Recognizing, Understanding and Addressing Triangulation in Congregations and Organizations

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My earliest awareness of triangulation came in my first position after ordination. Among other duties, I ran the religious school in a large congregation and worked with a lot of b'nai mitzvah kids. Naturally, they would complain about their parents and I felt sympathetic. In April of that first year on the job, I had a fateful conversation with my mentor, Milly Brichto, whom I had taught for when she was running the Religious School at Temple Sholom in Cincinnati. I was complaining to her about these parents and how unreasonable they were when Milly wisely asked me: why are the parents any less your client than the child? That one question changed the whole way I worked with those families. It didn't change the fact of the triangle (made up of the kids, their parents and me); it just meant I had a different awareness of the pitfalls and could work more comfortably within the triangle.

You might find yourself wishing triangulation away, but if you've been in the rabbinate for two minutes, you've learned that triangulation is an inevitable and common human experience. I want to offer some background theory as to why. Many of you have learned about the Bowenian theory of triangulation, named for Murray Bowen, an eminent family systems therapist. Those of you who are fans of Ed Friedman (Generation to Generation) might know he was a student of Bowen. Bowen theorized that a two-person emotional system is unstable; under that stress, it is likely to form itself into a three-person system or triangle.[1] For Bowen, it's like having a two-legged table that can't stand unless you add in a third leg. Bowen's therapeutic goal is called differentiation; how you can stay connected -

for instance - to your family without becoming enmeshed or fused. That's a good foundational definition that I'd like to expand on.
Today I want to take what you've learned about Bowen and broaden it by offering additional ideas about triangulation using a modern psychoanalytical, psychodynamic and feminist perspective. If you find a theory that speaks to you, it will help you choose what interventions to make in particular situations.

Let's start with the most basic question: Where do triangles come from? I make this assumption: We are all born into triangles. If you have two parents, you as the child represent the third angle of the triangle. Even if you have one parent, children fantasize the existence of a second parent and still create an emotional triangle. If you are adopted, that triangle might include your adoptive parents and your missing birth parents. The third corner of that triangle might be the parental relationship or even the outside world. Freud uses the classic oedipal definition of the mother -father - child structure where the father intrudes into the relationship between mother and child. The child's maturational task there involves navigating parental rivalry, separating and eventually seeing the mother as a separate person. You've probably heard of that one but we aren't going to stay there.

The British analyst Donald Winnicott (of good-enough mother fame) imagines the third corner as a transitional space between "mother" and child as a way of introducing gradual separation between mother and child without a violent rupture. Feminist theory critiques Freud and his followers because he frames the triangle around the father as symbolic authority while the mother remains a passive object the child must separate from. Jessica Benjamin, who is a relational analyst, counters that the mother needs to be seen more as a subject, a person, rather than an object. She replaces Freud's paternal third corner with "what she calls the

"moral third" or **"intersubjective third"** — a shared space of recognition between two subjects. That is her therapeutic goal. This is less about a literal third person and more about a *quality of relating* in which both parties can hold complexity, difference, and their own subjectivity simultaneously". Judith Butler, in a queer critique (not psychoanalytic), says all this thinking is heteronormative and invites us to consider "how the "third" function can be carried by figures who don't fit the paternal mold at all." And feminist psychoanalyst Adrienne Harris says triangles don't map onto gender since gender itself is fluid. ["If gender is more fluid and multiple, then triangulation cannot be a single developmental event but rather an ongoing, revisable process of negotiating difference and sameness across a lifetime."]

Wherever you might land in the theoretical world, all these thinkers take triangles seriously and acknowledge them as a fundamental part of human experience. Your first experience of triangulation happens when you are too young to know it. There is a British therapist David Pocock, who blends both psychoanalytic and systemic approaches. He quotes studies that [Elisabeth Depeursinge and Nicolas Favez (2006)] "show how infants as young as twelve weeks have the ability to relate triadically, alternating their gaze and whole range of affect signals between parents. In optimal conditions the infant then sees herself reflected in their responses. Under stress—for example, if the father is intrusive—the infant will turn to the mother to register her distress. There is then a variety of outcomes depending on the qualities of the parental alliance." Even though most research has been done in hetero studies, the conclusions apply regardless of the child's gender.

Fast forward from infancy until adulthood. Triangulation will present itself in adult life as a repetition of that childhood relationship. I want to clarify that there's

nothing wrong with these triangles if the people in them function in a healthy way. Pocock comments that: "[Perhaps the most significant legacy of the Oedipus Complex is a broader conception developed more fully in the systemic family therapy world:] *that three-person relationships have within them a range of dynamics: some developmentally progressive, some stabilizing, some regressive, and some destabilizing, but all… relevant in understanding individuals within their relational contexts…"*

This emotional triangle can actually facilitate healthy development in a child if the parents work together in the best interest of the child. This is true in polyamorous relationships as well, perhaps a bit more challenging since there are more adults to relate to the child and each other and therefore more triangles to manage. What's important here for healthy child development is that the parents create an alliance in which they don't let the infant's aggressive feelings divide them, but rather they can jointly tolerate and contain them (in the language of Bion and Winnicott), and then feed them back to the infant in a less toxic way. Think about the things you say to a crying infant: "Are you angry that I took so much time warming the bottle? Are you frustrated that no one picked you up when you wanted to be held? Are you mad that you had to sit too long in a wet diaper?" Whatever you say, you are offering a way of accepting a feeling, giving language to it and feeding it back to the baby. In turn, the baby feels seen, accepted and understood. That's a healthy use of the triangle.

And equally importantly, the baby learns that its feelings can't destroy you, the caregiver, that you will survive the baby's aggressive feelings. Jessica Benjamin, calls this "mindful survival": no one gets hurt by those feelings and the baby begins to see the parent not just as a fantasy but as a real person. What all that

means is that the baby comes to realize that the parent who doesn't always come on time is the same parent who also comes right away. The baby feels its own separateness and can also begin to see the separate parents as integrated whole people.

But what if the parenting doesn't go well? Those of us who are parents try to do our best but that still doesn't guarantee an ideal outcome.This parental-child triangle is a challenge for all concerned. The psychoanalyst, Maureen Marks (2002, p. 95), [who] notes there are stresses for *all* participants in the triangle: "The task for mother, father and infant involves tolerating the link between two people that they love and desire, which excludes them." The baby can feel excluded from the parental bond; one parent can feel excluded from the bond between the baby and the other parent, regardless of gender. The more parents, the more possibility for feeling connected or excluded.

What if there is tension between the parents? What if the father is jealous of the mother's focusing on the baby? What if the mother feels displaced in the life of her partner? What if both mothers or fathers have ongoing basic disagreements about how to raise that child? What if the child feels compelled to take sides? What if the parents need the child to be the buffer between them? You can see the beginnings of the formation of an unhealthy triangle. And you can see where the child begins to develop unhealthy defenses, that is, ways of protecting itself that ultimately both work and don't work, both protect and also harm that child. Where we see that is in how that child as an adult relates to us as clergy. Their emotional transferences to us reflect their personal past.

We adults use old ways of defending ourselves from difficult feelings. We recapitulate our emotional past in the present. We all do that at times. It's an unconscious reflexive process. Your congregants aren't doing it intentionally to trap you (or if they are, that's a different issue). They don't even know they are doing it. They are just relying on an old unconscious habit. They bring all these old feelings into their relationship with you. Being a member of the clergy always ignites peoples' transferences, as you well know. A moment here about how those transferences might be different if you are a woman. Clergy often represent God as the divine third corner of the triangle; we have God's ear, so to speak. Since traditionally that ear belonged to "God as father", that means that female clergy are disruptive by definition, offering a radical non-masculine alternative while also being seen as some kind of interlocutor. Women rabbis can feel caught in a double bind. If you respond warmly and pastorally to people, you risk losing your symbolic authority. If you maintain the traditional more masculine distance associated with the clergy role, you may be experienced as the mother who is cold, withholding or rejecting. People still have different transferences to women than to men, maybe not forever, but now.

So where do you fit into this picture? Let's start with the assumption that everyone has a personal history of triangulation. This isn't just about them; it's also about you and your own intersecting triangles. The path here is to reflect on your own mental state as well as theirs. In the trade, we call that process mentalization. [Peter Fonagy and colleagues (2002)] Professionals "see the capacity to mentalise as a crucial achievement in mental health. Mentalising or, to phrase it differently, 'reflective function', is the ability to reflect upon one's own mental states as well as that of others in relationship." But, in the words again of British therapist Pocock: "The capacity to mentalise—to understand both one's own and

other people's behaviour in terms of mental states, such as, for example, desires, feelings, and beliefs—is inhibited in the confusion of triangulation."

If your caregivers can consider you and think of your needs when you are a child, you naturally develop a capacity to self-reflect as an adult. If you didn't get the consideration you needed, your capacity to self-reflect will be compromised. In other words, you can work backwards from the present to understand how a current situation might push old buttons in both you and them. If you are experiencing a relationship in a particularly intense way that stays with you, that keeps you up at night, that is a tipoff for you to self-reflect on your historical emotions. You might not have a concrete memory of a specific occasion in your childhood, but if you have a strong feeling, the feeling is actually the memory. If you didn't get what you needed in that childhood formation, if you felt excluded from or enmeshed in that triangle, those feelings will be reawakened in an intense way in your adult life.

How do you identify your feelings of having been triangulated? That depends on you. For some of you, when you feel powerless. When you feel paralyzed. When you feel suffocated by enmeshment. When you feel confused and don't know what to do. When you become enraged. Those are all possibilities. What can you do about it? I wish I could tell you there is a one-size-fits-all remedy, but each situation is different and each of you are different. This is why you should all have regular professional supervision to talk through possible strategies.

Dennis is going to offer some concrete strategies. What I can do is offer you some general principles you can extrapolate from off of this theory. In no particular order, I offer you some observations:

1. Don’t take it personally. This might be the most important learning. This triangulation doesn’t have anything to do with you; they’re just trying to protect themselves using an old defense. They don’t even know they’re doing it. We call this a Reenactment - it is the way an individual’s emotional past exists in the emotional present. This is how they related to significant people in their early life and they are playing it out with you in a Transference.
2. Expect resistance from people when you don’t cooperate with the triangle. If you do something other than what the other person expects, that person will feel challenged and perhaps destabilized. It doesn’t mean you’re doing something wrong. It may mean you’re doing something right. You do want to be careful you don’t cause harm to the other person, but you also don’t want to cause harm to yourself.
3. If your reaction feels out of proportion to the moment, ask yourself whether your feelings could be old: are you reacting to the person in the present or are you re-experiencing something from your own emotional past.
4. You wish they could be direct; they resist being direct. In a typical example, the president says, someone told me you were rude to her at the oneg but they don’t want you to know their name. You might say, tell them to come tell me directly. Sometimes that can work. Often it doesn’t: They won’t because they can’t. It is how they protect a fragile ego. What can you do? You can only deal with the person in the room, in this case, the president. Here are a couple of ideas: “You know, I feel really conflicted when you tell me this. I want to help resolve this problem but I don’t know how to if I can’t talk to them. How would you recommend I handle it.” Or: “It must be hard to be in your position, caught in the middle.” You can try to build an

alliance with the president the way two parents try to build an alliance that reassures the child. The key is to stay engaged but not enmeshed. “You recommend I ignore this. Are there any other possibilities I can consider?”

5. Don’t say: you are triangulating me. They won’t know what you’re talking about - it’s unconscious, remember- and will feel attacked. You want to stay away from their ego, not challenge it. Your goal is to try to resolve their resistance to relating to you in a healthy way, not club them over the head.
6. Don’t let them destroy you even if they act like they want to. Let them know they can’t destroy you, not in those actual words, but in your calm and curious response . Young children act like they want to kill you- they may even threaten to kill you - but they’re actually terrified that they’ll succeed. Reassure them that they won’t.
7. Try to accept their feelings even if to you they make no sense or are out of proportion. You might feel like you need to turn around to see whom they’re accusing of this terrible thing, but they are convinced it’s you.
8. Remember you are still in a position of power even if being in the triangle makes you feel powerless.You might feel defensive. Take a moment to assess your own feelings before you decide if you should act on them. Your feelings may tell you something about them or about yourself. For example, consider that you might be experiencing their feelings of powerlessness.
9. Don’t be afraid to ask a question and don’t be afraid to be surprised by the answer. I once asked a patient, “How would I know if you were mad at me?” and he said, “you wouldn’t.” And we both laughed. He had learned how to protect his parents from his feelings; we both saw how he was reenacting that with me.
10. Being smart won’t help you. It’s better to be curious until you know something more. It’s not always what you know, it’s being aware of what

you feel that matters. Use your feelings to guide your intervention. For example, if you feel scared or uncomfortable: “Is there something I do that prevents you from talking to me directly? Is there something that would make this conversation more comfortable?”

How can you metabolize these different concepts of triangulation? I asked Claude and Claude offered a spot-on summary. Claude says: “What connects all these perspectives is the idea that the capacity to *tolerate* triangulation — to accept the existence of the third, to recognize that others have relationships and desires beyond you, to take a reflective position on yourself — is a marker of psychological maturity. Conversely, the *inability* to tolerate it (collapsing into dyadic merger, using third parties defensively, being chronically triangulated by others) signals areas of .developmental arrest or relational difficulty.”

What can you do about triangles? You can’t get rid of them. You can’t fight them. You might as well join them. You can focus on your use of self to engage in the relationship. You can think about what you know about them and what you know about yourself. Think about your pastoral role. I like the way one supervisor in pastoral care framed this approach:*...amid the diversity of contemporary life, it is essential to extend one’s pastoral identity beyond being an expert in content, toward being a specialist in the process of facilitating meaning- making and healing conversations. This is a shift from the objective treatment of particular issues to facilitating a healing process for the subjects of our care.*

“Claiming a Substantive View of Presence: The Significance of the Pastor’s Self” Joel A. Jueckstock, supervisor, spiritual care, Maple Grove Hospital Kyle J. Vlach, Clinical Pastoral Education supervisor, United Hospital, St. Paul, MinnesotaThe Covenant Quarterly, Vol. 73, Nos. 3/4 (August/November 2015)