

CONTENT, PROCESS, AND INHERITANCE

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What goes into the conduits between generations? What is “passed on”? Often family diagrams contain labels along with the names of family members, such as “alcoholic”, “bipolar”, schizophrenia”, “addiction.” There is an assumption that if the label appears in two generations (or more) it was “inherited” or passed on from one generation to the next. It is a short leap to then assume that there is an “alcoholic” gene that is inherited. There is a strong “science” effort searching for these specific genes that cause a specific disease. For the most part, the nature/nurture dichotomy has been discarded, recognizing that it is an interactive process between genes and their environment that determines outcome.* The process that drives gene expression contains multi variables in these communications and interactions.

If one can get beyond the A causes B thinking, what are the more relevant questions? The core questions are related to the individual’s interaction with his/her environment. What is the impact of the pressures from the environment? How does one manage one’s anxiety that is responding to these pressures? How does one manage one’s emotional history when a present event triggers the emotional memory? How does one manage one’s vulnerabilities? For example, if a person grew up in a family with a parent being hospitalized for “mental illness” numerous times, how does this person manage their own anxiety processes or moods? Can the theory account for who does better or worse with their schizophrenia?

In the clinical setting, parents often bring in a child whose functioning leaves something to be desired in the parents’ or school’s eyes (e.g., not getting up to go to school, smoking pot, pushing against school requirements). If the clinician can “see” and “hear,” it is obvious that the parents aren’t taking care of business. A systems perspective says that how the parents manage self (i.e., their responsibilities) automatically impacts other family members. As Dr. Bowen wrote in another letter, “It’s the attitude that is important, not the words.” Is “responsibility” inherited? Dr. Bowen’s letter of September 1985 is a response to a letter written to him referencing an article in Scientific American on multigenerational transmission of incest. He, as usual, raises a number of questions, and points out certain pitfalls in the unclear thinking about multigenerational transmission processes. How similar is today’s political thinking to the thinking that produced the Salem witch trials?

*The biological definition of differentiation has to do with this process.

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Dear Mrs.

I did read the paper in Scientific American when it appeared. I thought it pretty good, as another assumption about the beginning. Your letter came in June. It was a busy Summer for me, and now I am trying to catch up with some back correspondence.

Re the multigenerational transmission of incestuous symptoms! It sounds like you accept the popular notion of the transmission of symptoms. I am aware that TV, the media, and a fair percentage of the population, and also family therapists, go along with this theoretical notion. I do not.

I simply cannot accept this fatalistic view of the future of the race, nor can I say that I have ever been able to use the "differentiation of self" or the notion of "multigenerational transmission process" as more than a beginning effort to understand the process. Thirty years ago, I thought the notion of "differentiation" had merit. I still do, for psychological things, and a spectrum of genetic things, but it is weak on sociological things. That is why I added the notion of "societal regression". Now, thirty years later, I do not retract anything I said in "differentiation", but there is much more to it.

Society is littered with complex problems for which there were no simple answers. Looking back, we might say that society went wrong in the burning of witches at the Salem Witch Trials. But, are we doing better, or worse, late in the 20th century? If you want to bring it up to the present, how about the current anxiety about the "Nuclear Holocaust", or the current fear about "Aids" which drives some school officials crazy. How about a test for "Aids" (we already have one - How do we know it is accurate) in which people with positive tests are isolated forever. What happens when the number of "isolated" people is greater than the number of non-isolated? Crazy???? Maybe. Thirty years ago some scientists developed a test for latent schizophrenia. I think schizophrenia (mostly a psychological problem) is present in most of us. Then it was found that a cup of coffee would create a positive test, after the thing was in general use.

Too many questions for a detailed letter. How about felons and murderers? Worse than incest! Is that characteristic transmitted into the reproductive future? Maybe we should sterilize all felons! Society has already tried that with psychotic people.

Personally I think you put too much emphasis on correlating incest in your husbands past, with the social adjustment of your son. This year I have been more and more interested in the theoretical trends in society. Good luck in your effort to find answers.

Sincerely,

Murray Bowen, M.D.