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## An Extended Metaphor: Family Medicine as Family

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*With the development of the specialty of family medicine, family physicians and behavioral scientists have been working together in medical settings for the past 20 years. Lack of clarity of goals, divergence in values, and different professional training have resulted in tension between the two disciplines. However, these tensions need not be paralyzing for the field and, in fact, may reflect necessary developmental milestones. This article uses the analogy of the family to describe some of the difficulties in the relationship between family physician, resident, and behavioral scientist. Using a Bowenian model, it also explores solutions to these relational problems. It is hoped that a more harmonious*

*relationship might allow both family medicine and behavioral science to differentiate from their families of origin and to begin tapping the creativity required for the ongoing development of the discipline of family medicine.*

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WITH the emphasis in the field of family medicine on families and family therapy (5, 15), it is surprising that the metaphor of family medicine as family has not been used more frequently. When the family analogy has been made with reference to medicine as a whole, it has not always been flattering; on at least one occasion, medicine has been compared to an abusive family (12). Of course, family medicine departments are organizations, not families. Appropriately, models derived from group dynamics and organizational development theory are best suited

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to analyze and modify the problems of departments as a whole (16). However, there is one triangle in particular operating within the system of family medicine that seems worthy of attention from a family therapy perspective: the triangle of physician-behavioral scientist-resident. It is to this subset of the specialty of family medicine that we now apply the metaphor of family medicine as family, as it is our contention that the behaviors in this triangle are often governed not so much by the rules of organizational behavior as by the principles of family dynamics.

The purpose of this article will be to use the conceit of a family interview with family physician and behavioral scientist to help us understand the problematic nuances of interaction, and outright failures of communication, between these two "parental" players in a family drama that is enacted repetitively in the family medicine setting (19). (While we recognize that behavioral scientists are a heterogeneous breed, coming in all sizes, shapes, theoretical orientations, and educational backgrounds, for the purpose of our metaphor, we have in mind a non-physician behavioral scientist with a strong family orientation.) Clearly, any development of this fiction involves simplification, exaggeration, at times even distortion. We believe, however, that such a "playful" analysis of a critical educational relationship can stimulate useful insights for all parties.

### **The Parental Subsystem**

In most cases, the physician is the father model in the family of family medicine. "He" (although, of course, the physician may be a biological he or she) presents during the family interview as objective, logical, and most comfortable with a rationalistic view of the world, in which facts are facts, and truth is unitary and discrete (18). He appears to control most of the power in the family—that is, has a major voice in the

finances of the family, makes important decisions unilaterally, and is looked on by the larger community (the medical system) as the undisputed leader of the family. He is extremely involved with the education of his children (the residents) but also tends to be somewhat remote from them emotionally.

Father is the biological parent of his children, and he initially attempted to raise them alone. However, while he considered himself to be a good role model for his children, he was frustrated in his efforts to transmit the values and priorities he considered of importance in his own life. Perhaps he was too busy; perhaps the situation needed a gentler touch. Certainly, he had difficulty formulating exactly how to raise his children differently from other children in the neighborhood. But when he met his future wife, he recognized right away that her way of looking at the world, her ideas about child-rearing, were exactly what he wanted for his kids.

The behavioral scientist has assumed the difficult role of step-mother in this family. "Mom" also works outside the home, although her work is seen as less important (and generates less income) than her husband's. While she has been married 20 years, Mom still allows herself to be defined by the "step" that prefaces her name. This is because she is not quite sure that she deserves more than a peripheral role in this family, a perception generally shared by other family members. At best, she seems to represent, in both Dad's and the children's eyes, qualities of sensitivity, compassion, and intimacy. However, it is also apparent that often she is not taken seriously by other members of the family, that sometimes Dad and the children see her concerns as tangential or irrelevant. She is the sensitive one, an inclination regarded with a mixture of admiration and contempt by the other more logical, pragmatic family members. Mom is definitely the odd one

out in this family, since year after year all the children want to grow up to be like Dad. In the emotional triangle, Dad and kids tend to form the two most comfortable sides of the triangle, with Mom in the outside position (2). Still, it is to Mom that the children tend to bring their problems, their worries, their fears.

As the interview progresses, it becomes apparent that one source of the chronic conflict in this relationship has to do with a lack of clarity in the underlying assumptions on which the marriage is based: the boundaries of the relationship, and the parents' primary tasks within the family. Dad and Mom share an ambivalence about the purpose of this union. In their more daring moments, both agree on a relational vision of equality and mutuality, a collaborative model in which Dad could relinquish some of his control over family life, while Mom could assume a greater degree of involvement and responsibility. But often, while Mom still fantasizes about this image, Dad draws back in fear. In these moments, he sees Mom's role as definitely subordinate to his own. His is the primary task, hers the secondary. In this context, Mother's role is clearly to supplement and complement Father. Mom shares this confusion about her role: Is it to be a loving and supportive helpmate, to uphold her husband's positions, and to function as his extender? Is it to subtly undercut him, to show their children and his intrusive, domineering family that there are other, better ways? Is it to claim a role of leadership and independence in the family? It is the unresolved tension between the various options that contributes to the chronicity of the conflict within the family.

Mom's confusion is compounded by the fact she is a woman. Her family of origin emphasized skills of nurturance, empathy, careful listening. She is used to playing a reactive role, to putting out fires, to being understanding. In reconsidering this role,

she appears to be betraying not only her family of origin, and her spouse (who also feels more comfortable with this behavior), but also her very femininity.

### **The Sibling Subsystem**

The siblings in this family tend to be competitive for parental attention. Although there are some efforts at formation of a sibling holon, siblings may be withdrawn and suspicious of each other. There is a tendency for the siblings to splinter into the strong, successful ones, and the weak, inadequate ones, in a way mirroring a split in the marital subsystem.

### **Parenting**

Both parents agree that their primary task is to raise their children well. They are committed parents and have devoted much time and energy to this endeavor, but there are problems. This is the prime reason they are seeking family therapy. Both parents fear that the children are not turning out as they should. Sometimes the children have resorted to drugs and alcohol, which makes the parents feel guilty, angry, and anguished. More often the children muddle through, but they seem to leave the nest without that spark, that sense of commitment and passion that Dad had as a young man, and which he remembers in his own father. The children often seem burned out, disillusioned, and cynical (14) when they have barely embarked on life. Sometimes they have even run away from home (into pediatrics, or emergency medicine!).

On the other hand, despite their expressed concern for their children, there is a fair amount of scapegoating of the children by their parents (11), especially when the child questions the family system or the larger community. "Good" children tend to be defined as those who do their work and don't cause trouble. Both parents also project irrational role assignments onto the children. Often, to allay their own fears

about the overwhelming, high-pressured, and competitive community in which they live, they demand that their children be unrealistically competent on the one hand; or, actualizing their fear expectations, they may label them failures, unstable, and unreliable (6). In this family, the children often assume the role of victims, father that of persecutor, and mother that of rescuer.

Further dialogue reveals Mom and Dad have rather different parenting approaches as well. Mom and Dad both sometimes feel overwhelmed by the children. In addition, Dad has multiple other responsibilities and commitments that tend to direct his attention away from the children. Still, when he is with them, he takes their instruction seriously, and tries to emphasize the application of facts and rules to specific situations in their daily life. Mom is more intuitive and process-oriented in her approach to the world. However, when she tries to impart this vision to the children, Father tends to be dismissive. At best, he agrees it would be nice if the children could incorporate this dimension of their step-mother's, but he feels there are more important skills that they must acquire first.

Mom is frequently frustrated because she knows that often Dad is equally familiar with and competent in the skills necessary for the areas of child-rearing to which she has been assigned. However, while their interactions in other contexts convince her that this is the case, she notices that while he is instructing the children, he often tends to ignore this dimension of the children's education, or simply suggests, "Go talk to your mother about that." Mom wishes that Dad would be more willing to support her efforts by demonstrating to the children his own psychosocial proficiencies.

Mom and Dad rarely spend joint time with the children. Rather, their activities more often resemble parallel play. Sometimes, it seems as though Mom is expected to do the day-to-day hand-holding and

nose-wiping of the children; but in the important moments she must yield to Dad's authority. Mom tends to overidentify, to become too involved, and be overly protective of the children, whom she sometimes sees, like herself, as victims of Dad's sternness and high demands. She often takes their side against Dad, but in a way that emphasizes her essential powerlessness in the family system. It is less easy for her to assert herself within her family and play more of a central role in relation to her husband and her children.

Perhaps this perpetual championing of the children is related to Mom's lack of integration into the family system, despite her relatively long marriage. She worries that the children have still not accepted her as their real mother, that she is just some "nice lady" who is sometimes useful in soothing their hurts, but ultimately has little to teach about the lives they are preparing to lead in adulthood.

### **Triangulation**

Because Mom and Dad are so child-focused, they frequently resort to triangulation of one or more children (their family is unusually large) in an effort to defuse some of the chronic conflict between them. These triangles contribute to some of the behavioral problems in the children alluded to earlier. In these triangles, Mom sometimes selects the role of mediator, in which she allies with the child, thus finding an outlet for her anger against Dad; however, this alliance effectively deprives her of power or seriousness in the family system. Alternatively, she shores up Dad's attacks on the children, thus finding a safe outlet for her own anger by displacing it onto the children. This scenario gives her a pseudo sense of self by making common cause with Dad. However, in most instances, Mom cannot initiate such actions as disciplinary behavior against children. The most she can do is join forces with decisions Dad has already made. There-

fore, the impression of mutuality in these situations is deceptive.

### Families of Origin

Family genograms indicate that Mom's and Dad's backgrounds are rather different. Indeed, some members of Dad's extended family feel that he married someone from the wrong side of the tracks, someone without the education, the values, and the money that he himself has. Dad himself would never admit this openly. Indeed Dad says, "When I thought about raising my children, I looked for a partner who would complement me, who would not be afraid to express the sensitivity, the holism I wanted my children to have." But it is true that at important community meetings involving the future of his family, he often leaves Mom at home. Dad, after a rebellious youth, is now focused on proving to his family of origin that he has matured, is responsible, and is worthy of inheriting a big piece of the family business.

Mom, on the other hand, comes from a family that encouraged her to marry a doctor, but at the same time had a considerable degree of skepticism about doctors' efficacy and abilities. Incorporating these attitudes, Mom admires Dad enormously, and secretly feels somewhat inferior to him. Yet she has the nagging suspicion that Dad, for all his assumed confidence and competence, has missed the boat somewhere along the way.

Reflecting the ambivalence of her family of origin toward its own self-worth, Mom rapidly distanced from this family soon after her marriage. Mirroring their stated sense that she had "married up," she thrust herself wholeheartedly into her husband's family, and found she rarely had time to visit home. Yet she feels betrayed by her early, rosy expectations, and finds herself often caught in another triangle between her spouse and his family of origin. "During our courtship, my husband said he admired me for being intuitive and sensitive. But

once we were married, there were a lot of pressures from his extended family. I was expected to be one of them." Occasionally, after a particularly alienating period, Mom runs home to her own family. But she discovers that she no longer really fits there either, and must allow yet another pseudo-self to emerge in order to get through emotionally demanding family reunions.

Separation from families of origin is an issue very much alive for both parents. Dad tends to be too enmeshed in his family of origin, too dependent on their judgments and acceptance. True, he might have made a marriage without their approval, but much of his subsequent energies have been devoted to getting back into their good graces. Mom, on the other hand, often feels as though she has made the opposite mistake. She frequently finds herself with very little regular contact with her own family of origin, but not truly belonging to the family she has chosen. She ends up with the feeling of functioning in an alien environment, no longer sure of the bridges leading toward home.

### Development of the Couple

Up to now, the focus of these parents has been almost exclusively on raising the children. They have had little time to reflect on their family or their marriage. Their priority thus far has been basic survival in the face of financial problems and general disapproval from extended family, and lack of support from the surrounding community. Twenty years later, they have fallen into rigidified roles, which are not completely satisfying, but are too threatening to challenge directly.

Mom and Dad have never been able to construct new rules specifically relevant to their nuclear family. Rather, they have attempted to rely on the rules each brought from his or her family of origin (10). There has been a breakdown in the complementarity of family relationships (1). By and large, changes and differences in the family

over the last 20 years have not produced clear adaptations in roles; rather, conflict has increased. Most of this conflict has remained implicit and unstated. Mom and Dad both feel burned-out, stressed, and overworked by the business of running their family. Each feels the other is insufficiently supportive and understanding. Neither feels truly “understood” by the other. Rather than a dialogue about their mutual confusion and uncertainty, about the essential mystery of how to raise kids who turn out “all right,” they alternate between strategies of mutual blaming and the fond pretense that the situation is under control.

### **Communication**

Communication patterns are seriously impaired in this family. Communications between parents, and between parents and children are often haphazard, oblique. As the family communication patterns are presently constituted, there is an overreliance on dysfunctional modes of communication: blaming, placating, irrelevance, and super reasonableness (17). Double-bind interactions are common (9). A classic double bind from father to mother is: “Teach our children all you know, but I won’t give you any family time to do so.” A common double bind directed at the children is: “Be the perfect scientist, the perfect medical technologist, and while you’re at it, don’t forget to be completely loving, sensitive, compassionate, and humane.” Double-bind messages directed at father simultaneously demand that he exert strong authority as a leader in the family and also be accommodating and nondirective. At times, these statements have been elevated to the status of family myths because the rules of the family under which they were originally formulated are changing, as are the values that had informed these rules. Traditional family values are being challenged by calls for fiscal responsibility and the emerging gatekeeper role in primary care (20). Lack of

clarity about directions for the future results in confusion and paralysis.

### **Overadequate-Underadequate Reciprocity**

The family also is plagued by “overadequate-underadequate reciprocity” (4) in which one family member overcompensates for the underfunctioning of another, in roles that become rigid and flexible over time. In this case, Father is chronically overcommitted in attempting to meet the needs of the family on multiple levels; Mother is restricted to a role so circumscribed as to be nonexistent at times. Yet Father masochistically relishes his dominant role in the family and often is unwilling to relinquish power because, he rationalizes, Mom does not have the necessary qualifications, training, or experience to be trusted with the large decisions. Mom, by the same token, has accepted her marginality in the family system, and appears unable to mobilize a challenge to this role definition (3).

### **Emotional Fusion and the Pseudo-Self**

Despite the many differences and areas of conflict within the family, the interactions can assume a kind of emotional stuck-togetherness (13). At times the family seems to adopt an attitude of “us against the world,” for they feel beleaguered and attacked by the larger community. Father and mother also have had difficulty with differentiation of self within the family unit (7). They both may sometimes appear to suffer from a kind of pseudo- or pretend-self (21), which they have acquired to conform to the demands of the external environment. Their chameleon-like behaviors superficially allow them to stay in emotional harmony with the larger community, but also yield a sense of identity confusion and inner turmoil. Because neither parent has formed a true self, they are left with unstable, vacillating

pseudo-selves, overly reactive to the discrepant messages from families of origin, community, friends, and fellow travelers. Thus, at various, and usually conflicting times, we see father or mother adopting a scientific (as opposed to scientific) stance, a humanistic stance, a gatekeeper stance. Where is the real self—who knows?

### **Behavioral Disengagement**

While there is fusion at the emotional level, there is a certain quality of chaotic disengagement about this family at a behavioral level. Everyone, parents and children alike, seems extremely busy, over-committed, chronically overwhelmed. These pressures appear to be generated to a large degree by Dad's extended family and the larger community, which set high standards for performance and achievement. In attempting to achieve these conflicting and at times contradictory goals and images, family members often go in separate and uncoordinated directions.

### **Self-Esteem Issues**

Reliance on pseudo-self formulations in the parental generation leads to significant self-esteem problems that pervade the entire family. We might expect that self-esteem in general would be low in this family, that many unstated and protected hurts might exist, about which family members feel too vulnerable to share. In fact, Father often appears plagued with doubts about the legitimacy of his career choice, and at times overcompensates by becoming procedure-happy; mother seems generally to have lost her moorings, and can't seem to decide whether she is psychologist, physician, behavioral scientist, healer, or rabble-rouser. Responses of the children to typical self-esteem assessment questions indicate they feel they are not important members of their school class; they are worried about their schoolwork; they have difficulty making friends and do not feel very sure of themselves (8).

### **INTERVENTION: FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE**

Most family therapists would agree that the family of family medicine is in serious need of intervention at a systemic level. Most therapists would simultaneously recognize that the family's situation is made especially difficult by the fact that it exists within the context of a rigid and demanding community, with strict mores governing the behavior of its members. Already this particular family is considered somewhat deviant. In fact, one of father's preoccupations at this stage of his life (despite earlier desires to challenge prevailing community and family norms) is how to make the family conform more closely to other families in the neighborhood.

There are several serious problems in this family that need to be addressed. First, there is a high level of chronic anxiety that has spread infectiously throughout the entire family. Second, there is poor differentiation of self in the parental generation, leading to the reliance on pseudo-selves by both father and mother. Third, parental methods for dealing with anxiety are generally not constructive. Sometimes they rely on the creation of emotional distance between each other. At times, there is marital conflict. Very often, the relationship becomes characterized by overadequate-underadequate reciprocity, whereby father is chronically overextended and mother fragile and underutilized. Worst of all, these parents, in a repetitive pattern, project their own undifferentiation in the marriage onto their children. The result is an emotional configuration that produces stabilization but does not lead to resolution of conflict.

The key to achieving some resolution and detriangulation may lie in the differentiation of self both from the families of origin and within the marriage itself. Although the level of differentiation from family of origin may *look* different for

Mother and Father, as Bowen observes, people tend to marry people with the same level of differentiation. Both spouses must confront their fusion with their families of origin.

Early in their marriage, both Mom and Dad were fleeing their original families, attempting to put as much distance as possible between themselves and "home." While Mom remains somewhat severed from her family of origin, Dad has returned to his, actively seeking to reclaim a secure place. However, simply returning home does not necessarily address the issue of fusion. We may argue that Dad still has not established adult linkages to his family of origin, that he has still not chosen to differentiate fully. In particular, he must deal with his dependency on his family of origin, and adopt an adult posture toward this family, not one of a defiant or placating child. Mom faces a similar dilemma in reverse. Her concerns may focus initially on the separation and physical distance she has created from her family of origin. How can she build bridges back without surrendering the creation of a new and independent life? Return to family of origin must mean more to her than beating a quick retreat from the pressures of one's adult family. It must include a finding of self.

For Mom and Dad, the problem of being locked into stereotypic gender roles also can be profitably addressed by differentiation from families of origin, which have tended to stress sex-typed behaviors in both parents. Rigid gender and role expectations derived from families of origin have encouraged Mom and Dad to form pseudo-selves, which maximize yielding, nurturing attributes for the former, and assertive, controlling attributes for the latter. It is up to the two spouses to create solidly differential selves, incorporating qualities of empathy, caring, strength, and leadership.

Can Dad ever leave his family of origin in the same way Mom should leave hers? No;

nor should they try. The issue is not that Mom and Dad should work to form a single self, but that they should not be afraid to find their own selves. What is critical is that both are able to form an individuated, person-to-person relationship with their families of origin. It is the qualities of separateness, not separation, and linkage, not dependence, that are important to identify and develop. Separation from family of origin does not imply abandonment. Thus, loyalty to both the biomedical establishment and the world of family therapy, for example, should remain strong. However, both parties need to commit once and for all to the creation of a new home (perhaps family-centered health care).

In such a collaborative model, integration of Mom into the family becomes a key issue. Is this a marriage based on equality, or on second-class citizenship? Is Mom to be included fully in the family, or is her core essence to be defined in perpetuity by her "stepness"? "In what sense is Mom really a part of this family?" is a serious question for Dad to consider. Mom may need to ask, "How much of myself can I really devote to this family?" Issues of control, decision making, and sharing of responsibilities might then be framed in terms other than chronic power struggles (marital conflict), the rigidity of over-/underfunctioning, or the displacement of conflict onto children.

To succeed in a collaborative relationship requires a high level of personal individuation. Dad needs to relinquish some of his control over family life, which would also free him from the burden of unilateral responsibility. He needs to take the risk of acknowledging a legitimate, core role for Mom in the home and in the education and rearing of the children. This implies recognition that the shaping of this home and these children should be regarded as an act of co-creation, rather than a unilateral achievement with vague peripheral assis-



tance. Collaborative control would force Mom to assume a greater degree of involvement and responsibility, but would also address some of her concerns about belonging in her family unit. Mom would need to risk growing up, rejecting excessive identification with the children and their problems, and assuming adult responsibilities. To do this, Mom needs to claim more of a dominant decision-making role in her nuclear family, and not be afraid of participating with Dad in creating new rules suited to the unique needs of their family. She needs to let go of reactive control—her tendency to counteract Dad's dominant control through resistance or rebellion.

Another result of the differentiation of self would be a decrease in the emotional distance between the spouses. As family members come to value and trust themselves, as their sense of self is established, and their experience of emotional and intellectual differentiation is confirmed, they begin a process of emotional engagement within the relationship. In the family of family medicine, such affection and intimacy have been achieved only sporadically (although with powerful results). It is probably true that in their haste to form a union and raise the kids, Mom and Dad have spent insufficient time getting to know each other, learning to appreciate each other's values and beliefs, and developing an understanding of each other's language and world view. This can be a rewarding and creative phase of the family life cycle, in which parents can explore and experiment in a safe and supportive atmosphere.

### CONCLUSION

Bowenian therapy, as we know, works especially well with professional couples. Thus, the prognosis for this family is optimistic. However, we must also remember that the therapist can act only as coach or consultant. It is the family that must assume primary responsibility for the effort toward change. If they do not, the

consequences are potentially severe. We are already entering our second generation of family physicians and behavioral scientists. The multigenerational transmission process predicts that, left untreated, fusion becomes increasingly regressive. Ultimately, it produces a child who is seriously impaired symptomatically. On the other hand, with effective intervention, this can become a family in which differences are tolerated, even encouraged; in which reactive emotions do not overwhelm reasoned and innovative problem solving; and, to use Bowen's well-known criterion for family health, "everyone thinks it's a pretty good family to live in."

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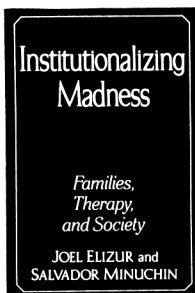
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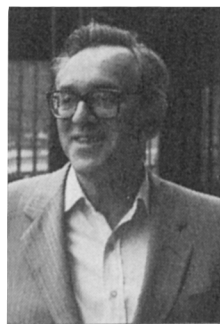
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