

Family Systems Analysis of *Gifted*

Sarah Mondock

University of Georgia

### Abstract

Every family has their own unique story and system to how they operate. The film *Gifted*, tells the story of gifted seven-year old Mary Adler and the custody battle between her Uncle Frank Adler and Grandmother Evelyn Adler. The unique family structure plays a huge role in this story and how it impacted the relationships throughout the film. Family systems are a unit of interdependent individuals and are an important influence in a child's life. The way a family functions and interacts creates a platform for how children grow up and develops their viewpoints on different situations and topics. The function of family systems theory and social interactions are showcased through the film *Gifted*. The family system of the Adler family reveals how first-order tasks, second-order tasks, and functioning of the family influences the dynamics within the Adler family itself.

### **Family Systems Analysis of *Gifted***

Mary Adler has spent her whole life being raised under the love and care of her Uncle Frank, after her mother, who was also Frank's sister Diane, died by suicide. Due to a long legacy of intelligent mathematicians, stress and conflict was created within the family system. Mary's grandmother, Evelyn, had different ideas of how to raise Mary regarding what is best for her overall. Throughout the film, tension between Frank and Evelyn resulted in a custody battle over Mary placing her in foster care until she is old enough to decide where she wants to live. When Frank learns that Evelyn would see Mary while in foster care, he brings his late-sister's life-long work of her completed math equation to Evelyn. Frank informs Evelyn that Diane instructed him to publish her work only after Evelyn's death. After this information is released, Frank and Evelyn compromise with Mary going back to live with Frank, while attending advanced classes and Evelyn defending Diane's work at MIT. Through the complicated mother-son relationship of Frank and Evelyn, they eventually were able to come together to create the best compromise for everyone involved.

### **Part A: first order tasks**

The dimension of a family is greatly influenced by the structure and tasks inside a family. The structure includes the composition and organization of the family, while the tasks relate to the responsibilities of the family. "First-order tasks are common to all families and essential business of families" (George). Further, first-order tasks can be broken down into four parts, emotional climate, boundaries, maintenance, and identity.

### **Emotional Climate**

The emotional climate of first-order tasks can be so beneficial to the family systems perspective. The emotional climate of the Alder family is complex when considering all

members of the family. For example, Frank attempts to raise Mary as he sees fit and how he believes his sister would want her to be raised. He states that Diane would want Mary to be a real kid with a real childhood (Cohen, Lunder, & Webb).

Throughout the film one learns that Frank sometimes has a short-temper when dealing with conflict as he had previously gotten into a bar fight and raised his voice when he became frustrated with Mary. When either Frank or Mary became frustrated, they would sit down and explain what the issue was. This strategy was supportive and developmentally appropriate to Mary's age and maturity because Frank would talk to her and not at her. In other words, just because Mary was more emotionally mature than some of her peers, she is still seven years old and is more than just her giftedness. However, this conflict resolution pattern was also revealed in Mary as she broke an older kid's nose with a textbook on the bus after he made fun of one of her peers. While this is not the best way to deal with conflict, Mary still learned from Frank that you should always stick up for yourself and those around you.

In contrast, Evelyn had a different view on the emotional climate. Evelyn is not one to compromise with her opinions or her normal way of life. In the face of conflict, she would stretch the truth to change the reality of things. For example, she said that Frank was hurting Mary by not sending her to a private school and that he makes Mary live in "unhealthy and not good conditions" (Cohen, Lunder, & Webb). The way that conflict was handled and the compromise that was eventually found, showed that Evelyn and Frank truly wanted what was best for the well-being of Mary. The different emotional climates presented by Frank and Evelyn led to some confusion for Mary as she thought she was abandoned by Frank and only wanted by Evelyn for her intelligence.

## **Boundaries**

Boundaries are important for all family systems. In other words, boundaries “mark the limit of a system, delineate systems, and separate subsystems from the main system” (George). Internal and external boundaries play a huge role in the family structure. Internal boundaries include individuals or subsystems and how they are regulated within the family. For example, Frank struggles with self-doubt as he does not know if he is raising Mary correctly. Frank gave Mary a set of rules that she knows to follow, however, she crossed the boundaries when she broke every rule when she came into their apartment Saturday morning when she was supposed to be staying with their neighbor, Roberta.

The internal boundaries set are disengaged as Frank encourages Mary to be whoever she wants to be and not what people expect her to be. External boundaries are seen in the Adler family through Frank and his actions in daily life. In the context of the Adler family, they would open their closed boundaries as Frank was very hesitant to talk to the faculty of Mary’s school, especially Bonnie, Mary’s teacher. Bonnie gained information about the Adler’s and later asked Frank why he did not open up to her. Frank was very private when it came to their family and it took longer for him to let people in. Throughout the film, they relaxed and were more welcoming to people not in their immediate circle. The relationship between Frank and Bonnie helps connect the boundaries within the family system.

Morphogenesis, “processes that foster system growth and change,” are shown throughout the film as the compromises between Frank and Evelyn are met (George). They eventually worked together and truly talked about the reasons they did what they did to grow and adapt to the reality of the situation. Boundaries are strengthened throughout the film as communication and openness improves between people.

### **Maintenance**

Maintenance helps to organize the family and allows people to get their daily tasks accomplished. Maintenance is exemplified through the family system as Frank and Roberta work together to raise Mary. Roberta, a mother figure to Mary, is always next door when Frank needs help watching Mary. For example, Roberta helps to babysit Mary on Saturday's and comfort Mary when she gets upset.

Daily maintenance is determined by family structure and the resources they have available to them. Frank could have used the resources provided for education more wisely when Mary was awarded a scholarship for the private gifted school. While Mary did attend a public school that provided an education, the more advanced school could have better fit Mary's needs. However, this is countered when Mary eventually attends more advanced classes while also attending the public school with peers her age. Frank now makes better use of the resources available, such as advanced classes and clubs, as they customize the resources to fit exactly what they need and allow for balance. They are able to "go with the flow" without being stuck to an exact plan that is inflexible. At the end of the film, the maintenance tasks greatly improved as colleagues work with Evelyn to improve their resources combined with the already adequate resources provided.

### **Identity**

Identity is seen to help develop family themes, socialize members, and promote peace between individuals. The identity of the Adler's is that they are very intelligent individuals. A legacy of mathematicians is also showcased throughout the film, as Diane dedicated her entire life to solve the Navier-Stokes problem, Evelyn was a researcher in math at Cambridge University in England, and Mary is a math prodigy. This legacy is reinforced after Evelyn learns about Mary's giftedness through Mary's school's principal.

Evelyn also exemplifies poor differentiation as she had a set opinion about how things should go without being able to compromise. Poor differentiation is shown as Evelyn was unhappy with Diane when she had a relationship with their neighbor growing up. After Diane took a trip with him, Evelyn called the police saying he had kidnapped her. This caused a wedge between them, but Evelyn's reasoning was that "Diane was not a normal girl and she was intelligent and extraordinary. She couldn't get distracted by this because she needed to focus on her education" (Cohen, Lunder, & Webb). Diane's relationship did not fit into Evelyn's plan, resulting in decreased family cohesion and Evelyn's ultimate control over Diane.

Contrasting, Frank provided a well-differentiated atmosphere for Mary. Frank always allowed Mary to explore subjects she was interested in and voice her opinion. There is a high level of maturity with Mary as she is not kept hidden from the truth. For example, after the court hearing with her biological father, Frank told her that he was in town. Mary was then able to show she was upset and express her emotions without fear of getting rejected from Frank. The harmony between the individual identities allowed for individual growth, but also to follow the family legacy on their own choice rather than being forced into it.

### **Second Order Tasks**

Second-order tasks are a huge component in the family systems perspective. These tasks are defined as "the strategies families use to manage stress and transition in the family" (George). Family stress is a huge component of the film as they are put in many stressful situations that disrupted the family structure and routine. The Adler's developed many different coping strategies for their stress and stressors to help them manage the pressures together. For example, after Mary became upset at her foster house when Frank came, she started to run away. Frank was able to catch up with her and calm her down as he hugged her and let her express all

her emotions. They had been separated causing a lot of stress for each other, but this time apart showed how important it was for them to be together and that this is what was truly best for Mary's overall well-being.

First-order and second-order tasks greatly influence the overall family system perspective. The different order tasks work together to create the dimensions of the family and create the overall atmosphere of the family.

### **Part B: case study**

Social factors come together to address different aspects of family systems theory and the Adler family throughout *Gifted*. The subject of our case study, Mary, spent her whole life being raised under the care of her Uncle Frank.

#### **Family Life Cycle**

Family life cycle is defined as "beginning with marriage, the normative stages and shared experiences in families as they progress over time" (Allen & Henderson, p. 84). "The phrase 'family life-cycle' implies the symbol of a circle, the wheel of life, things going around endlessly. But the image of motion in a circle leaves out the important dimension of development over a period of time" (Neighbour RH). The life cycle of the Adler's is not what one would consider a "typical family". A family does not need to just be a mom, dad, and children; often in today's society that is rarely the case. The Adler family cycle did not start with marriage and the biological father was never in the picture.

The differing in families influence the roles and expectations within the family unit and individually. In addition, "thus, what began as the family life cycle concept of normative stages of marriage and parenthood, has evolved to accommodate variations in family roles and processes" (Allen & Henderson, p. 84). These concepts have influenced the roles and



expectations within the family as Frank would normally just be an uncle, but he is now the father figure and main parental figure in Mary's life. Frank is greatly influenced as he is growing and learning with Mary, as well. However, the family unit is influenced through the expected and unexpected events. Throughout the stages of the family life cycle, the relationship between Frank and Mary are unique to the dynamics of their family system.

### **Social Factors**

Social influences can positively and negatively shape the way a family function. For example, Frank and Mary's neighbor Roberta plays a major role in the way the family functions. Roberta is a social connection as she helps to support Frank in his parenting methods and is friends with Frank and Mary. She helps to provide a sense of community and togetherness throughout the film.

The social background plays a major role in the family relationship, habits, attitudes, values, and lifestyle of the Adler's. For example, Evelyn has a social background of academia and wealthy lifestyle habits from living in Europe. In contrast, Frank raises Mary in Florida where they live in a small home together. Frank works as a boat repair man and wants Mary to grow up without the pressures of being a prodigy. Therefore, since Frank and Evelyn's ways of life are so different, their parenting styles also contrast.

Social factors are also influenced by how 'important' education is within the family system. For example, "It is evident that familial and parental factors can either benefit or harm the chances of children receiving an education and excelling in a scholastic environment" (De Serf '02, Megan). To emphasize, Frank believed that Mary needed more than just advanced education for her to succeed in life. Mary's mother was also extremely gifted and dedicated her whole life to math and Frank noticed how this can create harm. He believed that it was more

important for Mary to learn social skills and compassion than strictly academics, while Evelyn believed that Mary needed a strict education to develop her already gifted capabilities. This could also show how Frank is trying to break away from a strict intergenerational pattern of academia for the benefit of Mary as he wants more for her than just one path. These social forces shape and influence the first order tasks as they create the framework and definition for how they will affect the family system.

### **Celebrations and Rituals**

Celebrations and rituals are showcased in every family system through traditions and events. “Family routines and rituals tend to create a more stable environment, which in turn may predict better outcomes for individuals” (Yoon). Special occasions are celebrated in different ways throughout the film. When Evelyn met Mary, they celebrated with Evelyn bringing expensive, elaborate gifts for Mary. For example, Mary was gifted a MacBook when she normally uses Frank’s computer.

Mary decided to celebrate her show and tell with her class by bringing Fred, her one-eye cat, to school. Fred was very important to the story and family system of the Adler’s as he symbolizes Mary’s normal childhood and that she is just a regular kid with a pet. As Mary was showing Fred off to her class, she was not seen as gifted or different, just a girl with a unique cat. In addition, Fred plays a role in the daily and weekly rituals as he is Mary’s pet and she helps to take care of him. To add, “A review from evidence for an association between pet ownership and a wide range of emotional health benefits from childhood pet ownership; particularly for self-esteem and loneliness” (Purewal, Christley, Kordas, Joinson, Meints, Gee, & Westgarth). This helps to show how significant Fred is to the overall mental wellbeing of Mary beyond just being a pet.

Other daily and weekly rituals include Mary's schedule for school, Frank making Mary spend time outdoors together, and Mary's weekly schedule to stay with Roberta on the weekend. These celebrations are important to the family functioning as they represent the normalness in the stressful situation of custody battles. First-order tasks significantly influence the relationship between celebrations and rituals in the family life cycle.

### **Philosophy of Life**

Philosophy of life is interesting to consider when looking at family systems. Frank had an interesting take on how he "made meaning" of things and how he shared them with Mary. When Mary was upset when her biological father did not want to meet her, Frank took Mary and Roberta to a hospital waiting room with no explanation. Shown in the waiting room was a family sitting together and after some time, a man appeared from the back announcing the sex of his baby. The family celebrated and Mary was overwhelmed with happiness when Frank told her that is how he reacted when Mary was born. Through this strategy, Frank showed how he looked at things in the past and how he felt in the situation. He was there for Mary from the very beginning and that nothing was going to change that now.

This philosophy has stayed with them from the start and can be seen in the current situation as even though they may be separated at times, Frank is always going to be there cheering Mary on. "Those receiving support from their family members may feel a greater sense of self-worth, and this enhanced self-esteem may be a psychological resource, encouraging optimism, positive affect, and better mental health" (Thomas, Liu, Umberson). The positive philosophy that is held between the Adler's helps to promote the overall well-roundedness of Mary to allow her to grow to who she wants to be rather than what is forced by others.

### **Conclusion**

The family systems theory was important to look at when considering the Adler family. One was able to determine the overall function and differentiation within the family system as boundaries were strengthened and positive growth and identity were formed. Even with years of conflict and unresolved issues, family members eventually came together in compromise to do what was best for the well-being of Mary. While no family can be perfect and completely harmonious, the Adler's truly care for Mary and want to do what is best for her and each other.

## References

- Allen, K.R., & Henderson, A. C. (2017). *Family theories: Foundations and applications*. Chichester, West Sussex, UK: Wiley Blackwell.
- Cohen, A., Lunder, K. (Producers), & Webb, M. (Director). (2017). *Gifted* [Motion picture]. United States: Dayday Films.
- De Serf '02, Megan, "The Effects of Family, Social and Background Factors on Children's Educational Attainment" (2002). Honors Projects. Paper 8.  
[http://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/econ\\_honproj/8](http://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/econ_honproj/8)
- George, J. (2020). Intergenerational Structures [TopHat]. University of Georgia  
<https://app.tophat.com/e/24565/lecture>
- Neighbour RH. The family life-cycle. *J R Soc Med*. 1985;78 Suppl 8(Suppl 8):11-15.
- Purewal, R., Christley, R., Kordas, K., Joinson, C., Meints, K., Gee, N., & Westgarth, C. (2017). Companion Animals and Child/Adolescent Development: A Systematic Review of the Evidence. *International journal of environmental research and public health*, 14(3), 234.  
<https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph14030234>
- Thomas PA, Liu H, Umberson D. Family Relationships and Well-Being. *Innov Aging*. 2017;1(3):igx025. doi:10.1093/geroni/igx025
- Yoon, Yesel, "The Role of Family Routines and Rituals in the Psychological Well Being of Emerging Adults" (2012). Masters Theses 1911 - February 2014. 965. Retrieved from  
<https://scholarworks.umass.edu/theses/965>