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# Triadic Analysis: A Conceptual Tool for Clinical Sociologists\*

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the utility of triadic analysis as a conceptual tool for clinical sociologists. Departing from earlier research on patterns of interaction, triads are emphasized over dyads as the structural basis of both micro- and macro-processes, and interdependency is recognized as a decisive influence in the formation and dynamics of triads.

Clinical examples and applications of triadic analysis suggest that stress and conflict within a dyad prompt its members to seek out a third party to neutralize the tension. A third party functions to stabilize the dyad, in some cases as participant in a new dyadic coalition within the triad. Until the original dyadic stress is effectively lowered, third parties are continuously sought. This predictable outreach creates networks that stabilize dyads and relationship systems.

Delineating representative patterns of interdependency within and between triads can deepen our understanding of a variety of social forms and processes (Wolff, 1950). Departing from most earlier sociological research on patterns of interaction, this paper suggests that triads are the irreducible foundation of small group dynamics, and that groups are composed of interdependent and interlocking triads. Group dynamics are viewed as being shaped and reshaped by the continuous shift of dyadic coalitions between and among triads.

Triads are most readily activated in conflict, stress, and contingency situations. Triadic relations are more clearly illustrated by clinical data than by data from community settings, primarily because of the higher levels of dependency

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and volatility in personal interaction. The power a majority of two wields over a minority of one has been documented, although it remains unclear whether this ascendancy owes more to the isolation of the one than to the strength of the two united (Hare, 1976).

On a micro-level, triads are activated when individuals take an unpopular stand vis-a-vis others around them. Because personal belief systems are inextricably bound to social institutions, triadic exchanges are simultaneously micro and macro in substance and consequence. Just as role structures are moored by social institutions (Parsons, 1937, 1951; Zelditch, 1963), the flux of interpersonal coalitions and alliances are framed by triads.

## Review of Research

Although the concept of the triad has rich sources of symbolic meanings in our culture (Piclin, 1980) and has added new dimensions of understanding to the social sciences in general, its utility for clinical sociologists has not yet been fully realized. Micro-sociological research has continued to emphasize dyadic or two-person interaction over triadic exchanges as the basic unit of small group interaction (Borgatta, 1960). Transactional perspectives are used to understand dyadic exchanges (Wilmot, 1975), and communication within dyads is emphasized over interaction between dyads (Homans 1950, 1962, 1974; Blau, 1967).

Sociological research on triads was initiated by Georg Simmel (Simmel, 1908; Wolff, 1950), whose contributions to the field come under the rubrics of "formalism" and "geometry of social forms" (Coser, 1965; Levine, 1971). Simmel postulated that human life is made intelligible through ascribing cognitive status or "form" to phenomena (Simmel, 1980). According to Simmel, because social "forms" define the conditions under which the world is experienced, an understanding of these forms should be the foundation of sociological analysis (Simmel, 1908; Axelrod, 1979). Simmel's emphasis on the geometry of social forms made group size an important aspect of subsequent small group research (Hare, Borgatta and Bales, 1965), and defined the triad as a qualitatively distinct central paradigm of sociological analysis (Kuhn, 1970).

Triadic analysis of family and interpersonal dynamics has been used in some psychological (Nacci and Tedeschi, 1976; Keating, 1984) and anthropological (Hsu, 1961; Bean, 1970) research. In recent decades, the concept of the triad has been used primarily in alliance (Caplow, 1968) and family research (Bowen, 1978). Themes of inquiry in these areas of research include the formation of interest coalitions (Caplow, 1968) and dependency and emotional reactivity in intimate interpersonal behavior (Bowen, 1978; Hare, 1976). Research on coalitions has been developed through Caplow's studies of power (1968), while other coalition researchers have examined a variety of themes, such as the rationality of coalition formation (Hinckley, 1976; Borgatta and Borgatta, 1962;

Goehlert, 1981; Zerschling and Palisi, 1975). By contrast Bowen has hypothesized that in families a third party is predictably drawn into a dyad when there is stress and anxiety within the dyad (1978).

Triads have been conceptualized in some sociological research as structures of interaction in small groups (Davis, 1977) and as bases of social systems (Freilich, 1964; Dolliff, 1982; Rustin, 1971). In this research the third person is viewed as functioning to stabilize the dyad (Rubinstein and Timmins, 1978). Triadic analysis is occasionally found in organizational analyses (Caplow, 1968) and game theory (Rapoport, 1960), and, to a lesser extent, in studies of reference groups (Merton, 1957) and social networks (Bott, 1957).

Overall, triads have been used mainly in micro-sociological research on these selected topics, although a few macro studies of broad change processes have triadic conceptualizations (Edwards, 1927; Brinton, 1957). Triadic principles are tentatively implemented in sociological methodology (Horowitz, 1972; Wallerstein, 1974; Boorman, 1976; Bach, 1977; Synder and Kick, 1979). For example, triangulation is the deliberate use of multiple measures in social science research in order to reduce measurement error (Denzin, 1978; Riley, Wagenfeld and Sonnad, 1981).

### **Properties of Triads**

A triad is less dependent on the specific behavior of its immediate participants for its structure and characteristic processes than is a dyad. A triad requires less commitment from each of its members for its survival and maintenance, and it is perpetuated through substitute participants if one member of the three-person system drops out (Gurvitch and Moore, 1945). While dyads are transformed by the addition of a third party, a further extension of membership of a triad does not modify relationship patterns to a corresponding degree. A third member in a relationship system creates a super-individual unity as a group, and makes significant changes in patterns of reciprocal exchanges between members (Spykman, 1964).

Triads generally stabilize in two-to-one patterns of interaction and interdependence. Dyads within triads tend to be close relationships with shared values, or conflictual relationships with opposed values (Coser, 1956). These patterns are not static, however, and vary from situation to situation.

Data from clinical settings suggest two major possibilities for triads. First, when there is close sharing in a dyad, the preferred position for the third party is within that togetherness. The third member predictably tries to replace one of the participants in the emotionally fused dyad. Second, when there is a conflictual dyad within the triad, the preferred position for the third party is outside the negatively reactive dyad. The third member tries to remain detached or distant from the antagonisms generated by the dyad.

Triads are fundamental units and bases of complex social interdependencies. Third parties play a pivotal role in stabilizing dyads, and interconnected triads stabilize each other in network and community structures. Triads are latent or dormant when they are not active. They are activated mostly in conditions of anomie, and during periods of stress, anxiety, boredom, or complacency. Whereas dyads are characteristically dominated by either of its members, the third party in a triad usually provides a mooring or a sense of direction that may eventually orient all three triad members.

Rarely is a triad comprised of three equal parties with shared values (Freilich, 1964). Its pattern-maintaining properties notwithstanding, a potential for imbalance within and between triads remains. In families and other primary groups, latent conflicts and interdependencies are predictably activated in crises (Bowen, 1978).

Motivations other than the pursuit of equality or stability in relationships influence behavior in triads. Whereas intimacy characterizes a dyad, social distance and deference are key properties of a triad (Bean, 1970). The substance of social processes within and between triads reflects members' value commitments and vested interests. Peaceful or conflictual exchanges and negotiations take place in relation to participants' most cherished values (Denzin, 1978).

### **Triads and Social Processes**

The triad concept has philosophical and epistemological dimensions, as it assumes intrinsic qualities of human interdependency and the necessity of a community of communication in individual and social life (Apel, 1972; McCarthy, 1978). Sociological commentary about the nature of social action and voluntarism, a persistent theme of functionalism (Parsons, 1937; Alexander, 1978), can also be formulated in a context of triads.

The triad paradigm is abstracted from a wide range of social observations, and can be used to analyze complex social systems. By making interdependencies more comprehensible, triadic analysis offers a more diverse understanding of human nature itself (Lovejoy, 1936) and of structures underlying social processes (von Wiese, 1932).

Triadic interaction is most easily identified and documented in micro-systems, where social action is contextually defined and limited by larger structures (Durkheim, 1893; Parsons, 1951). The concept has been used to analyze interlocking role structures at different levels of social systems (Boorman, 1976), although empirical substantiation has focused primarily on intra-triadic rather than inter-triadic dynamics of micro-systems (Wolff, 1950).

In most sociological research on social processes, conflict is viewed as being strictly bilateral, that is, occurring only within a diadic exchange. However, clinical data indicate that conflictual dyads are activated within basic

triads, and that these dyads predictably draw in a third party to stabilize bilateral tensions. Furthermore, conflictual dyads repeatedly substitute new individuals as third parties until dyadic stability has been achieved, or until one party of the original dyad is replaced by a new member to form a triad.

This pattern of self-perpetuating substitution in triadic substructures can be seen most clearly in highly reactive groups of intimates. In contemporary family systems research, Simmel's triad paradigm has facilitated a broader conceptualization of relationships as interdependent, interlocking triangles or triads (Bowen, 1978). Observations of behavior within and between triads in family systems are used to document conflicts and shifts toward homeostasis. Data on differences and conflicts within and between triads underscore the fluidity of relationships that is often obscured by more easily substantiated patterns of social solidarity (Durkheim, 1897, 1915). Our understanding of diverse social processes may be greatly enhanced by using paradigms which describe the whole system (Wallerstein, 1974), and by emphasizing triads over dyads in documenting interaction patterns.

### **Triads in Clinical Practice**

In clinical work with dyads in crisis, the practitioner functions as a third party in what may be called a "consultation triad." To the extent that a clinician is able to avoid being pulled into the emotional field of the dyad, the two-person relationship will be opened up and constructively modified. By sustaining an autonomous functioning position, while at the same time interacting meaningfully with each member of the dyad, the clinical sociologist may catalytically bring about change within the troubled dyad.

The predictability of triadic behavior patterns makes triadic analysis a particularly useful therapeutic tool. A long-range objective in crisis intervention is to alter clients' habitual behavior in their most significant triadic interactions. Optimally, this effort culminates in a shift by clients into more autonomous operating positions as outsiders in their triads.

More specific examples of triadic interaction illustrate their distinctiveness and consequences for the analysis of interpersonal relationships. The following examples of triadic patterns have been distilled from life-history data from crisis intervention work with families and individuals in community mental health services and private practice since 1971. While a wide range of families and individuals with contrasting social backgrounds were interviewed, no formal research design or systematic sampling of diverse social classes and ethnic groups has been applied to the data collected throughout this seventeen-year period. Approximately five hundred families and individuals with varied presenting problems participated in these clinical sociological interventions, and periodic consultations in some cases spanned several years.

Information and assessments recorded about these families and individuals include birth dates, death dates, occupations, migrations, health status, and observed degrees of emotional dependency between family members. Social class, religious affiliation, and expressed political interest were also documented. In keeping with the primary clinical goal of strengthening clients' emotional and behavioral functioning, habitual patterns of interaction were assessed by using increments of interdependence ranging from a tight emotional togetherness (fusion) to a more independent autonomy (individuation).

Exchanges between spouses were examined, as were spouses' participation in multiple triads, such as both spouses and each of their children, and both spouses and each of their parents. Generally speaking, beneficial changes in behavior take place in families and relationships when rigid or symptomatic triadic patterns of interdependence become less intense and more flexible (Bowen, 1978).

In times of stress and crisis, third parties are predictably drawn into anxious dyads. A network of interrelated triads may be gradually activated, and during this process family members can increase their options for interaction within their core relationship system. The clinician's and client's awareness of triads and possibilities for activating triads enhances recovery, as behavior can be predicted more accurately and choices discerned more clearly through triadic analysis.

The most characteristic pattern of interaction in interpersonal triads is activated by conflict, tension, and perceived stress. The pattern of a conflictual dyad seeking stabilization through contact with a third person was overwhelmingly predominant in the life-history data. Further, the probability that moves to potential third parties would be made by members of conflictual dyads was markedly greater than the probability of other patterns of behavior.

When a stressed or conflictual dyad makes contact with a third party to stabilize the relationship, the preferred position in the triad is that of outsider to the conflict. Clinical data suggest that whether dyadic interaction is conflict or fusion, the strongest position in triads is that of the outsider. Intense emotional involvement with another person, regardless of whether that involvement is negative (conflict) or positive (affection), tends to deplete and drain personal resources and decrease autonomy.

Three examples are used to illustrate the stabilizing function of third parties in triads. Emotional dependencies are emphasized in order to show the distinctiveness of triadic interaction.

#### Example 1:

A conflictual marriage is overburdened by spouses' unrealistic expectations, leaving both husband and wife incapable of autonomous action. Similar

social backgrounds of religion, education, and social class have predisposed the couple to experience an uncomfortably intense degree of sharing, producing a highly conflictual dyad. When one spouse was able to establish meaningful contact with the clinical sociologist, however, the couple's conflict was considerably reduced.

The clinician's long-range strategy was to encourage both spouses to activate triads in their own families by establishing contact with members of their extended systems. As the most intense original triad for most people is with their parents, the establishment by one spouse of a meaningful relationship with a surviving parent contributed to the reduction of conflict between the spouses. Increased contacts with friends and work colleagues also reduced the couple's conflict. However, as these third parties are less emotionally significant to the couple than their parents or siblings, they are also correspondingly less effective as long-term stabilizers of the couple's conflict.

Triads have the capacity to transform dyadic patterns of behavior, and the clinician's emphasis on strategies involving increased or renewed contact by the spouses with their own extended families oriented the couple toward activating triadic support systems for themselves. A close examination of dyadic marital conflict alone could not have brought about as much change as triadic analysis, primarily because the clinician's and clients' increased attention and scrutiny of the dyad exclusively would have increased rather than decreased the original conflict.

Triadic analysis delineated possibilities for change in this conflictual dyad by articulating a meaningful, broader context of personal relationships for the spouses. Encouraging the spouses to establish personal one-to-one relationships with their children also modified their conflict somewhat. However, children are more dependent and less powerful in their own right than are adult members of the spouses' extended families. Consequently, the activation of triads with their children was less effective in modifying their conflict than was the activation of past and present emotional relationships through increased or renewed contact with their extended family members.

Where couples manifest their uncomfortable emotional intensity as estrangement or emotional distance, the less overt tensions can be decreased or stabilized by the spouses' contact with members of their extended families. Third-party involvement in situations of estranged marriages also reduces the potential for volatility or disruption in those relationships (Kerr and Bowen, 1988).

#### Example 2:

A long-term father-daughter conflict in a white, Protestant, middle-class family has characteristically been active and dormant at different stages of the



daughter's life. The father-daughter conflict is particularly intense at times when the mother is emotionally distant from both husband and daughter. On the relatively rare occasions mother and daughter disagree about their respective roles and responsibilities, there is more agreement and expressed affection between father and daughter.

When the daughter became romantically involved, the intensity of her positive attachment to this man generated a more negative reaction from her father than from her mother, as historically father-daughter conflict characterized triadic exchanges between daughter and parents. The stability of the habitual parents-daughter triad was threatened by the intense closeness between daughter and friend. The reactive father-daughter conflict was stabilized at times when mother-daughter conflict was activated by the situation, and when the daughter's involvement in her romantic relationship waned.

In this example, the latent dyadic conflict between father and daughter was activated when the daughter's relationship with a third party formed the most intense side of a new triad. The passionate quality of this particular third-party relationship produced marked changes in the parents-daughter triadic patterns. The original father-daughter conflict was reactivated, and latent conflict between the mother and daughter eventually became manifest. The father-daughter conflict was stabilized when either the father or daughter established meaningful contact with the mother.

Triadic analysis reveals how conflict in personal relationships evolves as a reactive chain of events. Each move away from dyads creates a triad, and thereby increases possibilities for changing uncomfortable dependencies within the dyads. When clinical sociologists conceptualize relationship systems as active or dormant triads, alternative modes for clients' participation can be identified and discussed. More effective long term changes in dyads are accomplished when clients make deliberate attempts to establish triads than when dyadic patterns are examined outside the context of triadic interaction. Just as a consideration of the influence of broad historical structures on behavior defines sociological research, so too must a recognition of triadic structures in relationship systems precede a sophisticated understanding of dyadic patterns of behavior.

### Example 3:

Two spouses are locked into an uncomfortably fused relationship through their similar social backgrounds, shared religious affiliation, and identical political interests. Personal boundaries between the spouses have essentially dissolved, and neither spouse has a clear sense of individuality. In parenting, the intensity of this dyad is sustained by the spouses' projection of their unresolved differences and latent conflict to one of their children. The scapegoated child is

labeled a problem, and the conflict between one or both parents and the scapegoated child functions to stabilize the closeness of the parents (Vogel and Bell, 1960; Rabow et al., 1987).

As children are more dependent and therefore more vulnerable and more likely to be scapegoated than other third parties, this triadic involvement continued for several years. A child is less able to break away from such a triad than is an adult, and this particular stabilization of the dyad evidenced no immediate need for substitutions of third parties. After several years, however, different children in that family became objects of the projection processes generated by the marital closeness. To a large extent the siblings substituted for each other as triadic stabilizers of the fused parental dyad (Bowen, 1978).

A clinical sociologist is more likely to be able to alleviate the problem of scapegoating within a family when interactions are analyzed in terms of the key triad between the parents and that child, and between related triads in the extended families. The parents can change their behavior through creating alternative triads in their separate family systems, thereby reducing the intensity of their shared focus on their child. The child becomes freer of parental pressures and expectations, and is able to behave more autonomously. If clinical discussion focuses exclusively on the mother-child dyad, father-child dyad and husband-wife dyad, the broader picture of interdependency is lost and the potential for change is reduced. The activation of dormant triads in the tangential relationship systems defuses the harmful intensity and volatility of the relationships between parents and child.

The three examples above illustrate several essential properties of triads. Triads form around an emotionally intense dyad, which may be either positive or negative in valence. The function of the third party is to decrease the intensity of the dominant dyad. Changes in triadic patterns of interdependence and behavior occur when participants become less reactive to each other. As a member of a dyad becomes more autonomous, the intensity of that dyad is reduced and may be shifted to the dyad comprising the other leg of the triad. Both conflict and fusion in dyads are understood more fully when degrees of interdependency in three-person systems are assessed and recorded in clinical consultations. It is triads rather than dyads that define patterns of interaction in dyads, and shape broader social processes and social structures.

### **Triadic Analysis of Wider Society**

The dearth of triadic analyses of broad social groupings makes possible only tentative observations about triadic relations in society at large. The following broad-brush illustrations are offered as guidelines for the application of triadic analysis to more general social processes, and as a call for further research in this area.

Social groups and friendship networks exhibit repeated patterns of interaction and interdependency which may be conceptualized as interlocking triads (Freilich, 1964). A network of friends is extended or modified when existing intimacies are uncomfortably strained or overloaded, in the same way that a family draws outsiders into its core emotional system during times of stress. Broadening the base of interaction in social groups and friendship networks brings stability to these social systems. For more specific theory construction it has been suggested that triadic analysis can be used in field research on leadership and marginality (Caplow, 1964).

Social institutions can be viewed as sustaining or changing their interdependence through triadic interaction. For example, the social institutions of family and religion interact differently with the political system, the economy, and the educational system. Triadic analyses provide a significant structural basis for understanding interdependence between the different major social institutions (Gamson, 1961).

The passage of time strongly influences the consequences of triadic interaction. Although triads have been more directly linked to theories of development than to traditional sociological theories of change (Horowitz, 1972), triadic analysis has been used to analyze historical trends (Spykman, 1964). The observation and documentation of triadic forms and exchanges in broad social processes can also demonstrate shifts in culture and social values, and triadic analysis has been used in longitudinal studies of capitalism in the world economy. The triadic interaction paradigm provides a viable alternative for holistic research on the world economy (Bach, 1977).

Societies as well as groups or institutions can be thought of as participants in triads. Underdeveloped societies, highly industrialized societies and industrializing societies, for example, manifest distinctive values and modes of organization (Horowitz, 1972). Conflicts between these broad groupings of societies must be understood in terms of triadic interaction rather than dyadic patterns if they are to be comprehensively assessed, explained, and predicted.

## **Conclusion**

To the extent that triads can be substantiated as a universal organizing element of personal relationships and groups (Caplow, 1964), triadic analysis has diverse practical applications for understanding and shaping small-group dynamics and social processes. Predictions about behavior in families have already been made from clinical data on triadic dependencies (Bowen, 1978), and triadic analysis is a useful tool for clinical sociologists in their work with small group interdependencies, dyadic overload, and closed relationship systems.

Strategies for crisis intervention have greater efficacy when they rest on a

recognition of the intricacies of triadic interaction. As a potential third party, the clinical sociologist is vulnerable to enmeshment in volatile dyadic conflicts, and can more ably sustain an autonomous working position by understanding the triadic dimensions of dyadic tensions.

Professional detachment and consistent interaction with the distressed dyad provide optimal conditions for the consultative triad to transform problematic dyadic patterns. Triadic analysis of the broader aspects of the clients' relationship systems enables the clinical sociologist to synthesize observations and move beyond piecemeal diagnoses and temporary resolutions of crises.

Triadic analysis may also delineate significant broader structures and forces of social change. Research on these aspects of triadic interaction is much needed. For example, triadic analysis may provide conceptualizations of class relations and class conflict which contrast with and even contradict the more established views of class relations (Marx, 1867; Dahrendorf, 1959). In the same way that triadic analysis gives a new view of clinical facts, it has the potential of changing world views (Kuhn, 1970).

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