

1-1-1991

Personal, Marital, and Family Myths: Theoretical Formulations and Clinical Strategies

Harry Cohen
Iowa State University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/csr>

Recommended Citation

Cohen, Harry (1991) "Personal, Marital, and Family Myths: Theoretical Formulations and Clinical Strategies," *Clinical Sociology Review*: Vol. 9: Iss. 1, Article 23.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.wayne.edu/csr/vol9/iss1/23>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@WayneState. It has been accepted for inclusion in Clinical Sociology Review by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@WayneState.

to be good for the group. Favors were granted to workers who would "rat" on their fellow QC members who mentioned the union during working hours. Working conditions became very difficult for pro-union workers, "time off" became almost impossible to get, and their breaks were monitored to the second.

The QCs were also a form of control because they fragmented the work force. They promoted a sense of belonging to the small group, but decreased the feeling of membership in the larger community of the plant. These small teams made it easier for management to recognize deviants. Even though the work force was fragmented, the power structure of management remained intact and in control.

Toward Grenier's last month at Ethicon-Albuquerque, the workers voted to determine if the union would be allowed to come into the plant. The author gave some examples of his personal experiences and feelings of that time. Grenier said he was now actively involved in pro-union activities, yet continued to gather data for his research. The company had become suspicious of him. He reported that as a result of his pro-union participation, he received threatening phone calls, his files and notes were subpoenaed (illegally), and his house was watched for weeks. On two occasions he and his family were forced to leave their home because of threats.

Grenier mentioned that stepping outside his role of a neutral social scientist bothered him. I was surprised by his reaction. I also do not understand why he appeared so unprepared to deal with, or was taken aback by, the tactics of a capitalist organization's manipulation of workers. Grenier's training should have made him more aware of the workings of the personnel system. This naivete may reinforce the idea that academia is an "ivory tower" and perhaps does not prepare some of its students to confront the realities of the outside world.

Grenier's book will be a useful tool for educating social scientists about the relationship between sociological practice and academic sociology. I recommend this book for students, teachers, and practitioners who are concerned about management and labor issues and those conducting research on organizational programs.

The following review was originally published in volume 8 of CSR and is reprinted here with author corrections.

Personal, Marital, and Family Myths: Theoretical Formulations and Clinical Strategies, by Dennis A. Bagarozzi and Stephen A. Anderson. New York: W.W. Norton, 1989, 321pp., \$32.95 cloth. **Family Evaluation**, by Michael E. Kerr and Murray Bowen. New York: W.W. Norton, 1988, 400pp., \$29.95 cloth.

Harry Cohen

Iowa State University

In *As You Like It*, Shakespeare wrote that "All the world's a stage" and "all the men and women merely players." In *Using Sociology*, edited by Roger Straus, I stated my dramaturgical equation:

Act ← *re-act* = *inter-act-ion*

The roles we play, based on scripts set into the mind, lead our audiences to re-act our acts based on their own perceptions, inner scripts, and roles. They and we are "on stage," acting, reacting, and interacting. When maids come together "on stage" in marriage, each brings a repertoire of scripts, acts, and expectations. These meld and often enough also lead to conflict. This is my dramaturgical "stage-setting" for the book *Personal, Marital, and Family Myths* by Drs. Bagarozzi and Anderson.

Dr. Dennis Bagarozzi is a psychotherapist in private practice in Atlanta and Athens, Georgia. Dr. Stephen Anderson is associate professor and director of the marital and family therapy training program at the University of Connecticut. They have written a clinical analysis of personal and family myths. Changing myths as mental scripts changes behavior based on them, affecting roles on stages of life. Audiences tend to react differently, affecting the interactive life show.

One oversimplified example from the Bagarozzi-Anderson book: A man's relationship to his mother and wife is characterized as "a moth drawn to a flame." He does not trust people. A moth drawn to a flame is powerless and is burned. He is drawn to his wife's flame but fears (his mistrust of people) the burn and withdraws. The wife reacts. The marriage is locked into a show with sad scenes. The therapist inspired the vision that the couple could live more like "two peas in a pod." Here people are together and separate. They are together for warmth and separated to avoid becoming inflamed. This new image improves the marital interaction (63).

This "together and separate" theme is a key element of the "differentiated self" as presented in the book *Family Evaluation*, by Michael Kerr and Murray Bowen. "Drawn to a flame" represents the uncontrolled emotional reactivity that Kerr and Bowen show to be the state of the "undifferentiated self," the self which has the most problems because of emotional fusion to other people's anxiety and provocations. The undifferentiated are the "identified patients" who suffer by acting out the anxiety of the group.

Bagarozzi and Anderson focus on constructing new myths for clinical improvement. The Bowen model of change focuses on developing a systemic understanding of the family scene to shift roles toward greater differentiation. People are taught to stop blaming others. Behavior is seen as the consequence of systemic multigenerational processes (254-55). The Bowen method is to "focus

on changing self rather than on trying to change others." It is necessary to develop an "ability *not* to react to relieve the anxiety of the moment" (79). "Focus on self, an awareness of the emotional process in the family, and the ability not to be governed by anxiety and emotional reactivity are all components of a long-term effort to increase one's level of differentiation" (79n.19).

Some people think a myth by definition is a fake and constraining. Bagarozzi and Anderson take exception to this view. A myth may seem nonsensical because it is made up from nothing. I add so is everything else made up, if one adopts a constructionist, attributional view of how reality is created. A myth may be made up but functions as an ordering device, as does perceiving the importance of sports or other social constructions of reality. "It is our contention that family myths are universal and not necessarily pathological. Their functionality can be determined only by assessing the degree to which they contribute to or curtail the growth and development of each family member and the family system as a whole" (2).

Drs. Bagarozzi and Anderson, writing to set the framework for their book, at the same time offer a summary of major points of Bowen's theory presented with Kerr in *Family Evaluation*:

[We] are born into and raised by a family group from which we must separate and individuate. As we attempt to master each successive developmental task, to disentangle thoughts from feelings [major aspect of Bowen's differentiated self], to develop a true self (as opposed to a false or pseudo self), to free oneself from the enmeshed confines of an undifferentiated ego mass . . . [the authors correctly credit Bowen for these terms], to achieve self-realization (Jung . . .), and to actualize our inherent potentials (Maslow . . ., Rogers . . .), we create our own personal mythology, complete with attendant rituals, rites, and taboos. Our individual struggles with differentiation and self realization can be conceptualized as a personal recapitulation of our primitive ancestors' struggles to free themselves from the confines of the participation mystique and to separate the self from an all encompassing, preconscious existence in the primal group (Neumann . . .) (3-4).

Drs. Bagarozzi and Anderson write that in their clinical practice they have often seen a client taken over by the power of personal mythology. Such a person "seems possessed, driven, compelled to behave in a particular fashion. As if in a dream or surrealistic passion play, the person goes through various ritualistic behavior patterns in an attempt to relive and resolve some conflict or to master a particular life task" (4). I see the same process in the collective behavior of

groups and whole societies. Fascist groups and intemperate ideologies and behavior even in our democracy and academic world share compulsions, ritualistic thinking and regression (toward the immature primal past).

Individuals and groups share a recursive myth-making. Bagarozzi and Anderson explain that it is impossible to separate an individual's personal myths from those of family, community and culture. They focus on understanding

personal myths in terms of how they affect relationships with significant others in the context of marital/family systems. Individuals, couples and families are seen as actively selecting and adopting, as their own, those cultural myths whose various components, symbols, rituals . . . have meaning and importance for each family member and the marital/family system as a whole. These cultural myths are modified and reworked by the individual in ways that fit into his/her personal mythology (5-6).

Bagarozzi and Anderson determine profiles of their clients through varied questionnaires. One is called "Spousal Inventory of Desired Changes and Relationship Barriers." This is used to help evaluate the perceived fairness of the social exchange dimension of the marriage, providing clues to relational dysfunctions (96).

Many fascinating case studies are presented. Equally fascinating are examples of how life stories are changed. One method is to have clients state their favorite stories and characters from novels, movies, or television shows. One chose the movie based on Jean Auel's novel, *The Clan of the Cave Bear*, which is also a story of the quest for differentiation. Clients design roles and write new scripts for characters who may be seen to represent themselves and family members. While doing this they can experiment with new possibilities in their families and lives.

In our way we are all as Shakespeare said, "players" on the stage of life. Drs. Bagarozzi and Anderson show that while we are players we do not have to be puppets. We can be players and script writers, directors and producers at the same time.

In their powerful book on "the role of the family as an emotional unit that governs individual behavior and development," Michael Kerr and Murray Bowen show that for some people it is difficult to play on stages of life without being pulled as puppets by strings of the group. The group pulls and they "act up," "acting out" the group processes. This type is called the "undifferentiated self." The "differentiated self" is a social player but not a puppet. The book has implications for all social groups and is not limited to the family.

No one, not even the authors, is totally differentiated. Everyone has a basic level of differentiation which comes from a process dating across generations. It is not someone's fault to have a certain eye or hair color; nor is it a person's fault to have "inherited" a lower level of differentiation. If people and life conditions do not press, a person may have a good functional differentiation level, performing with few problems. But when life constrains, a person with a low basic level of differentiation falls in functional differentiation level and tends to suffer more problems than one with a higher level (97-107). Those lowest in differentiation may engage in violence, suffer psychoses, or become physically ill in response to group pressures. They have difficulty separating self from others.

Sociologically important is the authors' observation that society itself has become more undifferentiated. We see this in varied social pathologies. Much of our democracy is based on attempts to achieve more differentiation. A free press, rights to free speech, separation and balance of governmental powers, separation of church and state, all aim toward "separate while together." However, we are subject to societal regressions: intemperate attacks for divergent views, unyielding emotional ideologies which are based on blaming others and hate, mutual and unending intergroup provocations and emotional "fusion," gangs, and addictions. "The lower the functional level of a society, the greater the incidence of 'social symptoms' such as a high crime rate, a high divorce rate, an incessant clamor for 'rights,' and a notable neglect of responsibilities" (334).

Social regressions are like infectious epidemics. Not everyone acts out anti-social behavior, but as the level of anxiety and emotional reactivity in the group increases the larger the number of group members who "fall" and act out. This "infects" still others.

Individuals and families with higher levels of differentiation . . . are better able to avoid the pitfall of blaming others [blaming keeps people enmeshed and provides justification for getting even] and are less influenced by the pressures of a frenzied group. Entire societies [as are families] can be conceptualized as emotional systems. When anxiety mounts in the society, the average functional level of differentiation decreases and the society goes through a period of regression. [There is] more behavior by certain subgroups that impairs the functioning of other subgroups, and more symptoms of all types (251n.29).

The family process transmitting levels of differentiation works as follows: People of common levels of differentiation tend to marry. Some of their children tend to have similar levels of differentiation-undifferentiation, and some

siblings are more or less differentiated. Those siblings less differentiated tend to marry similar partners and have children, one or more of whom are even less differentiated. These also marry on an equal level of differentiation. After several generations this process yields a highly undifferentiated family and one member who is so fused to the group anxiety that (s)he acts out the provocations of the group (ch. 8).

Murray Bowen, M.D., is clinical professor at Georgetown University Medical Center, and director of the Georgetown University Family Center. He was a pioneer in the development of family systems theory and in research and treatment of schizophrenia. Michael Kerr, M.D., is clinical associate professor at Georgetown University Medical Center, Washington, D.C., and director of training at the Georgetown University Family Center.

Dr. Bowen has written an epilogue to the book in which he states his "40-year odyssey in developing family systems theory and therapy, also known as the Bowen theory" (339). True to the theory of differentiation, Dr. Kerr wrote the major portion of the book without Bowen's knowledge of its content. They are intellectually linked and remain separate in their scholarly development.

A brief book review cannot adequately cover the impact, wisdom, depth, beauty and importance of the Kerr-Bowen book.