

Black Sheep, Scapegoats and Family Systems Therapy (Part 1)

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Do you have a black sheep in your family? Someone who's considered the odd one out or a bit weird or not quite living up to the family ideal somehow. A misfit. An outsider. Maybe a 'failure'.

Maybe you're it...

Black sheep seem a fairly common phenomenon. Many families have one. Someone who the others might fret about or devote a lot of energy discussing when they're not in earshot. Someone they're generally worried about or furious with. Someone the family is united in their difference from.

And maybe that sense of unity is key.

For at the risk of getting too many farm animals involved here, scapegoating the black sheep can be a uniting force in families. It's a pastime that brings everyone *else* closer together. Something that swings attention away from other, potentially deeper, tensions in the family and builds allegiances instead. And it's also thought to be a great soother of anxiety in groups.

So the black sheep can actually perform a very important role in families. It's just a shame that it usually doesn't feel that way...

So what can **you** do if you've ended up filling this spot in your family?

The 'father' of family systems theory had some ideas...

In this post we'll look at some of the background to how he saw families working (or *not* working so well...), and in Part 2, we'll explore some potential solutions to this black sheep effect.

Murray Bowen, founder of family systems theory, felt that there's a natural tension in all families – a tension between the desire for togetherness and the need for individuation – and that this tension evokes anxiety in the whole family system.

One way of overcoming this is to set-up a 'detour' for the anxiety – a way to head it off at the pass.

Enter the role of the black sheep.

Instead of family members working out their relationship tensions directly with one another on an individual basis, we can start to form "triangles," where two people become 'insiders' and one the 'outsider.' Two (or maybe more) can unite in their focus on another person. Often, we can become locked into repeated patterns of behaviour together like this in families (sometimes in very familiar roles – and this is where the black sheep fits in).

The Karpman Drama Triangle, often used in Transactional Analysis (TA), is another way of understanding these roles: as 'victim,' 'persecutor' and 'rescuer.' It's thought that we can all end up on this drama triangle, moving around to different parts of it at different times. But we run into trouble when we corner ourselves into one particular role – relating to our family, or to much of the world, in only one way.

TA theory suggests a possible solution: the idea is that if anyone on the drama triangle changes their positions, then everyone else will as well. Or you can try to get off the triangle altogether.

Similarly, Bowen's idea was to try to "detriangle" and disentangle yourself from all of this a bit more, too. To try to get out of these systematic ways of relating to your family. To try to take a step back and really *see* the patterns for *what they are*, rather than automatically getting sucked into them, or getting into blame games about who did what to whom. To consciously be aware of the different roles there might be in your family; the different 'rules.'

And to try not to be stuck in one particular role all the time – to resist being a 'person dressed in (black) sheep's clothing.' (Even if the rest of the family seems pretty keen for you to embrace that role.)

It's not always easy. Particularly if you find yourself on the *outside* of a triangle... perhaps feeling a bit of an outsider to the whole family at times.

But Bowen felt that it's possible. In [Part 2 of this post](#), we'll look more closely at what he meant by that, and how you might be able to apply some of this in *your* family.

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Photo: [Gabrielle Gawne-Kelnar](#)

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