

THE THERAPIST AND TRIANGLES

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Anyone having any knowledge of Bowen and his theoretical concepts has learned or at least heard about the importance of the concept of triangles. Yet being able to describe how the concept works in therapy is more difficult. I have heard experienced therapists say that they don't really "understand" triangles. What makes therapy a triangle phenomena? How does one do therapy with a couple and not focus on the relationship emotional content? How does a self "fuse into the we-mess of the marriage?" How do interlocking triangles develop in one's social environment? Are there principles to guide the therapist? Where do options come from? How does a therapist decide what his/her options are in continuing with a couple who insist on perpetuating a "collision course?"

In the majority of psychiatric and mental health settings, the prevailing practice is for each family member to have a separate therapist, a practice which is supported by medical record and billing procedures and "requirements." A lack of understanding of how triangles work in an emotional system probably plays a major role in perpetuating this model.

Bowen's letter of 1974 to a wife of a couple he is seeing addresses many of these questions and articulate the logic underlying his practice principles.

May 20(?), 1974

Dear Mrs.

Perhaps I assumed that you understood triangles better than you do. I usually go into some detail about this when it involves two sets of people who work in the same office or who are in the same social circle. It is possible to work with either both sets of people separately and productively as long as they do not start "gabbing" to each other about their "therapy" (I do not use the term therapy or therapist, which I can talk about later). When they start gabbing, it fuses the whole social system into an emotional amalgam which can nullify progress, if the differentiation of self is the goal. Once the social system becomes an amalgam, progress is limited to what can be done with an encounter, a network, or a group. Another reason I did not go into more detail was a sort of assumption that the relationship between you and Dr. was more private than it is.

It is impossible to fully explain this briefly. It all works on the knowledge of triangles. I did not invent triangles in my head. God invented triangles. It has to do with the way one human protoplasm relates to another. It is the way people are. It is the way people "triangle" themselves into emotional messes by following the dictates of their feelings. The concept provides an amazingly accurate way of "De-triangling" the mess if they are motivated to learn about triangles and then have the courage to avoid doing the things that create problems. Until people can get a better grasp of triangles, it is necessary for me to have some rules to keep me reasonably de-triangled and to insure the best possible outcome for the total effort.

Most therapists would deal with the thing between you and Dr. with separate "therapists", which has built in limitations. There is a big advantage if it is possible to have a single person who can relate to all segments of the larger system, and still keep self emotionally disentangled. If the "therapist" is able to do this, there is a way out if the various people can learn about triangles and respect them in their daily living. Let me put in one good example, all within the same family. However good family therapy may be, it is common to reach unresolvable impasses with both spouses together. Beyond that it is possible to get through that bind by helping one spouse, or both separately, to work toward defining "self" rather than focusing on the relationship. Work on

self is a difficult and private task. At times of uncertainty, people tend to talk to others to clarify their own thoughts. It is okay to go to the literature or to another person outside the emotional system, but the impulse is to discuss it with the other spouses. The moment that occurs, self immediately fuses into the we-ness of the marriage and the effort of self is nullified. I learned about this the hard way, from trying to work with a single spouse who would then go home and discuss everything with the other spouse. How does one go about relating actively to the other while still maintaining a self? That is the size of the problem. There are all kinds of ways of doing it, if one can find a way for self.

As a therapist, I have an option for me too. If I suggest to someone that they are on a collision course, they have an option of continuing on course, or making an effort to modify it. I avoid trying to "tell" them what to do. which is de-selfing in itself. They can insist on their right to continue. and then I have the option, and the responsibility, of deciding whether or not I am willing to invest my time in an effort that I believe will be unproductive.

This is already too long, which happens when I get into this subject. From experience only a fraction of the explanations get through until people know about triangles. So, the average person interprets most of this sort of thing as "whimsy" or my theory.

Thanks for your letter. It lets me know better where you stand. Perhaps I was precipitous in taking my position. Certainly it was timed with the sudden awareness that the situation was "leaking" over the whole field which would nullify any advantage in my position. Perhaps your reaction was more in you than in the situation.

My position has nothing to say what happens to you and Dr. in your private relationship. I hope I have already communicated that. I have made an effort to leave the outcome of the amalgam up to the various people involved. According to my standards, I have done rather well with that thus far. When the system starts triangling me outside the sessions, it nullifies my effectiveness and makes me responsible for the outcome. That is when I start reacting.

These are things that require a lot of talk and explanation. I will try to do my part in making my position as clear as Possible.

Sincerely,

Murray Bowen, M.D.