

# FUNDAMENTALS OF FAMILY THEORY

## 3. THE EIGHT INTERLOCKING CONCEPTS

### 3.1. Bowen Family Systems Theory

Bowen Family Systems Theory, also known as Bowen Natural Systems Theory, describes the natural emotional processes which shape how families and other social groups function. Dr. Bowen built his theory after studying the human family as a living, natural system. He strived for consistency between the theory's concepts and knowledge from the rest of the life sciences. Before outlining the eight concepts of the theory, it is important to understand four background concepts and assumptions: Chronic Anxiety, Basic Life Forces, Emotional Process, and the Family as an Emotional Unit.

#### **Chronic Anxiety**

*While specific events or issues are often the principal generators of acute anxiety, the principal generators of chronic anxiety are people's reactions to a disturbance in the balance of a relationship system.*

Anxiety is an organism's response to a real or imagined threat. Dr. Bowen presumed that all living things experience anxiety in some form. He used the term interchangeably with emotional reactivity. Both terms indicate an increase in physical manifestations, such as heart rate and blood pressure changes, gaze aversion, fight or flight responses, and heightened alertness or fear sensations. Though a certain level of anxiety may mobilize necessary responses for human survival, some reactions to threat may not be adaptive.

Chronic anxiety differs from acute anxiety. Acute anxiety is usually a response to a real threat and is of short duration. Chronic anxiety is ordinarily a response to an imagined threat and has a more enduring quality. Various life events may disturb the balance in a family system, but once it is disturbed, family members may react more to the disturbance in the relationship system than to the events themselves. Chronic anxiety often exceeds a person's or family's ability to cope with it.

## **Basic Life Forces**

*The theory postulates two opposing basic life forces. One is a built-in life growth force toward individuality and the differentiation of a separate self, and the other an equally intense emotional closeness.*

Bowen defined two life forces at work in human relationship systems, togetherness and individuality. The togetherness force entails the pressure and desire to be like others, to agree on beliefs, principles, values, and feelings. The individuality force, also termed the differentiating force, involves the impetus to define a separate self from others. Bowen viewed the differentiating force as responsible for self without making demands on others or blaming others. A person defining self to an emotional system takes action based on well thought out principles. According to Bowen, the togetherness force assumes responsibility for the happiness, comfort, and well-being of others while a person differentiating a self assumes responsibility for one's own happiness and comfort and well-being.

## **Emotional System**

*The emotional system is composed of genes, mitochondria, cell membranes, intercellular connections, extracellular fluids, organs, tissues, physiological systems, and all the emotional reactions supported by these components.*

While Darwin theorized a physical link between the human and other life forms, Bowen theorized an emotional link between the two. The human, by virtue of possessing an emotional system akin to what exists in all life, has major portions of his behavior governed by processes that predate the development of his complex cerebral cortex. The emotional system in the context of Bowen theory includes instinctual drives, reproduction, and responses controlled by the autonomic nervous system.

Bowen distinguished between emotions and feelings. This made it possible to apply the term emotional to all living things. Feelings can be felt while emotions operate outside of awareness. Feelings like joy, despair, anger, or guilt, may be a surface awareness of emotions. The intellectual system separates humans from other animals. Bowen made a distinction between thinking that is overly influenced by the feeling and emotional system, and thinking that is independent of it. A person who distorts reality fuses thinking with feeling and emotional states. On the other hand, objective thinking is more independent of the emotional and feeling systems.

## **The Family as an Emotional Unit**

*The emotional functioning of individual members was so interdependent that the family could be more accurately conceptualized as an emotional unit.*

Bowen's view of the family as an emotional unit represents a significant paradigm shift. The concept of the family as an emotional unit implies a deep, multi-generational connection between family members that significantly influences the behaviors of its members outside of their conscious awareness. It conceptualizes the family as one organism. Pathology in an individual member of the family is seen as a symptom of imbalance in the family emotional system. Individuals may be more vulnerable to developing symptoms in the context of an emotional system that is out of balance.

Symptoms can fall into three categories: physical, emotional, and social dysfunction. For example, developing cancer, getting depressed, or committing a crime, would each be conceptualized as symptoms of emotional process in the family. This does not mean that families cause symptoms, only that they can get caught in unconscious ways of regulating anxiety that can have unanticipated consequences. This way of thinking about symptoms reduces the stigma associated with certain human problems and increases objectivity for creatively addressing them.

### **3.2. The 8 Interlocking Concepts**

The eight interlocking concepts of Bowen Theory include:

- 1) Differentiation of Self
- 2) Triangles
- 3) Nuclear Family Emotional Process
- 4) Family Projection Process
- 5) Cutoff
- 6) Multigenerational Transmission Process
- 7) Sibling Position
- 8) Societal Emotional Process

#### **Differentiation of Self**

Depicted with a theoretical scale, differentiation of self describes how people cope with life's demands and pursue their goals on a continuum from most adaptive to

least. Variations in this adaptiveness depend on several connected factors, including the amount of solid self, the part of self that is not negotiable in relationships. For example, a person with well thought out principles enhances solid self, and will not be swayed by fads or opinions. A person with less solid self will feel more pressure to think, feel, and act like the other. This fusion between two people generates more chronic anxiety as one becomes more sensitive to what the other thinks, feels, and does. Acute anxiety also plays a role. A fairly well differentiated person can develop symptoms under acute anxiety, but will probably return to adaptive functioning soon after. A less differentiated person may live in a stress free environment and therefore function quite well for long periods of time.

Level of differentiation refers to the degree to which a person can think and act for self while in contact with emotionally charged issues. It also refers to the degree to which a person can discern between thoughts and feelings. At higher levels of differentiation, people maintain separate, solid selves under considerable stress and anxiety. They manage their own reactivity and choose thoughtful actions. At lower levels of differentiation, people depend on others to function, and they develop significant symptoms under stress. They act, often destructively, based on anxious reactions to the environment. Their intellectual reasoning fuses with emotionality. Even highly intelligent people can be poorly differentiated. One cannot actually measure level of differentiation because it requires observation of multiple areas of functioning over a life course. However, the scale gives a way of conceptualizing variability in coping among people. For example, the concept gives a way of thinking about variability in the functioning among children of the same parents.

Some may think Bowen Theory appears too deterministic, but it actually promotes personal agency and improving one's life, the life of one's children, and the life of one's family. The process of differentiating a self involves a conscious effort at strengthening or raising the amount of solid self by defining beliefs and principles, managing anxiety and reactivity, and relating differently to the family system. People engaged in these efforts reap positive benefits for their own functioning, and they automatically raise the level of differentiation in the whole system.

### **Triangles**

Triangles are the basic molecule of human relationship systems. A two-person dyad becomes unstable once anxiety increases. Then, one or both members of the dyad usually pulls in a third person to relieve some of the pressure. In a three-person system, anxiety has more places to go, and the relationship where it originated experiences some relief. When the three-person system can no longer

contain the anxiety, it involves more people and forms a series of interlocking triangles. Bowen researchers consider triangles a natural function of living systems. Triangles can have either negative or positive outcomes depending on how their members manage anxiety and reactivity. Bowen postulated that if one member of the triangle remains calm and in emotional contact with the other two, the system automatically calms down. On the other hand, with enough stress and reactivity, members lock into a triangular position, and develop symptoms.

### **Nuclear Family Emotional Process**

The nuclear family manages differentiation and anxiety with conflict, distance, over and underfunctioning reciprocity, which at extremes can lead to dysfunction in a spouse, and child focus. People engaged in conflict fight, argue, blame and criticize each other. Partners who distance tend to be emotionally unavailable and to avoid potentially uncomfortable, though important, topics. Reciprocity in relationships occurs when one person takes on responsibilities for the twosome. The two people slide into overadequate and underadequate roles. This can become so extreme that one partner becomes incapacitated either with an illness or a general lack of direction. Child focus is discussed more under the next concept.

### **Family Projection Process**

The fixed triangle is evident in the family projection process, where parents in a nuclear family focus anxiety on a child and the child develops problems. Parents then usually attempt to get the child to change or they ask an expert to "fix" the child. Experienced Bowen family systems consultants report that when parents can instead manage their own anxiety and resolve their own relationship issues, the functioning of the child automatically improves.

### **Emotional Cutoff**

An extreme distancing posture constitutes the concept of emotional cutoff, where family members discontinue emotional contact with each other. This has significant implications for the functioning of future generations, as the emotional family unit is severed in such a way that anxiety has fewer places to be absorbed in the extended family system. Consequently, chronic anxiety increases. People look for other relationships to substitute for the cut off relationship. These new relationships intensify and people become vulnerable to symptoms.

## **Multigenerational Transmission Process**

Differentiation of Self is transmitted through the multigenerational transmission process. This concept describes patterns of emotional process through multiple generations. It offers a way of thinking about family patterns that goes beyond a dichotomy of genes versus environment. One of the ways family patterns are transmitted across generations is through relationship triangles.

## **Sibling Position**

Sibling position, a concept which Bowen adopted from the research of Walter Toman, affects variation in basic and functional levels of differentiation as well. Oldest, youngest, and middle children tend toward certain functional roles in families, influenced also by the particular mix of sibling positions in it and the sibling positions of parents and other relatives.

## **Societal Emotional Process**

The last concept Bowen developed is societal emotional process. It refers to the tendency of people within a society to be more anxious and unstable at certain times than others. Environmental stressors like overpopulation, scarcity of natural resources, epidemics, economic forces, and lack of skills for living in a diverse world are all potential stressors that contribute to a regression in society.