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Progressive triangulation in psychotherapy and the spiritual journey

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Relationship triangles are usually considered symptomatic of family dysfunction in systems-oriented therapy, but they may also serve a progressive, transitional role in relationships. The author examines the phenomenon and function of “progressive” triangles in East and West spiritual traditions, and suggests that triangles comprising seeker, mediator, and higher power are common in both traditions, regardless of differing views of human nature. A progressive triangle in the therapeutic setting can be seen as a function of teleological transference, in which a seeker’s spiritual aspirations are projected onto a mediator, who provides support and direction for its further realization. The implications of progressive triangulation and teleological transference in contemporary practice are discussed.

Keywords: family therapy; relationship triangles; spiritual mentoring; teleological transference

Introduction

According to systems-oriented family therapy, one of the principal sources of distress in families is the failure of its members to communicate directly with each other. Anxious over the possible consequences of honest disclosure, they will confide in substitutes—other family members, lovers, and friends—rather than communicating with those with whom they have difficulties (Bowen, 1978; Hoffman, 1981). This proclivity for avoiding direct communication by turning to surrogates was first acknowledged by Bowen who, in believing that dyadic relationships are inherently unstable, came to regard triangles as “the smallest stable relationship structure” and triangulation as a problematic dynamic in families (Bowen, 1978). Trained as a psychoanalyst, Bowen recast Freud’s original conception of the Oedipal triangle into a here-and-now emotional process that can take place between any three people. Fogarty (1976) contributed to the concept by approaching triangles in treatment planning more structurally by moving distanced parents closer to their children, or by creating more distance between overinvolved parents and their children. Guerin went on to differentiate between “triangulation” as the reactive emotional process that activates a triangle, and a “triangle” as a relationship structure (Guerin, Fogarty, Fay, & Kautto, 1996). Minuchin (1974) further developed the idea by

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describing how a triangle could express itself as a “cross-generational coalition” between one parent and a child against the other parent, or as “detouring” in which parents channel their relationship distress onto a child.

If the anxious avoidance of direct communication promotes triangulation, then encouraging honest communication, in which the individuals take responsibility for their respective contributions to the relationship, constitutes a priority in alleviating marital and family distress. Bowen believed that the best way to assist in “detriangling” was to remain neutral and to ask questions designed to help the conflicted family members become more aware of their respective contributions to the problem and what they needed to change in their own behavior in order to facilitate improvement in the relationship. In so doing, Bowen (1978) believed that a therapist could participate in a “therapeutic triangle,” which, instead of serving as a substitute for honest communication, creates a transitional context in which distressed family members can deal openly with their differences through the mediation of a respectful witness.

Benefits of triangles

Although triangles have become synonymous with family dysfunction, triangles can also serve as useful transitional structures whenever a third person, or mediator, helps to bridge the gulf between distanced parties. Bowen’s (1978) “therapeutic triangle” represents one such example of a triangle working progressively within the therapeutic setting, but triangles may serve a valuable function outside of the therapeutic setting, as well. For instance, a husband may feel *more* willing to disclose his grievance with his wife after confiding with a friend or a counselor, especially if the confidant encourages him to do so. Similarly, a daughter may have a better idea about how to talk with her father about a difficult issue after her mother coaches her on how best to approach him. Whenever a triangle promotes a better understanding of another person and a greater willingness to communicate with that person, then it might be considered constructive in intent, and progressive in outcome. Thus, individuals may turn to third parties not only as a way to perpetuate relational distance, but in an effort to resolve it.

Triangles in sacred traditions

While it may not be customary to compare ordinary human-to-human relationships with a person’s relationship with higher power, it is possible that observations in one field can deepen our understanding of the other if there is a willingness to compare and contrast similar relational dynamics in each of these dimensions of human experience.

One does not have to look very far to discover triangles and triangulation functioning in the spiritual life. In religion traditions where the divine is considered ontologically distinct from the human realm—such as in Judaism, and in post-Augustinian Western Christianity—the gulf between heaven and earth constitutes an a priori condition that confronts every human being. This division is not a problem that can be resolved simply through a change in perspective, or a breakthrough in awareness. However, in other traditions, such as in Hinduism and Buddhism, God or a higher consciousness is considered humankind’s essential nature and ultimate destiny. Human beings are estranged from higher power not ontologically, but psychologically—that is, through a lack of awareness of their true selves. As one might expect, triangles in the Judeo-Christian tradition tend to become enshrined as permanent and necessary aspects of one’s

relationship with God, whereas triangles in Hinduism and Buddhism are, at least in principle, symbolic and transitional.

Triangles in the Judeo-Christian tradition

The Israelites of the Old Testament considered covenant to be the highest expression of their relationship with God. The statement attributed to God, “Listen to my voice, and do all that I command you. So shall you be my people, and I will be your God” (Jeremiah 11:4 Revised Standard Version) captures the essence of this reciprocal arrangement. It was through honoring the covenant expressed by Mosaic law that the Israelites would gain God’s blessings and protection from their enemies. But it was initially through the mediating agency of Moses that the law became articulated in the first place. Priests and prophets served as mediators and conduits of God’s will, while the ontological distinction between God and humanity remained an irrevocable fact.

Jesus introduced a variation on the triangular theme. In John 14:6, he says, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” In this succinct formulation, he describes a triangular relationship in which he occupies an exclusive mediating position between humankind and God. However, Jesus also seemed to anticipate the gulf that his death would create by alluding to a third “person,” who would continue to perform his mediating role once he was gone: “But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you” (John 14:26).

By alluding to the Holy Spirit, Jesus encouraged his followers to enjoy his continuing influence through a fully congruent mediating spirit that was presumably available in all times and places. This concept energized the early Christians and has been cited as one of the reasons that the nascent religion appealed to so many people. However, the emerging Church leadership, in its attempt to consolidate its authority in the face of an array of opposing beliefs and claims, eventually found it untenable to accept the diverse and idiosyncratic nature of presumed experiences of the Holy Spirit. Indeed, the “spontaneous experience of the Holy Spirit...soon came into conflict with the conservative imperatives of the institutional Church... Individuals claiming the presence of the Spirit tended to produce unpredictably variable revelations and charismatic phenomena” (Tarnas, 1991, p. 157).

The notion of the Holy Spirit as a divine principle of revolutionary spiritual power, immanent in the human community and moving it toward deification, diminished in the Christian belief in favor of a Holy Spirit as solely invested in the authorities and activities of the institutional Church. (Tarnas, 1991, p. 157)

Another mediator—Mary, the mother of Jesus—was venerated, beginning in the early centuries of the Christian era. As early as 373, St. Ephraem heralded Mary’s mediating role, by saying, “With the Mediator, you are the Mediatrix of the entire world,” and “referred to her as “the friendly advocate of sinners” (Miravale, 2007). Mary was, “by 400... occupying a mounting place in private devotion that was soon to pass into the official liturgy” (Chadwick, 1986, p. 281). Mary’s unique role as a human who gave birth to the redeemer allowed for a natural transfer of devotional sentiment from the pagan goddess to a human figure within Christianity to whom worshippers could easily relate (Tarnas, 1991, pp. 162–164).

Another reason for Mary’s constellation as an independent focus of worship in the early church was the widening theological distance between Jesus and the human realm.

In response to an array of divergent challenges from various so-called heresies, the “proto-orthodox” (Ehrman, 2005) Church fathers progressively asserted the divinity of Jesus over his humanity, thus making it more difficult for the common person to imagine Jesus serving as an approachable mediator between the austere Judeo-Christian God and the world. Through the consolidation of the orthodox position, in which Jesus became increasingly synonymous with God, Jesus’ role as an approachable mediator between God and humanity was progressively undermined. In Chadwick’s (1986, p. 282) words, “Because of this loss of solidarity between Christ and the rest of the human race, the faithful increasingly looked towards Mary as the perfect representative of redeemed humanity.” This shift of worship toward Mary concerned the Church authorities, who considered “the massive popular veneration of Mary...to exceed the bounds of theological justifiability” (Tarnas, 1991, p. 163). Much in the way that the Church brought the Holy Spirit within the walls of the Church, the problem “was resolved...through the identification of the Virgin Mary with the Church” (p. 164). Thereafter, the feminine and receptive qualities associated with the virginal Mother became associated with the Church, which in turn became viewed as the “Bride of Christ.”

Mary’s elevation in theological status made sense within a Church eager to incorporate various popular ideas into acceptable dogma. But as Marina Warner says, the constellation of Mary has had its downside:

Soaring above the men and women who pray to her, the Virgin conceived without sin underscores rather than alleviates pain and anxiety and accentuates the feeling of sinfulness...Any symbol that exacerbates the pain runs counter to the central Christian doctrine that mankind was made and redeemed by God, and, more important, is the continuing enemy of hope and happiness. (Warner, 1976, p. 254)

The progressive elevation of Jesus and Mary in the Christian tradition has not entirely prevented seekers from appealing to their traditional mediating roles in the religious life. When asked why people overlook the doctrinal distance between themselves and these lofty figures, one Catholic priest simply replied, “People don’t want theology, they want love” (Sparrow, 2002, p. 143).

In summary, the Judeo-Christian legacy reveals a preoccupation with resolving humanity’s ontological split from God through triangular relationships with beings and spirits who might bridge the perceived gulf between heaven and earth. The eventual appropriation of these mediators into institutional religious structures—and/or the tendency to elevate the mediators to semidivine or divine status—accounts for the psychological distance between these mediators and the people who appeal to them, as well as the psychological impulse to find new ones.

Progressive triangles in the eastern tradition

In Buddhism and Hinduism, the problem of humanity’s separation from higher power is psychological—or a matter of perception or awareness—rather than theological (Suzuki, 1987). According to these religions, human beings labor under the illusion, not the fact, of their estrangement from God. The resolution of humanity’s perceived estrangement is always available through a complete release from the conditioned mind, referred to in Buddhism as the “turning about in the deepest seat of consciousness” (Govinda, 1969; Suzuki, 1987). However, in recognition of the difficulty of emancipating oneself from the compelling illusion of separateness, gurus serve as external guides and catalysts in both Buddhism and Hinduism for awakening a person to their true nature.

This triangular dynamic between guru, devotee, and higher power is illustrated by the biographical account of the Tibetan guru, Milarepa (1040–1143). The young seeker, who was destined to become the second patriarch of the Kargyupa sect, went to study under Marpa the Translator after using his psychic powers to kill his aunt and uncle in revenge for stealing his family's wealth. Marpa instantly recognized Milarepa as his successor, but he knew that he would have to adopt unusual tactics to facilitate Milarepa's spiritual refinement. So he set about making his disciple do things, and undo things, that made no sense to the young aspirant. Marpa would often appear drunk or deranged, and he constantly contradicted things that he had told Milarepa to do. Meanwhile, Marpa steadfastly refused to admit his student into his inner circle, and would dismiss him harshly whenever Milarepa tried to attend the initiation ceremonies. In effect, Marpa ceased to be the approachable symbol of higher power, and became instead harsh and unknowable.

In a state of suicidal despondency, Milarepa turned to Marpa's wife Dagmema for help and solace, thus establishing a triangular dynamic between Milarepa and his teacher. Dagmema pleaded with her husband on Milarepa's behalf, as Mary had pleaded with Jesus at the wedding at Cana. Even though Marpa was initially unrelenting—as Jesus had been when first approached—his wife's compassion for the young disciple provided the support Milarepa needed to persist in his efforts to win his master's approval. Finally, Marpa exhibited an apparent sudden change of heart, and bestowed upon his disciple the full measure of his love and his teachings (Evans-Wentz, Gtsan-Smyon He-Ru-Ka, Lopez, & Zla-Ba-Bsam-'Grub, 2000).

Milarepa's reliance upon Marpa's wife was not unlike that of a Christian petitioner for whom Christ has become so apparently austere and unknowable that they turn to Mary for mediation and clemency. Regardless of the spiritual tradition, the pattern seems clear: When the perceived distance between a seeker and a symbol of one's higher power widens, another mediator is sought.

To illustrate this dynamic in contemporary terms, I once counseled an elderly woman who happened to be a devotee of the late Sikh guru Maharaj Charan Singh Ji, and who often prayed to him. Knowing that she had never evidenced the slightest problem with her earlier Christian faith, I once enquired as to why she did not also pray to Jesus. She looked surprised, and replied as if it were an obvious fact, "Why, Jesus has much more important things to do than to answer *my* prayers."

When progressive triangles become stagnant

Progressive triangles can turn stagnant, and even regressive—either because the seeker becomes too dependent on the teacher, or the teacher begins to usurp the position of the transcendent goal. There is a Mahayana Buddhist saying, "When the master points at the moon, the fool looks at the finger." This pithy metaphor, which succinctly summarizes the *Lankavatara Sutra* (Suzuki, 1987), conveys the classic error of the seeker who fails to discriminate between a reflection of the truth and the truth itself. Stories abound in the Hindu and Buddhist traditions of spiritual teachers who intentionally frustrate their followers' inclinations to worship them. For instance, when a devotee once asked of a great saint, "What is my duty?" he replied, "Do you want me to peel your banana and eat it, too?" (Chidvalasananda, 1989, p. 222).

Jesus, too, was sensitive to the tendency of his disciples to idealize him, and even to deify him. He admonished the rich young man by saying, "Why callest thou me good? There is none good but one, that is, God" (Mark 10:18 King James Version).

Not all teachers or religious institutions successfully resist the temptation to exploit their followers' dependency on them. By the Middle Ages, the Catholic Church had taken to dispensing grace through the sale of indulgences, which undermined its moral authority. Luther's effort to remove the Catholic Church from its mediating role left Protestants with a direct avenue to God, but without a well-defined bridge into that relationship. In contemporary times, Jung was particularly articulate in underscoring the alienation that the Reformation fostered by disavowing the living symbols and sacerdotal functions that had once served to mediate God's felt presence in this world. "Protestantism," says Jung, "having divested itself from much of the ritual and codes of the Catholic Church, leaves the individual to confront his sins alone" (Jung, 1970, p. 34).

Implications for modern therapy

Systems-oriented family therapists have become adept at diagnosing dysfunctional triangles in relational therapy, and psychodynamic therapists have been trained to recognize and treat transference in the therapeutic setting. However, the concept of progressive triangulation in the spiritual journey may call for a broader view of triangulation and transference in the clinical setting for the purposes of conducting therapy with individuals who are also seeking a closer relationship with higher power.

Given the function of mediators in spiritual traditions both East and West, it may be important for modern therapists to consider how they may be called upon to accept the client's projection of spiritual yearning and to participate in progressive triangles that arise as a natural outgrowth of a client's spiritual aspirations. Some therapists may reject outright accepting a mentoring role in their clients' spiritual lives, much less becoming a symbol of a client's own higher power. That decision, of course, depends on a therapist's theoretical rationale for practice. But as Jung was fond of saying, "Called or not called, God is present," alluding to a quote that originated at the Oracle at Delphi. Whether one interprets this statement from a metaphysical or a psychological standpoint, it is certainly true that the presence or absence of a felt sense of higher power comprises a significant aspect of psychotherapy, whether it is acknowledged or not. Consequently, a therapist's refusal to play an active role in the client's spiritual journey may merely keep the clients from exploring a crucially important part of their lives and, by implication, a valuable resource in their therapeutic process. In contrast, therapists who accept the role of mediator/mentor may perform a sacred function that is needed in this world without representing themselves as agents of any particular religious tradition, or as substitutes for priests and ministers.

Clinical anecdotes

Progressive triangulation is probably more likely to occur when: a client is consciously seeking spiritually; a therapist makes it clear that spirituality has a place in the therapeutic process and welcomes a discussion of the client's dreams and spiritual experiences; and the therapist is comfortable enough in their own spirituality that the client may tacitly learn from and identify with the therapist. As the client begins to regard the therapist as a spiritual companion within the therapeutic role, the client may experience a deepening connection with higher power as an apparent result of the relationship. They may associate the therapist with that experience, and come to rely on the therapist for mentoring and

guidance. In my 25 years as a psychotherapist, I have found that this is neither unusual nor ominous, and will tend to parallel and support the therapeutic process. During this time of progressive triangulation, clients will occasionally fantasize or dream about me in ways that reveal that I have become a symbol for their higher power.

For instance, I once counseled a 25-year-old woman who, as a child, had been severely abused by her mother, and whose divorced father had been effectively prevented from spending much time with her. She entered therapy addicted to alcohol and cocaine, and vowing never to have children of her own. In the course of our therapeutic work, her recovery entailed weekly individual and group therapy, a Twelve-Step Program, a deep devotion to Christ, and a regular meditational practice. Concurrently, she often dreamed of coming to my home and talking with me and my wife about spiritual matters, or just sitting quietly in the comfort of our home. She said that such dreams gave her a sense of belonging. While the obvious transference kept me ever-watchful of problematic developments, she always treated me with respect, indicating to me that the dream “visits” were not exclusively about her need to find the parenting that she never had. It appeared that our relationship was also serving as a springboard into communion with her higher power. Her therapeutic work came to a successful conclusion shortly after she reported two dramatic dreams.

In the first, she experienced herself as rising up and floating above her bed. There she encountered a being of light whom she identified as Jesus. The being embraced her and danced with her in the space above her bed. Significantly, she had been a professional dancer, and her mother had often intruded upon her career in efforts to “assist” her. In the second dream, she stood upon a shoreline and watched a huge wave approaching. Out of the wave appeared a whale, which beached itself in front of her. It turned its head and held the woman’s gaze momentarily before retreating into the water. The woman looked down and saw that the whale had left a baby whale at her feet. She knew somehow that she needed to care for it, so she took it into her arms. Not long after, she terminated her therapeutic work with me. She was free of drugs and alcohol and determined to make a fresh start on her life. Soon after, she met her future husband and within a year had given birth to a baby girl. Looking back, I believe it is accurate to say that the spiritual dimensions of our relationship facilitated her awareness of her own higher power, as represented by the two dreams that she shared near the end of our relationship.

A similar story involves another client—a divorced 32-year-old woman who had been diagnosed by her previous two therapists, as well as by myself, as having borderline personality disorder (American Psychiatric Association, 2000; *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (4th ed.)). From the first moment of our first session, she expressed an intense transference—alternating between attraction, fear of abandonment, and rage—apparently as an outgrowth of her childhood molestation. Her dreams and waking fantasies predictably ran the gamut from overidealizing me to wishing me dead. Our work revolved around recovering an enduring sense of an inviolate self in the context of healthy therapeutic boundaries, but also included a focus on her emergent spirituality, as evidenced by dreams that she related to me during our sessions. Toward the end of our work, she had a dream of digging into a rubbish heap, and discovering a doll at the bottom of the debris. As she held it, it suddenly came to life. About that time, she also began to report having frequent dreams about me, in which I would come into her bedroom at night, sit beside her bed, and talk to her about my life and our respective struggles. Finally, in a dream that clearly foreshadowed the termination of her therapy, she dreamt that I appeared in her room dressed in armor, saying that I was leaving for

some distant crusade. She heard me say, “I cannot promise you that I will not leave, only that I will return.” This dream portrayed the end of our therapeutic relationship, as well as a sense of healthy relational distance that had become increasingly tolerable within the context of her emergent sense of self. She began to attend church for the first time since childhood, and met a man whom she subsequently married. Today, she is a licensed psychotherapist working in hospice care.

In my experience, most of the significant indications of the importance of the progressive triangle are depicted in dreams. However, in some instances, dramatic mutual experiences of “presence” have occurred during the therapeutic hour. For instance, I had been working for over a year with a 30-year-old man, who had been addicted to painkillers since he was a teenager. During one session, when he was feeling particularly despondent, we were talking about people who had experienced Christ’s direct intervention in their lives—including Bill Wilson, the founder of AA. My client expressed a hope that Jesus would intervene in his life, too, since his own efforts had failed. As we sat together sharing this deep yearning for spiritual intervention, something remarkable happened:

Suddenly, I was “struck” by what felt like a wave of energy coming from my left... I continued to sit in silence, looking at and listening to R. as usual, not knowing where this was going to go. After a few moments, he stopped talking in mid-sentence, looked in the direction from which I had felt the wave of energy come, and then said, “What’s happening? Something’s happening here.” Then a second, stronger wave hit and I felt almost overwhelmed by it—like I was becoming a child again, and overshadowed by someone with tremendous power and love. I suggested that we close our eyes and be still. As we did, I saw white light. The sense of radiance and love lasted for several minutes. (Sparrow, 2003, pp. 17–18)

After the experience was over, we compared notes and discovered that we had each experienced almost exactly the same sensations and emotions. While the experience did not precipitate an immediate cure for my client, the man drew sustenance from it until—when he was finally ready—he entered a drug rehab program. He has since remained drug free for over three years.

This experience would be termed *shaktipat* (literally, descent of grace) in the Hindu tradition, defined as an initiation in which the Guru transmits spiritual energy to the seeker, thereby awakening the recipient’s dormant *kundalini*, or life force (Syda Foundation, 2007). Similarly, it might be regarded as the descent of the Holy Spirit in the Christian tradition, or of *shekinah* in Judaism—defined as “a light created to be an intermediary between God and the world” (Blah & Kohler, 2007). Each tradition cited considers the light itself as a mediator between an individual and God, or between an individual and one’s ultimate nature.

Broadening the concept of transference

When considered from the standpoint of classic psychoanalytic theory, a client’s elevation of a therapist to the position of spiritual catalyst mediator would represent an unambiguous example of transference. While contemporary psychoanalysts have augmented the classic view with the egalitarian concept of “sibling transference” to denote transference between equals (Coleman, 1996; Moser, 2005), transference, in accord with Freud’s original formulation, still refers to earlier events and relational dynamics in a person’s life. As for a future orientation, “Freud rejected the notion outright: the unconscious had (was) an “*arche*,” not a “*telos*.” It referred back to infancy, but not

forward to maturity” (Homans, 1995, p. xxxvi). In contrast, teleological theories posit an individuating (Jung, 1972) or self-actualizing (Maslow, 1962; Rogers, 1961) impulse that has as its ultimate aim the emergence of a complete self. Such systems anticipate the benefits of progressive triangulation in the emergence of the whole person. Jung, in particular, acknowledged that transference could be progressive or teleological as well as retrospective:

The analytic process itself is unconsciously directed by the archetype of individuation, the impulse to grow in psychological depth and complexity... Transference thereby acquires a teleological dimension, the symbolic intent and meaning of which is revealed and experienced as analysis unfolds; this is its prospective aspect, in contrast to the regressive projection of unconscious material from infantile or other past experience. (Mijolla, 2005)

Within a theoretical framework that includes a prospective or teleological function, the elevation of the therapist to the symbol of the client’s higher power could be seen as a function of *teleological transference*, the resolution of which is the further actualization of a client’s unrealized spiritual potentials. Within such an expanded theoretical framework, transference may come to be seen as an mixture of unresolved conflicts and unacknowledged spiritual potentials that co-inhere within the same person.

Serving in such a mediating capacity requires the utmost in integrity. Alan Jones says, “A true spiritual authority leaves us thinking our own thoughts rather than merely mouthing his... A true spiritual authority leaves us with our own work to do” (Jones, 1999). Of course, it is easy for a therapist to decline the role, for it can be quite burdensome. Just as a therapist may reflexively discourage a client’s romantic feelings without regard for how these emotions may support the therapeutic process, it may seem prudent to refuse a client’s projection of spiritual yearning, as well. It may require as much beneficence and integrity to weather a projection of a client’s spiritual hunger as it does to deal with a client’s romantic attraction: In both instances, the success of the therapeutic process depends on never taking the projection personally, nor exploiting the power that it may bestow. Further, when participating in a progressive triangle, it is essential to treat the client as an equal in value if not in status, as emphasized by Kopp (1971, pp. 96–97), who asserts unequivocally, “I will not accept the burdensome illusion that we are not the same.”

In some cases, it is certainly wise to disqualify oneself from the mentoring/mediating role. For instance, a woman who, with her husband, had been seeing me for marital problems, asked me to become her spiritual mentor within the counseling relationship. Knowing that she respected me for my books concerning religious experiences (1997, 2002, 2003), I might have consented if I had been seeing her on an individual basis. But her spirituality had kept her aloof from emotional and sexual intimacy in her marriage, much to her husband’s distress, and so I respectfully declined. My acquiescence would have created a non-therapeutic triangle weighted toward the wife’s presumed interests, which would have surely alienated her husband.

In regard to those psychotherapeutic clients for whom I accept the additional role of spiritual mentor, it is essential to discuss with them how spiritual mentoring relationships have a long history in Eastern and Western spiritual traditions, and that if the spiritual dimension of the relationship progresses as it should, the client/mentee will eventually experience a more direct connection with higher power. By keeping the client oriented to this goal, the therapist-mentor can minimize the chances that the client will become unduly attached to the mediator, or that either party will succumb to the “burdensome illusion” (Kopp, 1971, pp. 96–97) that they are not spiritually equal.

Summary and discussion

I began this paper by introducing a relationship dynamic that is associated with family dysfunction in systems-oriented family therapy. I subsequently examined how “progressive” triangulation arises naturally whenever individuals attempt to bridge the real or perceived gulf between themselves and someone else—including one’s higher power—with the help of an intermediary. Given the constructive nature of progressive triangulation, I believe that it may be timely for family therapists to revisit the concept of “ordinary” triangulation with an eye for how the impulse that impels an outwardly dysfunctional process may be motivated by an individual’s yearning for intimacy and wholeness. This recasting of an ostensible “problem” may be aided by drawing upon the influences of one of the founding fathers of family therapy—Milton Erickson—whose legendary capacity to facilitate change was based in large part upon his ability to perceive how unwanted symptoms were tied to a person’s strengths, and could be harnessed in the service of change (Haley, 1976, 1981). By contemplating how triangulation serves the individual in the spiritual life, and invoking the competency-based principles of Erickson, contemporary family therapists may be able to perceive the triangulating urge as a resourceful, albeit misdirected, *willingness to connect* in order to mitigate an anxious sense of alienation. By reframing triangulation as a competency that can be used constructively, a family therapist may be able to redirect this impulse and put it to better use in establishing communication between disengaged family members.

As for individual psychotherapy, progressive triangulation provides a way to understand a client’s constructive impulse to search for a closer relationship with higher power, or innate wholeness, through the mediating agency of the therapist. By embracing the teleological nature of this impulse, and abiding by the requirements of a progressive triangle, therapists can participate in a forward-looking emergence of the client’s relationship with higher power or actualizing potential, which may in turn accelerate the therapeutic process. A psychotherapist who participates in a progressive triangle may effectively harness the impulse of the client’s spiritual yearning as a way to recast the therapeutic endeavor, from an exclusive healing of past and current wounds and conflicts, to a process that is overshadowed by—and to some extent governed by—the client’s deeper unfoldment.

The significance of progressive triangulation from the standpoint of the phenomenology of religion is that it provides a lens through which one may view the struggle of individuals to balance their devotion between transcendent and immanent expressions of the divine. By considering that triangles can promote or retard a person’s spiritual development—depending on the motives of both seeker and mediator—one can remain sensitive to the way that the spiritual journey can be furthered or arrested within the same relational dynamic.

Triangles in the spiritual life resemble ordinary relationship triangles except, perhaps, in one significant regard: While ordinary triangles can ultimately be resolved by having the distanced parties communicate and accept responsibility for their respective contributions to the disengagement, triangles in the spiritual life cannot be resolved as long as the transcendent “other” remains remote from the seeker’s experience. Because the experience of the transcendent tends to be elusive, regardless of one’s spiritual tradition, mentors and mediating symbols may continue to play an important role throughout a seeker’s life. Indeed, history reveals that the alternating focus between a direct and mediated relationship with the divine represents a timeless dialectic that cannot be resolved merely by rejecting one and asserting the importance of the other.

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