Family Systems - Police Tactical Psychology Bulletin

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Family Systems

In the criminal justice system, we deal with people in terms of their individual rights and actions. But often times, police officers are called to deal with families in conflict or turmoil. In these situations, police have to work within the framework of individual rights, responsibilities, and duties, but often are frustrated, confounded or inhibited by complex family dynamics. Other close groups of people exhibit similar or the same dynamics at times, but families are unique because of their interdependent kinship natures. The reason I say they are interdependent systems is because each member of a family creates and co-creates his or her identity with the influences of the other members. These identities are made up of various roles and aspects that the members play in different situations in which the family comes together. Clear responsibilities and boundaries associated with each member’s roles make a family functional. However, conflict and dysfunction emerge in families when there is role confusion, role conflicts, and unfulfilled role expectations.

Family problems are typically multicausal and intercausal. This means that there is not a clear line of cause and effect in the conflicts in which officers are called to intervene. When situations present a clear villain role that has acted badly creating a clear victim, police decision making is fairly straightforward. In family conflicts, the system has been created over time which means there is always a history within which the identities of the members have been developed. In other words, there are no households that are formed in the beginning with everyone being the worst versions of their selves. Actually, developmental psychology has come to regard the famous nature versus nurture debates by saying that both, innate endowments and life-experiences mold and shape “who” we are.

Consider for a moment, the roles that you play at home and for the different members of the family for whom you fulfill them. Even for one person like your spouse, you may be a provider, nurturer, intimate, friend, confidant, and others. The present circumstances in your relationship influences to which of these roles within your identity you will orient. When roles between family members are complimentary or cooperative, the family functions harmoniously. On the other hand, conflict and turmoil emerge in the household when responsibilities or unfulfilled expectations occur between family members and the roles they are playing. Even comedians make jokes about the words exchanged and behaviors at extended family events like holiday gatherings and family reunions. Roles that have not interacted between family members in their personal lives suddenly re-emerge when the family constellation is gathered in the same space and time. Suddenly, the black sheep, the princess, the responsible, the peacemaker, the caretaker, the expert, the rebel, and others start being played out by those who have historically played them. You can hear references to these at family disturbance calls to some degree. Officers can find psychologically tactical leverage points within this psychodrama with which to accomplish their goals of restoring peace or facilitating justice for that incident.

Decoding Systems and Leverage

- Identify the “type” of role each person is playing.
• What roles are pro- or anti-police?
• What are the benefits? (responsibility passing, vengeance, protection, etc.)
• Why were the police called and what are the meta-reason(s)?
• What role are the officers being expected to play and why? (are you being the parent?)
• If you play the role they want, will that serve justice or another value of some kind?
• Can you defuse the system or just divide the players?
• What “issues” are raised by whom and what do they symbolically represent? (respect, reciprocity, caring, etc.)

In dysfunctional families, there tends to be an antagonist or “problem” person in the system. Perhaps this role emerged out of being a temperamental child with an over-anxious perfectionist parent. Perhaps the conflicting roles emerged later in life due to some event or state of affairs. Either way, police officers that listen for these roles and themes in the histories given by the people in the household can be invaluable. Of course, the people are telling the police their entire life story to make a case for why they are not the problem, why the other is the problem, and how the history indicates that this is now an emergency that needs immediate attention. However, unless a crime has been committed, the police really only have an interest in restoring peace.

The officer(s) need to ascertain what “role” or what type of officer each member in the family expects him or her to be. Family members are often upset about some “principle” that has been violated and feels that the pattern of abuse or threat is unfolding. Officers can listen for, or even sometimes ask, “What do you think should happen?” Officers beware! Do not get sucked into playing a role in the family system that does not serve a criminal justice interest. The “problem child” may try to provoke an arrest so that later it can be used to force the complainant back into the role of “enabler” through guilt. Avoid falling into the trap of arresting the “problem child” for unnecessary misdemeanors simply to get things over with. It is an immediate return on a very little investment, but in future encounters with this system you have established the police as having “a role” in “their system.” If the officers play into the dysfunctional interactions of the system, he or she can actually become another supporting factor in perpetuating it.

Officers can also get sucked into taking the authority and responsibility role in the house. In this way, the member(s) of the family that would be in-charge in a functional family are sometimes all-too quick to abrogate his or her authority to you. You make the decision and take action and then they don’t have any responsibility with the outcomes; unless of course it turns out well. Then that person(s) will be all-too quickly to lay claim to making the call that saved the day. Tactically sizing up the family system, its players and scripts can enable officers to keep out of being manipulated by them, but also speak to the leverage points they find within the family’s interactions. Families are often blind to their own systemic dynamics and scripts, so officers that can elucidate the manipulations, power moves, and role shifting for the players can help them recognize their own traps and scripts.

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