The Family Crucible Theory Application

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Introduction

The Family Crucible is a story about the Brice family who is recommended by Claudia’s psychiatrist to go to family therapy due to the fact that she has not been making any progress in individual psychotherapy. The Brice family comes in to meet with Dr. Carl Whitaker and Dr. Augustus Napier, who co-facilitate family therapy throughout the entirety of the book.

The family is made up of five people: Claudia, the IP; Carolyn, mother; Laura, the sister; Don, the brother; and David, the father. The family is coming into therapy because there have been mounting concerns about Claudia and her behavior—acting out, staying out late, some fairly typical teenage stuff. For the purpose of this paper, I will be starting at the beginning where the family is first coming into therapy. I will first school that I will apply is Structural Family Therapy and the second school is Bowen Family Therapy.
Assessment

Structural Family Therapy

In the Structural Family Therapy model, therapy is not focused solely on the individual, but upon the person within the family system (Colapinto, 1982; Minuchin, 1974). The major idea behind viewing the family in this way is that “an individual’s symptoms are best understood when examined in the context of the family interactional patterns,” (Gladding, 1998, p. 210). In SFT, there are two basic assumptions: 1) families possess the skills to solve their own problems; and 2) family members usually are acting with good intentions, and as such, no blame is to be made, (Powell & Dosser, 1992, pp. 243-256).

The Brice family is trying to find a way to “deal” with an increase in Claudia’s presenting behaviors—being defiant, acting out, suicidal thoughts/feelings, staying out past curfew and sneaking out of the house. In the family’s structure, Carolyn seems to have little control over the kids, specifically Claudia; while David seems to try and connect with Claudia, but does not succeed. One interesting fact about the Brice family is that the father is very disconnected due to being a lawyer, and this leaves mom to deal with all of the problems.

The family seems to have poor boundaries with Claudia, and David. From the point that I read in the book, I noticed that there was a coalition forming—Claudia + dad ≠ mom. There was one example in the book that really shows a long-lived coalition, “‘As I said before, I have felt torn
between the two sides. For a long time, I felt that Claudia was the underdog in the fights, and I suppose that I defended her. I’ve tried to get Carolyn to ease up on her…” (Napier & Whitaker, 1978, pp. 29-30). This shows that mom and dad are having different views on how the family should/needs to run and how dad sometimes takes Claudia’s side, which could make mom feel unsupported by her husband. The Brice family is also displaying alignment, which according to Nelson & Utesch, 1990, is when “family members as individuals and as parts of subsystems relate to each other relative to other family members and subsystems,” (p. 237). For instance, in the Brice family, David is opposing Carolyn by disagreeing with the way that Carolyn disciplines Claudia, and David has a history of taking Claudia’s side.

Throughout reading this book, it appears that the parental subsystem can be described as disengaged, because it seems that the father, being a lawyer and working long hours, is rarely home. This affects the family because the parents were not able to act as a unified subsystem, which consequently Claudia felt divided loyalties. Another important note about the family is in regards to boundaries. According to Minuchin, 1974 and Gladding, 1998, family members exhibit disengagement in regards to boundaries when they are overly rigid. As a result of being disengaged, the Brice family has difficulty relating to one another in intimate ways and appear to be disconnected from one another.
Bowen Family Therapy

Bowenian Family Therapy (BFT), focuses largely on the idea of individuality and togetherness. In the case of the Brice family, it appears that Carolyn is attempting to have the family be “too close” which is causing the problems with Claudia, which can cause Claudia to have a lack of sense of self and individuality (differentiation of self); in contrast however, Claudia is trying to be too independent which is creating a sense of distance which is causing an estrangement in the family. As with SFT, the family is seen as a person within the family unit, but also as an individual person. In addition to Claudia’s differentiation of self, there seems to be an indication of “multigenerational transmission process” within the family; namely with Carolyn. In Napier & Whitaker’s (1978) book, “My mother was a very... controversial woman in our home. Nobody dared cross her, especially her husband...And she could be very critical,” (p. 100). With Carolyn’s upbringing, it is no surprise that her family of origin has affected her in her current family.

In the case of the Brice family, Claudia seems to be cut off from the family, especially with mom. Claudia does not see herself as part of the system, and therefore, as Kerr and Bowen, 1988, suggest that her only option is to get others to change, or withdraw from the system entirely, (pp. 272-273). Again, as with SFT, there appears to be a triangle forming within the family. Claudia and mom are, inadvertently, “inviting” dad into the conflict, to help reduce the anxiety that is building between them (mom and
Claudia). However, for the family, this is only making the family “walk on eggshells” so to speak. The final point that I wanted to touch on is that the family’s emotional system is affecting the family unit. This is again showed by the mothers’ unresolved emotional attachment to her mother, and until she resolved her emotional attachments with her mother, she will pass this down to her children as well, just keeping the cycle going on even longer.

**Intervention**

**Structural Family Therapy**

To begin my work with the Brice family, I would begin the first session with some introductions and then jump into the assessment process. During the assessment phase, I would want to ask information about the family structure, subsystems, boundaries and overall family functioning. It is also important to note that during the assessment process and throughout therapy, it is essential that as the therapist you establish and maintain an empathetic relationship with the family. The initial impression gathered from the assessment process was that there has been some difficulties presenting for some time. “Claudia has been in trouble, and I mean psychological trouble for some time…but for the last year it has been getting worse,” (Napier & Whitaker, 1978, p. 14). It appears that the family has been struggling greatly with the problems Claudia has been experiencing.

After the initial assessment phase, it became apparent that Carolyn is semi-appropriately situated in the family hierarchy, at least with Don and
Laura; however with Claudia she does not have control and Claudia is very defiant. It is necessary to focus on the parenting skills of both Carolyn and David as both of them struggle to control Claudia and her actions. It would be the recommendation of this writer that the parents attending parenting classes to help them learn more proper ways to work with Claudia. This intervention will help the parents feel more competent as parents and will empower themselves. However, in the therapy room, a major part of therapy will be joining Carolyn and David with Claudia. In order to work on this, this writer will need to approach the intervention from a trusted and empathetic position. It will be essential to the therapeutic process that I communicate with the family that I was there to help the family and not to assign blame to anyone in the family. The goal of this process is to help Carolyn and David feel support and enable them to take action and become more pro-active.

One of the most important therapeutic techniques that will help with the Brice family is reframing. Reframing is examining a situation from a new perspective so the meaning is changed. According to P. Minuchin, Colapinto and S. Minuchin., 1998, by reframing, the therapist can help the family focus on the positives that are occurring and the challenge the negatives. According to Minuchin et al., 1998, a therapist

Must become adept at reframing that behavior in more positive terms— not because it is more true but because it is equally true, and because
it helps people who feel defeated and self-critical mobilize some other, stronger, part of themselves (p. 50).

With the Brice family, reframing would look like telling Carolyn that she is too involved in Claudia’s decisions/life because this illustrates how much she loves her daughter; this will hopefully help Carolyn see that her actions are not her being rude or mean, but she is trying to demonstrate her love for Claudia.

Enactments would also be useful with the Brice family because it can help the therapist see and interpret the existing patterns of functioning and this technique also empowers the family because it allows them to communicate new behaviors and communicate their typical way of functioning, (Minuchin et al., 1998; Colapinto, 1982). An example of where this would be helpful for the Brice family appears within the first few sessions. There is part at the beginning of the 3rd session where Claudia and her dad are having a discussion about her staying out late. “Well, we don’t like it. You are not even sixteen yet, and we don’t seem to have any control of what you do,” (Napier & Whitaker, 1978, p. 67). In the exchange with Claudia and her dad, the therapist stepping in would be very important. As the therapist, I would introduce an enactment. In this particular situation, I would say something along the lines of, “what do you think your father is trying to tell you Claudia?” This would hopefully stop the familiar pattern and
forces Claudia to listen to what her father was saying. This would hopefully help Claudia pay attention to what he was really trying to say to her.

**Bowen Family Therapy**

Starting with the very first session, it is extremely important to develop a calm environment that allows this writer to begin the research and explore the broader/nuclear family systems that are occurring. In the case of the Brice family, as previously mentioned during the assessment process, is that Carolyn has some unresolved issues with her parents. These unresolved issues are causing dysfunction within her own family. One of the most important clinical tools used not only in Bowenian family therapy, but in most therapeutic models, is a genogram. The genogram which helps display the generational patterns that help examines the emotional processes in their family of origins.

As Bowen Family Therapy is a type of therapy that focuses on individuality and togetherness. In the case of the Brice family, Claudia’s individuality is creating a sense of distance which causes estrangement from the family. As the therapist, it is our job to find patterns within the family to help develop healthier and stronger relationships which can serve the purpose of lowering anxiety that is caused by the emotional turmoil the family is experiencing. An example of this in *The Family Crucible* occurs when Carolyn and David have an exchange about his working too much and that he is rarely home, and when he is, he isn’t “present.” With the
impending sense of growing apart, this caused Carolyn to become more involved with the kids, especially Claudia. Carolyn was losing control over her marriage, so she needed to find something/someone else to control. In this situation, it would be wise to work with Carolyn and David and increase their communication, which could potentially reduce the anxiety that is showing elsewhere in the family, (Napier & Whitaker, 1978).

As the sessions progress, I would work on calming the system and take the focus away from Claudia and her issues in order to help the family explore their roles in the anxious family patterns. As Claudia is in individual therapy, the psychiatrist will be able to work with Claudia on her individual problems, which can help the family therapy sessions concentrate on the way the family deals with Claudia’s behavior.

In the Brice family, triangulation appears to be a significant issue. As previously mentioned during the assessment process, there is a triangulation between Claudia, David and Carolyn. According to the Bowen model, as a therapist, we should coach one or two family members to become aware of the triangle(s) they are part(s) of and help them assume new functioning positions in relation to the triangle. With the Brice family, I would work with David and Carolyn specifically in order to help them come to terms with how being part of this triangle is causing problems within the entire system (Hall, n.d., Triangles: Therapeutic Considerations section, para. 1-3). On top of
helping the family assume new positions in relation to triangles, it will also be important to address the emotional cut-off within the family.

As a therapist, I would look to Bowen and his concept regarding emotional cutoffs. According to Hall, n.d., there are several predictable sequences related to emotional cut-off. There are two sequences that I see playing out in the Brice family: 1) “When cut-offs exist between parent and grandparent generations, a cut-off between parents and children in the next generation is more likely to develop, especially when the children are old enough to leave their parental home,” and 2) “All members of a family play some part in the cut-offs that exist and are perpetuated in that system,” (Hall, n.d., Emotional Cut-Off section, para. 11). In order to decrease the emotional-offs within the family, I could encourage the bridging of these cut-offs by suggesting that each member of the family could have interesting insights about “inn-core family members and nodal events in the family,” (Hall, n.d., Emotional Cut-Off: Therapeutic Considerations, para. 2). By helping the family see the perceptions they have about the emotional cut-offs within the family, it can help them compare their views with those who have withdrawn from the family system and have been driven out of the active emotional exchanges between family members. When this is applied to the Brice family, I believe it would be best to have each family member assess their perceptions about the emotional cut-off between mom and dad, and mom and Claudia. With regards to Carolyn, Hall, n.d., suggest that in some families, these cut-offs may have occurred several generations in the
past and be affecting the functioning of members in the current family system.

The last technique that I will address in this paper is the differentiation of self. Assessing one’s level of differentiation of self is a critical concept to Bowenian family therapy. In the case of the Brice family, I would first with Claudia on determining her level of differentiation. Based on The Family Crucible, Claudia’s level of differentiation would be classified as hard-core self-differentiated, which would be defined as “nonnegotiable with others and is composed with an individual’s firmest convictions and most integrated beliefs,” (Hall, n.d., The Eight Processes section, para. 4). One core beliefs of Bowen’s theory is to increase one’s differentiation of self. In the case of Claudia, this would help her display less dysfunctional symptoms in individual behaviors and in patterns of family interaction decrease. The best way to assess a higher level of differentiation would be by seeing the following signs: “effective functioning, goal-directed activity and responsible behavior,” (Hall, n.d., The Eight Processes: One’s Own Family section, para. 4). This process would also be very useful with Carolyn. Carolyn seems to also be classified as hard-core self-differentiated. Her way of handling problems is nonnegotiable. It be helpful to have Carolyn become more differentiated.
References


http://www.bowentheory.com/thebowenfamilytheoryanditsusesc3cmhall.htm


Appendix A—Brice Family Genogram
Appendix B—GARF

For the GARF scale of the Brice family, I have determined a score of 30 points. The reasoning behind this number is simple. The Brice family has many open conflicts (arguing over Claudia’s behavior and Claudia making her own rules). There are rare times when there is satisfactory relating, mainly seen in the therapy session, and later in the book especially when Carolyn and David begin to open up more to each other. In regards to family routines, Laura and Don seem to be having their needs met, but yet again, Claudia is not. Claudia does not feel supported nor heard with her concerns. For decision making, David and Carolyn are on different ends of the spectrum, especially when they first come into therapy. The rule making and decision making is quite ineffective with Claudia, as Claudia does not have any respect for authority, nor do the parents have respect for giving Claudia more responsibilities. The Brice family does not display many periods of enjoyment together, and there is open hostility in the family between mom and Claudia. When the family first comes to therapy, there does not seem to be any coherence among the family—Claudia is the problem, not anyone else. Also, the parents do not to be very involved in the therapy until later in the book. Carolyn and David also complain of sexual dysfunction (i.e. they are not intimate very often).