

FUNDAMENTALS OF FAMILY THEORY

8. SOCIETAL EMOTIONAL PROCESS & EMOTIONAL CUT-OFF

8.1. Societal Emotional Process

Emotional process in society, along with emotional cut-off, is one of Bowen's most recently developed concepts, and it is less refined than other concepts of the Bowen family theory. Emotional process in society represents the broadest possible tensions between individuation and togetherness, tensions that Bowen had already described and conceptualized in the context of individual family units. This concept expands Bowen's theoretical system through its accounting for the impact of social influences on family processes and for the impact of family processes on wider society.

Some of the emotional processes in society move toward societal extinction over long periods of time. Constructive and effective adaptation is another possible outcome of the interdependency and interaction of emotional processes in society. When adaptation is successful, the related emotional processes are more flexible and more conducive to growth. These processes generate constructive social changes in the wider society. Although particular sections of society may manifest different qualities and rates of change at any given point in time, an overall trend toward adaptation or toward extinction is frequently suggested by a variety of evidence. In families, one of the two strongest overall thrusts of emotional process is toward togetherness. In society also, one of the two major thrusts of emotional process is toward shared togetherness. Insofar as togetherness or fusion forces predominate in society, they impede the differentiation of individuals and groups. Growth and development are stunted in the conditions of fusion, as individuals and groups are unable to function effectively in such an intense and restrictive emotional climate. Differentiation continues to be extremely difficult to accomplish as long as it is counteracted by the strong togetherness in society.

Bowen suggests that in certain periods in history, there have been tendencies for society to move in the direction of either differentiation or togetherness, and these tendencies are likely to continue. When differentiation predominates, social improvements and constructive developments follow: when fusion predominates, a society is considered stagnant, manifesting destructive forms of change. In times of high anxiety fusion predominates and people are pressured to make short-term tension-ridden decisions rather than more deliberate, long-range decisions. Responsible decision-making is more apparent in societies where differentiation forces are more prevalent than togetherness forces. High crime rates, violence, arbitrary political leadership, and high rates of divorce can be considered indicators of the potency and dysfunctional consequences of togetherness forces in a societal regression. The quality or intensity of emotional process in society is an important influence on the level of functioning of individual families. Although family systems are significant emotional units in themselves, they are generally sufficiently open that they can be strongly influenced by broader societal forces. When the emotional process in society is intense, individuals frequently try to avoid responsibility for self both in the context of their own families and in other social groups.

8.2. One's Own Family with Societal Emotional Process

Although changing one's position in one's own family does not appear directly related to the concept of emotional process in society, the overall climate of anxiety in the broader social setting has some impact on the facility or effectiveness of one's level of differentiation on how one's differentiation is viewed by other family members. Where togetherness forces in society are strong, differentiating moves are correspondingly difficult for the individuals making these efforts and for members of their families. When the emotional process in society is intense, socially accepted goals and standards of behavior tend to be incompatible with responsible individual inner beliefs. When togetherness forces are strong, one tends to sacrifice self for others' needs and to act from pseudo-self. In such an emotional environment, individual thinking is so difficult that action integrated with self and personal convictions is almost impossible; decisions tend to be made in response to anxiety of the moment; and one is less able to formulate an effective plan for differentiating moves in one's family. As geographical moves under conditions of fusion may be followed by continued over involvement in substitute feeling systems, spatial distance cannot increase objectivity about one's family. In

general, emotional dependency is transferred, rather than dealt with when social fusion is strong. Emotional process in society may be less easy to apply to one's own family than are other Bowen concepts. However, the concept of emotional process in society can be used to some extent, and some implications of this broad influence for individual emotional functioning in one's family can be explored.

8.3. Emotional Cut-Off

The concept of emotional cut-off describes extreme cases of distancing between family members. High levels of anxiety in self and in the family relationship system are preconditions for the development of emotional cut-offs. Increases in anxiety or the perpetuation of the same degree of anxiety reinforce existing cut-offs and predispose the system to develop new cut-offs. Emotional cut-off may be used as a means of dealing with fusion in intimate relationships. Each person who participates in an emotional cut-off plays a part in the complex estranging processes. Although each party has a strong need for the other, neither is able to handle that need effectively. Going away from each other emotionally and perhaps geographically is chosen as the easiest and most effective way to deal with the intensity and demands of the interdependency. The existence of many cut-offs in a family's emotional system indicates a high level of anxiety. A considerable number of emotional cut-offs is associated with symptomatic behavior, illness, and premature deaths. In families where anxiety is low, there are few cut-offs in important relationships and between nuclear and extended parts of the family. Families with few cut-offs have few symptoms and only minor disabilities.

Although several reasons are usually given for an emotional cut-off in a family, such as geographical migration, these tend to be rationalizations for anxious reactions rather than accurate descriptions of existing conditions. Moreover, single incidents tends to be inappropriately cited as significant factors in precipitating emotional cut-offs. In reality, estrangements take long periods of time to develop, perhaps several generations. Although it is difficult to measure the intensity of an emotional cut-off, the duration of a cut-off is an indicator of the investment of feelings each party has in continuing the repulsion. When anxiety is high in a family relationship, the probability that a cut-off will occur or will be perpetuated increases. These conditions may be inevitable unless one of the parties involved makes conscious efforts to reverse the interactive estranging processes. If one is able to bridge cut-offs in one's own family, there will be significant benefits for

self and others throughout the entire relationship system. Bridging a cut-off is a differentiating move to the extent that emotional contact is maintained with other family members as the cut-off is bridged. People find many ways to cut-off from each other. A close examination of the triangular substructure of the family relationship system facilitates the prediction of cut-offs and contributes toward describing cut-offs that have already occurred. The pervasiveness of loneliness and misunderstandings between members of different generations in contemporary society suggests high frequencies of emotional cut-offs in families and other relationship systems. Although loneliness and distance between generations have always existed to some extent, these phenomena have reached problem dimensions in contemporary society.

Emotional cut-offs in families have intergenerational consequences. One of the more predictable and more visible outcomes is that when a parent generation cuts off from the grandparent generation, there is a strong likelihood that the children of these parents will also cut off. Hypothetically, the more an individual cuts off from the family of origin, the more that person's children are likely to cut off relationships in the future. A cut-off from the parent generation is frequently justified as making a break from a difficult past for the sake of living in a more ideal present. However, such reasoning is an emotional reaction to the anxiety in the relationships that have been cut off.

The ultimate emotional cut-off is death. Premature and accidental death are ways in which a person or a family may deal with overload anxiety. One possible sequence of events is that intense emotional cut-offs are followed by symptomatic behavior and premature death. Although this pattern of events is crude and extreme, its outlines are manifested to some extent in a variety of families. It is possible to make some moves toward closing a cut-off between a dead person and self. These moves consist of contacting persons who were close to the cut-off deceased family member and trying to piece together the life history of the deceased individual. As with other Bowen family concepts, emotional cut-off can be considered scientific in terms of its predictive capacity. Some of the more predictable sequences of behavior related to emotional cut-off include the following:

- 1. Where anxiety is high in a family, there is a high frequency of intense cut-offs.**

- 2. When a cut-off is bridged in a family and emotional contact with family members is maintained, the probability of effective differentiation increases.**
- 3. When cut-offs exist between parent and grandparent generations, a cut-off between parents and children in the next generation is more likely to develop, especially when the children are old enough to leave their parental home.**
- 4. As emotional cut-off is not a constructively adaptive means of dealing with fusion and intimate relationships, cut-offs may be followed by symptomatic behaviors, including premature death.**
- 5. The degree of cut-off in relationship is an indicator of the degree of fusion or un-differentiation in the same relationship.**
- 6. All members of a family play some part in the cut-offs that exist and are perpetuated in that system.**

To the extent that emotional cut-offs reflect the degree of fusion and anxiety in a family, their distribution is largely determined by characteristics of the substructure of triangles in this system. Close togetherness in triangle frequently occurs at the expense of cutting off from the third member of the triangle. In this situation, emotional cut-off assists in coping with the overload of anxiety or fusion in a triangle and the relationship system. Activity that culminates in cutting off emotional contact with other family members is frequently an ineffective effort to achieve independence. These moves do not differentiate self, and the process is almost the opposite of differentiation. Any gain in pseudo-self through creation of an emotional cut-off provides only temporary relief from the intense anxiety in a relationship system. The cut-off merely makes "self" more vulnerable to a new mode of intense togetherness with others, which also tends to annihilate self. The degree of cut-off over sensitizes self and predisposes the cut-off individual to participate in other fused relationships. The greater a cut-off from past relationships, the higher is the probability that intense fusion in future relationships will develop.

An estimate of the number of cut-offs in a family is easier to make than an estimate of the intensity of the cut-offs. The manifestation of symptoms in a family provides some indicators of the intensity of cut-offs in the emotional system. Children who are cut off from their grandparents generally have more problems in performing at school than children who are in meaningful contact with their grandparents. If a

child becomes delinquent or is chronically sick, the intensity of the cut-off between generations tends to be greater than if a child's behavior is mildly symptomatic.