

The Observer Effect, Part 2

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Free tickets from my children's elementary school got me started on a love affair with college basketball. In twenty years, I've probably watched hundreds of games, cheered on dozens of teams as each formed and re-formed with the changing season, and donated countless road hours to fandom. My beloved team doesn't know me from the next yelling maniac, but every year I know each one of those ten players, sometimes even identifying their family members in the stands.

I thought I knew a lot about basketball. Just ask me! And then again, sometimes it would be clear that there were things happening on that court that had zipped past me. The players would be following some blueprint that was not working well—or working spectacularly. I would respond to the disappointment, or perhaps the thrilling outcome. But I could never see under a layer to explain what had really happened. The real game—with its varieties of plays, tempos, artful ball movements—was pretty much a mystery to me. Not a big deal, except for those confusing moments when the ref would call an illegal screen. I would think “I need to figure out what a legal screen looks like.” I literally couldn't see either.

Then, in my 19th year of enthusiasm, a new fan moved into the neighborhood. Season ticket holders often buy the same seats year after year, and most know who their seat mates are. I knew most of my “neighbors” at least by sight if not by name. So, when a bona fide basketball sage and his wife filled the seats behind me, I noticed. It's hard not to notice; the arena is packed tight and when he leaned forward his face was close to me. I could practically hear him breathe.

Fortunately, he was not the yelling type. He was, however, the commenting type. It seemed his wife was mostly the listening type. I don't think I ever heard a complete sentence from her. The Basketball Sage had lots of complete sentences.

“Now, look at that. He put #3 in and look how that has disrupted #45. Threw the whole thing off. Good chaos.”

“The 3-2 zone now? Let's see how it works.”

“Hmmm...the diamond, let's see what happens...”

“Full court, well maybe. Yeah.”

I felt like I had died and gone to sports heaven. He was describing the game that I could not see. His regard for the game and the complexity of movement was a joy to hear.

In a way it was like visiting the eye doctor. There's always that task with giant Bullwinkle glasses in front of your eyes and the doctor asks you to read the chart starting with the bottom tiny letters. She keeps changing the lenses and asks you "Is this better? Or is this better?" Finally, you're peering at the rows with larger letters and then crystal-sharp clarity when she clicks "just the right" lens into place.

When it comes to "seeing" self and relationships, it would be nice if we all had a relationship whisperer sitting on our shoulder. The human experience is suffused with feeling and emotion, creating the probability of perceptual distortion or plain observational blindness much of the time. We live with this myopia and work with and around our biases.

But it doesn't have to be that way!

Bowen Family Systems theory has laid out well-researched data on how the family operates and shapes human functioning. Knowledge of how the family, or any social system, works is the key to understanding the individual, not the other way around as it is usually presented.

Four basic relationship patterns direct the movement of the family. And the motion is constant, if generally repetitive. What are the commonplaces that make families so similar?

Repetition #1

Conflict.

Tension between two people. Often with an underlying "who's in charge of me—and—you" tug of war. The two often communicate well while they argue, so it can be a time of togetherness, although generally quite uncomfortable. Or there can be a very silent conflict which one or the other might say is "full of noise." Again, quite unwanted but driven by intense reactivity. The two are apart, yet very together.

Repetition #2

Distance.

An automatic backing away from tension. Distance can be overt—not attending the wedding, taking a week to return a phone call, ignoring a spouses bid for time together—or it can be subtle. Always saying “I’m fine” when mother inquires, being quiet in team meetings, sitting in the back of the room. Distance exists in all families and like conflict, is not good or bad, just a reflex, an autopilot.

Repetition #3

Overfunctioning/underfunctioning reciprocity

Also known as “It’s just easier if I do it myself” meets “It’s just easier if I let you do it.” A twosome operates as a unit rather than as two separate selves. Each an extension of the other which is in line with our connected nature. The one stabilizes the other, as well as the family, when the level of stress is low. Things can become unproductive with increased stress; the overfunctioner becoming taxed and the underfunctioner sliding into symptoms.

Repetition #4

Triangles

Families are made up of triangles, a series of triangles. The way these triangles play out drives the patterns outlined above. Two are lined up and a third is on the outside. And the three can change positions! A husband and wife can join in disciplining their son—then the wife can feel sympathy for the boy and agree with him that Dad is inflexible. Or perhaps two sisters are harmonious in many ways, the third sister is “different” and somehow “the odd one out.” When the joined sisters tangle over an issue, one of them chats with the outlier about what an annoyance the other sister is. After a day or so, the harmonious sisters regain their harmony and chat about what an annoyance the outside sister is. Another common triangle: marital distance drones on, unaddressed and buffered by the husband’s affair with a co-worker. The affair stabilizes the marriage, which is not to say it improves it.

With these patterns in mind, behaviors take on new meaning. “Individual behavior” doesn’t really exist outside of a context, and that context is the field of observation, best case (?). Of course, it is possible to work towards being more of an individual within the mix of operating patterns. but an awareness of the way the system operates

is essential in that effort. Trying to be more of a separate, self-directed person without knowledge of the family's signature patterns would be like a rural Virginia driver attempting to find a particular bakery in Brooklyn without a map or a GPS.*

As families are similar, are they also different?

Yes, by level of functioning. The more mature and well-connected family looks different than the less well-integrated family. The former is less easily stressed into dysfunction and more robust in the face of challenge and demand. However, under enough pressure, the more mature family can devolve in the direction of poor functioning, just as in the absence of stress the less integrated family can appear higher in functioning.

Through it all, the repetitions inform the family and influence the functioning of the members, in patterns written in our long history as social beings.

A new basketball season has just started, and I am getting to know a new team. They look pretty good out there, agile and quick, some new stars clearly in the making. The team will likely look even better at the end of the season. Months of running familiar plays, getting used to each other's strengths and weaknesses, growing into assigned positions while mastering the intensity of competitive play. With any luck, they will be transformed into a beautifully interdependent unit, making the most of the togetherness built over time, and hopefully with room for the individual player to claim her own unique contribution to the outcome.

And they'll have me, in row F, saying to my seatmate "Hey, that was an illegal screen, did you see that?"

*For a detailed reading on family patterns consider *Bowen Family Secrets: Revealing the Hidden Life of Families*, Michael Kerr, 2019.

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