**A CHILD’S ROLE IN THE FAMILY**

Were you?

* The golden child.
* The troublesome child.
* The go between the parents child.
* The rescuer child.
* The quiet child.
* The loud child.

How would you describe your role in these or other brief terms?

**A DIALOGUE**

Father: What’s that I can smell from the kitchen?

Mother: Sorry I burned the dinner a little.

Father: Not again! Can’t you do anything right!

Mother: Yes go on. Not that you do anything around the house.

Father: Well it’s your kitchen. You hardly allow me in there.

Mother: Well I would if you would cook anything I like!

*The door bell rings.*

Mother: That must be John. I invited him to come over tonight.

Father: *(Letting John in the door)* Hi John. Come in. Don’t worry about the smoke. That’s your mother cooking again.

Mother: Sorry John. I was distracted by call from your sister who couldn’t make it tonight.

Father: Here we go again. Blame the kids. Blame anyone. You think your mum would have it sorted by now.

John: Nothings change eh. You to still at it. I think I’ll give dinner a miss. See you later *(He lets himself out the door)*

**THE DRAMA TRIANGLE**

**PERSECUTOR**

**RESCUER**

***VICTIM***

**CREATOR**

***MENTOR***

**FACILITATOR**



 **Breaking The Drama Triangle**

The Drama Triangle is a model of dysfunctional social interaction, created by psychotherapist Stephen Karpman. Each point on the triangle represents a common and ineffective response to conflict, one more likely to prolong disharmony than to end it.

**Rescuer Persecutor**

**Victim**

The Drama Triangle

Participants in a drama triangle create misery for themselves and others. The goal is to transform this lose-lose situation and create a more positive outcome for everyone.

Each player in this particular mind game begins by assuming one of three archetypical roles: Victim, Rescuer, or Persecutor.

• **Victims** are helpless and hopeless. They deny responsibility for their negative circumstances, and deny possession of the power to change them. They do less than 50%, won’t take a stand, act “super-sensitive”, wanting kid glove treatment, and pretend impotence and incompetence.

• **Rescuers** are constantly applying short-term repairs to a Victim’s problems, while neglecting their own needs. They are always working hard to “help” other people. They are harried, tired, and often have physical complaints. They are usually angry underneath and may be a loud or quiet martyr in style. They use guilt to get their way.

• **Persecutors** blame the Victims and criticize the enabling behavior of Rescuers, without providing guidance, assistance or a solution to the underlying problem. They are critical and unpleasant and good at finding fault. They often feel inadequate underneath. They control with threats, order, and rigidity. They can be loud or quiet in style and sometimes be a bully.

Players sometimes alternate or “switch” roles during the course of a game. For example, a Rescuer pushed too far by a Persecutor will switch to the role of Victim or counter-Persecutor. *Victims depend on a savior, Rescuers yearn for a basket case and Persecutors need a scapegoat.*

While a healthy person will perform in each of these roles occasionally, pathological role-players actively avoid leaving the familiar and comfortable environment of the game. Thus, if no recent misfortune has befallen them or their loved ones, they will often create one. In each case, the drama triangle is an instrument of destruction. The only way to “escape” the Drama Triangle is to function as an “adult” and not participate in the game.

***HOW THE GAME IS PLAYED***

A good example of the game could be this fictitious argument between John and Mary, a married couple. Sometimes the Rescuer’s point seems calm and even reasonable. If the words placate, soothe, calm, explain or justify, it can be considered a Rescuer response--it is an attempt to move the other person from their position.

In order to give a visual of the way the participants move from one point of the triangle to another, the Persecutor position is shown in red, the Rescuer in blue and the Victim in green.

John: I can't believe you burnt dinner! That's the third time this month! (P) Mary: Well, little Johnny fell and skinned his knee, it burned while I was busy getting him a bandage. (R) John: You baby that boy too much! (P) Mary: You wouldn't want him to get an infection, would you? I'd end up having to take care of him while he was sick. (V) John: He's big enough to get his own bandage. (R) Mary: I just didn't want him bleeding all over the carpet. (R) John: You know, that's the problem with these kids! They expect you to do everything! (R) Mary: That's only natural, honey, they are just young. (R) John: I work like a dog all day at a job I hate... (V) Mary: Yes, you do work very hard, dear. (R) John: And I can't even sit down to a good dinner! (V) Mary: I can cook something else, it won't take too long. (R) John: A waste of an expensive steak! (P) Mary: Well maybe if you could have hauled your ass out of your chair for a minute while I was busy, it wouldn't have gotten burned! (P) John: You didn't say anything! How was I supposed to know? (P) Mary: As if you couldn't hear Johnny crying? You always ignore the kids! (P) John: I do not, I just need time to sit and relax and unwind after working all day! You don't know what it's like... (V) Mary: Sure, as if taking care of the house and kids isn't WORK! (P)

Anyone reading this article could undoubtedly continue this argument indefinitely. What is of perhaps more interest is how one can remove oneself from the triangle, which, as the example makes clear, can be exhausting.

The simplest method is the non-defensive response. This works at any point no matter what the role the other person is taking, as it doesn't give a cue as to the next response.

For instance:

Mary: Well maybe if you could have hauled your ass out of your chair for a minute while I was busy, it wouldn't have gotten burned! (P) John: Yes, that's true.

Although Mary may attempt to restart the cycle by continuing to scold, if John continues in the same vein, Mary will eventually run out of things to say. Unless Mary is actually abusive, in which case care should be used in employing this method, John's calm response invites discussion rather than continued wrangling. She might realize that she didn't ask him for help, and they might well be able to resolve the situation by planning on a course of action should something similar arise in the future.

It works just as well for the victim role:

John: I do not, I just need time to sit and relax and unwind after working all day! You don't know what it's like... (V) Mary: I'm sorry you're feeling so tired.

This acknowledges any real problem the other person might have without continuing the dance. Again, the other person may attempt to restart the cycle by continuing to complain, but again, with continued non-defensive responses, the other person will run out of things to say.

While the "rescuer" role is seemingly the least problematic of the three points of the triangle, it still is a part of a non-communicative cycle, and thus should be treated in the same manner.

Mary: That's only natural, honey, they are just young. (R) John: Yes, they are young.

Once again, the cycle is broken, and John has made it clear to Mary that he needs no further placating or assistance.

Other excellent non-defensive responses:

"Oh." **THE BRAIN - A SOCIAL ORGAN**

Psychologist [Louis Cozolino](http://gsep.pepperdine.edu/welcome/faculty/default.htm?faculty=lou_cozolino) describes the brain as a "social organ," saying there is no such thing as an individual human being, because [we are so fundamentally shaped](http://www.dailygood.org/story/441/nine-things-educators-need-to-know-about-the-brain-louis-cozolino/) and co-created by our relationships. He explains that human relationships [actually sculpt brain tissue:](http://psycnet.apa.org/psycinfo/2006-13260-000) Our positive relationships trigger our brain chemistry to be more plastic, enabling us to learn more easily. Traumatic experiences, on the other hand, negatively alter the brain and can shut down learning. Our brains and bodies are constantly being shaped at a cellular and genetic level by our environments as we live. Our brains are constantly evolving through our interactions with each other. The Neuroscience of Human Relationships,2014

The Emergence of the Social Brain

by [SoP](https://www.thescienceofpsychotherapy.com/author/admin/%22%20%5Co%20%22Posts%20by%20SoP) | May 7, 2020 | [Magazine](https://www.thescienceofpsychotherapy.com/category/magazine/)

https://www.thescienceofpsychotherapy.com/the-emergence-of-the-social-brain/

The brain has long been the subject of human fascination—this has never been as true as it is today. For most of recorded history, the brain was thought to be just another organ, like the liver or the kidneys, while our sense of self was thought to reside in the heart. With the [emergence](https://www.thescienceofpsychotherapy.com/glossary/emergence/) of phrenology and neurology, the idea that the brain somehow organized personality and behavior gradually gained prominence. As religious and mythological beliefs began to diverge from scientific investigation, the concept of the brain as the organizer of experience took hold. The newer notion of the brain as a social organ emerged only in the last few decades, and with it, the field of social neuroscience.

The more we’ve come to understand how our brains work, the more we’ve realized that significant portions are dedicated to connecting us with others. These findings have made it possible to forge fields like affective neuroscience and psychoneuroimmunology. We’ve learned from these interdisciplinary studies that models of psychotherapy focused exclusively on individuals and their internal experiences reveal but a small portion of the information relevant to healing. Further, focusing on thinking, feeling, behavior, somatic experience, relationships, or culture alone limits our ability to comprehend our clients and leverage psychotherapy as an agent of change. The consistent message of recent research is that minds are always embodied, encultured, and embedded within the context of relationships. When we forget their ultimate interdependence, we come to objectified and superficial understandings of the people we treat. As Wilhelm Reich once said, “We arrive at a catastrophic comprehension of the psychic surface.” For this reason, I begin with a discussion of the social brain, and how it is built, regulated, and modified. These are all central topics for psychotherapists, parents, and teachers and the most important reasons to become neurofluent.

**THE SOCIAL BRAIN**
*Out of yourself and into the team.*
—University of Alabama locker room sign

The social brain refers to two primary concepts. The first is that the brains of social animals (like ourselves) contain multiple neural systems that are partly or wholly dedicated to receiving, processing, and transmitting information to others. For example, we have a neural system (called the fusiform face area) dedicated to the recognition of right-side-up faces that switches off when faces are turned upside down. Upside-down faces get transferred to our object recognition systems, which is why we find it much harder to recognize inverted faces. Damage to the primitive core of the [prefrontal cortex](https://www.thescienceofpsychotherapy.com/glossary/prefrontal-cortex/) can result in a loss of empathy, sympathy, and compassion. The same circuits are also involved in the organization of our [attachment](https://www.thescienceofpsychotherapy.com/glossary/attachment/) schema and our ability to regulate our emotions.

Humans have also evolved to automatically communicate their states of body, emotion, and mind to one another. Research in physiology has shown that our internal organs are automatically linked to our facial expressions to give others a real-time readout of our internal biological state. We also have things called mirror [neurons](https://www.thescienceofpsychotherapy.com/glossary/neuron/) designed to create an internal representation of the actions, expressions, and emotions of others within our own bodies. This allows us to be able to feel our own version of what others are feeling, especially strong emotions like pain, fear, disgust, love, and joy. This is especially important for the parents of young children, who need to read the primitive expressions of comfort and distress acted out by their children. These and a host of other findings serve as the foundation of our understanding of the social brain.

The notion that “genetics is destiny,” assumes that the genes we inherit from our parents shape our bodies, brains, and minds, while experience has little influence on development. The opposite notion of a tabula rasa (blank slate) suggests that everything we are is the result of how we have been conditioned by experience. We now know that we are born with both genetic input that guides the basic organization of our brains and also that many brain systems are highly dependent on postnatal experience, especially those involved in social relating. These systems, specifically those related to [attachment](https://www.thescienceofpsychotherapy.com/glossary/attachment/) and affect regulation, are of particular importance to the field of psychotherapy and are said to develop in an experience dependent manner.

Most neural systems dedicated to social connectedness are shaped by an interaction between our genetic inheritance and our lived experience. The complex wiring of our brain is shaped to adapt to the particular relationships in which we grow up. As social animals, this adaptation strategy most likely maximizes the survival of both the individual and the tribe. Of course, this is not without its problems. The brains of many children are shaped to people and situations that are not good models for survival outside the family and thus, are poorly suited to long-term adaptation. This certainly describes many of the clients who come to us seeking help. Our challenge is to make their unconscious adaptational patterns conscious, and then modify them in ways more in line with their present situation and long-term goals.

Human infants are born into the most abject dependency, connection equals survival. So we all enter the world with a basic rule: The first order of business is to attach to our parents and trigger their bonding instincts to take care of us. We stare into their eyes, grab their fingers, smile and coo, and cry when they leave us alone, making it clear that we want and need them. For at least the first decade of life, our caretakers and immediate family are our entire world. The input we receive from these interactions teaches us how to get what we want, regulate our fears, teach us if we are lovable, and what we can expect from others in the future.

Think about the game of peekaboo we play with our children. We hide our face with our hands, then expose our face, and say “Peek- aboo!” with wide eyes, an exaggerated smile, and a high-pitched voice. The baby’s eyes and mouth open wide, and then the baby gives us a big smile and maybe even an open-mouthed laugh. What just happened in our brains? First, the surprise and big smile stimulated metabolic activity in both the baby’s and the parent’s brain, delivering extra glucose and oxygen to support learning. We both experience surges of oxytocin, [dopamine](https://www.thescienceofpsychotherapy.com/glossary/dopamine/), and [serotonin](https://www.thescienceofpsychotherapy.com/glossary/serotonin/) triggered by our mutual enjoyment, making us feel good and making us want to do it again. (Again! Again!) Epigenetic processes within the baby’s brain trigger neuroanatomical growth that supports a sense of joy and creates the building blocks of long-term well-being.

Changes in the parents’ brains support deepening [attachment](https://www.thescienceofpsychotherapy.com/glossary/attachment/), physical health, and emotional well-being. Parenting, grandparenting, and caring for any child, turn out to be good medicine for all of us at any age.

A good example of this is the epigenetic translation of these pleasurable experiences into the building of endorphin receptors on the baby’s [amygdala](https://www.thescienceofpsychotherapy.com/glossary/amygdala/). The more of these receptors we build, the more the endorphins in our nervous system keep the [amygdala](https://www.thescienceofpsychotherapy.com/glossary/amygdala/) downregulated, decreasing our vulnerability to stress, anxiety, and fear. This is one of the many physiological variables related to qualities like ego strength, grit, or resilience.

In stark contrast to this situation are the many children who lack quality caretakers, attentive others, or positive stimulation. Within the brains of these children, opposite biochemical and neuroanatomical processes occur that lead them to be more vulnerable to stress. This is why children with a greater number of adverse social experiences during childhood (e.g., parental psychopathology, exposure to domestic violence) are far more likely to experience psychological, physical, and adaptational difficulties later in life.

Our social experiences are translated, for better and worse, into the neurobiological structure of our brains and tend to stabilize over time. Early trauma is truly a gift that keeps on giving, and a suffering child often grows into a suffering adult.

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 BRIEF REPORT

TRIANGLES: THE “GLUE” OF BOWEN FAMILY

SYSTEMS THEORY

**Patricia A. Comella, JD**

*Bowen family systems theory is a descriptive theory about emotional process in the human species. The theory describes several interlock­ing concepts. This paper presents a brief discussion of the concept of the “triangle,” which was critical to integration of the theory. Until Bowen “saw” the centrality of triangles to emotional process, integration of the theory eluded him. Once Bowen saw triangles, he “became a different person.” The paper also offers several compara­tive examples from the realm of human and nonhuman behavior to illustrate the concept of the triangle.*

Introduction

Murray Bowen (1913-1990) devoted over forty years to observing emotional process in the human species, developing concepts to describe that process, integrating the concepts stem­ming from those observations into a coherent theory, and testing the theory that bears his name with hundreds of human families. Bowen family systems theory examines the human as an emotional species whose members have instincts for self-preservation and reproduc­tion, interest in their own well-being, a capacity for living together in complex relationship systems, a capacity for distinguishing fact from imagination, and a capacity for choice. Many of the patterns of behavior observed in humans in their relationship systems also seem to be present in other animal societies.

In its present form Bowen theory is the integration of the con­cepts of differentiation of self, triangles, nuclear family emotional system, family projection process, multigenerational transmission process, sibling position, emotional cutoff, and societal regression into a coherent theory about human emotional functioning (Bowen 1978, Kerr and Bowen 1988). Integration of the concepts into a co­herent theory did not occur overnight. It was not until August 1966, about two decades into his quest for a science of human behavior, that Bowen discovered the “glue” that cemented the concepts together

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67

68 Family Systems2001

into an integrated theory about emotional process in the human species. That glue was the concept of triangles.

Once Bowen “saw” triangles, he “*became a different person,*”(Kerr and Bowen, 379) and *”finally knew one way through the impenetrable thicket which is the family emotional process.*” (380, italics in original). Defining his family in terms of triangles and interlocking triangles and making contact with “every important triangle in the family,” he brought representatives from all of those triangles together “in one living room” in 1967. “By the time this new meeting was thirty minutes old,” Bowen knew he had the key to understanding family emotional process (379).

What is aTriangle?

A triangle may be defined as the smallest emotional unit in which the stresses of living together can be managed at a given level of intensity, which varies from individual to individual and also with time and circumstances. A triangle is a three-individual system. The fundamental triangle in human social systems is a child and its two parents or primary caretakers. In this triangle, the child learns basic patterns of adapting to life’s challenges and assumes a functioning position in relation to the parents. The emotional maturity of the parents in managing the intensity of the emotional process in the marital relationship will strongly influence the degree to which the child will be able to function as a separate self, rather than as an appendage of the parents and stabilizer of the marital relationship. In the triangle with the child, the parents, within limits, are able to manage the stresses of the marital relationship.

After years of research, Bowen came to regard the triangle as a fact of life. Until he “saw” the relationship of mother, father and child, he was not able to explain fully enough the individual behavior and functioning he was observing. Before seeing the relationship among mother, father and child, he was not able to understand the intensity and persistence of the attachment between mother and child. Seeing the relationship among the three explained the functioning positions of each in maintaining the stability and persistence of the relationship system and the difficulty in achieving fundamental shifts toward greater flexibility in making the choices to meet life’s challenges. Seeing the triangle as part of a multigenerational process helped to explain the intensity of emotional process being observed.

Through his work at the Menninger Clinic and at the National Institute of Mental Health, Bowen ultimately came to understand

triangles and interlocking triangles as basic building blocks of the social systems to which humans belong. These systems include the family and the workplace, as well as the larger society (Bowen 1978). Triangles and interlocking triangles reflect the proposition that to understand individual behavior and functioning it is necessary to understand the context—the relationship system—in which the basic patterns of functioning are laid down.

What makes triangles so central to social systems? Social systems are purposeful systems. They contribute to the well-be­ing and sometimes survival of the members. Members coordinate and cooperate in making the system work and endure. They have functioning positions within the system and enter into reciprocal relationships with one another, in which the functioning of one can only be understood in the context of the relationship with the other. However, living and working together involve stress, even under the best of circumstances. No individual can have his own way all of the time. Maintaining the well-being of the system requires give and take. Under conditions of relative scarcity members must cooperate and coordinate with competitors for access to resources—and almost anything can be a resource! Simply put, triangles help individuals to manage the stresses of living together (Comella 1997).

Membership in a social system carries with it inescapable costs in the form of membership-induced stress, which engenders automatic responses to threat. The stress may vary from member to member and may change with time, but it is endemic to the system. When a living organism forms an appraisal of threat, it responds automatically (LeDoux 1996). Bowen called response to threat “anxi­ety.” Anxiety is unavoidable and is a cost of membership. The stress is highest in two-individual relationships where the relationships have special importance to survival or well- being. A way of manag­ing the intensity of the emotional process and the level of stress is by converting the two-individual relationship to a three-individual relationship. Doing so lowers the intensity of the emotional process between the two by diffusing it into the larger three-person system. It makes the relationship more manageable, more bearable, and more durable. Presumably, the triangle preserves the benefits in sufficient measure while ameliorating the relationship-induced costs. In this manner, triangles contribute to the survival of the social system and the well-being of its members.

Consider life within reproductive units (harems) of the gelada baboon, where comfortable twosomes may ameliorate conditions within the social groups. (Dunbar 1984.) Harems are headed by an

Vol. 6, No. 1 BriefReport 6970 Family SyStemS 2001

adult male (the harem-master) and may include one or two younger male followers not yet physically mature enough to secure mastership for themselves, or older male followers who have lost mastership. Despite their premier status as sires of offspring during their tenure, harem-masters do not “call the shots” when it comes to social struc­ture or harem size: the females do. The female dominance hierarchy affects female access to the harem-master and fertility. Females gain advantage through partnerships, particularly enduring ones between mothers and elder daughters, and thereby accomplish together what they could not accomplish alone in the female dominance hierarchy. Although described as coalitions, the partnerships have meaning only when viewed in the context of the advantages the partners gain through their association *vis a vis* other members of the reproductive unit.

De Waal (1989a) describes life in a captive colony of chimpan­zees, a naturally “closed” social system because emigration is not an option available to the captives to manage their relationships with each other. Two young chimpanzees, members of the colony, were playing together. As so often happens among playmates, they got into a squabble. The mothers of the two were watching and becoming increasingly uncomfortable. One mother summoned a third female, Mama, who had a history of peaceful interventions. The peacemaker separated the two young chimpanzees. Neither was hurt and the relationship between the mothers remained undisturbed.

The therapeutic relationship is yet another example of a tri­angle. Freud postulated that in the relationship with the therapist, an individual would automatically replicate a significant early relationship (the transference). The therapist had the potential to act out significant past relationships in a countertransference. In other words, the seemingly dyadic relationship between therapist and patient could not be fully understood without reference to the relationships “transferred” or “counter-transferred” into the thera­pist-patient relationship. Underlying the therapeutic application of Bowen theory is the premise that if one member of a family system enters into relationship with a neutral therapist (*vis a vis* the family issues), who avoids a countertransference, the individual can relate to members of the family differently. Thus, the individual’s relation­ships with family members can be conceptualized as triangles that include the neutral therapist.

Here are a few other examples of triangles and interlocking triangles and questions they prompt that illustrate the underlying utility of the triangle in managing relationships. Does the introduction of a third make a relationship between two more manageable?

An individual who wants to make contact with a stranger uses an intermediary who is a mutual friend. Is the individual making contact with a stranger through a mutual friend more likely to get an interview?

Headhunters, matchmakers, mediators and negotiators assist in managing sensitive relationships between other parties. Is a “no” through a matchmaker or headhunter easier to accept than a “no” to one’s face?

An individual who can no longer occupy the number one posi­tion becomes and stays number two by relating to each of the rivals for the number one position. Isn’t the power behind the throne some­times as powerful (or more so) than the occupant of the throne?

An individual tells one colleague about a troublesome aspect of his relationship with another colleague or the boss. Doesn’t one usually feel better after complaining about “unfair” treatment to a trusted colleague or friend?

A student is under pressure to perform at a higher level, the teacher is under pressure to raise the test scores, and the headmas­ter is striving to enhance the academic reputation of his school, the student’s underperformance becomes a focus for the teacher and headmaster. Isn’t an underperforming student a good focus when there is a potential for teacher and headmaster to fail to meet ex­pectations?

The mannerisms of the new boss remind one of the old boss and the reaction is as if to the old boss. What goes on in a new re­lationship when the new person reminds one of a favorite relative or worst enemy?

A dog is resting peacefully by the side of his human compan­ion; a cat climbs onto the companion’s lap and begins fiddling with the dog’s tail; the dog gets onto the floor. Is the cat envious of the relationship between the dog and human?

A toddler invariably makes mischief every time his mother is on the telephone. Why does the toddler seem to hit the baby only when his mother is on the phone?

A safety commissioner returns from a grueling Congressional hearing about the level of safety of a controversial technology and shortly thereafter votes to increase safety requirements governing use of the technology. Is it possible that a desire to avoid another confrontation with the senator has influenced the vote?

What makes triangles so difficult to see? Triangles are likely to operate out of awareness. The content of the issues may mask the underlying process. Also, humans and members of other species

Vol. 6, No. 1 BriefReport 7172 Family SyStemS 2001

seem to have an intuition about the efficacy of triangles in smooth­ing relationships or making them more manageable. So they are ordinary. It is just that they probably are not recognized as being part of emotional process nor as a basic building block of emotional systems. Yet an understanding of triangles is critically important to interpreting relationships observed in a social system, whether human or nonhuman. DeWaal, Strum, Fossey, and Dunbar, to name just a few observers of nonhuman species, all document triangles and emotional process, even though the label “triangle” might not be affixed to their observations.

Not recognizing triangles as such afflicted Bowen and his research team at the National Institute of Mental Health with “ob­servational blindness” in the 1950s:

Man can fail to see what is before his eyes unless it fits into his theoretical frame of reference. For instance, man had been looking at the bones of prehistoric animals for centuries without really “seeing them”; he believed the earth had been created exactly as it is now, and he could not “see” the bones until there was a theory of evolution. . . . Increasing ability to “see” the family, plus the increased intensity of the relation­ship characteristics, were sufficient for the new observations to break through. Once seen, the new relationship phenom­enon was so forceful that it pervaded the entire operation. It was then possible to see the phenomenon in concurrent work with out-patient families in which the phenomenon was less intense in its manifestations. (Bowen 1978, 119)

In the three examples that follow, I illustrate the triangle in nonhuman and human systems. First I give the nonhuman example, then the human example. The first two human examples are drawn from the workplace, an important arena for applying Bowen theory. The last illustrates interlocking triangles and the transmission of culture.

Examples

*Getting to Know You*

The first set of examples demonstrates parallels in the way humans and nonhumans employ intermediaries to gain member­ship in a new group.

Ray wants to join a new community. He’s completed his inves­tigations and he knows what he wants. However, he doesn’t know anyone in the community and the community is very selective as to who may join it. Also, Ray doesn’t know anyone who can arrange an introduction for him. He’s on his own. He watches and waits, try­ing to find an opportunity for entry. He begins to notice a pleasant female with a small child who always seems to be on the periphery of the community’s social gatherings. The child is curious about Ray. The pleasant female is protective of the child. It is through the child, however, that Ray and the pleasant female make contact. Over a pe­riod of time Ray and the female become friends, and gradually his circle of acquaintances within the community widens. The children become curious about him, and the mothers see no harm coming from Ray’s contact with them. Slowly, Ray is able to move freely within the community. But moving freely in the community is not all that Ray wants. Ray wants to be a community leader. To accomplish this, Ray needs to be part of the coterie of the reigning matriarch of the community. One day Ray makes contact with the matriarch. Things go well. However, the males in the coterie are not happy to have a newcomer in their midst and relationships between Ray and the males are pretty testy for a while. When Ray and the matriarch try to meet, Ray has to deal with the male leaders first. Finally, tensions escalate and there is a confrontation, complete with gesturing and “words.” No one gets hurt, but thereafter the male leaders accept Ray. He is part of the inner circle. As long as he observes proprieties with his male peers, he can engage the matriarch freely. From *Almost Human: A Journey into the World of Baboons* (Strum 1987).

An academic wants to strengthen his and his department’s working relationships with a renowned research institution. An energetic, creative, go-getting student of his is just finishing his doc­toral studies. The academic calls a colleague in the institution and the student joins the institution as a post-doctoral research associate. The department’s contacts with the institution and involvement in its programs increase.

*Eternal Triangles*

The second set of examples illustrates how triangles may be used to manage relationships among members of a system to achieve through a third what can not be achieved directly:

Yeroen used to be alpha male, but as he ages he no longer has the energy to stay on top. He is forced to retire to the sidelines.

Vol. 6, No. 1 BriefReport 7374 Family SyStemS 2001

Neither Nikkie nor Luit, the two younger males vying for supreme control, have Yeroen’s experience, wile or cunning in managing community politics and relationships. Whoever is in power needs Yeroen’s cooperation and support to continue as alpha male and Yeroen takes steps to ensure this is so. By deftly shifting his alliance between the two younger males, Yeroen assures that he remains number two regardless of whether Nikkie or Luit is number one. From *Chimpanzee Politics* (de Waal 1989a) and *Peacemaking among Primates (*de Waal 1989b).

Tom is bright, young and ambitious. As part of building impor­tant relationships with the superiors of Harry, his boss, Tom prepares “think pieces” which he delivers to the top floor after Harry has gone home for the day. Tom’s activities do not escape Harry’s notice, how­ever. One day, Tom receives a “special assignment” which results in his immediate transfer to a distant part of the organization. Suffice it to say, Tom no longer has access to the top floor, but Harry does.

*Entraining the Future*

The third examples illustrate how roles within a social sys­tem may be transmitted intergenerationally through interlocking triangles.

Rhesus monkeys live in a matrilineal society. The females in a lineage live together throughout their lives. Sons leave home at an early age and often move away to join a new social group. Several lineages comprise the larger social system, and relationships among the lineages are ordered by rank. The social status of a daughter de­pends upon that of her mother. De Waal discusses the relationship phenomenon:

It is a well-established fact that hierarchies among female macaques are virtually independent of weight, physical condition, and other indicators of fighting ability. The status tradition is primarily a *social* institution. Juvenile members of high-ranking lineages behave dominantly only when their relatives are nearby; their rank depends on the presence of supporters, rather than on some inborn predisposition. . . .Young females have to wage countless battles before settling at the predestined status level. It is no easy task to break the resistance of the heavier and stronger adult females of lower-ranking lineages. The youngsters consistently receive the necessary support from relatives, but there is also evidence that the female community as a whole supports the kinship system. From *Peacemaking among Primates* (de Waal 1989b).

On an island where I lived, there is a community renowned for its resistance to change. It sits out on a spit of land, jutting into the sea. Generation after generation, its men become fishermen. The women marry fishermen. They live in small row houses, which line narrow streets, winding down to the sea. I walk down one of these streets toward the sea. It is a school day when all school-aged chil­dren are supposed to be in school. Children are everywhere. I reach the shore. A rocky beach stretches before me. To my left are three generations of women and girls hanging laundry on lines running from poles jammed among the rocks. The older women and some of the younger women wear black. They are the widows of fishermen. The girls are of school age. The taller girls help to hang the laundry. The smaller girls watch. To my right are three generations of men and boys. The men are coiling their fishing lines, checking hooks, and otherwise readying for sea. The boys are of school age. The bigger boys help the men. The smaller boys watch.

Conclusion

Bowen family systems theory appears to have relevance to understanding behavior and functioning in human and nonhuman social (emotional) systems. The theory, however, with its multiple interlocking concepts, presents challenges to students of the theory, be they therapists, parents, members of the workplace or other social system, or researchers studying emotional process in nonhuman social systems. Integration of the theory’s concepts into a coherent theory foiled even Murray Bowen for a time. But, when he “saw triangles,” he “became a different person.” With this in mind, I thought that writing a paper about triangles might enhance my own understanding of the theory and, perhaps, assist other students in finding entrée into a theory that holds much promise as a tool for achieving insights into both human and nonhuman behavior and functioning. ❉

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Vol. 6, No. 1 BriefReport 7576 Family SyStemS 2001

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