

Family Systems and the Power of Roles, Secrets, Myths, and Lies

By David Stoop, PhD

[ED. NOTE: This piece is excerpted verbatim from chapter 22, a chapters on family systems and family therapy, of our new book—Competent Christian Counseling: Pursuing and Practicing Compassionate Soul Care—to be published by WaterBrook Press and released in October. Dr. Stoop tracks the case of “Marian,” an adult child who had attempted suicide and was triangulated as the ‘scapegoat’ by her parents following the suicide of her older brother.]

One of the forces that helps families maintain homeostasis are the roles different family members play. A family role is an assigned place in the family constellation where an expected pattern of behavior and emotion are played out that, while hiding the family pathology, also serve to maintain the family equilibrium. The more rigid these roles in a family, the more difficult it is to break free of them.

Much of the research on family roles has been done by looking at alcoholic families. In the alcoholic family, someone has a problem with alcohol, usually one of the parents. Alcohol or drug abuse is a real and significant problem in the family, but other family members are punished when they confront it, so eventually no one is willing to face it as such. Usually the roles get assigned through the entire system once the other parent gives up confronting the problem directly to become the “Chief Enabler.” The enabling parent becomes “codependent” in collusion with the drug-dependent parent, and helps to maintain the façade that hides the real problem, often very successfully.

The children in the family will take on some very specific roles as well, depending on the number of children in the family. In intelligent and highly active families, the enabling parent and some children learn multiple roles, switching back-and-forth as the situation demands it. Many times, these roles are so well learned and practice that the family becomes very confused and unaware of the real problem(s) until treatment is started.

The ‘scapegoat.’ A key role played by one of the children is that of the “Scapegoat,” who is often the first-born child. That was Marian’s role in her family, after her older brother ‘bailed out’ of the role by attempting suicide. Instead of the parents assuming responsibility and looking at the real issues in their marriage and in the family, they put all of the family trouble or badness on one person. The parents collude together to point a common finger and exclaim, “They are the problem!” All of the energy within the family is focused on this child and their “problem.” When the scapegoat breaks out of that role, as Marian’s brother did, someone else is put into that role, without that person even realizing what has happened until much later.

The ‘hero.’ Another very important role is that of the “Hero.” This is the child who makes the family look good to outsiders. I recall a family that we worked with in the hospital that was very dysfunctional. Dad never worked; Mom held down temporary jobs; and most of the kids were in and out of trouble. But they were very proud of the

oldest son, who “had held down a job for over twenty years at a good company and even had been promoted several times.” He was the family hero. If a neighbor family complained about this family, someone would probably say, “Yes, but they can’t be that bad—look at their older son!” The hero serves the desired family image very well.

The ‘comic.’ If there are enough children in the family, another role that may be taken is that of the family “Comic.” This is the child who can offer comic relief in the family when tensions build too high. This role is perfectly revealed by many professional comedians who describe their family-of-origin as being highly dysfunctional and painful. While much of the family dysfunction is exaggerated in their comic routines, much of it isn’t, and was played out as bizarrely as described publicly. It is true when comedians say that they learned their comedy within the family as a means of coping with the pain.

The ‘lost child.’ Another common role is the “Lost Child,” or one who is sometimes known as the “Perfect Child.” This is the child, usually the youngest, who gets lost in all the family chaos. They do fairly well and seldom make any waves in the family, often insulated from the parental chaos by the other children in front of them (who, also, often raise this child in many ways). Because they aren’t a problem, they are often overlooked by the parents. Like the enabler-in-training, they also often end up repeating the patterns of the parents in their own marriages and family.

The ‘enabler-in-training.’ Another possible role taken by one of the children is what I call the “Enabler-in-Training.” This is the child who supports and helps out the adult enabler, learning to hide, lie for, and excuse the problem parent whenever cover is needed. This child’s role kicks in especially when the enabling adult is too tired or too angry to fulfill their role. Typically the enabler-in-training learns this role well as a child, and as an adult, often repeats the pattern of the enabler parent, marrying someone just like the problem parent.

The ‘violent child.’ A final role that I see developing in families of our modern culture—a form of the ‘scapegoat’ or problem child—is what I call the “Violent Child.” This is an angry child who learns to act out in aggressive and violent ways, both within and outside the family. Often diagnosed with a Conduct Disorder, the violent child may be a fire-starter, enjoy inflicting pain on animals or other people, and be socially isolated and inept, and is often picked on and bullied in school. He (this child is almost always male) often shows an inordinate interest in guns, bombs, violent video games, and ‘blood-and-gore’ horror movies—possibly the most telling examples of this role are the rash of school shootings by children in recent years. The violent child also shows how precarious is the maintenance of family homeostasis by any use of dysfunctional roles as, while no doubt sustaining the attention and concern of the rest of the family, violent acting out also threatens to blow the family cover and tear the family apart.

Other factors that help a family maintain dysfunctional homeostasis are family secrets, myths, and lies. Family secrets are those shameful things that ‘good families’ never acknowledge or talk about, protected by the unspoken rules that govern family interactions. They are the things that families and family members do, but no one ever

talks about it without being punished and ostracized. Secrets can be the obvious, such as drug abuse or alcoholism, or a family member's incest, or the parent's loveless or previous marriage that is never spoken about. Secrets can also be as seemingly innocuous as the 'crazy uncle in the institution' that the nephews and nieces never learned about until adulthood, or the unspoken rule that certain emotions, like anger, are not acceptable in the family

Families are as sick as their secrets. The classic metaphor to which family secrets have been likened is having an elephant in the living room that no one ever talks about. Eventually the elephant grows and takes over the living room, spraying its waste on everyone and making it impossible for anyone to be in the living room. Still, no one ever talks about the elephant. Guests come to the house and have to walk around the elephant and its waste, but somehow quickly learn that they are not to ask about the elephant, perhaps because they themselves have an elephant or "dead dog" in their living room, and don't want you to ask about it.

Family myths operate very much like secrets, only in counter-functioning ways. Myths are the things we do talk about in our family, but aren't really there. Like secrets, all families have their myths, which are used to project and exaggerate a picture of family goodness or perfection. Probably the most common one is for family members to say "We're very close as a family." When I ask people about their family-of-origin, they inevitably start and end with that statement. And in between, they describe a family that is anything but close. Other common family myths are how much the family enjoys get-togethers and reunions, how harmonious family relations are, how much the family respects one another, and how selfless, godly, ungreedy, and unpetty are family members.

Family lies are the corollary dynamic to family myths, except that lies are told to exaggerate the ugliness or badness of certain families or family members. Family lies operate when families fail to resolve its problems or forgive the pain that has been caused. Like the ugly but funny exaggerations that comics use when talking about their family-of-origin, family lies are used to contrast good and bad members of the family. Commonly seen in divorced and blended families, much conflict in re-marriage and blended family therapy revolves around family lies. Lies and exaggerations operate about the ex-spouse, and between step-parents and step-children. Step-parents will often contrast their own or favored 'perfect' child with the 'black sheep' step-child, and step-children will contrast their 'perfect' but lost-to-divorce natural parent with the 'mean and hateful' step-parent.

The important idea here is recognizing how family roles and the behavior around family secrets, myths, and lies help to maintain homeostasis in a dysfunctional family. Understanding the circularity of these dynamics also suggests that maintaining family equilibrium helps reinforce the roles different members of the family play, and the secrets, myths, and lies that family members tell--all members thoroughly convinced of their truthfulness, of course. These systems dynamics are to be seen and understood as the ways that families live in denial and resist change, and are a major part of the family's system of overt and covert rules.

