

TRIANGLES

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Introduction

The complex idea of triangles, in many shapes and forms, clear and misunderstood, has become an integral part of the systematic approach to emotional function and dysfunction. It is safe to assume that triangles exist in all families and all human relationships. They are an omnipresent phenomenon. The only question is the number, intensity and composition of the triangles in one's life. They are such a fundamental part of emotional systems that some consider them to be the "normal" situation. On the other side of the coin, Murray Bowen has spoken of them for years as the "building block of the immature family." In this presentation, triangles will always be used to signify a dysfunctional structural relationship. The word "threesome" will be used to signify a functional relationship between three people and/or objects.

The Paranoia of Triangles

Like all key concepts and words, this one tends to take on a mystique. It is spoken of and used in so many ways that people assume they are talking about the same entity. Because of the confusion, one kind of hates to be seen in a room with two other people because someone will call it a triangle. Some therapists refuse to answer questions, to express a viewpoint, lest they be "triangled." They allow the idea to suffocate their personality. Others attribute remarkable implications to becoming "de-triangulated." The magic of the word eludes the understanding of the process. In the beginning, the essence of a triangle is fairly easy to understand. As one probes more and more deeply into its nature, the essence tends to become obscure. It is no longer such a simple idea. But this should not be discouraging. The very muddling around to understand more and more about triangles leads to a deeper understanding of the one (the person), the two-some (the personal relationship) and the threesome. This understanding is critical.

If one lived to be 1000 years old, he would not be able to get out of all the triangles he is in. Fortunately, it is not necessary to stay out of all of them. "Function" is a relative state. It is not necessary to function well with everybody in the world. One must be able to use the concept of triangles when

there is an emotional difficulty in relationships that are significant — those particularly of blood and marriage, the family. It is not a problem to be in a triangle. It is a problem to be in one and stay there. It is an equal sized problem to be so afraid of triangles that one stays distant, not realizing that his fear, his distance, can become a part of a triangle.

Fragmentary Triangles

The concept of triangles is not a new one. Since the beginning of time, people have recognized that "three is a crowd." Diplomats know that the international power balance is based on threes and the absence of one of the three creates a dangerous power vacuum. (In the year 1892, a book was written about triangles based on the issue of power.) Freud "created" the Oedipus complex, a rare form of sexual triangle. He also spoke of the ego, the id and the superego, a form of inner triangle. Today, many family therapists pick it up in fragmentary form, using it around certain issues such as power, communications, or control. Others speak of "siding" or a "go between process" or a "triad." All of these are perceptions of and descriptions of the triangular process. All of these limit it to a certain area or issue and fail to abstract out its essence, a process which is universal and common to all of these situations. Clinically this is very similar to the person who works on one triangle in his family and manages to get some change. Unless he understands the nature of triangles, he will then have to learn about the next one and the one after that. If he can learn the guts of the triangular process, he can then, on his own, use that knowledge to change other triangles. It can become a part of his working philosophy of life.

Mathematical Definition of a Triangle

Mathematically, a triangle can be defined as three points connected by three lines. Two intersect at each point. The result is three points, three angles and each point has two lines going from it. Each point also faces one line that it has no direct connection to. A triangle then, is not just three points but three interconnecting lines. If one adds up to the length of the lines and

maintains this sum of the distances as a constant, then any shift in the position of one point will necessarily influence the position of the other points. If the sum of the distances between the points is a constant, then we have a **closed system**. If the sum of the distances between the three points is not a constant but can fluctuate, then a shift in the position of one point will not necessarily influence the position of the other points. This is an **open system**. Emotionally speaking, a **triangle is always a closed system**. If the system is open, the structure is a threesome. Mathematically speaking, the problem with the three points is that the lines (relationships) are fixed, closed, determinative of each other. Movement in such a closed system is **reciprocal** — movement in one position necessarily creates movement in the other positions.

The Origin of Triangles

A basic assumption in emotional systems is that all people seek closeness. Not recognizing the 5th dimension (the natural incompleteness of self and systems), they find closeness difficult to maintain and tend to fuse or blend into each other. In the process of fusion, one person overlaps the other so that there is an indistinctness of self identification and self differentiation. It is difficult to tell what is self and what is the other person. It is difficult to tell where self ends and the other begins. Seeking the impossible goal of completeness, one person will try to merge into the other to gain self. (I am right and you are wrong.) Or two people will try to merge into a one. (We always agree.) Or one person will give his self to the other person. (What do you want me to do?) These various forms of fusion lead to emotional turmoil. There may be emotional conflict (arguments), loss of self (development of symptoms), or other signs of emotional fusion. The person who is trying to accumulate self will pursue and the one trying to maintain self will distance. The inevitable result of fusion is distance. To some extent, these difficulties are a part of every personal relationship, of every twosome. This alternating fusion and distance will become a problem after some variable and indefinite point, depending on the level of expectation of each different twosome.

The best analogy is to think of two strong magnets, with one held in each hand. The closer the hands are to each other, the more difficult it is to keep them from uniting or fusing. When they fuse, there is no space in between and they

form a magnetic oneness. This is what people tend to do. They search for that comfortable distance where they can feel the tug between the magnets (emotional connectedness) and yet avoid the magnets uniting (fusion) with minimum effort. In some situations, some people attain this to some variable extent. In others, more and more distance is required to avoid fusion. At a certain point, the distance is so great that the system tends to break off. Some do, e.g. by divorce. Others avoid the break by introducing a triangle — converting the twosome into a triangle (not a threesome).

The Purpose of Triangles

When the twosome begins to be rocked by extreme distance, the development of exquisite sensitivities, closed off areas, wants that are experienced as needs and not met, the situation is ripe for the development of a triangle or a break up. Introducing the third party is an attempt to stabilize the two person system when it is in danger of disintegrating. The key to understanding the triangle is to think of **stabilization and the avoidance of chance**. If two people can get interested in a third person, object, issue, fantasy, etc., they can avoid facing the real, threatening, scary issues between them. Thus, a husband and wife may stay together "for the sake of the children." They may get into an argument over his girlfriend — does he have one or not? They can argue over the right way to do anything. The right time for the children to go to bed. The right amount of TV to watch. Which child causes what trouble. As if there were answers to these questions. The process can cross generations. Be like my father and mother. Be different than my father and mother. In the long run, no matter what the emotional problem, the purpose of the triangle remains the same. Only the details vary. It is the avoidance of real, hard emotional issues inside of and between the members of the twosome. It is to avoid my changing myself, my part in the problem.

Scapegoating

When first introduced, the idea of scapegoating was useful. It served to refocus the "identified patient" and reinforce the idea that an emotional problem is larger in context than one person. Having served that purpose it should now be buried. Today, it carries the strong tendency toward seeing the "identified patient" as a helpless victim of others in the family. This biased approach is often seen in

therapists who feel that the parents avoid their marital difficulties by focusing on the child. The child becomes the victim of their difficulties. They end up blaming the parents. Now, the third leg of the triangle is introduced to keep the focus off of the twosome. But this is true of all three twosomes in the triangle. Father and mother may avoid marital strife by focusing on their son. That is one part of the triangle. Son and mother avoid facing the difficulties in their overcloseness by having a common enemy — father. Father and son avoid dealing with their distance by relating to each other indirectly through mother. There is no victimizer or victim. The notion of causality or who started it is a chicken and egg question. It is irrelevant. Emotional systems deal with process and not cause. **All members of a triangle participate equally in perpetuating the triangle and no triangle can persist without the active cooperation of all its members.** One of the first lessons a child learns in life is how to parlay a potential triangle.

sympathy with her son. She can really "feel" what son experiences. Son thinks father doesn't understand him and is indifferent. He really wants father's respect and approval but has given up on getting it. Mother understands him but gives him approval so easily it really isn't worth much. These relationships between the three twosomes are potentially trouble. Son asks if he can go to a movie. Father says it is o.k., mother agrees and son leaves. This episode is functional because the potential for emotional turmoil was not stressed. The clinician can only get in touch with a triangle like this by being able to spot operating principles which are intrinsically dysfunctional between the members of any twosome. Examples are infinite. They include one seeing a problem in the other person, one trying to change the other, one assuming responsibility for the other, mind reading, etc.

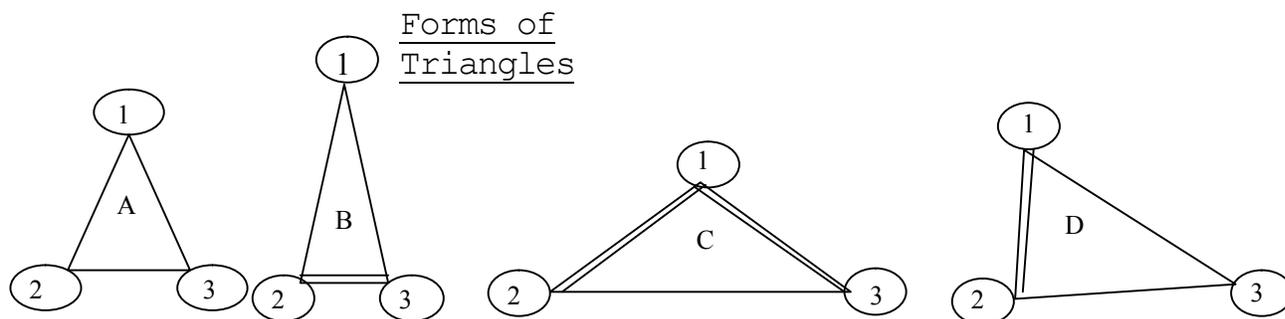


Figure 1

(A) The equilateral triangle: This has three sides which are equal in length. It is balanced but still a closed system with a rubber band around it. It could be considered a "functional" triangle since it shows no overt signs of dysfunction. It is a potential triangle with basically unworkable relationships between the members of each twosome. The dysfunction does not show because the emotional system is not being stressed or tested out at one particular time. Under stress, the system will triangle. Example: Father has an underlying feeling that mother does not care enough about him and that she is too sympathetic with son. He also feels that son does not appreciate him. Mother feels that father only cares about his job and she has a deep

(B) The isosceles triangle: Two sides are equal in length and the third side is shorter than the two equal sides. In this shape one person is distant from the other two who are over-close. The two over-close people have a kind of warm empathy for each other. A feeling or experience in one is felt as being in the other too. The distant one feels lonely but safe. He tends to be calm, reasonable and objective but uninvolved. He may show symptoms by his move to some person or object outside the family to relieve his loneliness. When he narrows the distance with the other two, emotional turmoil ensues. The over-close couple can get along while they have the common enemy but can't maintain that closeness on their own.

Symptoms show in one or both when, for any reason, they lose their common enemy and have to focus on their own insides and relationship. Example: Son comes home from movie late. Father and son get into argument. This arouses mother's sympathy for son and she attacks the father. Father distances to the living room and mother and son sit in the kitchen and discuss father's lack of understanding.

(C) Isosceles triangle: In this form, one line is very long and the other two are shorter but equal. Here the distance between two people is extreme and the third person forms the bridge between them. The bridging or intermediary person feels a tremendous strain but an equal obligation to maintain the relationship between the other two. He has little opportunity or inclination to look at himself. The other two experience intense feelings against each other and use distance as a solution. Communications and interconnectedness run through the intermediary. Example: Father, in the living room, and mother, in the kitchen, maintain their distance for days. Son cools off and begins to feel some sympathy for father and some guilt about his own part in the fight. He moves into a more intermediate position between father and mother. Trying to calm things down, he does not realize that he actually perpetuates their distance by serving as a bridge between them. A therapist often gets into the same position.

(D) In Between forms of Triangles: These triangles take all kinds of shapes somewhere in between those already described. For example, son and mother may feel distant from father but not equally so. Son may have less anger at father than mother does.

Triangles, Movement and Time

All human behavior, thoughts, and feelings can be conceived of in terms of the one (the person), the two (the personal relationship), and the three (a threesome or a triangle). When we reflect on any of these configurations, we really speak of them at a certain moment in time. A photograph represents a particular slice of time with the people in it frozen into a posture. But people are continually on the move like molecules in a container. The distances and closenesses between them are in a continual state of flux. They operate as a one, in twos or in threes. Sometimes the threesome becomes a triangle, breaks up into a twosome with one leaving, reforms as a threesome or splits up into ones. Triangles may form and reform. Different people may have different positions around differ-

ent issues. Every triangle is defined around a particular issue and issues can change rapidly. These are not static notions. A distant father may be the over involved father around a different problem. A highly emotional mother around a problem in her son may be the calm reasonable one around a problem in her daughter. So, when we talk about a triangle, we are referring to the main configuration of three positions around a particular problem. It is fully understood that this is a particular context.

Things are not always this way. The emotional bonding and reactivity (the lines between positions) may be greater or less at any moment. Configurations change as problems change with different people. There is a real flow of movement.

How a Triangle Operates

So far we have discussed the lines that interconnect the points of a triangle. Now, a triangle is an emotional process. When we translate these ideas to a human structure, the lines become emotional bonds, emotional bands that are the basis for connectedness between people. Connectedness between people is made up of many things, including the experience they have in common and the reality of their existence. By far, the most significant part of the bonding is the emotional relationship. When the level of tension or anxiety arises in this emotional bond within a two person system, distance ensues. After a certain amount of distance, tension is deposited into a relationship with a third person. Let us imagine a room with three people in it. One or more members of this threesome can leave the room, move about in the room freely, get closer or more distant from each other without any reactive consequences on the others. When one changes his position, there is no necessary change in the position of others. The three people are connected to each other by an emotional cord which can be shortened or lengthened at will. They either **function as ones or as three simultaneous twosomes**. Now, if the process is going to triangulate, we have to imagine a **rubber band** placed around the three people. The idea is to keep the rubber band taut. In this situation, a change in the position of one will necessarily create a change in the position of the others or an increased tension between them. The rubber band (closed system) will keep the sum of the distances between the three people at a constant figure. If one moves away, the other two will pull closer to each other. It is this closed system, this rubber band effect, which keeps the system from breaking but is also very limiting.

Overloaded emotionality in each of the three twosomes is partly transferred into another twosome. The result is a dilution and confusion of the emotional issues and tensions. There is still an overload of tension in the system but it shifts about. It may appear as conflict in any one of the twosomes or as "symptoms" in any member. At this point, the triangle takes on a life of its own. It becomes larger than the sum of its parts. It is a process that rises above and dominates the three people and their relationships. As the rubber band takes over, movement in one is necessarily accompanied by movement in the other. Self determination, the ability for any one person to decide and direct his own movement, gives way to reactive movement. The freedom of each person is limited. The triangle runs the three people. The inescapable pull, tug and reciprocity carry the day. There is no self, no person, no "I."

Interlocking Generational Triangles

So far we have looked at the development of one triangle from a threesome. But the picture of a family is not so simple or clear. There are many triangles in a family and they tend to interlock. By this I mean that one triangle tends to unite or join closely with another. One hooks into and dovetails with another. The entire picture and the number of triangles becomes almost infinite. Every time one person is added to a system, the potential number of triangles increases geometrically. By this process of interlocking, one person occupies positions in many triangles at the same time. These positions may be different so that he is the overdose pursuer in one triangle, and the distancer in the other. The result is integrated movement as the number of triangles he is in increases. As he moves away from one person, he moves toward the other. Unfortunately, because each move contributes to the forma-

tion of a triangle, this integrated movement becomes integrated dysfunction.

In the example below, figure 2, we can see that A is locked into one triangle with B and C. We can then add D which interlocks him into another as does E. Now triangles are also generational. They spread across generations and may go back into a generation that is "unknown" to the family. This is the **funnel effect**. In figure 2, one could see unresolved emotional problems in the generation E — D passed on to the next generation A. A marries B and another triangle spreads into the third generation C. Problems appearing in C (the third generation) can have their roots in previous generations, going far back. The funnel effect states that the unresolved difficulties literally pass on to the next generation until they reach the apex of the funnel. At this point, symptoms develop. When one runs into a triangle that is so emotionally fixed that it seems beyond the possibility of change, one can be certain that this problem is the apex of an overloaded generational series of triangles. The funnel is full and pouring out of the apex. Unresolved emotional dysfunction from past generations is operational in the present. Generational overload and interlocking add to the difficulties in trying to get out of triangles. If A is trying to narrow the gap with B, he will meet resistance from D and E whose system will be shaken by the move. A change in the position of any one person will cause problems through the system. Other people will tell him to stop shaking the boat. If a husband leaves a wife, that may be difficult. Add to that his mother's approval, his father's disapproval, his children turning both ways at different times, and the price of emotional change is severe.

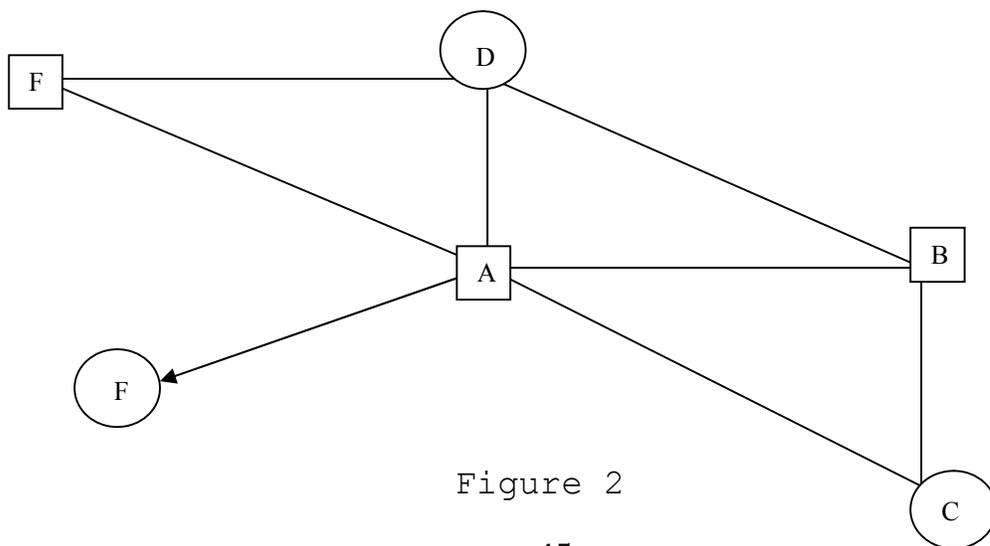


Figure 2

Deterioration of the Triangle

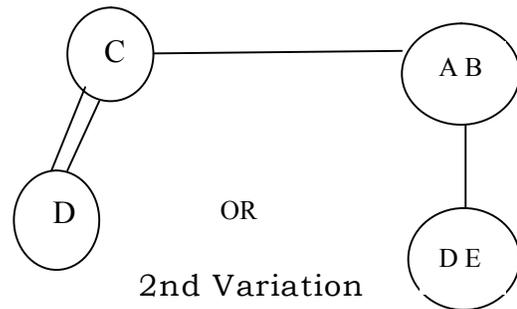
As the level of emotion, much of it out of awareness or perceived as general anxiety, increases in the same family or person and over the generations, there is a general call for more triangles to stabilize the process. Triangles buy time but avoid real issues. Eventually the piper will be paid. Fundamental issues are avoided until, inevitably, the necessity for change becomes apparent. In all of life, change is inevitable. Sensitive, anxiety provoking, emotionally laden areas continue to operate even when no one is handling them. The twosome, left unattended, continues to deteriorate. Unhandled emotionality is transferred more and more from one hand to the other. Symptoms, diagnosis and distress must appear somewhere. As the level of anxiety and upset rises to a pitch, we see psychosis, conflict between members of the family, behavior disorders, physical symptoms, broken systems, and less crippling but more pervasive problems through the system. The focus may end up inside one or more people, between them or in the network surrounding the family. The intensity of the symptoms and the very dysfunction in the family feed on each other. The level of blame accusation and attack give rise to increasing defense. Distance no longer works. All too often therapeutic systems reinforce fixing the blame, the diagnosis, the therapy on one or more particular members of the family. The therapy system becomes enmeshed in the family dysfunction. Everybody needs a patient. Therapists and hospitals become absorbed to form even more triangles. Something must give and eventually the triangles burst. The forms of break are infinite in degree and type. Some are socially acceptable and some are not. If one focuses on the symptom, on the individual, he misses the generations, the interlocking, the very context necessary to understand any emotional picture.

Components of Triangles

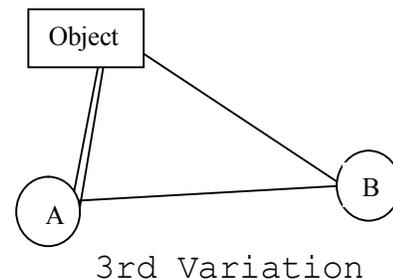
1. The most common components (as we might suspect) of triangles are three people, the kinds of forms and situations we have discussed up to the present. The first variation is the substitution of some person outside the family for one of the members of the family. The potential candidates include the family therapist, the family doctor, the attorney, priest, minister or rabbi, girlfriend, good friend, or associates in any shape or form.

The second variation, in the components of a triangle, occurs when one or more positions can be occupied by more than one person. Each of these grouped positions actually represents a merger of

many underlying "sub-triangles." The conflict in one family may have the extended family of one spouse in one position. In the child centered family, parents often get into a "we" position against the child who is overdose to his peer group. The group position is actually a fused one. The group

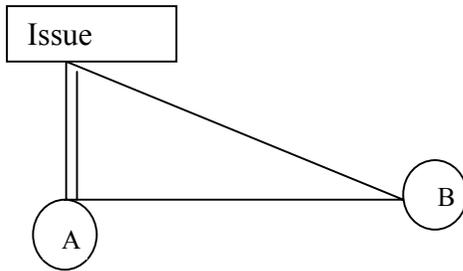


is presented as a single entity as if it were united, and without individual differences. For the sake of clarity in the head of the therapist, it is useful initially to visualize the triangle in the simplest shape with groups occupying some of the positions. Eventually, many of these groups will have to be broken down into their component parts and their component triangles to break up key triangles. Common groups include Alcoholics Anonymous, the school system, parents who speak in terms of "we," groups of friends, children, etc.



A third variation is one in which an object replaces a person. It has the same forms as the other but the problem is usually a larger one than when three people are involved. It is more severe because there is one less person to work with, there is one less opportunity for change (objects do not change), and the object is so often clearly dysfunctional that it is easy to condemn the person connected to it. The list of objects is endless. It can be work in the basement, books and newspapers, alcohol, drugs, golf, tennis, sporting events, television, work, money, house cleaning, furniture, clothes, etc.

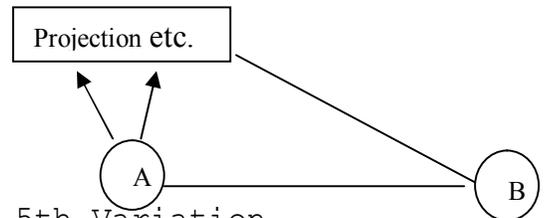
In the fourth variation, a person is replaced by an issue. One of the most common is the issue of marriage and the marriage counselor falls into this trap regularly. Two people debate the issue of the marriage, one wanting to keep it together and the other wanting to break it up. This becomes a tri-



4th Variation

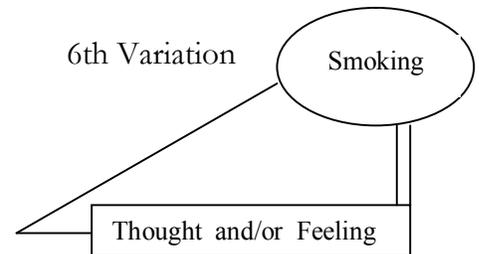
angle because it avoids the real issues inside and between the two people. The "marriage" is often spoken of as if it had a life of its own. Other common issues include women's lib, birth control, religion, political causes, men-women theories, who is the head of the house, cleanliness, neatness, etc. Issues are legitimate for discussion. One must define himself to some extent around them. When they become a mask to avoid self definition, they are being used as the third leg of a triangle. To determine them, one must see them as symbols of the real emotional difficulty in the twosome. Translation into their emotional equivalent is called for. It is useless to argue the value of women's lib. It may be useful to discuss it. The emotional equivalent of women's lib may be "I feel you don't appreciate me."

The fifth variation occurs when one position is occupied by a projection from inside another person. The projection takes on a life of its own as if it were external to the person. In a psychotic level problem, one member projects an hallucination or delusion outside himself as if it were real. Both he and the therapist relate to the projection and avoid dealing with the treatment system (the relationship between the therapist and the patient) and the family system. Both do the same thing but one is called sickness and the other therapy. This also includes psychosomatic problems where one person speaks of his ulcer or colitis as if the gut were a separate entity from his own self. The gut takes on a life of its own. "Me and my colitis." Especially after



5th Variation

"therapy," many people do this with an emotional problem. It becomes "me and my hostility or my neurosis." The emotional problem is spoken of as being separate from the person. They "have" a problem. They are not the problem. Their feelings are so acute and sensitive, they have a distinct existence.



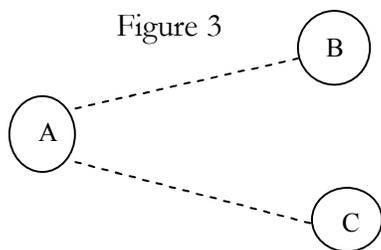
6th Variation

In the last variation, two or more positions lie within one person. One can have a thought that he should give up smoking, a feeling that he would like to continue smoking and the cigarette (object) is in the third position. If feeling and cigarettes are overdose with thought distant, the person will continue to smoke. A father can have two sets of conflicting feelings about his son, these two sets being two legs of a triangle, both inside of him. If one believes in the ego, the id and the superego, this would be an example of a triangle totally within one person. The variations on this theme are limitless but they still represent triangles. The components are different and so the symptoms are different. This becomes basically an inner system problem, in the person and is reflected largely by inner conflict and discomfort. Any inner discomfort or conflict will represent this kind of triangle.

Knowing when a Triangle Exists

First of all, it must be constantly remembered that a triangle is an **emotional process**. People tend to use "I think" (intellectual process based on fact) and "I feel" (emotional process — reactivity) interchangeably. These words cannot be relied upon to separate thinking from feeling. One must inquire about the basis of any position to see if it has emotional footing or is based on fact. The next step is to be keenly **aware of the potential** for triangles. Whenever there is conflict, discomfort, complete weness in a twosome, be on guard for the

development of a triangle whenever a third person, object or issue is introduced. Ask yourself if this third party is being used by each person to define himself as a person. Or is it being used as a part of a triangle to avoid the real issues in the twosome and avoid self definition. If it is an attempt on the part of one to convert, change or win over the other, then it is a triangle. To determine if a triangle exists, one looks for **repetitive patterns**. If mother always sides with son against father, then this is a triangle. If this only happens sometimes, then mother may be expressing her viewpoint based on her beliefs and principles. This would not be a triangle. If she can express her viewpoint but allow them to deal with their problems, not intrude, then she is not in a triangle. Once the positions of three people around any problem are **predictable**, then we know that a triangle exists. At this point, the emotionality of each person and the triangle take over the determination of the system. The rubber band lines close the system off. The movement of each person is determined by the larger movement of the system or by reactive movement in one person. **Loss of self determination** is a necessary element in a triangle.



One of the keys to identifying a triangle is to recall that it is an **emotional avoidance phenomena aiming at stability without change**. There are three lines of communication and connectedness in any threesome (figure 3). Each position has two direct lines. A has legitimate business with B and C. There is one area he is not directly connected to —the line between B and C. That is the area he should stay out of. He can have a viewpoint about it, an interest in it. If this viewpoint becomes so emotionally invested that he cannot allow B and C to assume responsibility for themselves and their relationship, then A enters into a triangle. If A intrudes and cannot let them work it out themselves, if he sides with one against the other, if he labels any dysfunction between them as a problem in one of them, if he moves to change one of them, if he sees one as right and the other as wrong or to blame, if he cannot accept one or both as different rather than wrong, if A compromises his own thinking and

emotional position to gain peace at any price, if he starts telling them what to do — if these things occur, he is in or heading toward a triangle. If A starts using "we" or "us" instead of "I", then he is probably in a fused position with someone else in one leg of the triangle. In a sense, he must be able to deal objectively with that third line between B and C so that he can put an **emotional equal sign in between them**. They **emotionally** deserve each other. There is no right or wrong in an emotional system. It either works and functions or it does not. A hand fits a glove and a glove fits a hand.

It is very important to distinguish between being in a triangle and a **tendency toward triangling**. There is no problem with recognized tendencies toward triangling. This is the necessary price of using one's own self. It is not a triangle until one acts on this tendency.

If A must not intrude between B and C, he must be able to handle all emotionality and tensions between A and B and A and C. If he does not do this, he will tend to overload the surplus into the third leg. All of these same ideas apply to the other two positions, B and C in their dealings in the threesome.

One can run an experiment to see if he is in a triangle. If A can see something going on between B and C and **do different things with it consistently over a fairly long period of time**, he is not in a triangle. If he can at times take no position about it, if he can at times express his real emotional and thinking position about it, if he can at times express the opposite of his real emotional and thinking position about it, if he can accept the consequences of any position he takes about it, if he can deal one on one (A with B and then A with C) with these consequences, if he can get B and C out of his head —if he can do all of these, then he is unhooked and not in a triangle.

The Therapist and the Triangle

The mystique of triangles can scare a therapist so much that he not only tends to stay out of them but fails to use his own self with the family. This limitation preserves objectivity but at the price of using a very important tool — himself. He may fail to answer questions (seeing them as a trap) and avoid talking about his own experience, family, knowledge and expertise. Yet, we all know a personal story is worth a million words. His very

distance may contribute to open conflict in the family and involve him unwittingly as the distant member of a therapeutic triangle. He may be afraid to take up legitimate issues that involve him and any member of the family, such as who is running the interview. Being less involved, his feed-back from the family and his own feeling reactions tend to be minimal. This bias may influence him to confuse distance in a member of the family with an "I" position. Other therapists have an unhealthy disrespect for the subtleties of a triangle. They pride themselves on their ability to jump in and become an active member of the family emotional system. Fooling themselves with their overconfidence, they become enmeshed and end up reduplicating many of the dysfunctional moves that the family is making. Under the guise of dynamic formulations, transference interpretations, diagnoses and rationalizations, they add to and perpetuate the family problem. Their blinded vision from their own nuclear and extended family systems becomes operational. They become cooperating, participating members of every family they are trying to "help."

Somewhere, in between these two ends of the spectrum, there must be a balanced point of view. Early in his dealings with a family (especially for a novice family therapist), the therapist should probably stay somewhat distant and objective. He should maintain this position until he has a relatively clear overview of family triangles, of the family system. To do this, he should concentrate on the dealings between people and not what goes on inside of them. Later, depending on his experience, he should be able to move in personally without getting triangled. To move in, he needs many, many **operating principles**. The action is fast and furious in a family with literally millions of pieces of information and emotion flowing about. Some of these principles of function can be taught, some are unknown and some are probably special to each individual therapist. They enable him to move in guided by some concept, functional rule, idea which he carries about inside his head. The principle lies outside the emotional field of the family and is independent of the family emotional system. This keeps him from becoming a part of that system and still allows him to use his own self. It is not my purpose here to elaborate on these principles. Common examples include, "never pursue a distancer, never assume responsibility for another person, never try to change a person, there is no difference between men and women except biologically, there is no difference between adults and children,

everybody is responsible for his own feelings, etc. etc." If one acts on principle, he is not siding emotionally (unless his "principle" is based on some emotional process in his own family). Since he can now **act with emotion but not on emotion**, he cannot be in a triangle. A triangle is an emotional process and involves acting on emotion. Now, of course, the family may take the therapist home in fantasy and use him as a triangle leg at home. This does not mean the therapist is in a triangle. After all, he can only use himself and can't control how people use him as an object at home. He should at one time or another always inquire how the family uses him at home.

When a therapist expresses a viewpoint, based on principle, it may appear to observers or to the family he is speaking to, that he is siding into a triangle. It should be carefully explained to the family and observers that he applies this principle equally to all people, to all members of the family. If he knows what he is up to and can determine the application of his own principle as he sees fit, then he is not in a triangle. His freedom is not limited, he is self determined, he has an "I" position. The experienced therapist, armed with multiple operating principles, convinced of their effectiveness in the families he has seen **and in his own family**, can move into a more personal relationship with families. He can use his own feelings, his own discomforts as a barometer of the emotional climate in the family. (Phil Guerin: Family Therapy, Style, Art & Theory, The Family, Vol. 1, No. 1) for example, if he begins to feel irritation at one spouse, he can place this feeling back into the family by asking if the other spouse feels irritation in similar circumstances.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to paint a picture of a triangle, its origin, purpose, movement, form, operation, composition, and nature. As long as triangles exist, they simply prevent the resolution of any emotional problem. When they are eliminated, one gets at the person and the twosome. At this point, the person and the twosome are faced with open conflict or a deep awareness of the emptiness in the person and the personal relationship. This explains why things get worse before they get better. Though this is a terribly troublesome insight, it at least structures the family system so that change can occur, so that each person can face his own incompleteness.