

Thomas F. Fogarty, M.D.

He who knows not and knows not that he knows not — is a fool. Shun him.
He who knows not and knows that he knows not — is simple. Teach him.
He who knows, but knows not that he knows — is asleep. Awaken him.
He who knows and knows that he knows — is wise. Follow him.

(*Old Arabian proverb*)

The process of *fusion* is central to the entire theory of family systems. One descriptive model is to picture two strong magnets, one held in each hand. The closer the hands are held to each other, the greater the magnetic pull and the greater the tendency for the magnets to unite. So it is with people. As two people get closer to each other, the intensity of emotional attraction (level of expectation, positive or negative) increases and the tendency for them to fuse or unite increases.

People seek a distance at which the emotional attraction is still felt but at which the effort at preventing union is within a comfortable range. This is not a static or fixed position. People move toward or away from each other in their search for that comfortable balance. The amount of distance will vary from family to family and within the same family around different issues, problems and stressful times in life. The amount of distance between people will also vary with the level of expectation for closeness — expectations that come from the extended family.

Dr. Fogarty is a member of the faculty at the Center for Family Learning, New Rochelle, N. Y., and is on the faculty also of the Albert Einstein College of Medicine.

In some families an entire continent may be physically placed between two members, to avoid fusion or a total emotional cutoff. Fusion leads to distance and people seek closeness without fusion.

This alternating phenomenon of distance and closeness is present to some degree as a problem in all families and relationships. It becomes labelled as a problem when the actual fusion, or the tendency to use, is so intense that the degree of closeness expected by one or more members of the family is impossible to attain. Complaints of loss or individuality ensue . . . "I don't know who I am. I have not been myself since I got married." Emotional disruption is common . . . "My feelings for my husband are dead. I only feel bitterness. I wish he would leave." . . . Distance ensues . . . "We haven't talked to each other in years. He is never home and I am just as happy." Feelings of emptiness creep into awareness . . . "I no longer have hope. There is nothing outside or inside of me."

Fusion can be described as a mixture — a blending, or coalescence of one person into the other. It is a process because it consists of a series of actions or operations that results in a flow of movement . . . an ebb and a tide. Clinically,

these operations can be seen clearly in the openly conflictual family. One can ask father a question. While he is pausing to think about his answer, mother starts to answer for him. She is half way through the answer when son interrupts her to say that she is wrong. Father interrupts son angrily to tell him that he should not interrupt. By this time the therapist cannot remember the question. This example also illustrates the importance of rhythm as a part of fusion. The slow, careful person in effect issues an invitation to the impatient, rapid mover to fuse and take over. Nature abhors a vacuum.

Let us consider some of the elements in the process of fusion:

THE PROCESS OF FUSION

1. The Identification of Self

The identity of self includes the endless list of elements that make up the individual person in his entirety. Because of this complexity, total awareness of self is impossible. Furthermore, every time one changes his context, a different aspect of self appears. Clinically we use this when we introduce children into sessions involving bitter marital dispute. Husband and wife will often listen to their children when they can't hear each other.

There is, then, no real self. There are infinite facets of self that the context helps to elicit. One of the most important aspects of self is the differentiation of thinking from feeling. Thinking is an attempt to perceive truth and is subject to the rules of evidence. Feelings are reactive experiences (either to the insides of one's own self or to others) and are subject to the rules of function. Fusion is an emotional process and not a thinking process. The closer one moves toward the emotional position, the greater the possibility for fusion. Two pure thinking beings would not fuse because they would never connect. The thinking part of self provides structure, while feelings provide the drive for closeness. One of the hallmarks of fusion is the lack of an inner balance between thought and feeling. One must seek to balance all the elements of self, and put an "equal sign" between them. To the extent that a person becomes more emotional and less thoughtful, he becomes highly reactive and susceptible to fusion. To the extent that he becomes more thoughtful and less emotional, he becomes structured and susceptible to distance.

2. The Identification of the Other Person

At the very heart of the idea of "people systems" is the fact that no man is an island unto himself. It is impossible to understand any person in isolation. No one can understand a car battery without mentioning other parts of the car. There is simply no purpose in a battery without a car. Similarly, fusion cannot be discussed without asking the question, "Fusing with what . . . or with whom?"

It is a lesson in humility to remember that objects cannot replace people, and that all of the elements in self exist in others. One of the problems in dealing with others is that they appear to be more complicated than they are. They are open to our faulty assumptions about them, and therefore to a greater chance for error. It is particularly easy for one to project his own understanding of himself, his motivations and values onto another person, and act as if that is what makes him tick. This is responsible for the development of the five-million or so psychiatric theories that we have today. For example, a man preoccupied with work may listen with only half an ear to what his wife is saying. She sees his preoccupation as rejection. She makes an assumption about her husband's "indifference." Assumptions of and about others are pervasive. If you come early for an appointment, you are anxious. If you come late, you are resistant. If you come on time you are compulsive!

People commonly make assumptions about others and accept them as completely true. These "truths" often verge on arrogance, as when someone assumes that something he did caused the death of another person. It is important to distinguish between knowing, guessing, and assuming. Knowing demands reasonable assurance and cannot be based on "my feeling about you." A guess is all right as long as it is clearly recognized as such. Assumptions cause trouble. An assumption usually says more about the person who makes the assumption than the person it is directed at. All therapists should remember that when they make an "interpretation." Understanding the other person requires the ability to *know*, and not to assume.

A digression at this point might be useful, to explore "what is knowing." There are roughly four forms of knowledge:

(a) *That which is known.* It is possible to know some things about self, and some small

