

FUNDAMENTALS OF FAMILY THEORY

7. FAMILY PROJECTION & MULTIGENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION PROCESSES

7.1. Family Projection

The family projection process describes the primary way parents transmit their emotional problems to a child. The projection process can impair the functioning of one or more children and increase their vulnerability to clinical symptoms. Children inherit many types of problems, as well as strengths, through the relationships with their parents, but the problems they inherit that most affect their lives are relationship sensitivities such as heightened needs for attention and approval, difficulty dealing with expectations, the tendency to blame oneself or others, feeling responsible for the happiness of others or that others are responsible for one's own happiness, and acting impulsively to relieve the anxiety of the moment rather than tolerating anxiety and acting thoughtfully. If the projection process is fairly intense, the child develops stronger relationship sensitivities than his parents. The sensitivities increase a person's vulnerability to symptoms by fostering behaviors that escalate chronic anxiety in a relationship system.

The projection process follows three steps:

- (1) the parent focuses on a child out of fear that something is wrong with the child;**
- (2) the parent interprets the child's behavior as confirming the fear; and**
- (3) the parent treats the child as if something is really wrong with the child.**

These steps of scanning, diagnosing, and treating begin early in the child's life and continue. The parents' fears and perceptions so shape the child's development and behavior that he grows to embody their fears and perceptions. One reason the projection process is a self-fulfilling prophecy is that parents try to "fix" the problem they have diagnosed in the child; for example, parents perceive their child to have low self-esteem, they repeatedly try to affirm the child, and the child's self-esteem grows dependent on their affirmation.

Parents often feel they have not given enough love, attention, or support to a child manifesting problems, but they have invested more time, energy, and worry in this child than in his siblings. The siblings less involved in the family projection

process have a more mature and reality-based relationship with their parents that fosters the siblings developing into less needy, less reactive, and more goal-directed people. Both parents participate equally in the family projection process, but in different ways. The mother is usually the primary caretaker and more prone than the father to excessive emotional involvement with one or more of the children. The father typically occupies the outside position in the parental triangle, except during periods of heightened tension in the mother-child relationship. Both parents are unsure of themselves in relationship to the child, but commonly one parent acts sure of himself or herself and the other parent goes along. The intensity of the projection process is unrelated to the amount of time parents spend with a child. If the family anxiety tends to settle in a child long and often enough, the child will develop a physical, mental, emotional, or social symptom. The onset of the symptom will add to the parents' anxiety, and they will begin to worry about the child. The more they worry, the more anxious the child becomes. This intensifies the symptom, and a vicious cycle ensues. This pattern is called the child focus.

This worried focus, or projection of anxiety is how anxiety gets off-loaded to offspring. If the parents...

- worry excessively about their child or
- react to an overload of anxiety by neglect or
- focus on the child in an overly positive manner

then they transmit or project that anxiety directly onto the child.

7.2. Variation in the Same Family & A Blameless Process

That's just one child, though. What about the other children? The answer is that the projection process is different for different children. Parents worry about or neglect or unrealistically adore some of their children more than others. Parents might say that some children "draw" more focus than others. What is interesting is that the focus may be overly negative expressed in anger or worry, neglectful, or overly positive. The valence, positive or negative, doesn't matter. Thus, different children in the same family end up with differing amounts of inappropriate focus. A parent may react to her or his own anxiety by focusing worry, neglect, or admiration on a child and, thereby, transmit the anxiety, causing a fusion of selves. The greater the fusion, the lower the level of differentiation of self.

In a given family, one child may receive so much focus (anxiety) that other siblings are left a bit freer of the family emotional process. That is, they will

receive less anxiety and are less fused into the family self-amalgam. They are less a part of the family emotional process. At the same time, they do not cut off from it. They are in communication with it. They recognize the problems, and they, too, carry some of the spill over anxiety, just not as much of it as the child who receives the most focus. With less anxiety to deal with, they develop more basic self and tend to be better equipped to manage their lives.

Does Bowen theory blame parents for their children's problems? It may seem that way, but that is not the case at all. The family projection process is not intentional; it is entirely automatic. It is often the case, however, that, when parents learn about this concept, they modify their tendency to displace anxiety. This change has the potential of leading to quite positive results. Not only is the family projection process automatic and out of awareness; it also has to do with the parents' connection to the generations in their own families. They, too, were the recipients of parental anxiety, as were their parents before them. The process is too big in all our families to leave room for blame. The observations made possible by Bowen theory are not meant for the purpose of condemnation. Instead, they make it possible for the present generation to have more choices than they otherwise might have had with regard to the part they play in the family. Thus, they leave a different legacy for their offspring.

7.3. Multigenerational Transmission Process

The concept of the multigenerational transmission process describes how small differences in the levels of differentiation between parents and their offspring lead over many generations to marked differences in differentiation among the members of a multigenerational family. The information creating these differences is transmitted across generations through relationships. The transmission occurs on several interconnected levels ranging from the conscious teaching and learning of information to the automatic and unconscious programming of emotional reactions and behaviors. Relationally and genetically transmitted information interact to shape an individual's self. The combination of parents actively shaping the development of their offspring, offspring innately responding to their parents' moods, attitudes, and actions, and the long dependency period of human offspring results in people developing levels of differentiation of self-similar to their parents' levels. However, the relationship patterns of nuclear family emotional systems often result in at least one member of a sibling group developing a little more self and another member developing a little less self than the parents.

The next step in the multigenerational transmission process is people predictably selecting mates with levels of differentiation of self that match their own.

Therefore, if one sibling's level of self is higher and another sibling's level of self is lower than the parents, one sibling's marriage is more differentiated and the other sibling's marriage is less differentiated than the parents' marriage. If each sibling then has a child who is more differentiated and a child who is less differentiated than himself, one three generational line becomes progressively more differentiated (the most differentiated child of the most differentiated sibling) and one line becomes progressively less differentiated (the least differentiated child of the least differentiated sibling). As these processes repeat over multiple generations, the differences between family lines grow increasingly marked.

Level of differentiation of self can affect longevity, marital stability, reproduction, health, educational accomplishments, and occupational success. This impact of differentiation on overall life functioning explains the marked variation that typically exists in the lives of the members of a multigenerational family. The highly differentiated people have unusually stable nuclear families and contribute much to society; the poorly differentiated people have chaotic personal lives and depend heavily on others to sustain them. A key implication of the multigenerational concept is that the roots of the most severe human problems as well as of the highest levels of human adaptation are generations deep. The multigenerational transmission process not only programs the levels of "self" people develop, but it also programs how people interact with others. Both types of programming affect the selection of a spouse. For example, if a family programs someone to attach intensely to others and to function in a helpless and indecisive way, he will likely select a mate who not only attaches to him with equal intensity, but one who directs others and make decisions for them. The concepts of Bowen theory proceed one out of the other. If the family projection process explains how differentiation and un-differentiation are passed from one generation to another, the multigenerational transmission process is simply that same phenomenon, writ large, through the generations.

Varying levels of differentiation in different siblings can give rise to whole branches of families that are ascending or descending on the Differentiation of Self Scale. The enormity of this phenomenon makes us realize that all of us are only a small part of something much larger than we are by ourselves. Many people are too cut off to take much interest in the generations of their families. But for those who make the effort there is great reward. They constantly demonstrate it in their lives. Many people start by making contact with the oldest members of their families. This can be a rich, connecting experience. Older relatives are often glad to share what they know. Simply connecting with these family members can bridge existing emotional cutoffs, an outcome that may yield a sense of feeling well grounded and more functional than before. Learning how people have related to one another

within and across generational lines helps make sense of the present day emotional process of the family.

In her book, *The Eight Concepts of Bowen Theory*, Roberta M. Gilbert introduces the use of a family diagram as a tool for observing the multigenerational transmission process. Emotion-colored stories (as long as they are factual) offer much to our understanding of differentiation among members within a family system. Important facts include the following:

- names
- longevity of family members
- health
- their locations, including moves (with dates)
- their incomes and businesses or professions, including what positions they held
- reproductive history, including abortions, stillbirths, and miscarriages
- marriages, living-with arrangements, divorces, and separations
- dates of births, deaths, marriages
- highest degree of education or year in school

7.4. Researching the Generations

In studying the multiple generations of a family, look for themes and topics such as these:

- **Death** / How has each generation in our family approached death and loss?
- **Survival** / What has each generation survived? How has the experience of one or more generations impacted the family across the years? How does the anxiety of one generation continue to manifest itself in succeeding generations?
- **Reproduction** / What similarities exist across generational lines around such issues as birth and abortion?
- **Money** / What patterns can be observed with regard to making, collecting, earning, or using money?
- **Religion** / How are the beliefs and religious practices of former generations preserved or reacted to in subsequent generations? Has anyone cut off from the family because of someone marrying outside the faith or changing denominations?
- **Divorce and Separation** / Has divorce or separation led to emotional cutoff? If so, how?

- **Nodal Events** / How have people entered or left the family? What degree of tumult resulted?
- **Watershed Events** / Have there been large-scale, perhaps even cultural or historical events, that have impacted the family (wars, global economic conditions, persecution of an ethnic group, immigration, etc.)?

Other subjects related to the emotional processes of a multigenerational family system may be researched, and every effort can lead to great benefit. There is no better way to remove a “block” in life, to work on a stubborn personality characteristic or irrational belief, or in general to become a little more objective than to take a specific question back through the generations of one’s family to see what can be learned from the people that have gone before us.