

Family Shadow Box

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Family origin systems are important because they impact our development and can be valuable resources for understanding ourselves. For this shadow box project I have created symbols representing my own family of origins that I have strategically positioned in a game box. Throughout the paper I expand on the meanings of these symbols and how they tie together. Going through the exercise of examining my own family of origin structure helped me connect and understand the family I came from and the drawbacks and strengths of those dynamics coming into the therapeutic field.

The Box

The shadow box that I designed contains a series of objects that are placed inside a game box. Reflecting on my family, I thought that a game box was fitting because maintaining healthy relationships in my family operates similar to a game that requires strategy and a little bit of luck. Furthermore, like my family, games can be fun but they also can spark heated emotion. They may even get to the point where some players may put the game away and refuse to play with certain players for months at a time. I love my family, but engaging with them takes tactics and awareness if you are going to have a good time. For these reasons the structure of my family resides in a setting that is either actively getting played or being put on a shelf.

Who it Contains

My shadow box contains six pieces starting with my mom and my dad. After my parents I represented my siblings and myself in order from oldest to youngest starting with me (Haley), then Katie, Nathan, and Abby. Growing up our family was private and a bit isolated. I would describe my parents as immature and judgmental, and as a result there were few people that were consistently around in my childhood. I saw my grandparents on occasion, but my mom had hard

feelings towards them which as kids we picked up and reflected. Although these perspectives changed as I got older and I became closer with my grandma, I chose to leave her out because our authentic relationship developed later in life.

The Depiction of Myself

In the box I chose to represent myself as a rock, specifically an agate. The agate has a few pieces of symbolism for me. First, my family loved looking for agates when I was growing up. It was one of my favorite parts about my childhood that still connects me with the rest of my family.

Second, agates are formed from different minerals interacting with lava and water. When combined these forces create the unique and beautiful banding that can be seen on the agates. Due to this banding they are considered to be Minnesota's gemstone, which is where I grew up. Furthermore, I see how the forces that have impacted my life created my own layers of banding that I now consider to be beautiful too.

Lastly, that specific agate was one that Ben, my partner who passed away a few years ago, found and gave to me. He found it on the shore of Lake Superior, which is one of my favorite places and tied to some of my favorite memories. Although Ben is not in my family of origin, he significantly shaped who I am now. When he passed I received little empathy from my family, because of this, my final meaning behind that rock is that it is a reminder that sometimes we have to be our own rock and be strong for ourselves. Being strong for myself and learning to thrive under pressure instead of crumble is something that I have had to master throughout my life, and there is no better symbol of that to me than the agate.

Symbolism of the other Pieces

The Written Rules

The first step in learning a new game is oftentimes reading the rules. To learn the rules of the family, we look to my dad who is represented by a pen writing rules. I specifically did not include the official game rules because my dad is someone who makes his own. In his life this has lead to great accomplishments. Thinking outside of the box has helped him excel as an engineer and define new ways of operating in the field.

In the home, it is a bit different. For me, when my dad writes rules they are considered to be the only right way and anyone that goes against those rules and beliefs tend to be thought of in a “less than” regard. As a child with my own belief system I felt silenced, because if I went against his rules I would be ridiculed. Also, his rules were not always bad; they represented safety and security. This created a lot of conflict for me as I have grown up. I have had to define my own rules in a way that did not insult his.

There have been times where I have openly defied the rules. To be honest, I think there is an element of respect from my dad when I do this. However, there are other people in the family that need the rules to feel secure themselves, so when I break them that is when the game gets smashed and the box gets put on the shelf.

The Worn Juggling Ball

Rules are great, especially for people who thrive in structure. My mom is someone who needs predictability and structure so I decided to represent her as a juggling ball. Juggling is a game that only works when following predictable patterns. If that pattern is interrupted or misses a beat, those balls will fall to the ground. This is why she does well with my dad who operates by his own predictable rulebook.

As a rock, I am able to participate in the juggling act put on by my mom. However, I am not a juggling ball and have my own set of characteristics. If I exercise these characteristics in a way that defies the family rules, we all fall. As the one who has always been different, I typically take the blame for the fall. Growing up as the eldest daughter, I shouldered a lot of my mom's emotions and took a lot of blame when her patterns would get interrupted (which was a pattern in itself).

The juggling ball I picked for my mom is a flimsy design that is wearing out. I have to be careful when juggling with her because I never know when her seams will tear. I have tried to mend the tears, but every time I do, a new one opens so it feels pointless to fix and better to just be gentle.

The New Juggling Ball

There is another juggling ball in the family that I need to know the patterns of in order to engage with. This ball represents my youngest sister, Abby. Abby is a reflection of my mother and operates with similar patterns. She is not as worn in as my mom, and therefore a little more slippery and less predictable. From my perspective she operates on my dad's rules and my mom's patterns. For this reason, they all interact with ease and enjoy each other.

For a while I wasn't able to juggle with my sister. As mentioned above my mom is judgmental, and I was often the one who took on the blame when things went wrong. My sister saw this growing up and used me in the same way. I am a rock not a soft juggling ball, so when we would try to interact I would end up hurting her because of the nature of who I am. As we have gotten older we have gotten better at juggling, but I am still a rock, and she is still a new juggling ball.

The Green Soldier

The green soldier is from a completely different strategy game. I chose this for my brother because he is incredibly strategic in the way that he lives his life. My brother is a reflection of my dad in the way of his values, perspectives, and career. That being said, he does not fit into the strict juggling patterns of my mom and sister. He still lives by the rules so he fits in well, but he prefers to play his own game.

Another thing about the green soldiers is growing up Nate would hide them everywhere so they were always making surprise appearances. Like the army guys, my brother will pop up when you least expect him too. When I moved to Utah, my brother relocated to Utah a year after me. He moved to Utah for a job, and was still playing his own game, but it is nice because as a rock I am able to support him, and as a soldier he is able to support me. We have a mutual and relaxed relationship with low expectations, and I always am happy to see him when he pops up.

The Lit Candle

The only other member included in my family of origin that is not a game piece (other than myself) is my sister Katie. I chose to represent Katie as a candle and not as a game piece because she is the only other person in my family that does not play by my dad's rules or my mom's patterns. I thought Katie would best be represented as a candle because she has always been one to create her own light in places of darkness. When she was a kid she was always holed up in her room and very withdrawn. That was her space to be creative and escape the negativity.

She has her own family now and is still fairly withdrawn from the rest of our family of origin. That being said, she still will occasionally shine her light for others and provide a source of comfort when people need it. I know I can go to her for comfort and she knows that she can come to me if she needs a rock.

I also liked the idea of Katie being a flame because she can get heated when people try to suffocate her in their rules and beliefs; she will burn the instructions and make them rewrite them. I love this about her. Katie and I are similar in that we are each in our own element, and our elements can complement each other even though we are still very different.

How the Pieces are Arranged

In the box you will find Katie and I at the bottom, my dad and Nate in the middle, and my mom and Abby at the top. My mom and Abby are frequently concerned with coming out on top in the family system so that is where I put them. Katie and I are in the lower opposite corners because we are the most distant from the family. Nate and my dad are in the middle because they get along with everybody. In the box I am closest with my brother and dad, and Katie is still close to me although we are a little more distant. Abby and my mom are the farthest away from me because distance is good for our relationships, same goes for their positions in relation to Katie. We are all still in the box together playing each other's games.

The Impact of my Family Origins in the Therapeutic Setting

Understanding my family has been confusing for me as I have grown up. On the surface I come from a privileged and happy family, but at the same time those dynamics were severely impacted by my mom's emotional swings and unresolved experiences. My mom resents her mother, and as a kid I reflected those patterns back at my mom. I viewed myself as the punching bag for the family for a long time because if I was taking the hits it meant that other people were not. As I got older I was able to let that burden go and learn to support myself instead of giving all my energy to help others.

As I write this paper I can feel the unease in my body. At this point in time I think it would be hard working with clients when my body consistently feels this way. From a family

systems perspective, that young Haley still emerges when family dynamics are brought up because she still needs to learn to trust that the current version of herself has got this. If I were working with clients, I think that young version of myself would potentially come out and side with the kids instead of working with the system as a whole.

To be completely honest, working with couples and families is not what I want to focus on in the therapeutic field. My own family causes enough stress in my life and I frankly do not think I have the bandwidth to do that on the daily for others. Also, my family is still a raw spot for me and I do not think I am ready to reliably immerse myself into other people's family systems yet.

That being said, if one day I do end up working with couples and families I think that my own personal experience will positively impact the sessions as well. Growing up in an environment where I had to dial into family member's patterns is a skill I can use to help identify and navigate other people's challenges. I am also good at separating myself when things get messy and have a strong sense of self to come back to.

Overall I do love my family, but they have hurt me in the past, and I approach them with caution in the present. Healing the rifts and patterns that have divided us through childhood has been a taxing and lengthy challenge. It is also fresh, as it has only been three years since I left home and one year since I wrote my mom a letter establishing new boundaries. Although one day I may be ready to work outside of individual counseling, at the moment I need to let my own life settle before I consider taking on a family or couple system.

