Family Systems Theory:

A Case Study of Carrie Ford

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Introduction

Much like how the earth's and moon's gravitational forces influence each other to cause the tides, what drives youth largely depends on their interactions with family and others as well as their surroundings. This idea of systems theory suggests that individuals can be best understood within the context of their families as a whole, how that family is part of a "larger system (e.g., the community), and the interactions…within and across these various levels" (Cox & Paley, 1997, p. 245). This paper will explore the facets of systems theories that contributed to the successes of a particular youth, Carrie Ford, and strategies youth development leaders may use to enhance and reinforce such strengths.

The Carrie Ford Experience

As a liaison for my undergraduate institution, the U.S. Naval Academy, I interview students, or "candidates," who aspire to attend the Academy. Two years ago, one of my candidates, Carrie Ford, contacted me for advice on how to attack the tedious and lengthy admission process. The process can take up to one year and involves multiple letters of recommendation, a fitness exam, an interview, a medical exam, as well as parallel application processes for required nominations from Congressional Representatives and Senators. Carrie embraced the challenge and wanted to get a head start. With her above average SAT scores, A+ average, commitment to varsity swimming, numerous leadership positions, and having founded her own swim instruction company, I quickly determined that she was one of the most outstanding candidates I had encountered.

I mentored Carrie for one year through the admission process, offering her advice on areas she could target to set herself apart from other candidates. Despite her exceptional credentials, she did not receive acceptance, or an "appointment," to the Naval Academy. Early in

the mentoring process, however, I urged her to apply to other colleges to keep her options open.

She received a Naval Reserve Officer Training Corps full scholarship as well as appointments to

West Point, the Air Force Academy, and the Coast Guard Academy. Rather than being

discouraged by her rejection letter, she embraced the opportunity to attend a different service

academy and ultimately chose to attend West Point. Though I imparted my knowledge on her,

Carrie taught me more about drive, determination, and adaptation than I taught her.

Summary of Systems Theory

In reference to systems theory, Sameroff mentions Bertanlaffy's argument that "one

needs to understand not only the elements of a system but, more importantly, their interrelations"

(as cited by Cox & Paley, 1997, p. 245). This general systems theory naturally lends itself to

Bowen's Family Systems Theory. Bowen's holistic theory posits that families provide a dynamic

environment in which individuals influence and are influenced by their relationships within and

outside of the context of their family as a whole (Comella, 2011). As Ford & Lerner suggest,

people participate in and contribute to their environments (as cited by Bradley & Corwyn, 2004).

Because individuals and their environments mutually influence each other, they must be

considered together to gain an accurate perspective on the contributing factors to one's behavior

and outcomes.

A Systems Perspective of the Situation

Numerous factors contributed to Carrie's academic and personal successes, including

relationships with her parents, coaches, teachers, school environment, and athletic opportunities.

Her interactions, or what Brofenbrenner & Morris (1998) term "proximal processes" (p. 996),

with these people and her environment occurred frequently, bi-directionally, and throughout the

duration of her childhood, which consequently shaped her into the successful and confident young woman she became.

Bradley & Corwyn (2004) note, "parents must structure the child's encounters with the environment to benefit the child" (p. 15). During Carrie's early and middle childhood years, her father served as an active duty Marine, so she underwent frequent moves and lived overseas. In reference to a study by Pulkkinen (1983), Brofenbrenner & Morris (1998) suggest that family moves can cause "unsteadiness" (p. 1019) within the family unit. Understanding the level of strain such transitions can place on a young child, Carrie's parents were careful to choose extracurricular activities and school settings that would provide consistency and comfort throughout those transitions. At the encouragement of her parents, when she was only six years old, she joined her first swim team. Swimming counteracted the unsteadiness of frequent moves by providing consistency because she could join a team wherever they moved, make new friends, and have an outlet for stress. Swimming provided such an anchor in her life that she established her own company teaching summer swim lessons, continued swimming through high school, and now swims on West Point's varsity team.

In addition to swimming, Carrie's parents also carefully chose schools overseas that offered challenging curricula and engaged teachers so she would not be scholastically behind when returning to the U.S. Erickson, McDonald, & Elder (2009) indicate that interactions with helpful and compassionate adults in youths' lives tend to contribute to academic success. As early as middle school, Carrie began considering options for college. When she received an assignment in seventh grade to research and report on the Naval Academy, it sparked her interest in pursuing a college career that would allow her to serve as a military officer. The assignment prompted her to work closely with her teacher to learn as many details as possible about the

Academy even after she completed the project. According to Bradley & Corwyn (2004), when youth retain certain characteristics, they tend to "attract" (p. 23) positive attention not only from parents, but also from other non-parental adults. Because Carrie embodied characteristics of ambition and goal-orientation, she gained the attention of non-parental adults and this bi-directional influence resulted in her parents, teachers, and counselors helping her pursue the most challenging courses that would allow her to achieve the goal of entering a service academy and serving her country.

Carrie was fortunate enough to have a strong and supportive base within her family and the means to participate in extracurricular activities. "Social resources play an important role in channeling youths into mentoring relationships, especially those with teachers and community members" (Erickson, McDonald, & Elder, 2009, p. 356). Carrie developed complementary mentorships with her coaches, teachers, and me because we saw her potential, ambition, and intelligence. She motivated each of us to go beyond our responsibilities to help her obtain her goals. Her swim coach challenged her to cut time and qualify for a national competition. Her teachers tutored her to help her increase SAT scores and wrote her glowing letters of recommendation. I met with her and talked with her parents on numerous occasions, developing a strategy to successfully navigate the multiple application processes with four different service academies and also provided emotional support when she was turned down by the Naval Academy. With Carrie's history of transitions, she learned adaptability and accepted the rejection with grace, positively adjusting to her new plan.

According to Brofenbrenner & Morris (1998), development occurs when one's "proximal processes" (p. 996) occur frequently over a lengthy time period, increase in complexity, one actively participates in his or her surroundings, and develops mutually influential relationships

with others. As Carrie grew older, the tasks she needed to accomplish, such as excelling in school, became more difficult, but she remained engaged in them through the duration of both middle and high school. She took advantage when opportunities to lead peers or test her limits presented themselves and she shared her dreams with her parents, coaches, teachers, and me, inspiring us to do everything within our power to help her succeed.

Application: Guidelines/Tips for Promoting Youth Success

Carrie thrived in a highly structured and challenging atmosphere in which she could grow her leadership, athletic, and academic skills. To encourage this type of youth to continue on a trajectory of success, youth development leaders should reinforce values taught in the home, since a youth's interaction with external people and environments can affect the interaction within their own family units (Cox & Paley, 1997). Carrie's parents stressed the importance of education and fitness in their family, so I was able to reinforce those values by encouraging her to take the most challenging courses available and to aim for achieving the maximum scores when I administered her fitness exam.

Bradley & Corwyn (2004) suggest, "three conditions are necessary for parents to make positive investments in their children: a sense of future, a sense of purpose, and a sense of connection" (p. 2). Carrie's parents instilled these qualities in her because they knew her capabilities. Youth development leaders working with such a talented youth should emphasize these qualities by providing challenging goals, long-term peer leadership opportunities that require them plan for the future, encouraging words, and unwavering support.

Youth typically realize positive benefits from relationships with non-parental adults. "Supportive relationships are critical 'mediums' of development. They provide an environment of reinforcement, good modeling, and constructive feedback for physical, intellectual,

psychological, and social growth" (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). In Carrie's case, I was able to mentor her in certain areas, but not others, such as swimming. Youth development leaders in similar situations should encourage the youth to seek additional mentors with a variety of skill sets, so the youth may be both challenged and receive experienced direction from multiple sources.

These strategies are based in family systems theory in that they facilitate the interaction and cohesion of the youth, his or her family, and non-parental adults within the youth's environment, resulting in the achievement of common goals. Approaching Carrie in such a manner proved effective because her parents provided a strong foundation for her, while non-parental figures in her life found her enjoyable to mentor because of her ambitious characteristics. Through her interactions within and outside of her family unit, she benefitted by achieving her goal of attending a service academy. Those who worked with her felt a sense of pride when she accomplished that goal and our relationships with her gave us a foundation for how we might better serve similar youth in the future.

Summary/Conclusions

In my experience, encountering a youth like Carrie is more the exception than the rule, so youth leaders risk becoming complacent because it is easy to assume such a youth is already progressing toward a fulfilling adulthood and not in need of our help. Understanding the values and interactions of the family system surrounding this type of youth is critical in determining how we may best help them enhance their strengths. While they might not need as much intervention as a disadvantaged youth, we are still able to offer them advice, opportunities, and challenges so they may continue on a path to success. Whether a youth is already successful or not, he or she deserves the attention and guidance youth development leaders can provide.

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