A “Family Therapy” Road Trip:

The Hoovers of *Little Miss Sunshine* and Healing in a VW Bus

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Abstract

This paper applies ideas and theories from family therapy to the Hoovers, the blended, multigenerational family portrayed in the film *Little Miss Sunshine*. The author explores how the developmental and circumstantial issues facing each individual member of the Hoover family relate to the family as a whole. Communication patterns and family structures present in the Hoover family system are examined. Two theoretical approaches to family therapy—psychodynamic and structural—are used as examples to suggest the strengths and limitations of different theoretical approaches. Coping strategies used by the Hoovers and goals for family counseling are also briefly noted. Finally, family counseling resources that could be used by the Hoovers in Seattle are provided.
This paper will apply ideas and theories from family therapy to the Hoovers, the family portrayed in the film *Little Miss Sunshine*. The first section of the paper will describe Richard and Sheryl Hoover’s blended, multigenerational family. The second section will examine the various developmental and situational crises faced by the Hoover’s blended family, as well as by two members of their extended family. The third section will explore the family dynamics exhibited during their crisis-filled road trip from New Mexico to California. The fourth section will use family systems theory to show how the Hoover family can be understood from a systemic point of view. Next, any coping strategies used by the Hoovers, helpful or not, will be examined. The fourth section will describe how the Hoovers’ issues can be prioritized for family counseling. The fifth section will note resources that might be of use to the Hoovers in Seattle.

**The Family**

The film *Little Miss Sunshine* provides a comical, yet honest, portrayal of an average American family, the Hoovers, during a crisis-filled road trip across the American Southwest. The purpose of the trip is to take seven-year-old Olive Hoover from their home in Albuquerque, New Mexico to the Little Miss Sunshine beauty pageant in Redondo Beach, California. During the six-hundred mile odyssey, which occurs primarily in an aging, yellow, 1970s Volkswagen bus, the viewer witnesses the growth of the Hoovers—Richard, Sheryl, Olive, and Dwayne, as well as Sheryl’s brother Frank and Richard’s aging father Edwin—into a more healthy and communicative family.

A white, middle-class, American couple, Richard and Sheryl Hoover, are the center of the Hoover family. Richard, who appears to be in his mid to late 40s, does not appear to have a steady job and aspires to be a motivational writer and speaker. He is also Sheryl’s second husband. As a part of his effort to become a motivational writer and speaker, Richard frequently “lectures” his
blended, multigenerational family about how people are either winners or losers. Richard believes that he is a winner, and that his nine-step, “Refuse to Lose” program is the key to becoming a “winner.” In fact, he is desperately trying to become a “winner” himself by publishing a book about his “nine steps,” so that he and Sheryl can stop struggling financially. Although the details are sketchy, it appears as though Sheryl is the main breadwinner, since she has been financially supporting Richard and his effort to become a “winner.” Richard, who has made a recent contact in the publishing world, has convinced Sheryl it is just a matter of time before his book on the “nine-steps” will be published and their money worries will be lessened. Though the details may differ, the problems facing the Hoovers are not rare. Research has shown that issues surrounding finances, ways of dealing with children, and sexual issues are among the most common problems confronting couples at mid-life (Miller and Miller, 2004).

Olive and Dwayne are Richard and Sheryl’s’ children; Olive is their biological child, while Dwayne is Sheryl’s son from a prior marriage that is not described in detail. Recently, Olive unexpectedly became a runner up in the Little Miss Sunshine beauty pageant while visiting Sheryl’s more successful sister, Cindy, during a Spring Break vacation in California. Since then, Olive has become obsessed with beauty pageants, so Richard and Sheryl decide, somewhat impulsively, to take her at the last minute to Redondo Beach, California to compete in the Little Miss Sunshine beauty pageant when Olive advances higher in the rankings. In contrast, Dwayne, their fifteen-year-old son, has not spoken a word for nine months and will not speak again until he leaves home to join the Air Force. He also rarely visits his unnamed biological father, who lives in Florida. Dwayne also reads Nietzsche, wears a t-shirt that says “Jesus Was Wrong,” communicates with his family using a pad of paper, and is counting the days (473) until he can leave his family, which he hates.
For circumstantial reasons, two additional family members have recently joined the Hoover’s blended family: Edwin, Richard’s aging father, and Frank, Sheryl’s suicidal brother. Edwin, a WWII veteran who is probably in his 70s or 80s, was recently evicted from a retirement home for not following the rules and doing heroin. A widower, Edwin moved in with Richard and Sheryl for financial reasons. While Richard and Sheryl are away from the house during the day, he has been working with Olive, helping her prepare a dance routine for Albuquerque’s upcoming Little Miss Chile Pepper contest. In contrast, Frank, Sheryl’s brother, recently experienced the following traumas prior to moving in with the Hoovers: a failed relationship with a younger man, the loss (fired) of a high status job, evictions from an apartment and a hotel, and a suicide attempt. Again, despite their financial struggles, Sheryl and Richard have taken on the responsibility of caring for Frank, following Frank’s suicide attempt, since his insurance would not cover additional time in the hospital.

The Crisis/Situation/Family Issue

Every member of the Hoover family is dealing with both developmental and circumstantial crises that ratchet up the intrapersonal and interpersonal pressures at work within the family. In fact, the dramatic impact and comedic effectiveness of *Little Miss Sunshine* emerge naturally from the deft handling, in terms of writing, directing, and acting, of commonly experienced intrapersonal and interpersonal crises.

To begin with, Richard appears to passing through what Erickson would call the “generativity vs. stagnation” stage of personal development, or what is more commonly known as a mid-life crisis (Gladding, p. 12). Richard’s life and career have not turned out the way he had hoped, so he has become obsessed with the idea that there are only winners and losers in life and that he is a winner. Richard’s developmental crisis is symbolized by the revealing name of his nine-step program for being a winner: “Refuse to Lose.” In other words, Richard thinks that being a
“winner” in life is as easy as refusing to be a “loser.” The early part of the film makes it clear that every member of Richard’s family is having a hard time coping with Richard and his unhealthy obsession with being a “winner.”

Sheryl, Richard’s wife, is also dealing with the generativity vs. stagnation stage of development (Gladding, p. 12), but her struggles manifest themselves differently than Richard’s. She has better coping skills, so she is able to work full-time, pay the bills, and take care of everyone else in her blended, multigenerational family. As Richard’s mid-life crisis has taken hold of his life, their marriage, and their family she has struggled to keep their family together and remain positive and supportive, since she acts as though her family means a lot to her. Having to care for Edwin and Frank, who are experiencing developmental and circumstantial crises of their own, has placed Richard and Sheryl’s marriage under even more emotional and financial pressure. However, parenting Olive and Dwayne with Richard, who is not Dwayne’s biological father, is also becoming more of a challenge to Sheryl as the children go through developmental crises of their own.

Developmentally, Olive is becoming more aware of what it means to be a girl who is growing into a young woman in North American society. Central to Olive’s developmental crisis are the related issues of being perceived as an attractive girl and “winning” the approval of others, especially the men in her life, like her father and grandfather. Connected to Olive’s struggle to become a young woman is dealing with what Erikson would call the “industry vs. inferiority” stage (Gladding, p. 12). Essentially, after staying with Sheryl’s more socio-economically successful sister’s family and participating in the Little Miss Sunshine beauty pageant with her cousins, Olive has set a goal of training for and winning beauty pageants. Olive’s relationship with her grandfather and father underlie her desire to reach this goal, since she has, in many ways, equated “winning” the pageants with “winning” their love and acceptance. Perhaps most importantly, Richard, who initially knew nothing about the beauty pageant and could have cared less, becomes as obsessed
with winning the pageant as he is with becoming a “winner” himself by successfully publishing his “nine-steps.” Indeed, a direct connection between his “Refuse to Lose” philosophy and the Little Miss Sunshine beauty pageant is made when he asks Olive if she thinks she can win the pageant. When Olive, who is not stereotypical beauty pageant material, says yes, Richard acts as though she has already won the pageant. Figuring out what it means to be a “winner” in the Hoover family is the crisis that drives the growth and change of the main characters.

The developmental and circumstantial crises faced by the other characters in the film, Dwayne, Frank, and Edwin, play important but lesser roles in the film. Dwayne, who is fifteen years old, is passing through what Erikson would call the “identity vs. role confusion” stage of his development by rebelling against his stepfather and biological mother in an effort to differentiate himself from his dysfunctional, blended family (Gladding, p. 13). Edwin, on the other hand, is dealing with the stage of his development that Erikson would call “integrity vs. despair” (Gladding, p. 13). Indeed, Edwin, who is a widower in his late 70s, does not seem to be dealing with this stage very well, since he focuses much of his time, when not helping Olive learn how to dance, on sexual pleasure and the recreational use of heroin. Frank, who appears to be in his late 30s or early 40s, seems to be dealing with the same stage of development as Richard and Sheryl, “generativity vs. despair” (Gladding, p. 13). In many ways, Frank’s character is the antithesis of Richard’s, since he was successful in his career in academia. Indeed, it is made clear that Frank was a “winner,” since he was the number one Proust scholar in the United States before his life fell apart. However, Frank lacks what Richard and his sister, Sheryl, actually have, but have lost sight of: a more rewarding personal life, containing love, as imperfect and flawed as it may be.

**Family Dynamics**

In terms of family dynamics, the communication patterns exhibited by the members of the Hoover family are important to note. In the beginning of the film, the Hoovers are not
communicating well with each other. In fact, Richard’s effort to stop Frank from explaining to Olive why he tried to kill himself at the dinner table, provides a great example of how the Hoover’s have rules specifying that they avoid talking about serious and unpleasant topics. These “family process rules” can have a dramatic impact on the development of children and adolescents (Feinauer, Larson, and Harper, 2010). For example, Dwayne’s decision not to speak at all until he leaves home shows how a lack of communication has become an accepted norm in the Hoover family. The Hoover’s also frequently display a behavior known as “damping,” or “making hurtful comments even when others are clearly trying to be positive” (Gladding, p. 36). However, as the family bonds during their shared journey to California, they begin exhibiting a behavior known as “repair,” which involves resolving conflicts through discussions in which everyone is heard and listened to (Gladding, p. 36). In a sense, the unexpected crisis of transporting Olive to the beauty pageant forced all of the Hoover’s to sit and talk with each other for long periods of time in the van, making the trip, in a sense, an extended family therapy session. These “van sessions,” as well as various challenges along the way, forced the Hoovers to break through the “homeostasis” that kept them from relating in healthier ways.

There are also several structures present in the Hoover family that are worth commenting on. For example, the relationship between Olive and Edwin has become a bit of an “intergenerational coalition,” since their secret dance routine, the revelation of which brings the film to its emotionally satisfying conclusion, has become a secret kept from the rest of the family (Gladding, p. 38). There are also several “conflictual triangles” at work in the Hoover family (Gladding, pp. 38-39). For example, as the pressure on Sheryl’s relationship with her husband, Richard, increases, the relationship between Sheryl and her brother, Frank, leads them to align themselves together against Richard in subtle ways. For example, Frank’s snide and sarcastic comments to Richard about his
“nine-steps” make Sheryl smile quite a bit, since she, herself, harbors those same resentful emotions toward her husband.

**Family Systems Theory (Applied)**

The various approaches to family systems theory can also provide insight into how the Hoovers function as a family. For example, if one were to apply psychodynamic theory to understanding and working with the Hoovers, then the unconscious forces at work in the lives of Richard and Sheryl, Dwayne and Olive, and Edwin and Frank, could be addressed. The psychodynamic approach would lead to an examination of many of the “interlocking pathologies” described earlier (Gladding, p. 204). However, this approach would take time and money that the Hoovers do not appear to have. Therefore, other approaches should be considered. For example, the use of structural family therapy, would provide a more pragmatic approach, deemphasizing insight, and emphasizing symptom removal and family reorganization (Gladding, p. 288).

**Coping Strategies Utilized by the Family**

Every member of the Hoover family uses strategies, both healthy and unhealthy, to cope with how they feel toward themselves and each other. To begin with, Richard is in denial about where he is in his life as he approaches middle age; he uses clichés and catchy phrases to hide from his own lack of success in life. He also uses his “nine-step program” to delude himself into thinking that being a “winner” can simply be willed into existence. He does not see the pressure that he is putting on Sheryl, Olive, and the other members of their family. Sheryl, in contrast to Richard, copes with her increasing stress and anxiety by secretly smoking cigarettes when no one is around. Edwin also uses substances and activities, such as heroin and sex, to alter his awareness of his unhappiness at getting older. Dwayne simply stops talking to people that he thinks are crazy, while Olive copes with her struggle to “win” the approval and acceptance of her father by fantasizing
about winning beauty pageants. Finally, Frank coped with his difficulties by trying to commit suicide, often a cry for help, which his sister, Sheryl, quickly provided.

**Issues To Be Addressed in Counseling**

In order to work with the Hoovers, several important issues will need to be addressed in family counseling. Above all, addressing Frank’s suicidal ideation will be a top priority. Beyond this critical issue, however, the choice of a theoretical approach will drive the selection and prioritization of many of the Hoover’s other issues. For example, if a psychodynamic approach is used, then gaining insight into the unconscious processes and “interlocking pathologies” of individual family members would be considered an important issue to be addressed in counseling (Gladding, p. 226). Using this approach, it would become important to gain insight into why Richard is so obsessed with being a “winner.” Likewise, it would be important to help Olive gain insight into her desire to compete in and win beauty pageants. In contrast, a structural approach would lead to more of a focus more on how the Hoovers are interacting today, rather than on gaining insight on some aspect of their history as individuals.
### Resources

**Marriage & Family Counseling Resources In Seattle, Washington**

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<tr>
<th>Name</th>
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<tr>
<td>Rhoda Berlin, MS, LMFT (Greenlake)</td>
<td><a href="http://www.berlin-counseling.com/">http://www.berlin-counseling.com/</a></td>
<td>(206) 919-5771</td>
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| Dr. Philip Brown, LMFT       | [http://www.beacontherapy.com/index.htm](http://www.beacontherapy.com/index.htm) | (206) 780-1036 or (206) 853-6852  
bcft1@msn.com |
stephen@stephencrippen.com |
| Katherine Doyle, MA, LMFT (Seattle) | [http://www.emmauscounseling.net/how_we_can_help/katherine_doyle.html](http://www.emmauscounseling.net/how_we_can_help/katherine_doyle.html) | (425) 869-2644, ext. 15 |
michael@michaelgalloway.com |
| Dr. Angie Hoffpaur, LICSW, Ph.D. | [http://www.beacontherapy.com/index.htm](http://www.beacontherapy.com/index.htm) | (206) 780-1036 or (206) 853-6852  
bcft1@msn.com |
| Robert L. Horwith, MA, LMFT (West Seattle) |  | (206) 932-6638  
rlhmft@excite.com |
| Sierra Sanchez, MS, LMFT (Mount Lake Terrace) | [http://www.mindfultherapygroup.com/sierra-sanchez-ma-lmft/](http://www.mindfultherapygroup.com/sierra-sanchez-ma-lmft/) | (253) 576-0070 |
| Steven J. Schuetz, MS, LMHC, LMFT (Seattle) | [www.seattlecounselor.org](http://www.seattlecounselor.org) | (206) 217-4465 |
| Jamie M Slaughter, MA, LMFT (Fremont) |  | (206) 855-6652 |
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References


