

## TRIANGULATION: PITFALL FOR THE DEVELOPING CHILD

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The term individuation refers to a quality of relationship between people in a family (or other group). In a highly individuated family, boundaries between individuals are clear, yet permeable. Respect for individuality, uniqueness, similarity, and difference, is the ground for true mutuality and thus for cohesiveness and intimacy among family members. In unindividuated families, individual boundaries are not clear. Family members project owned and/or disowned parts of the self onto others. For instance, in an unindividuated family or family subgroup, individuals may experience an enmeshed sense of "we-ness" in which there is not delineation between own and others' feelings. If I'm sad my sense is that the other is also sad. An example of projection of unowned aspects of the self into another would be a marriage in which the myth is that she has feelings and he is rational—she senses and expresses feelings for both; he accepts all responsibility for making decisions. In an individuated family, family members are more similar than in an unindividuated family, in that each is more complete, more aware and accepting of all parts of the self. At the same time in an individuated family, family members are more different because each person's characteristics are perceived with a high degree of accuracy, unclouded by projections of the perceiver's own needs and feelings.

The level of family individuation in a family may be seen to derive from parental self concepts. Parents with clearly differentiated selves have a more realistic perception of self and others and can thus create an atmosphere of empathic acceptance in the family. A parent with a less clear sense of self will be more likely to project own moods and tensions onto a mate or child, responding selectively to those moods and tensions in the other which correspond to the parent's own state, or will tend to be preoccupied with own moods and thus be less responsive to the other. In an individuated family, interpersonal stress is less, both because there exist more realistic perceptions of each individual and because individuals are acknowledged as separate persons. There is less need for certain individuals to be or feel a certain way to meet the personal needs of another individual. A parent, for instance, is less likely to try to meet his

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own needs through identification with a child. When family members are distinct and autonomous, the child enjoys validation in the form of realistic feedback to her expression of feelings and thoughts, and to her behavior. She also has the freedom to expand herself by experimenting with alternative behavioral styles, and equally as important, she can receive constructive feedback from other family members to help her select successful styles. Without an individuated family environment, the lack of empathy for the child's state fails to provide the necessary ground for the child's development of self esteem and a strong self concept. (See Kohut, 1971, 1977).

One family structure which reflects a lower level of individuation often revolves around a method parents can use to avoid stress between them. This process is called triangulation (Anonymous, 1972; Haley, 1967). The term is used here to refer to two types of coalition formation in the family. The first is a type of scapegoating. (Vogel and Bell, 1968; see also Schmidt's, 1968, discussion of the united front family). When there is stress in the marital system, the husband and wife may react by focusing their attention and conversation around their child's problems, thus avoiding dealing with the conflict between them. Another method of dealing with marital stress is for one parent to pull in a child for support, orienting conversation around the faults of the spouse. This cross-generation coalition leaves the spouse in the position of a distanced, dissimilar outsider (see Schattschneider, 1960, for a discussion of the same process in the political sphere). Over time, families develop relatively stable patterns of triangulation (Anonymous, 1972, pp. 123-124). Both forms of triangulation are invalidating to the child because she is related to out of the needs of the parents rather than out of empathy and respect for her own needs. Her own understanding of her behavior is often denied by a parent who defines the child's behavior according to the parent's needs.

Because both types of triangulation are invalidating to the child, both are expected to interfere with the development of her self concept and to restrict her social and emotional development. It is hypothesized that triangulation of a child into the marital system will be negatively related to the child's personal development. By personal development, we refer to the skills and personality structure the child has (or has not) developed that enable her to act effectively in her environment. This includes variables such as ego development, self-acceptance, self-control, and interpersonal effectiveness.

### **Method**

Between October, 1975 and June, 1976, 99 families participated in a

structured 2-hour interview in their homes. We sought a homogeneous population (white, middle class, 2 and 3-child families, with a 15–17 year old girl) in order to minimize extraneous variance. The identified adolescent girl in each family had previously completed Loevinger's sentence completion measure of ego development (Loevinger, 1966; Loevinger and Wessler, 1970), a shortened California Personality Inventory, and a sociometric survey completed by about 3500 freshman and sophomore students in their high school.

Families were contacted first by letter, then by phone; the person making the telephone contacts was not an interviewer; she knew nothing about the status of the adolescent and little about the specific goals of the study. Of 215 families invited, 99 agreed to be interviewed. Families who declined the interview usually gave lack of time or a concern for maintaining their privacy as reasons. There were no significant differences in the group of families which declined the interview, compared with the group which accepted, in age, father's education, mother's education, number of children in the family, religion, or position of the identified adolescent (oldest, middle, or youngest). There was a difference in the functioning of the identified adolescent, as measured by the psychological and sociometric tests. Families who declined had, on the average, adolescents who scored less well on a summary score of these measures ( $t=2.30$ ,  $df=216$ ;  $p<.03$ , 2-tailed test).

Families participated in a structured home interview. Immediately after the family members had given their written permission for the interview, they completed individually, a 63-item True-False questionnaire about their family. This questionnaire was a shortened version of the Moos Family Environment Scale (Moos, 1974). Answers to the questionnaire are used to construct our measures of scapegoating and cross-generational coalitions.

### **Measurement of triangulation**

Because scapegoating and coalitions are relatively difficult to observe, we constructed indirect measures of each. We expect that in any long term coalition (either a cross-generational coalition or a coalition in which parents distance the adolescent), the allies in the coalition will tend to become similar to one another and more dissimilar from the excluded person. This is because persons in the coalition are more likely to share their perceptions and attitudes with each other, including those about the family. Also, since they define themselves as similar to each other and different from the outsider, they are most likely to accept each other's perceptions and reject the outsider's views. The same process would lead

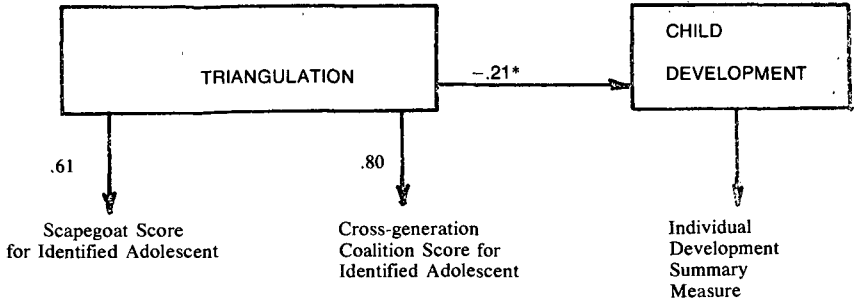
the person triangled "out" to define herself as seeing things differently from the other two. We thus look for evidence of scapegoating and cross-generational coalitions in the perceptual/attitudinal congruence among different pairs of family members.

To test the hypothesis, then, we assumed that the pattern of differences in how family members described the family climate (on the true-false Family Environment Scale) is a manifestation of their perceived closeness or distance from each other. A scapegoated child will be drawn into the position of increased disagreement with the parents as differences between child and parents are focused on and reinforced in this triangulation. When the child is in a cross-generational coalition with one parent, to the exclusion of the other, there is exaggerated agreement between coalition members and exaggerated disagreement between the child and the excluded mate.

To test the hypothesis, three dissimilarity scores were developed: one for the husband-wife dissimilarity (HW), and one for the dissimilarity between the identified adolescent (the one for whom we have psychological data) and each parent (husband-adolescent, HA; wife-adolescent, WA). The dissimilarity scores were found by calculating the proportion of items the two people disagreed on for the Family Environment Scale. Our interest was not in how much family members disagreed or in whether some families had more or less disagreement than other families, but in the *relative* amounts of disagreement between family members. Scapegoating and coalition scores were thus developed using the amount of disagreement between the two parents as a baseline. A *scapegoating score* was calculated for the identified adolescent by finding the dissimilarity of the child from both parents relative to the HW distance; i.e.,  $(HA + WA) / HW$ . This score thus represents the adolescent's isolation from parents; the more distant she is from both parents relative to the interparent distance, the higher the scapegoating score. A *coalition score* was calculated by finding the imbalance in the child's dissimilarity from the parents relative to the HW dissimilarity (dividing the HW distance into the absolute value of the difference between the two parent-child dissimilarities), i.e.  $|HA - WA| / HW$ . Thus the closer the adolescent is to one parent relative to her distance from the other parent, the higher her coalition score.

### Measurement of adolescent functioning

Following a factor analysis of the individual psychological variables, four scales were devised for each adolescent: ego development (Loevinger), sociometric (popularity and mutuality of choices), self ac-



\*  $p = .02$

Figure 1. Effect of triangulation into the marital system on child development.

ceptance and sociability (CPI), socialization and self control (CPI). A gross measure of individual development was achieved by summing the adolescent's standard scores on these four individual scales.

## Results

The hypothesis, that triangulation (either by scapegoating or cross-generational coalition formation) would be negatively related to child development, was tested by relating the individual development summary measure for the identified adolescent to a triangulation variable constructed of the child's scapegoat and coalition scores (see Figure 1). The results support the triangulation hypothesis. The estimate of the causal effect of triangulation on child development was significant ( $p = .02$ ) in the predicted direction.

## Discussion

Support is found for the hypothesis that triangulation of a child into the marital system is detrimental to that child's development. The sample was a group of unlabeled (normal) families. The results point to the importance of understanding the individual as part of the larger system and respecting the power of the family system to impact on the development and growth of the individual. Even an adult, no longer living with the family, is subject to the pull of the triangle (see Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark, 1973; Framo, 1976). The pull of the family triangle can hamper the individual's attempts at self differentiation and self actualization. The same family

triangle will effect the individual's integration into a therapy group, or any other group, in that the individual will tend to recreate the known, the interpersonal pattern which is comfortable and predictable. This tendency, when the individual is made aware of it, can provide impetus for meaningful personal growth.

The family system aside, triangulation is a dynamic present in all groups. Awareness of this process is an especially important asset for the group therapist. As tension arises between individuals in the group, a strong tendency develops for one person in a conflicting dyad to pull an outsider into a coalition, for group members to focus on something else outside the group, or to scapegoat one of the group members. Highlighting this process for group members will help all maintain clarity about individual identities and interpersonal boundaries.

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