability may also increase. The effort of the family to seek resolution may be through fighting, distancing, and the likes. According to McGoldrick and Carter (2001) as quoted by Goldberg and Goldberg (2004), there are three emotional patterns that can lead to dysfunction in families. These are physical or emotional dysfunction in a spouse, overt, chronic, unresolved marital conflict and psychological impairment in a child. Individuals have the tendency to repeat in their marital choices and other relationships they are involved in, the behaviours they have learned in their families of origin and also pass similar patterns to their children. The authors above believe that the only effective way to resolve current family problems is to change the individual interactions with their family of origin.

Emotional cutoff is the last concept to be considered in this paper. High level of anxiety and stress in the family can cause the children from such family on reaching adulthood, or even before then to insulate themselves from the family, by geophysical separation that is moving to another state through the use of psychological barriers by ceasing talking to parents and also by reassuring themselves through deception that they are free from family ties because the real contact has been broken off. This is considered as emotional cutoff by Bowen

(1997) as a flight of extreme emotional distancing in order to break emotional ties. Bowen sees cutting oneself off emotionally from one's family of origin often as representing a desperate effort to deal with unresolved fusion with one or both parents, and a way of managing the unresolved emotional attachment to them. Emotional cut-off reflects a problem that may be the underlying fusion between generations.

Family members may use an emotional cutoff to resolve their problems but they also create another problem of isolating themselves from family members who would have been of benefit if close contact exists. Such members feel that isolating themselves reduces the anxiety they would have experienced if they associate. According to McGoldrick and Carter (2001) as quoted by Goldberg and Goldberg (2004), cutting off a relationship by physical or emotional distance does not end the emotional process but actually intensifies it. The individuals that cut off from parents and siblings are always apt to form a new relationship with spouse or children which may lure them to further distancing or cutoffs perpetually.

Family System Techniques/Therapies for Resolving Family Problems

According to Kerr and Bowen (1998), in resolving family problems, professional counsellors or family therapists can adopt the following techniques:

Evaluation Interview—The counsellor can attempt to resolve the emotional problem in a family by interviewing some significant persons in the family by ensuring that he/she is not incorporated into the family's problem by taking sides in disputes or becoming overly sympathetic with one member or angry at another. The counsellor must not be involved in the family problem emotionally. The evaluation exercise can involve parents, husband, wife, the nuclear family, the children, and extended family members.

The history of the presenting problem is the first aspect of the evaluation interviews. The therapist should be concerned and have an interest in each member's perception of what created and what sustains the problem for which they seek relief. The following questions can serve as guidelines:

- a) What is the relationship system like in the family seeking for help?
- b) What are the current stressors?
- c) How well differentiated are the family members?
- d) What is the family's adaptive level?
- e) How stable is the family?
- f) How and (how successful) does the family handle anxiety problem?
- g) What three-person (or more) triangles exist?
- h) How effectively has the family adapted to stress since its inception?
- i) Is emotional cutoff operating in the family?

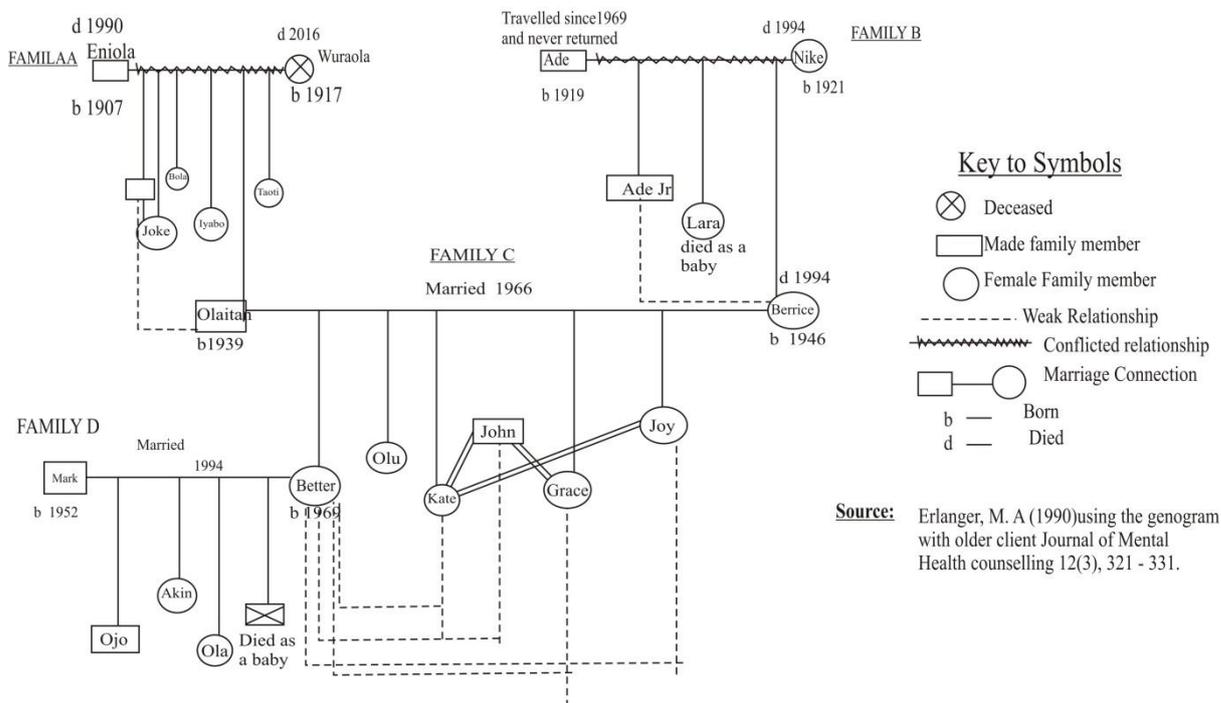
- j) What are the amounts of stress experienced in the past compared with the current function?
- k) What is the family's anxiety level?

The historical pattern of the family's emotional function is of utmost importance to Bowenian's counsellor and so also is the understanding of the nuclear family in the context of the maternal and paternal extended family systems

Genogram

According to Richard (2000), genogram is a method of diagramming families which include significant information about families, such as ages, sex, marriage dates, deaths and geographical locations. Genogram provides the opportunity to look for an emotional pattern in each partner's extended family. Papadopoulos, Bor and Stanion (1997) reported that genogram can be understood by counsellor as the key role played by each member of the family and where the problem lies in the family.

Example of a four-generation family



Source: Erlanger, M. A (1990) using the genogram with older client Journal of Mental Health counselling 12(3), 321 - 331.

Betty was the first born of Bernice who learnt through her mother that her maternal grandfather was a very wicked man who used to beat his wife frequently that is her grandmother (Nike). She also learnt through her mother that her grandfather was a strong merchant in the Northern part of Nigeria who used to travel to sell his goods. A day came that the man packed all his belongings without informing his wife and

he travelled to the north. For so many years, he never returned home to see his wife until the wife died. Bernice did not enjoy the joy of a father; this made her distance herself and her children from members of her father's family. She too died at the age of 48 years, leaving her husband and six children (five girls and a son). During her lifetime, she was fortunate to marry a caring husband. Her husband waited for a period of seven years before he remarried. The only son who was in his late twenties frowned at his father's decision and vowed that he was never in support of such marriage. He was so emotional about it that his action affected four of his siblings. The intention of John the only male child was to marry and keep his wife in his father's house so that she would be cooking for his father instead of the father marrying another woman to replace his mother. Betty the first-born was of a different opinion from her brother's. She told her siblings to leave their father alone and allow him to remarry. Since their father had remarried, all other girls distanced themselves from their father except the first daughter who supported their father. John is over forty but refused to be married.

It is obvious from this story that emotional circumstances that surround the death of John's mother were transferred to what he did to his father and those girls who believe in what he was doing also followed him. If care is not taken, John will transfer the same emotional feelings to his children. In the genogram, it can be observed from the map that John's maternal parents tend to have conflict relationship. The counsellor found out that in the story told to Betty by her mother that her maternal grandfather refused to get married and this made his father, that is the great-grandfather to Betty, to look for a woman for him. He did not like his wife and they were always quarrelling till he decided to leave her and relocate to Northern Nigeria. He cut off himself forever. Nobody knows his whereabouts till his wife died. The same trend is developing in the life of John. He cut off from his father and the first born and also refused to get married. The counsellor can use this observation to counsel John to take caution so that he will not behave like his maternal grandfather.

Genogram helps the counsellor to understand the trend of events in families from generation to generations. It is common this day to observe spousal killings. If such families are traced, there may be an evidence of excessive anger and strife. It shows that history may repeat itself in families if proper counsels are not sought for. Counsellors will be able to tell their clients that there is a need for a change of behaviour and actions for harmony to exist in families. This will ensure safety and security of members. When a husband kills the wife or the wife kills the husband, the children are exposed to psychological problems and fear of the future. Also, separation of husband and wife on any ground can pose insecurity to the children and other family members. To improve the security of families, all hands must be on

deck. Everybody must be concerned with the wellbeing of all members. Nichols and Schwartz (2001) emphasize that therapist needs to consider personal characteristics such as respect for client, compassion, empathy, and sensitivity which enhance the intervention process in resolving issues in the families.

Conclusion

The society can be mirrored from the family system theory. The society can be seen hypothetically as a family unit. The issue of national security can be explained relying on the concepts of the family system. Many citizens are not feeling secure because of the issues that are occurring in the society. Many reputable people have been killed in many societies and nothing happened to those who killed them. If a reputable person was kidnapped and killed based on emotional issues, it implies that the common men in the society are not secured. Some members of the society especially the youths are taking the option of travelling abroad to ensure their security and a better life. Despite the fact that many are not getting agenuine visa to these foreign countries, they still risk their lives to go so as to distance themselves from entire problems at home.

Politicians killed their opponents at will and family members of such opponents are not secured as well. Such hatred could be passed from generation to generation. Many emotional triangles have been formed by many members of the society so as to receive the sympathy of others. Those who find it difficult to differentiate themselves from the emotional attachment of their society may not be free too in retaliating or otherwise.

Ethnicity is another variable in the issue of national security. Many members of an ethnic group find it difficult to differentiate themselves from emotional attachment of their ethnic group. For instance, during the Nigerian civil war, Chief Obafemi Awolowo, the then Minister of Finance was alleged to have advised the Military Government to change the nation's currency and cut off the supply of foodstuffs to the Eastern part of the country. This actually was believed to be responsible for the suffering and the eventual capitulation of the Biafran soldiers. Since that time till now, many Igbo people dislike the Yoruba people. Only those who have differentiated themselves effectively will find it easy to relate or get married from the two ethnic groups.

Until members of the society and nation learn to be themselves and also differentiate themselves from any kind of emotional attachment, there will always be issues as long as the world exists. But the most important thing is to understand the individual position in national issues. If love binds the individual together, our society would be better for it.

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