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CHAPTER 3

# *The Cultural Meaning of Family Triangles*

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"Triangles" are pivotal constructs in family therapy. Symptoms of family distress have been regularly linked to the presence of family triangles (Ackerman, 1966; Bowen, 1972; Haley, 1967, 1976; Minuchin, 1974; Satir, 1967; Fogarty, 1979; Lerner, 1989; Feldman, 1994). Several hypotheses have been used to explain the link between triangles and family dysfunction. One is the idea that any persistent tension, conflict, or anxiety between two people can be diffused by involving a third party. A similar idea is that triangular processes detour a couple from underlying marital conflict; in such a case, the conflict is often manifested as disagreements over a third party, such as a child or an older parent. This latter form—the alliance between two members of different generations (usually a parent and child against the other parent), called the "cross-generational coalition"—has been focused on as being especially malevolent or "perverse."

Many therapists not only believe that unresolved marital conflicts "cause" the intrusion or the recruitment of a third party; they also believe that a triangle has the "effect" of weakening necessary boundaries around the couple, and thus further precludes the resolution of the underlying marital discord. Consequently, a therapist who detects a cross-generational coalition tends automatically to strengthen the boundary around the couple, and to extrude, block, or free up the person caught in the middle, while simultaneously addressing the underlying marital conflict.

In this chapter, I argue that the uncritical pathologizing of triangles (particularly cross-generational coalitions) and the automatic goal of restoring the boundary around the marital couple are based on *local* cultural<sup>1</sup> constructions that reflect and support the ideology of a particular

kind of family: the American middle-class nuclear family. In families from other ethnicities, races, and social classes, and from rural rather than urban settings, placing strong boundaries around a conflicted couple and blocking the participation of other family members may cause strain by undermining other central family ties (Hoffman, 1981) or other potential avenues for conflict resolution.

To demonstrate how triangles take on their meanings and implications from the social context and the cultural constructions in which they are embedded, I compare cross-generational coalitions in families with different cultural visions and different prioritizing of the marital and the intergenerational relationships. First, I focus on the principles of organization that affect the meaning of triangles in collectivistic and individualistic settings. These contexts vary in their ideological narratives regarding (1) connectedness and separateness, and (2) generation and gender hierarchies. Second, I show that these differences have implications for communication styles and for conflict resolution, and therefore that they influence how (and how much) a triangular pattern reveals or contributes to family distress.

## INDIVIDUALISTIC AND COLLECTIVISTIC CONTEXTS

### Connectedness and Separateness

The relatively isolated nuclear family is at the center of individualistic societies, and at the center of the nuclear family is the marital bond. Relative discontinuity with the families of origin of husband and wife is culturally supported. In fact, boundaries around the couple must be closely guarded, because the very existence of the family depends on the quality of the marital tie. Thus, intimate disclosure between parents and children is thought to interfere with this necessary separation. Healthy development is therefore equated with leaving home and individuation from one's own parents, so that attachment to a spouse becomes primary. This is also the view of contemporary psychological theory,<sup>2</sup> which clearly favors the values of the middle-class American family.

The nuclear family embedded in an extended, collectivistic network exists within a wholly dissimilar field of social interactions. In this type of family, the marital tie is not elevated above all others, and lifelong parent-child bonds insure continuity with the family of origin (Hsu, 1971; Bohannon, 1971). From a multiculturalist perspective, it is imperative not to pathologize this lifelong connectedness and interdependence, which are characteristic of many ethnic groups (Tamura & Lau, 1992;

McGoldrick, Giordano, & Pearce, 1996) and of many social minorities, whose life conditions often make of the parent-child dyad a more enduring or stable relationship than the marital bond. A most evocative description of familistic preferences in Asian collectivistic settings is given by Alan Roland (1988). He described a "familial self" for Japanese and Indians that contrasts with the "individual self" of mainstream Americans. The "familial self" involves connectedness, emotional involvement, empathy with and receptivity to one's family of origin, and strong identification with the honor and reputation of the extended family over attachments to outsiders.

Nevertheless, family therapists of disparate orientations, from strategic to intergenerational, subscribe to the cultural narrative that optimal development requires a stance of differentiation from one's family of origin. Some go to great lengths to create a boundary between the couple and the families of origin. Milton Erickson (reported in Haley, 1973), for example, instructed a woman to throw up on the floor (albeit apologetically) when her parents-in-law visited unannounced, so that they would become more "respectful of her needs." Poor taste aside, it is hard to picture this strategy working within a richly connected network of relatives. But it is also possible that a person raised in a collectivistic environment would be less likely to advance "her needs" for privacy as being so crucial.

### **Hierarchies: Generation and Gender**

In individualistic cultures, the family's leadership structure depends upon reaching marital agreement and a satisfactory quid pro quo through many implicit and explicit conversations and negotiations (Lederer & Jackson, 1968; Walsh, 1989). Horizontal, egalitarian, and symmetrical interactions are stressed, even when actual practices deviate from these ideals. All siblings are supposed to be equal in duties and privileges. Husband and wife expect joint domestic authority and strive for the proverbial "united parental front" because parental consensus is thought to be crucial. Spouses expect equal affective involvement with, and equal rights over, the children. A child is expected to love and be loyal to both parents equally and not to take sides. Parental authority is precarious and withdraws away as children advance in age and become colleagues and "friends" of their parents (Bohannon, 1971; Williamson, 1982).

On the other hand, in collectivistic extended families, vertical relationships and age hierarchies are stressed, with leadership and authority firmly vested in the older generation throughout life (Hsu, 1971; Tamura & Lau, 1992). To take one example, Mexican Americans respect the parents' hierarchical position throughout life, and move very slowly from

a position of inequality toward greater equality near the end of the parents' lives (Clark & Mendelson, 1975). Compare this parent-child attachment and lifelong respect with the prescriptions of mainstream psychological theory, which equate emotional maturity with the adult development of "personal authority" (Williamson, 1982).

Many collectivistic cultures are based on patriarchal privilege. Ideally, men have public authority over women. The husband has authority over his wife, and the brother over his sister. The father's leadership and executive role distance him from his wife and from the children. In fact, greater affective closeness between the mother and children is culturally expected (Slater, 1992; Del Castillo, 1996).

Asymmetries among the children or siblings are also common. A son or daughter may gain ascendancy, obligations, privilege, and access to adult information by being the oldest, parentified, or favorite son or daughter. This child may be in an apprenticeship role to take future care of the land, the inheritance, the aging parents, or the surviving parent. Or this child may be the culture and language "broker" or "go-between" for the immigrant parents.

### Implications for Communication Styles and Conflict Resolution

The ideologies described above regarding connectedness and hierarchies have implications for communicating and for managing conflicts. True to their wish to preserve family connectedness and avoid interpersonal conflict, collectivistic cultures favor indirect, implicit, and covert communications. People publicly agree with others in order not to make them uncomfortable. This superficial harmony may be accompanied by talking behind a person's back to a third party for two reasons: first, simply to decompress and reduce tension about some difficult aspect of the relationship; or, second, actually to engage the listener as a helper in changing the other person, with whom the speaker does not wish or dare to negotiate directly.

Furthermore, in extended networks, the permeable nuclear boundaries allow inclusion of parents, siblings, and even friends. They fulfill many instrumental functions and reduce tensions by providing emotional outlets in the form of "gossip" and "secrets" about the spouse, in-laws, or other relatives. Many rapport-based alliances are acceptable, particularly when they follow gender lines. These "light" triangles, rather than being detrimental, may actually enhance the stability of the marriage (Komarovsky, 1967). Tannen (1990) aptly describes women's socialization to "trouble talk," and to sharing details of theirs and other people's lives as a basic ingredient of intimacy—a view not espoused by most

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men. Mexican working-class women may consider it permissible to be disrespectful about their husbands when talking to other women (Benería & Roldán, 1987).

"Gossip" serves an important function in many cultures. For example, among Filipinos, gossip is an intricate way to criticize another's values or actions, without causing open conflict (Cimmarusti, 1996). The person criticized inevitably becomes aware of the criticism when another family member reports what is being said. This information can become an impetus for the recipient to change his or her behavior. According to Cimmarusti, the widespread practice of gossip leads to considerable (often functional) triangulation among first-generation Filipino Americans:

The process of triangulation, so often seen as dysfunctional by Western-culture clinicians, can be successfully employed by first-generation Filipino-American families and their second-generation offspring, especially in dealing with their parents. That is, concerns or complaints about a person can be relayed to that person without straining relationships or exacerbating conflict. For example, one family member tells another about concerns or complaints she/he has about a third member. When the person told has an appropriate family role, she/he can relay these concerns to the third party in a functional fashion. (1996, p. 211)

The opposite of gossip is communication characterized by assertiveness, direct expressions of opinions, demands for clarification, and a reluctance to participate in other people's problems. These forms of communication are more congruent with the ideals of differentiation prevalent in individualistic cultures and in conventional psychological theory. For example, during a consultation interview, a well-known White family therapist (implying "codependent" behavior) instructed a White middle-class daughter to interrupt her mother when the mother talked to her about her father's excessive drinking, and to tell her: "Don't involve me in your life. You have to live with your mistakes, or do something about it. Let me go on with my life. He is your guy, not mine."

There are many reasons why such an intervention may backfire with members of collectivistic cultures. First, a differentiated stance with clear and assertive communication is antithetical to the values of receptivity, concern, and obligation that are part of being socialized into an interconnected family network. A "hands-off" attitude may be perceived as selfish or disrespectful, and may puzzle a mother who may not have a cultural code about the autonomy and separation of the daughter. Indeed, the daughter may be the most valuable and powerful ally in engaging the father in a process of change. The daughter also may feel guilty for being disloyal to her mother's plight.

The value of *familismo* among Latinos stresses the duties of family members to help one another always, but particularly in the face of serious problems. Inclán and Hernandez (1993) offer a fitting cross-cultural critique of the therapy construct of "codependence" as being based on an individualistic cultural narrative.

### CROSS-GENERATIONAL AND SAME-GENERATION COALITIONS IN CULTURAL CONTEXT

In the larger field of the collectivistic narrative, the constellation of ties that is likely to upset the family balance is different from that which may upset a small nuclear unit.

#### Cross-Generational Coalitions

In the nuclear family, unresolved marital disagreements pose a major threat to the continuity and the authority structure of the family. Ideally, children should be equally attached to the mother and to the father. Therefore, if one parent enlists the cooperation of a child in a marital struggle, or if the child becomes more sympathetic toward one parent, this imbalance may be construed as a covert attack on the excluded parent. A cross-generational coalition strikes at the nuclear family foundation of ideals of individuation, marital unity, parental consensus and equidistance from children, direct communication, and egalitarian hierarchies.

Cross-generational coalitions are common in nuclear families living in collectivistic settings, but there are several reasons why they do not have the same unbalancing effect. Lines of authority are clearly defined *a priori*, and the exclusion of the father may not be read as a threat, because marital disclosure and parental consensus are not essential for the continuity of the family. In patriarchal extended settings, the mother's asymmetrical position in the family's hierarchy may prompt her to form a coalition with one son, either to challenge the father through the son, or simply because a strong relationship with the son may increase her influence (Lamphere, 1974; Romanucci-Ross, 1973; Del Castillo, 1996) or even her closeness with the husband.

It may even be that the family members regard this "traditional" triangular arrangement as unsatisfactory, but they may argue that it provides a necessary balance. Such is the case with the *hausfrau* of the German patriarchal household (Slater, 1977), who publicly endorses the father's authority, while privately siding with the children. The children may indeed feel more distant from the father than from the mother, but

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they still respect his authority. In fact, children in rigid, patriarchal families often feel that actively enlisting the mother's secret cooperation is the only way to obtain privileges and handle the father's strictness.

Observing this cross-generational coalition, many American-trained therapists may interpret the problem as stemming from a gender-based marital imbalance, and may attempt to disentangle the son or daughter from the middle so as to work on the marital power asymmetry and the wife's oppression. However, cautious inquiry and curiosity about how belief systems and ideologies are tied to the triangles observed should precede any jumping to conclusions about their meaning and functionality. Therapists should consider that cross-generational coalitions may be common "cultural solutions" that have a negative or positive impact, depending on the family's personal and cultural ideology. Cross-generational coalitions may indeed in some cases perpetuate a painful marital status quo that needs to be uncovered and counteracted with cultural resistance. But in other cases these coalitions may actually help redress imbalances of power that are not easy to change for an individual alone. Or they may help initiate a process of change, because the alliance between the mother and offspring dislodges the father from his patriarchal entrenchment.

Each client's generation needs to be taken into account, as it is so intricately tied to cultural ideology. An older Latina woman, for example, may resist a therapist's suggestion of weakening the tie with a son or daughter and developing a more egalitarian relationship with her husband. She may favor holding on to a value system that, in her view, affords her respect and protection in spite of considerable self-sacrifice (Vasquez & Gil, 1996). This resistance is sometimes accompanied by a well-founded fear that a direct demand for her rights could lead to divorce—a much greater evil than an unhappy marriage for a member of the older generation, especially for a woman.

### *Same-Generation Coalitions*

In the collectivistic setting, threats to the continuity and hegemony of the intergenerational tie need to be severely countered. Therefore, a different type of triangle from the cross-generational coalition is threatening—a triangle in which the strong dyad is not between two members of different generations in the same family, but between two people of the same generation. One is a family member, the other an outsider to the family.

A same-generation coalition may indeed have dangerous implications for a family bent on preserving the primacy of the intergenerational dyad. A parent, especially a mother, may react negatively to a son's new-

found intense closeness with an "outsider," such as a girlfriend or a new wife—particularly if the latter conceives of her love relationship as exclusive rather than inclusive of the husband's family. A same-generation coalition arises also from a marriage in which the husband supports the wife in disengaging from her "overbearing" mother, or, conversely, the wife wins the husband over from his "excessive" attachment to his mother.

These are adaptive processes from the vantage point of the marital bond, but may be very disturbing to an intergenerational tie in which the expectation is for lifelong, intense parent-child involvement. For example, whereas a White American man may "separate" from his parents by expecting his new wife to succeed him in continuing the closeness, or to handle conflicts with his mother (Silverstein & Rashbaum, 1994; Walters, Carter, Papp, & Silverstein, 1988; Friedman, 1985; Meyerstein, 1996), a "typical" Mexican man may not be stirred by the same cultural strivings for autonomy. It is likely that he will maintain an emotionally devoted and loyal relationship with his mother, without resorting to his wife's help at all. Both types of family situations may create considerable stress for the young wife, but the developmental meaning attached to the cross-generational triangle is different in each case.

Triangles, then, take on their meaning and implication in part from the underlying cultural code that defines their degree of acceptability and interpersonal usefulness in the culture. The potential for problems in a triangle depends on its congruence with the total social field.

### FAMILY TRIANGLES IN TRANSITION

In reality, individualistic and collectivistic families are not as separate and distinct as the descriptions to this point may have suggested. Even the most traditional families are constantly exposed, through globalization, urbanization, and migration, to contemporary nuclear ideologies; and even the most individualistic families have contacts with the extended families they come from. In spite of these complex realities of family life, American psychotherapy is biased toward the nuclear husband-wife bond, and regards continued attachment to parents as secondary.

A therapist must accept family variation in the meanings attached to the intergenerational and the marital bond, and the complex interconnection between the various family dyads. Thus, a therapist needs to develop a curious, open-minded attitude, and should closely examine the ramifications of a particular triangle in each particular family.

Consider this example: In an Italian American family where the husband is a fisherman at sea for several months a year, the benefits of his

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wife's ties to her own mother outweigh the adjustment costs that arise when he returns. The mother and daughter function as allies to keep the daughter's family together; for instance, the mother helps the daughter with the children (one of whom is physically challenged), and thus relieves pressure on the daughter's husband. Among other things, the mother-daughter interactions include frequent venting of complaints about the absent spouse. The Italian collectivistic background of the family, the husband's seasonal occupation, and the child's handicap may all contribute to the continuation of the mother-daughter attachment. These circumstances do not necessarily require the strengthening of the marital (or parental) relationship by blocking the wife's mother from "interfering" in the nuclear family. Rather than helping this family acculturate to the dominant American, couple-oriented model, the issue may be how to help this family alternate the two family models at different times in ecologically useful ways, perhaps by better orchestrating the entrances and exits of the family members involved.

When it appears that there is a clash of traditional and modern values, it is more productive to label families as being in "cultural transition"—that is, in a state and process of coexistence of different cultural ideologies and codes (for further discussion, see Falicov, 1995). Immigrant families often move from settings where there is a larger emphasis on tradition, generational continuity, and authority to rapidly changing settings that emphasize the centrality of the marital bond and generational discontinuity.

When a triangle is detected in a family, these questions must be asked: Is this family's cultural ideology in transition toward the individualistic code of husband-wife centrality? Or does the nuclear unit need to be simultaneously congruent with the collectivistic values of the intergenerational bond? To help resolve these dilemmas, it is important to understand the trajectory of migration and acculturation, because this information provides valuable guidelines about past and future family shapes.

In the following example, it seemed appropriate to help resolve two cross-generational coalitions by strengthening the marital bond, given the family's new ecological setting. A migrant Mexican man sided with his mother in a triangle involving his mother and his wife. He had insisted on leaving their baby daughter in Mexico with his mother, while he and his wife moved to the United States. He reasoned, "There is no love like a mother's love." At the time, he was unaware of the implications of his thinking for the mother of his child, because his definition of "mother" was limited only to his own mother. This pattern of leaving a child in the native land with a grandmother when moving to the United States to find better opportunity is not uncommon among Latinos. Con-

sequently, a therapist must not pathologize such a decision, but rather must recognize it (and even "normalize" it) as a legitimate attempt to resolve the practical and emotional problems of separation and still maintain some continuity with the family of origin. The biological mother, who was culturally accustomed to relying on the paternal grandmother, accepted the decision to leave her baby daughter, but only temporarily. Over time, she appealed to her husband to reincorporate the child into the nuclear family she had formed with her husband in the United States. The reunification of the family was stressful for all involved, and the child became triangulated between the mother and father and between the grandmother and mother, as a symbolic emotional link between the extended and the nuclear families.

Although adaptive to the immediate circumstances of migration, the decision to leave a child behind with a relative can eventually erode the husband-wife tie, preventing the formation of the strong marital bond that becomes so essential in the new setting. This particular family had made a commitment to remain in the United States (after two "trial" returns to Mexico). The parents agreed that developing a strong parental alliance would probably serve their family goals better than maintaining the permeable boundaries with the grandmother—a situation that implied a "ping-pong," precarious position for the young child. Note that the decision to promote marital unity in this family was not based on the usual inference that underlying marital problems were the cause of the triangular process. Instead, prioritizing the marital over the intergenerational bond was considered to be the most effective way of empowering this particular family, given its new setting. It was important to amplify the biological mother's voice and the need to reunite with her child; it was also important to strengthen the marital bond. Yet, to be culturally attuned, these issues were broached without pathologizing the father's attachment to his own mother, whom he could continue to honor and send money to.

Keeping a curious and open mind, a therapist needs to explore the meaning and function of a particular triangle within a family's cultural and ecological context, and determine which pathways to transition make more sense for each family.

## CONCLUSION

Triangles cannot be isolated from their cultural context, reified, and assumed to have the same universally problematic implications in all cases. Family therapists' views about triangles mirror several core American cultural assumptions about how family ties are balanced. A richer theo-

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retical and technical vocabulary about triangles in different ethnic backgrounds and social classes is required to explore the potentially benign or malevolent meaning of triangles.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENT

Some ideas in this chapter appeared previously in Falicov and Brudner-White (1983).

### NOTES

1. It is important to remember that almost all "universal" psychological theories are in fact based on less than a third of the world population—the portion that lives in the United States and in Western Europe (Triandis, 1996).
2. Clients may not agree with this view of development. Some studies have found a very large discrepancy between therapists' equation of normality with individual separation from families of origin on the one hand, and with many clients' continued wish for closeness and togetherness with their families on the other (Rogers & Leichter, 1964; Kazak et al., 1989).

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