Dynamics of Family Conflict

by Sophia Tutorial

≡ WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, we'll discuss how there are numerous meanings of family, and thus the dynamics of conflict can vary between families. In particular, we'll focus on:

1. Definitions of Family
2. The Family as a System
3. Cultural Norms in the Family
4. Family Conflict

1. Definitions of Family

We all have families in some form, but families can look very different from one another. Many traditional assumptions about family are changing rapidly.

For much of human history, it was most common for family groups to be multigenerational—parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, children, cousins, and more might all live under the same roof or on the same land.

In the 20th century in Western culture, the idea of the nuclear family became popular. The nuclear family is a household that consists only of a pair of married adults and their juvenile offspring. Any other kind of family structure was considered alternative or deviant.

But at no point in time has this nuclear family been the only, or even the primary, form of family structure. While some may think **family** is a group of people related by blood, it can also be comprised of anybody else that that group of people decides to accept, even if there isn't a genetic relationship.

There is increasing understanding in American society that families can come in many forms, including:

- Multigenerational families—Families that include more than two generations, which could also be called a vertical family
- Horizontal families—Families that include more people of the same generation, such as cousins and siblings of the same generation living together
- Blended families—Families with children who have different parents or families of origin, often the result of the parents remarrying after divorce
- Chosen families—Families composed of people who have decided as adults to have a family-like relationship with one another

- Single parent families—Families with only one adult and one or more children
- Skipped generation families—Families composed of grandparents and grandchildren, or similar
- Adoptive/foster families—Families including one or more children who are not biologically related to the parents
- Polyamorous families—Families in which the central romantic relationship is composed of more than two individuals

There are many more possible ways that a family can define or structure itself; these are only a few common examples.

Knowing how a family defines itself is particularly important for a conflict intervener, and it's up to the family to tell the intervener who the family members are.

⮌ EXAMPLE If you, as the intervener, are in a conflict resolution session, and someone says that so-and-so should be here because that person is family, then you understand that even if there isn't a blood relationship, that person is family according to the way this particular family defines the concept of family.

📄 TERM TO KNOW

Family
A group of people related by blood; or consisting of members accepted by the group without a genetic relationship.

2. The Family as a System

No matter how a particular family defines itself, all families are systems.

As you've learned in earlier lessons, a system is made up of separate components acting in certain ways that affect each other and the outcome of the system itself.

If you think about the people in a family as components whose behavior affects the other components, or people in the family, you can see that like in a system, the way individual components behave can cause a ripple effect throughout the entire system.

⮌ EXAMPLE Say a particular family has the structure of a two adults in a romantic relationship and their juvenile children. Lately, the mother and father have been fighting with one another. The children can see what's going on between their parents, and it's affecting the children's behavior. In some cases, those children might feel the effects of the fighting even more than their parents, despite not being direct parties in the conflict.

3. Cultural Norms in the Family

The family system is a group of people, and like any group, it is defined in many ways by **cultural norms**.

As we've discussed, a cultural norm is the behavior that any particular culture sees as being right, true, or proper. In other words, it's just the way things are done in that culture.

Families also have these norms, and they present themselves as the **assumptions/beliefs** about how a family should be.

These norms come from the family's larger culture, and also from the behavior that particular family sees as normal within the group. Naturally, families often differ in their cultural norms.

⤳ EXAMPLE You might be part of a family that considers it very important for everybody to eat dinner together. Everyone eats at the table at the same time, and unless there's some particular reason why this can't happen, this is a family norm. Conversely, that may not be the family norm for someone else. At dinnertime in this person's family, people grab their food and watch television in different rooms while they eat. That's just the way this person's family does things; it's a different version of what is considered "normal" within a family structure.

There are many examples of this kind of family cultural norm, as every family has its own traditions and practices based on the family's assumptions/beliefs of what is "right."

📄 **TERMS TO KNOW**

Cultural Norm
The variety of behaviors and perceptions considered "right", "true" or "proper" by a culture.

Assumptions/Beliefs
In relationship to family, cultural norms and culturally-influenced individual beliefs about what are "right, correct, or proper" relationships, feelings, and behaviors between family members.

4. Family Conflict

When families go into conflict, it tends to be more intense than other kinds of conflicts because family bonds are often strong as a result of many shared experiences.

In other words, conflict within a family is often very intense because these are the people that can hurt each other the most.

⤳ EXAMPLE If you're upset over a conflict with your neighbor, what happens in your relationship with the neighbor is probably not as important to you as what happens in your relationship with someone you consider family. On the other hand, if you're in conflict with your daughter, and you feel like you might lose that relationship unless you resolve the conflict, that's going to be more important to you than the outcome of a conflict with an acquaintance. Because of this, the conflict with your daughter is likely more intense.

The threat of losing someone in the family can motivate people who otherwise might not seek a conflict resolution process to enter that process; they don't want to lose their relationship with a family member.

⭐ **BIG IDEA**

As a group, a family is not only influenced by larger cultural norms, but also by its own individual norms, based on what the family considers appropriate behavior for the members of the group.

📋 **SUMMARY**

In this lesson, you learned that there many different **definitions of family**. In the **resolution process**, it's extremely important for the intervener to have an understanding of how the particular family they are working with defines itself. Even though families differ in their structures, all **families can be viewed as systems**. This means that the actions of one member can have a ripple effect on the state of the entire family.

You now understand that like in a group, there are **certain cultural norms in the family** unit. In addition to the norms influenced by a family's larger culture, each family has its own ideas about which behaviors or beliefs are considered "right." Because a family often has strong bonds as a result of shared experiences, **family conflict** tends to be more intense than other types of conflict, and can thus be a real motivation to seek conflict resolution. Good luck!

Source: Adapted from Sophia tutorial by Marlene Johnson.

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