Main Aspects of Family Functionality

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Abstract. Working with families is a real challenge for professionals. It is absolutely necessary for them to be familiarized by the main aspects of family functionality. Our study represents a theoretical approach of this issue by presenting family cycles of life, factors which influences family functionality and the levels of family functionality and underline the necessity of recognising these during therapy.

Keywords: common family unconscious, control and regulation, distribution of power, emotional attachment, energy management, family system of values, family structure

INTRODUCTION

The most important criteria in helping families during therapy are that professionals (couple and family therapist) should be familiarized by the main aspects of family functionality. It is absolutely necessary to recognize the family cycle of life (Carter and McGoldrick, 1989), the factors which influences family functionality (Strausz, 1998) and the levels of family functionality (Komlósi, 2002). The aim of our paper is a theoretical approach of this issue.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Our study represents a theoretical approach of the main aspects of family functionality.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Family cycles of life is a frame of thinking that presents the way a family functions within a given set of social and cultural norms, what kind of behaviour qualifies as acceptable and what not within a given family. Regardless of what period of the life of a family we analyze, it is doubtless that cultural expectations will be a decisive factor in it.

According to Minuchin (1974) a family is such a natural developmental unit that gets a new shape within its structure while continuously develops through various stages and maintains stability for its members.

Tensions in the family are a normal, acceptable phenomenon. Temporary crisis situations are, in fact, unavoidable. Every new, significant situation (marriage, newborn, death) exerts pressure on the original family frame and transforms it into a different one.

The development of a family occurs through transitive stages from one cycle to the other. According to Carter and McGoldrick (1989) these stages are: single young adult; family united through marriage: the newlywed couple; family with small children; family

with teenage children; family with teenage children; and family at old age. The following table is trying to present this process (Tab.1):

Tab.1

Phases of family lifecycles

PHASES OF FAMILY LIFECYCLE	KEY TASKS IN THE AFFECTIVE PROCESS OF THE TRANSITION	SECONDARY CHANGES IN THE FAMILY STATUS INDISPENSABLE TO DEVELOPMENT
1. Single young adult	- acceptance of parent-child separation	- self differentiation takes place from the old family - development of intimate relationships - development of professional identity
2. Family united through marriage: the newlywed couple	- commitment to the new system	- development of spousal system - rearrangement of relationships with the extended family and friends in a way that includes the new spouse
3. Family with small children	-acceptance of the new generation within the family	- modification of the spousal system in a way that allows the children to fit in - development of parental role - reorganization of the extended family system in a way that includes parental and grandparental roles
4. Family with teenage children	- increase of flexibility of family borders that allow children's independence	- modification of the parent child relationship in a way that allows teenagers to go beyond family borders and return within it. - new focus on questions of marriage and career as middle aged individuals. - preoccupation with the older generation
5. Family with independent children who are moving out	-acceptance of members leaving and new members arriving	- restarting the spousal system as a diad - development of adult-adult relationship between parents and grown-up children - rearranging relationships to accept the family of the spouse and grandchildren. - preoccupation with parents/grandparents illness and death.
6. Family at old age	-acceptance of the change of generation roles	- maintenance of independent and/or spousal activities despite physical decline: discovery of new social and family roles. - support of the central role of the middle generation - integration of old people's experience into the family: support without over helping or treating them like children. - dealing with the loss of spouse, siblings, friends, preparation for own death. A survey over life and its integration.

Source: Fabian, 2007: *A családokkal való syociális munka elméleti és gyakorlati vonatkozásai*. Cluj: Echinox

This model is about the "normal" development of a family. Of course there are situations (e.g. divorce and remarried, the "patchwork" families, the families with one-parent or families with "violent" separation caused by incarceration) effect new variations of the above model.

Anyway, indifferently in what stage of cycle of life is a family, there are factors which influence their functionality. These factors are the following: Family system of values,

Family traditions, Roles in the family, Everyday life in the family, Education within the family and Types of family (Strausz, 1998).

Traditional family values are usually passed on from one generation to the next, giving children the structure and boundaries in which to function and thrive. Family time, love, play and work give children this foundation (Duffy, 2012). The *family system of values* refers to the fact that families have their own categories and norms of value that advise and guide the members according to the objects, characteristics and forms of behaviour they consider correct, recommendable, valuable, and those they deem to be bad and avoidable. It is according to these uttered and unuttered regulations that the family system of values is tailored.

Family traditions are connected to family events, commemorations, or some kind of profession or career but at the same time they may denote some kind of frame of mind or way of life. For instance, religiousness or a sporty lifestyle can be considered a tradition.

It is important to notice, nevertheless, that a negative lifestyle can also perpetuate as tradition. For instance, alcoholism or divorce may also be transmitted from one family to the other (Fabian, 2007).

Roles in the family: every individual fills a position in the micro community of a family and the better they do it, according to their position and function, the more harmonious the community will be. Every member is aware of the role they have within the family. According to this structure there are roles as parents (husband, wife), as children, as siblings or grandparents. Roles harmoniously completing each other support the functionality of a family, their defective action obstructs it. A good example for the latter is the so called exchange of roles, in which the unemployed father takes over the administration of family life from the wife.

The role of the *father* is very important within a family. His roles:
➢ He has priority in leading the life of the family, in setting directions, deciding upon family goals. Such a role implies a responsible behaviour.
➢ Supports the mother in fulfilling her tasks related to raising the children.
➢ Enhances the educational effect of the common decisions related to raising the children by making his opinion known.
➢ Involves his son, primarily, in activities, work, sports, and training.
➢ Teaches his son all the home activities he knows.
➢ Lets the children, especially the boys, know about his respect and love for the mother.
➢ Makes an effort to establish a common system of requirements with the mother.

Some further tasks for the father are transmitting a love for work, an ability of decision making. The main focus of his educational methods should be on teaching, guidance, training and providing a suitable model, not on punishment.

The father should act in awareness of his function as providing a model, and modulate his behaviour, speech and quality of his relationship according to this.

The most important characteristics of the father role: politeness, seriousness, confidence, reliability, responsibility for his own and the mother's health as well as for the safety of his family. The man has the role of leader of the family; therefore, he has a crucial place in raising the boy. These roles should be in conformity with the role of the mother and by adapting to each other and through faithfulness they assure protection for the family.

The *mother*'s loving, caring and cohesive role bears great importance not only for the children and husband but also for society. In a healthy family the mother has the most important role in:
➢ Family cohesion,
➢ Assuring a balanced relationship between family members,

- Reassuring, nurturing, taking care of family members,
- Mediation,
- In securing the development of the children

She should pay attention to: assuring the needs of the child according to his age; make sure that conditions fulfilling his individual interests are present; organizing activities within the family and finally listening and guidance in case of the children's wishes and desires.

Mothers are very important within the family but they are not solely responsible for the well-being and problem-solving within a family. The whole family participates to the maintenance of a balanced state and they contribute, together with relatives, to the perpetuation of happiness. The mother doesn't act on her own; as a good organizer and mediator she makes sure that the whole family work together.

Additionally, she teaches her children, especially the girls, to keep their personal hygiene, to do housework, nursing and to economize. She plans the daily life of the whole family. She supports the father in carrying out tasks and plans, in wording parental requirements, in assuring the well-being of the family, both bodily and mentally. It is wrong to think that anybody could replace either the mother or the father.

Even in the case of adoptions, a genuine replacement can occur only if the child lives with the adoptive parents from a very early age and the parents adapt to the situation and learn how to solve conflicts.

The role of the child presupposes an unbreakable dependence from the parents. In the teenage period this role is modified and a state of reciprocity predominates; the process of decision-making becomes a more flexible one, still, the child role prevails for as long as the parents live.

Many people challenge the age of 18 when the individual comes of age claiming that, usually, a personality reaches a level of ethical responsability suitable for social roles by the age of 24 when it is capable of fulfilling even a role like parent and educator.

Defencelessness that's too long is not healthy; it only has an educational effect if it is based on reciprocity.

One of the ways of preventing inability to act is parenting itself, incitement, childhood and teenager period practice and training. If a child has no chores to complete around the house, he hasn't practiced such activities; he will be unable to act and continues to be dependent in his adult age as well.

Motherly care cannot prevent the child from actively developing life circumstances, from feeling the joy of solving tasks at school and at home, first together, then on their own.

Activities that have not been practiced by the age of 12 (e.g. successful learning activities, studying methods, development of skills based on abilities) will be more difficult to acquire later on.

The sibling role: if there are more siblings in the family the mutual reliance is developed as early as the conception of the second one. The first borne will no longer be the only centre of attention; he looses privileges but he gains another individual, beside the parents, who can give and receive love.

In a healthy family system siblings help each other. They have equal status and their providing mutual help has an educational function. They don't have to take over a parent's role altogether but at times they can try out some of the attitudes connected to that. Good siblings accept parental guidance, when expressing their opinions and needs they also consider respect towards grandparents and parents as well as the needs of other members of the family (Fabian, 2007).

Grandparents are no longer providers for the family, they don't set directions or educate. They are approaching or returning to a childlike status, transferring the teachings of their life experience, they are the 'lovely, wise and good' Grandpa and Grandma one can always turn to for advice. Occasionally, they undertake parenting tasks, supporting the parents' relationship as a couple, help them relax, etc.

They provide help through their advice and through the model they provide.

In families that don't function well, divorced or exaggeratedly work oriented parents shift usual parental tasks to grandparents. It is often grandparents who neglected their own role as parents, who are happy to take on parenting tasks. They can frequently take away the grandchild from the parents and deny them the love of their child. It is more often the grandmother's ability to love that gets damaged. In such cases, the child has behavioral problems because of the unclarified relationships and they become serious when the grandparent who has had a parental role gets seriously ill and returns the child to the parents. The instability generated in a child losing his grandparents who have acted as parents can have negative repercussions of deviant behaviour (*ibidem*, 2007).

The most important characteristics of the *grandparents' role*:
➢ Giving advice to the parents
➢ Telling stories to the children, preserving values and traditions

Everyday life in the family: in the case of behaviours related to this issue there are two main important factors: a healthy lifestyle and the way changes and conflicts are treated within the family.

The habits of a healthy lifestyle can provide a good example if the couple has a healthy mind, they value the qualities of their personality, their self knowledge and confidence has an adequate level. There are examples of individuals that have started off on the right path, yet, the various traumas and crisis situations in their new family deviate them, damaging and distorting the way they perceive and lead their lives.

Family conflicts can be avoided if the couple continuously discusses and agrees on their goals, lifestyle and perception on their happiness.

Education within the family is based on three basic factors.

The first one is the *role model* that the parent provides which shapes the behavor, perception of values, goals of the child. Most of the knowledge is also learned from the models the child is exposed to.

The second one is the *style of parenting* meaning the parents' emotional attitude towards the child and his/her attitude in parenting.

The third is represented by *consistency,* meaning stability and continuity of providing a role model, assumption of reasonable requirements and treatment of the child.

Family types also have an important role in the functionality of a family. From this point of view we can discuss families with two parents, families that have gone through several marriages, one-parent families, the single parent families as a result of an early pregnancy, and families with foster or adoptive parents.

When we analyze one family it is difficult to assess what it is that we are observing within the family. This position of the observer is similar to the psychological experiment in which we can see a chalice or two profiles on an illustration depending on what we are focusing on. Family life is quite spectacular (just like life itself), and what I focus on a matter of point of view.

One individual emerges at times from among the members, then something happens, and the whole family becomes important. This is why it is difficult to systematize what we notice in a family. Our observations are simply about the leads that the many levels of behaviour within a family offer us.

In a therapeutical situation we have to allow the spontaneous 'something' to work: 'doing something with a floating attention', which basically means that we'll be able to observe what they most intensely offer. In such a situation our feelings are set aside. Obviously in family therapy sessions this floating attention can only last for a time. After a short period of observation we have to start off on a lead and have to locate the functionality level from which the incidents originate (*ibidem*, 2007).

According to the specialized literature (Komlósi, 2002) there are six levels of functionality within a family: structure, distribution of power, emotional attachment, energy management, control and regulation, and common family unconscious.

Regarding the family structure, the following have to be observed: structure (sub-system, borders, alliances, specific structural formula <diad, triad>); hierarchy (the parental sub-system represents the top of the hierarchy) and role relations (subordination, super-, juxtaposition).

Distribution of power can be traced on the following levels within a family: values, functions, competence levels; material, informational relations; attachment- autonomy (emotional subordination and superiority); personality type (assertiveness, dominance, competition) and the common system of values.

Emotional attachment can be traced based on the following factors: closeness – distance; degree of intimacy; revealing oneself –self-defense (hiding); stability (trust); compulsion for attachment, need for intimacy and the acceptance –rejection.

It is important to analyze *the state of energy management of the family*. The following dimensions should be analyzed: physical (active - passive $\rightarrow$ behavioral capacity); motivation; psychological energy (self-assumption) and dealing with aggression.

Control and regulation can be observed on the following levels: Feed-back (habits, rules, regulations); Level of functioning (rigid-flexible-loose, chaotic); Individual level (dealing with borders); and Need for dominance.

It is also important to recognize *the common family unconscious*. From this point of view the following three specific situations have to be considered: instinctive destiny (Szondi); projective identification and undifferentiated family ego-mass (Bowen).

Lipót Szondi, psychiatrist, supposed that between the personal and collective unconscious there is a third: and this is the familial unconscious. He introduces the notion of familial unconscious to describe the role of individuals' familial ancestry grounding their choices. In his conception, people's fate is shaped by their choices. The choices of partner-, friend-, profession-, illnessand form of death are pivotal among these (Gyöngyössiné, 1999; Szondi, 1944).

We can talk about projective identification when the individual deals with emotional conflict or internal or external stressors by falsely attributing to another his or her own unacceptable feelings, impulses, or thoughts (*DSM-IV*).

Bowen's Intergenerational Model focuses on how experiences in the family of origin affect individual and family functioning in subsequent generations'. Undifferentiated family ego-mass, refers to families with low levels of differentiation who are "emotionally stuck together". Individual family members' individuality is viewed as disloyal and threatening to the family's stability. Poorly differentiated families tend to use dysfunctional strategies for managing conflict, such as triangulation (Hall, 1981).

CONCLUSION

During my 10 years praxis as a couple and family therapist, the most common entanglement with the families were confronting owed by the family structure. Very often

families are confronting with problems regarding their individual borders as well as their family's borders; they have hierarchy problems and role problems. Even more, in many cases, problems from family structure are tied up with problems caused by the distribution of power. The common system of values is determining in this case. It is very hard for the couple to conciliate their parental families system of value and family traditions in order to establish a new, common system of value and traditions (their families system of value, their family's traditions). Roles and education within the parental family and types of families are also determining the young family's functionality.

In case of a family with an incarcerated person (even if this person is one of the parents or a child) unravel the homeostasis of the family and many problems occur at the level of family functionality. In this case it is absolutely necessary for the family to reorganize their everyday life in order to maintain their functionality. The structure of the family is meanly disturbed (e.g. from triad they will be a dyad), the distribution of power could be transformed and the therapist should work with the family members not only in this issues, but also on emotional attachment and on the common family unconscious (e.g. if my father is a criminal, do I became a criminal, too..). Also the therapist responsibility is to help the family to understand this new cycle of life, what are the expectations from them and how to act responsible in this new, unexpected situation.

In order to be efficient couple and family therapists, professionals should be familiarized by the main aspects of family functionality: the factors which influence family functionality, the levels of family functionality and also should understand the crisis occurred during the different stages of a family's cycle of the life and it's the possible modifications caused by "unexpected" crisis. These modifications will cause "unexpected" tackle and adaptation problems.

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