

# The family crucible: a systemic approach essay sample



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The Family Crucible, written by Augustus Napier and Carl Whitaker (1978), exemplifies a fragmented family system. The family consists of David a VIP lawyer, Carolyn an angry mother, Claudia an enraged teenager, Don the 11-year-old peacemaker, and six-year-old Laura. Co-therapists, Napier and Whitaker have taken on the task of working with the family using a systemic approach to conceptualize the family's difficulties. Herein, this writer will describe how Whitaker and Napier depict the family struggles, how these struggles relate to the family unit in deference to an individual focus, and how specific interventions employed support the systemic approach.

### Conceptualization of the Brice Family's Difficulties

Conceptualization is more of an ideational structure with a potential for realization, very similar to a schema (Webster's Thesaurus, 2013).

Identifying how Whitaker and Napier (1978) conceptualize the Brice family's struggles brings forth an unimpeded view of the issues from an experiential perspective. The first session was to include the entire family so the therapists could visualize the family dynamics and the inner workings of the individuals involved. When Don did not arrive with the family, Whitaker began to question the family's commitment to the therapeutic process.

According to Whitaker (1978, p. 6), "to start the process with one fifth of the family absent would be unfair to Don and I think unfair to you. He's part of the family, and we need him here if the family as a whole is going to change." The family became frustrated and began employing Don as the scapegoat for the lack of commitment to therapy (Nichols, 2013, p. 292). Whitaker (1978) expressed his view of Don's absence as an unconscious process wherein Don was elected by the family to stay home (p. 8).

The family in turn would not have to face the electricity of the therapeutic process and could also test the validity of the therapeutic expectations of having the entire family present. Whitaker's (1978) conceptualization of the dynamic was evident when he told the family " It's really the family that has the anxiety about everybody's getting together, and the family he's acting for" (p. 9). Recognizing the importance of Don's participation in the therapeutic process, the family agreed to a second session with all members present. During the second session, the family was provided individual opportunities to relate his or her perceptions of the struggles in the family. Using Claudia as the identified patient, the family related struggles directly associated with Claudia's behavior (Nichols, 2013, p. 15). Whitaker (1978) conceptualized the issues in a different perspective stating, " sounds like Claudia is in charge of getting Mom and Dad to start fighting, and you and Laura are in charge of helping them stop" (p. 11).

Whitaker also indicated the parallels involving Carolyn's anger at Claudia for hiding in her room and David's propensity to hide in his study (p. 11). Using the unconscious frame of reference from session one, another conceptualization that was presented was that of Don's willingness to talk as the reason that the family had not wanted to bring him to the first session (p. 12). As the session progressed, Whitaker (1978) explored the family, trying to uncover the structure, the tone, and the patterns in the family that were deeper and more significant than Claudia's problems. Some identified patterns include triangulation between Claudia, David, and Carolyn, and coalitions between David and Carolyn against Claudia, Carolyn and Don against David, and David and Claudia against Carolyn (Nichols, 2013, p. 78).

The emotional divorce tone was also identified between Carolyn and David with the acknowledgement of the affair with work for David and the affair with the mother for Carolyn (p. 18). Whitaker conceptualized the affairs as a result of a fearfulness of dependency for the couple and the feelings of entrapment related to the old family of origin. Divergence of Individual and System Concepts

There are several differences between the individual approach to therapy and the systemic approach to therapy. According to Bitter (2009), there are some similarities too, but it is the differences that set the orientation of the helper toward those who are served. Whitaker and Napier employed the systemic approach when working with the Brice family. Table 1: 1 presents the differences between the two approaches in relation to The Family Crucible (Napier & Whitaker, 1978). Table 1: 1 Divergence of individual and systemic concepts

Individual (Claudia) Systemic (Brice Family)

Focus is on the development of the individual's self, coping responses, and problem solving. The identified patient is the focus. | Focus is on the transactions, sequences of interaction, interdependence, recursion, and mutual influence. | People are in isolation from the systems in which they live. | It is about the process, how a problem affects the family and how the family maintains the problem. | Clients are assessed against fixed norms, and their symptoms are considered in relation to standard descriptions of psychopathology. | Assessment includes understanding that each individual has an internal system that is learning to consider the impact of larger systems on the family | Interventions employ ways designed to help

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individual cope.] Interventions are designed to help change the transactions and familial patterns that maintain the behavior| (Adapted from Theory and Practice of Family Therapy and Counseling, by J. Bitter. 2009 by Brooks Cole).

Reflecting on Table 1: 1, the individual approach would focus on Claudia and the presenting issues surrounding the family's visit. The therapeutic approach would be specifically geared toward providing interventions designed to help Claudia change her maladaptive behavior. The divergence occurs during the systemic approach through the shift in focus from Claudia to the entire family unit and the interactions that are occurring. Systemically, the interventions would include the identification of familial transactions and specific Brice family patterns that perpetuate the behaviors. Specific

#### Systemic Interventions

Employing the systemic approach, Napier and Whitaker (1978) determine specific interventions designed to engage the entire Brice family in the process of change. Using the experiential premise that the root cause of family problems is emotional expression, both therapists engage the family in opportunities for emotional experiences (Nichols, 2013, p. 145). This is evidenced in the first session when Whitaker stated to Laura, "What do you think about all this crazy stuff?" (p. 11). The emotional expression opportunities continued with Whitaker pursuing emotional responses from all family members in attempt to gauge the family temperature. Whitaker (1981) also denoted that "There is no such thing as marriage, only two scapegoats sent out by their families to perpetuate themselves" (as cited in Nichols, 2013, p. 147). Accommodating this theoretical premise, Whitaker <https://assignbuster.com/the-family-crucible-a-systemic-approach-essay-sample/>

engaged in interventions designed to reveal the parental subsystem struggles as well as the dysfunctions in the marriage propagated onto the children. This is exemplified when the children identify the triangles in the family or the teams each member is a part of (Napier & Whitaker, 1978, p. 19). Conclusion

In conclusion, Whitaker and Napier (1978) provide insight into this fragmented family system. Using the systemic approach, they conceptualize the family's difficulties and employ experiential interventions in relation to their systemic understanding. The application of theoretical principles to the family as a whole sustains the family system and eliminates the need for one person to be responsible for the whole unit.

## References

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