

# FUNDAMENTALS OF FAMILY THEORY

## 6. NUCLEAR FAMILY EMOTIONAL SYSTEM

### 6.1. Background

Bowen's concept of nuclear family emotional system most closely approximates what is conventionally known as "the family" or "the nuclear family" in the United States today. To some extent, the meaning of nuclear family emotional system was articulated before Bowen's other family concepts. In the early stages of theoretical development Bowen used the term "undifferentiated family ego mass" rather than nuclear family emotional system. The concept of nuclear family emotional system describes qualities of the emotional field between inner-core family members rather than processes throughout the intergenerational network. Several nuclear family emotional systems can be identified within any given extended family.

The level of differentiation of self of spouses in a nuclear family largely determines the intensity of the triangles that make up that family's emotional system. When spouses are less differentiated, the intensity of relationships in the nuclear family system is greater than when spouses are more differentiated. The probability of certain kinds of behavior in nuclear family emotional systems also depends on complex stress factors and the overall level of anxiety in the families. Fairly accurate predictions about patterns of interaction can be made when there is intense emotional stuck togetherness, or fusion between spouses or between parent and child in a nuclear family. The intense fusion precipitates reactivity, and the tight interdependence between members of the nuclear family system restricts their behavior options. Levels of differentiation of self in spouses' families of origin influence the degree of the spouses' emotional fusion in a nuclear family. The ways in which spouses handle un-differentiation largely determine the areas in which the fusion is absorbed by the nuclear system, and the kind of symptoms that are expressed in times of stress.

A nuclear family emotional system has three major mechanisms for dealing with an overload of anxiety between the spouses: marital conflict, dysfunction of a spouse, and projection to one or more of the children. Most families resort to a combination of the three adaptive mechanisms. Symptoms surface most visibly

when only one means is selected as an outlet for the surplus un-differentiation. Even when a major proportion of the anxiety is absorbed by one mechanism, a certain amount of spill of un-differentiation is generally absorbed by the other two mechanisms. A family's ability to deal with the fusion in the nuclear emotional field largely depends on the level of differentiation of self of the most dominant person in the system. Marital conflict, which derives from excess fusion, usually develops when neither spouse will give in to the other. For example, the conflict may occur when an adaptive spouse refuses to continue giving in to a dominant spouse. Marital conflict is useful to the extent that it absorbs large quantities of the un-differentiation of spouses, thereby minimizing the probability of dysfunction of a spouse or projection to a child.

Spouses may also distance themselves from each other emotionally as an easier way of coping with a situation in which the two pseudo-selves have fused into a common self. Unlike conflict between spouses, distance between spouses is not generally viewed as a behavior symptom. Either conflict or distance (or both conflict and distance) can develop into the dysfunction of one spouse. As fusion increases, one spouse gives up pseudo-self and the other gains a higher level of functioning self. The higher level of functioning of one spouse in the fusion is thus bought at the expense of the functioning level of the adaptive spouse. These are the early stages of increased dysfunction of one spouse. The degree of closeness and togetherness between spouses influences the extent of the more adaptive spouse's dysfunction in the nuclear family emotional system. The merger between spouses may suppress conflict and encourage the increasing closeness. The dominant spouse, who gains self and does not become clinically symptomatic, is generally not aware of the problems of the adaptive one, who gives up self for the sake of the merger. Dysfunction of the adaptive spouse may include physical or emotional illness and social acting out such as alcoholism or promiscuity.

## **6.2. Research**

The tasks of the scientific enterprise are most effectively accomplished when research efforts have a relatively restricted focus. A nuclear family emotional system is a more clearly defined area of research than a complex social form such as a political movement. When the conditions examined are limited to a small by representative group in society, research objectives and methods become increasingly manageable and productive. A nuclear family emotional system may

be conceptualized as a fairly predictable unit of social interaction. When this relationship system is intense, participating members are anxious and their behavior is more clearly patterned and predictable. To expedite the accumulation of integrated and useful knowledge in the behavioral sciences, some delimitation of the infinite number of variables possible in any field of social interaction is necessary. To some extent, increased clarity has already been accomplished by adopting hypotheses as delimiting tools in research. If observations of facts are inductively related to hypotheses, the selection of social forms and processes to be examined is as crucial to the successful outcome of the research effort as the selection of a particular hypothesis. A working knowledge of a prototypical emotional system such as a nuclear family, which is fundamentally significant in many kinds of socialization processes, may be a more effective basis for collecting additional data and generating further productive hypotheses about human behavior than knowledge of less influential groups.

Nuclear family emotional system is, to some extent, a developmental concept. The term describes patterns of reciprocal behavior that originate with courtship and plans for marriage and continue more or less consistently throughout a marriage or a lifetime. Past and current emotional relationships outside the immediate nuclear unit, such as those of the spouses of the nuclear family and their parents, are important patterns of behavior in the related nuclear family. Patterns of interaction in a nuclear system tend to be directly or inversely correlated with patterns of behavior previously established in the family of origin of one or both spouses. Other indicators of the most significant processes in a nuclear family emotional system are patterns of behavior during the spouses' adjustment to each other before they have children. Patterns of behavior during crises in the relationship of spouses, such as births or deaths, further specify the range of intensity in a given nuclear family.

The nuclear family emotional system is an arena for many kinds of nodal events, or major turning points in microscopic evolutionary processes. The accumulation of data on nuclear family systems can contribute toward increasing knowledge of the perpetuation of society as well as of the procreation and care of its young. Scientific knowledge of processes within nuclear family emotional systems is useful for the description and prediction of human behavior in general. Although patterns of behavior in nuclear families are usually more visible and more extreme than are patterns of behavior in other social groups. Similar tendencies can be delineated in all emotional fields. Case history study is one of the most effective

research methods for examining nuclear family emotional systems. When this approach is used, data are collected from a fairly small number of families, and attention is focused on the delineation of indicators to represent the variety of qualities of relationships being served. A research tool that facilitates collection of this kind of data is a diagram illustrating the range of intensity of the emotional forces in a given nuclear family system. A graphic presentation of the basic data of a family network provides a reasonably clear view of the system-ness of a nuclear emotional field and provides a context for delineating primary triangles in a family.

Patterns of emotional reactivity in a nuclear family suggest the location of pressure points. Pressure points are junctions in the emotional network where undifferentiation tends to be absorbed. When the flow of emotional forces and pressures has been delineated, some predictions about the outcome of specific puts to the nuclear family can be made, and an individual family member can then choose a posture in relation to the system rather than allow self to be absorbed or dominated by the system. Such a choice and posture are possible only when patterns of interaction in a family system are known fairly well.

### **6.3. Therapeutic Considerations**

Central concerns of the Bowen family therapy include a systems description of emotional malfunctioning and a meaningful selection of means to work toward a more differentiated level of self. A knowledge of the complex dependencies in a nuclear family emotional system is a reliable basis for specifying such therapeutic measures.

Although one family member may be singled out as a "Patient," this person may not actually dysfunction or may not be undifferentiated. An "identified patient," as in the case of a child, is frequently not as emotionally impaired as those who identify the patient. It is more accurate to consider the whole family a "client" when dysfunction by a single member is reported. If the therapist views the entire family network as client or patient in a clinical context, the nuclear emotional system can be considered one of the most representative units of the whole, thereby indicating tendencies in characteristic behavior patterns of the wider network.

The Bowen theory suggests a course of therapy where the person coached begins to learn how to identify triangles and how to detriangle self. Although detriangling may be more easily accomplished in the extended system than in the nuclear family, knowledge of the nuclear system is indispensable for ensuring the effectiveness of moves in the extended network. The immediacy and intensity of emotional forces in the nuclear family must be dealt with to some extent to arrive at some degree of objectivity regarding the whole family. For example, multigenerational transmission processes cannot be delineated until the emotional forces in member nuclear systems have been defined.

Knowledge of the nuclear family emotional system facilitates the measurement of change in a course of psychotherapy. This knowledge is also needed by a therapist for dealing with the impact of changes in a family. For example, members of a nuclear family may be so reactive to a person who is trying to differentiate self that they may appear to an uninformed observer to be preventing, rather than resisting, change. A firm stand for self is only possible when the person attempting differentiation has a working knowledge of emotional forces in the nuclear family.