

## **THE SINS OF THE FATHERS** **Counseling College Students from a** **Family Systems Perspective**

Barbara T. Mills, MSW  
Part-time Director  
Tallahassee Community College  
Tallahassee, Florida

*"The Lord is slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation."*

Numbers 14:18

She was normally bouncy and vivacious, full of energy and laughter. This day she sat in my office the picture of dejection. Everything in her body language shouted misery; she slumped in her chair, her hair drooped, her downcast eyes were dull and her affect was flat. "Jane" made veiled references to suicide. There were just the two of us in the closed room, but the atmosphere was filled with the presence of her family who lived in another city. She responded to questions with references to school, her lack of friends, and her inability to hold a job, which were only the outward symptoms of the product of a dysfunctional family system. Family counseling was not only indicated, but necessary.

Counseling college students is often approached from an individual perspective. After all, the student is here, the family is not. The student is the one who has come for help with any variety of problems, i.e. dating relationships, sexual and substance abuse pressures, roommate problems, bad study habits, choice of a major, lack of friends and loneliness - any form of crisis from the barely significant to self-destructive behavior. How do you family counseling with only one person and why should you try?

In systems theory the family is identified as two or more individuals who are the components of a system, bound together in an organized, causal, interacting relationship. "The family is seen as a living system that maintains a relationship with the environment. . . Family members establish rules that regulate the ways they relate to each other and the outside world." (Jansen and Harris, 1980.) The dynamics surrounding the interactional roles and rules of the family members remain intact even when one is removed from the family location and "goes off to college." This then, is the "why" of family counseling.

Barbara S. Held and David C. Bellows (1983) stated that "An intolerance for change in role status, separation and new relationships may lead the family to undermine (albeit unintentionally) the student's attempts to meet the new demands to differentiate from the family, and thereby enhances the likelihood of a range of crisis reactions." This was precisely the case with Jane. Her role in the family had been to care for her mother who was divorced from her father. (A role reversal which often precipitates crisis as the child seeks ways to escape the burden, according to Held and Bellows.) Jane's mother had voiced suicidal ideation in the past so Jane had learned this was a way of coping and getting the attention needed for survival. It was also a way of holding the family together to care for mother. Jane's becoming suicidal was her way of rescuing her mother since she was now the "identified patient." This information came to light only as a result of counseling from a family systems perspective. Jane eventually was able to understand that she did not have to take responsibility for her mother or for her parents' divorce. Over a period of time she separated from the system and was then able to reestablish a healthier relationship with her mother, and eventually with her father. During the time she was working on family issues she started increasing her circle of friends, graduated from school, and maintained a steady job.

Betsy, a 23 year old graduate student, came to talk to me about breaking up with her boyfriend and the desire to date a

new guy she had met. She had voiced a minor concern about being able to maintain a relationship over a period of time, but dismissed it as part of the maturation process. We talked about her past relationships, the longest of which had lasted only a few months. Instead of dwelling on the how's and why's of her relationships with her boyfriends, we moved into a discussion of her family.

Betsy was the older of two children. Her brother was still in high school, not doing very well and possibly experimenting with drugs. She was concerned about him, but also indicated they were not very close. Her parents had been in conflict for as long as she could remember. She had become the "go between" when her parents weren't speaking and also mother's "comforter" when her father got angry and left the house. She threatened once to run away if they didn't stop fighting and when it ceased (temporarily), she tried it again the next time. Consequently her role became to hold the family together by drawing attention to herself and away from the couple conflict—a heavy responsibility for a 5 year old; no less burdensome for a 23 year old! No wonder she couldn't sustain a relationship with a man for very long. On the one hand she was too busy trying to keep her parents from divorcing, and on the other, the only way she knew how to relate to a potential mate was to be in conflict. The only way to avoid the conflict was to end the relationship, if the guy didn't end it first! Betsy had to learn how to extricate herself from her parents' marriage. She had been triangled in (as mediator, comforter, distractor, interpreter) for so long that none of them could operate effectively without her. The process of healing had to begin with her understanding of what had happened. Then she began to take steps to get the parents to communicate without her. She needed reinforcement and affirmation that what she was doing was the right thing, not only for her, but also for her parents. The more she refused to take sides or be the interpreter for one or the other, the more the parents tried to hold on to her. At the same time they were forced to begin to take responsibility for their own relationship:

As Betsy became more and more untangled from her parents she became better able to establish a relationship with the new boyfriend. A high degree of conflict remains as part of their interaction, but Betsy is now able to see how she replays the patterns of her parents' relationship in her own. As she understands that and identifies it more quickly, she is better equipped to change her behavior and reactions, defuse conflict and sustain a healthy relationship.

In today's society, even among Christians, we are finding more and more adult children of alcoholics. These people operate out of a system that has taught them highly constricted behaviors. Many of the symptoms found in adult children of alcoholics are often diagnosed from an individual perspective as depression, manic depression, behavioral disorders, or character defects. Misdiagnosis can lead to treatment that includes drugs which not only affects no permanent change, but can cause unwanted side effects. Counseling from a systemic approach can quickly identify the dysfunctional family and show the direction for the most effective interventions. In her book Adult Children of Alcoholics Judith Woititz (1983) has defined 13 areas of irrational behavior often exhibited by people from an alcoholic family. When these areas are addressed as family issues, the student is freed from unreasonable personal guilt and can work toward a realistic acceptance of family and self. The counselor must beware here that one characteristic of adult children of alcoholics is to go to extremes to please and so they will say what they believe the counselor wants to hear. The family systems/relational listener will be prepared to challenge and work through the too quick "cures" and continue to focus on the core issues relating to family interaction and the subsequent effect on all other relationships.

Probably the clearest indication of the necessity of family systems counseling is in the case of incest. Seldom do students seek counseling with incest as the presenting problem. Unfortunately, it is a hidden issue, as much by the victim as the perpetrator. When a student, especially a female, seeks counseling for problems that seem to have no clearly defined

root, it is time to start some thorough searching into the family system.

A young couple came for pre-marriage counseling. During the course of exploring their relationship, it came to light that Linda had frequent outbursts of extreme anger, especially towards her fiancée, but also toward her roommates and co-workers at her part-time job. As we looked deeper into the cause of her rage, Linda finally, and reluctantly, remembered and disclosed that she had been sexually abused by her brother. She has buried that unhappy experience so deep that it was lost to her conscious memory, but came out in the form of intense anger directed towards those around her, especially the male with whom she would very soon enter into an intimate, sexual relationship. Pre-marriage counseling gave way to systemic counseling with Linda in order for her to deal with her family history and later with the couple again in intensive preparation for their marriage.

Pre-marriage counseling is a perfect arena for a family systems approach. The roles and rules that keep a family system in balance and give identity to the individual must be merged and blended when a couple start their own family. Perspectives and expectations from each family of origin can be explored and identified. When there is an area of ongoing conflict for a couple, they are often surprised and happy to discover that it's their two families "fighting." Thus relieved from a personal guilt for the continuing disagreements, the couple can begin to take the best values and characteristics from each of their families, and mold a new model that fits them.

Donald R. Bardill (1983) in analyzing an individual's connection with the various systems of which s/he is a part, has expanded that thinking a step further. He says, "The relational approach considers the human being in his relationship to: (1) himself, (2) other people, (3) the context in which he lives, and (4) his spiritual nature," (p. 16.). This is a neatly tied package for the campus minister to use in a systems approach to counseling. It is one that takes all aspects of the student's life

into consideration, not only the self and family, but the systems a student becomes a part of in the campus setting as well as his/her relationship to God. Judgmentalism has no part in systemic counseling. Deal with the issues and the system without seeking to blame or scape-goat. Love the sinner, hate the sin.

The "how" of a systems approach to counseling begins with a genogram, which is a simplified family tree diagram (Fig. 1) that goes back ideally three generations. As the student fills in the information on the diagram, relational interactions should be discussed in depth, not only those involving the student, but also other familial interactions. Patterns often emerge that give pointed direction to the focus of interventions. A family "secret" may be revealed or at least hinted at (i.e. incest) which alerts the counselor to probe in a certain area. Alcoholism should always be looked for, and, if present in a parent, indicates another type of intervention, as previously mentioned. A wealth of additional information can be gleaned from this graphic portrayal of the family, even for someone using it for the first time.

Another tool that depicts in a visual form the relational approach to counseling (self, others, context, God) is the Concentric Circle Exercise (Fig. 2). The student puts him or herself in the center circle then adds people, groups, and activities that play a part in his/her daily life. Those who have a strong influence are put in the closest circles expanding outward to those that have the least influence. If certain people are not physically present, i.e., family or close friends, they should still be included for they are a part of the student's emotional context. School, job, church, BSU, recreation - - everything that impacts the student's life can be indicated on the diagram. Strong connections can be shown by a solid line between those involved, tenuous connections by a dotted line and stressful connections by a line with hash marks. Arrows are used to depict the direction of energy or resource flow.

A student who is isolated, with few friends and limited involvement in support groups is quickly identified with this

diagram. Likewise a student who is over committed, rapidly sees and understands the feeling of being overwhelmed. (This could be a good tool to use with your BSU Council!) When an unbalanced lifestyle is so evident, the campus minister knows exactly where to intervene!

At the beginning of this article reference was made to Numbers 14:18, "The Lord is slow to anger, abounding in love and forgiving sin and rebellion. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished; he punishes the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation."

I believe this is an early expression of systems theory! God punishes the guilty, not the innocent nor the victim. However, it is quite plain that children, and the children's children, suffer the consequences and the effects of their parents' behavior. (The genogram goes back three generations!) The incestuous family, the alcoholic or other addictive families are obvious manifestations of how the children bear the results of unhealthy, inappropriate, and sinful acts of their parent(s). Abuse begets abuse. Other studies indicate that a father who is even physically or emotionally distant from his daughter has an adverse effect on her self-esteem and personality adjustment (Musser and Fleck, 1983). "The fathers have eaten sour grapes and the children's teeth are set on edge" (Jer. 31:29).

There is a great scarcity of competent Christian counselors in relation to secular counselors in the college community. A campus minister is the logical choice to obtain additional training, particularly in systems theory in order to narrow this gap. At the very least, know the limits of your expertise and build a reservoir of referral sources. Family systems/relational counseling can become the avenue of grace dispensed by a knowledgeable, caring campus minister from a wise, loving, compassionate heavenly father. "But where sin abounded, grace did much more abound" (Rom. 5:20).

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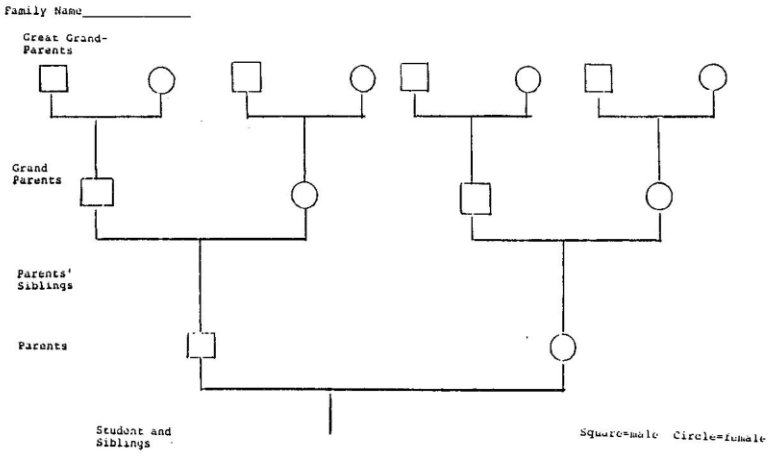


Fig. 1

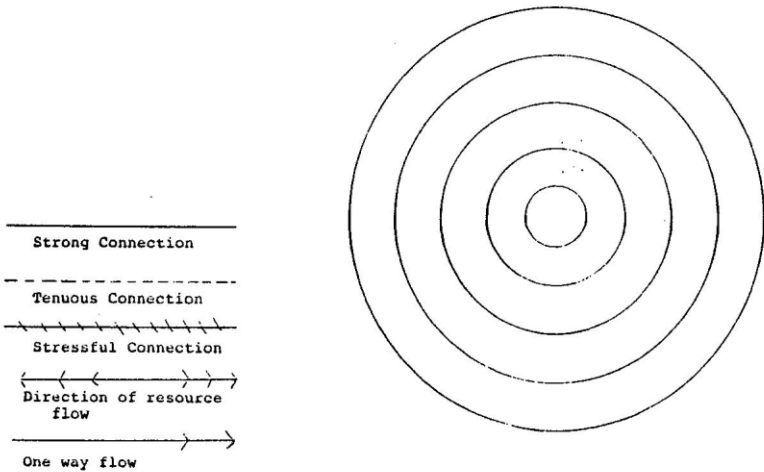


Fig. 2