

FAMILY SYSTEMS THEORY

I. What do we mean by a family system?

- A. Network of interpersonal relations characterized by a continuous interchange between members, and reciprocal causal effects
- B. Family seen as organic unit, a dynamic system in which every part seen as simultaneously organizing and being organized by other parts
- C. Distinction between linear vs. systems thinking
 - 1. Linear - cause and effect
 - 2. systems - circular causality, both caused and causative; does not accept concept of identified patient
- D. Assumptions
 - 1. psychiatric problems result from the way people behave with each other
 - 2. context affects inner processes, changes in context produce changes in individuals
- E. Caveats to a systems approach
 - 1. does not take into account individual intrapsychically
 - 2. does not take into account importance of family values

II. Characteristics of a family system

- A. Open - not closed; has continuous interchange with external social and physical environment
- B. Complex - complicated organizational structure, with varied aspects and attributes
- C. Adaptive - not fixed or rigid, but modifiable; should not dissolve under stress
- D. Self-regulating - a system which contains within it compensatory mechanisms to restore balance and equilibrium
- E. Information-processing - one of primary functions is to take in information, absorb and integrate it
- F. Homeostatic - tends toward equilibrium, cannot maintain perpetual state of imbalance or crisis
 - 1. change in one family member will effect change in another member
 - 2. improvement in one can be sabotaged
 - 3. stability maintained through calibration and feedback processes
- G. Capable of transformation - able to grow, change, and evolve
 - 1. family confronted with continuous internal and external demands for change

III. Some basic concepts

- A. Family rules
 - 1. relationships reciprocal, patterned and repetitive
 - 2. range of responses limited
 - 3. families establish quid pro quo relationships
 - 4. rules reflect family values
- B. Circular causality
- C. Overadequate-inadequate reciprocity
 - 1. overfunction and dysfunction go hand in hand: one member automatically compensates for dysfunction of other
 - 2. if flexible, healthy, but if chronic and fixed produces stress
- D. Differentiation of self from family unit
 - 1. fusion - produces psychological problems
 - 2. differentiation - better stress tolerance, psychological health
- E. Triangulation
 - 1. triangle as basic emotional unit of family system
 - 2. dysfunctional in that it offerw stabilization through diversion rather than through resolution of issues

F. Structure

1. invisible set of functional demands that organize the way members of system interact

G. Enmeshment/disengagement

1. continuum from overinvolvement to isolation, each end reflecting dysfunction

H. Locus of pathology family per se

1. individual symptoms viewed as by-products of relationship struggles
2. focus on family system rather than individual members

I. Dimensions of family system

1. power
2. feelings

IV. Communication in the family system

A. Emphasis on understanding the family system through attention to transaction, or interactions between family members, rather than on characteristics or attributes of family members

B. Family strategies - recurring patterns of interactional sequences

1. determine rule formation in family
2. reflect family organization and expectations

C. Feedback mechanisms - process by which system informs its component parts how to relate to internal and external environments

D. Feedback loops

1. negative - maintenance of steady-state
2. positive - produce system change

E. Three types of strategies

1. Maintenance - preserve relationship as is
2. Stress - accentuate tension
3. Repair - offer family chance to modify itself to remain a viable system

F. Communication problems

1. double bind theory
 - a. interactions in which one member refuses to acknowledge that he is setting rules for the other's behavior
 - b. interaction is oriented toward denying responsibility for nature of the relationship
2. pseudomutuality and pseudohostility
 - a. lack of true complementarity in role relationships
 - b. role structures pathologically rigid or ambiguous
3. levels of congruency of messages sent and received
4. distinctions between actual and metacommunications
5. consistency between verbal and nonverbal messages

V. Development of subsystems

A. Family differentiates and carries out its functions through subsystem formation

B. Subsystem - smaller units within the family (marital, sibling, parent-child)

C. Importance of boundaries between subsystems

1. spouse subsystem
 - a. skills of complementarity and mutual accommodation
 - b. importance of mutual support
2. parental subsystem
 - a. functions: nurture, guide, control
 - b. always requires use of authority

3. sibling subsystem

- a. function: learn how to negotiate, cooperate, compete

VI. Breakdown in the family system

- A. When system cannot respond to demands for change
- B. When rules for family functioning become ambiguous
- C. When family is so chaotic and disorganized it cannot fulfill functions
- D. When individuals insufficiently differentiated in the system
- E. When subsystems are excessively enmeshed
- F. When rigid triangulation occurs
- G. When undesirable behaviors of one or more family members reinforced by other family members