

FUNDAMENTALS OF FAMILY THEORY

10. THE BOWEN MODEL IN CLINICAL PRACTICE

10.1. The Model in Clinical Practice

Dr. Bowen's therapeutic focus is not a technique focused model which incorporates specific descriptions of how to structure therapy sessions. The goal of therapy is to assist family members towards greater levels of differentiation, where there is less blaming, decreased reactivity and increased responsibility for self in the emotional system. Perhaps the most distinctive aspects of Bowen's therapy are his emphasis on the therapist's own family of origin work, the central role of the therapist in directing conversation and his minimal focus on children in the process of therapy. Bowen views therapy in three broad stages;

1. Stage one aims to reduce clients' anxiety about the symptom by encouraging them to learn how the symptom is part of their pattern of relating.
2. Stage two focuses adult clients on 'self' issues so as to increase their levels of differentiation. Clients are helped to resist the pull of what Bowen termed the 'togetherness force' in the family.
3. In the latter phases of therapy, adult clients are coached in differentiating themselves from their family of origin, the assumption being that gains in differentiation will automatically flow over into decreased anxiety and greater self-responsibility within the nuclear family system.

10.2. The Clinical Practice of Each Component

The Role of the Therapist

The role of the therapist is to connect with a family without becoming emotionally reactive. Emphasis is given to the therapist maintaining a differentiated stance. This means that the therapist is not drawn into an over responsible/under responsible reciprocity in attempts to be helpful. A therapist position of calm and interested investigation is important, so that the family begins to learn about itself as an emotional system. Bowen instructs therapists to move out of a healing or helping position, where families passively wait for a cure, to getting the family into position to accept responsibility for its own change. Bowen warns of the problems of therapists losing sight of their part in the system of interactions, where they may

be inducted into a mediating role in a triangle with the family. Hence there is a high priority given to understanding and making changes within the therapist's own family of origin. In training, the emphasis is on the trainees' level of differentiation, and not on therapeutic technique. The therapist's resolution of family of origin issues is reflected in the ability to be in emotional contact with a difficult, emotionally charged problem and not feel compelled to preach about what others should do, not rush in to fix the problem and not pretend to be detached by emotionally insulating oneself.

Therapist Activity

The therapist is active in directing the therapeutic conversation. Enactments are halted so as to prevent the escalation of clients' anxiety. Clients are asked to talk directly to the therapist so that other family members can listen and really hear without reacting emotionally, for the first time in their lives together. Bowen himself would avoid couple interaction in the room and concentrate on interviewing one spouse in the presence of the other. Bowen clearly avoided asking for emotional responses, which he saw as less likely to lead to differentiation of self, preferring mostly to ask for thoughts, reactions and impressions. He called this activity externalizing the thinking of each client in the presence of the other.

Children in Bowen's Therapy

A surprising feature of Bowen's family therapy is his tendency to minimise the involvement of children. While Bowen might include children in the beginning stage of therapy, he would soon dismiss them, focusing on the adults as the most influential members of a family system. Excluding a child from therapy responsibility is viewed as a detriangling manoeuvre. When parents cannot use the child as a 'triangle person' for issues between them, and the therapist resists taking the replacement role in the triangle, parents can begin differentiating their respective selves from one other.

Family Evaluation

The beginning sessions in Bowenian therapy focus on information gathering in order to form ideas about the family's emotional processes, which concurrently provides information to family members about the presenting problem in its systemic context. The presenting problem is tracked through the history of the nuclear family and into the extended family system. A multigenerational genogram is a useful tool for recording this information. The therapist looks for clues about the emotional process of the particular family, including: patterns of regulating

closeness and distance, how anxiety is dealt with in the system, what triangles get activated, the degree of adaptivity to changes and stressful events, and any signs of emotional cutoff. Information collected is acknowledged to be extremely subjective, especially when extended family are discussed; but stories about past generations are viewed as useful clues to the roles people occupy in triangles and the tensions that remain unresolved from their families of origin. If for example, a member of the extended family is described as the rebel, the therapist explores what events gave rise to this label, who else has occupied this role across the generations and how triangles formed around family crises involving rebellion. Calming family members' anxiety in the early stages of therapy might involve helping them to make connections between the development of symptoms and potent themes in a family's history. Another aim will be to loosen the central triangle that has formed around, and maintains, the presenting problem. Teaching clients about systems concepts as they operate in their own family is part of therapy at this stage. This does not mean attempting to convince people to do things differently but to encourage family members to see beyond their biases so that it is possible for them to consider each person's part in the family patterns.

Questions that Encourage Differentiation

The therapist asks questions that assume that the adult client can be responsible for his or her reactivity to the other. An example would be, "How do you understand the way you seem to take your child's acting out so personally?" In response to such questions, family members are encouraged to take an I position where they speak about how they view the problem, without attacking, or defending against, another family. Clients are taught to make personal statements about their thoughts and feelings in order to facilitate a greater sense of responsibility in a relationship. For example, an accusatory statement such as, 'You are so selfish to cause this much worry for your parents!', is shifted to, 'I am really concerned that this might affect your school grades'. The parent is encouraged to own their worries, rather than to project their anxieties through blaming statements. Developing such a self-focus is said to be crucial in lowering anxiety and enabling person to person relationships where each family member can think about the part they play in problematic interactions.

Creating a Multigenerational Lens

Bowen's multigenerational model goes beyond the view that the past influences the present, to the view that patterns of relating in the past continue in the present family system. Hence the therapist uses questions to encourage clients to think

about the connection between their present problem and the ways previous generations have dealt with similar relationship issues. For example, if the onset of a symptom followed a death in the family, the therapist asks about how grief has been dealt with in previous generations. Questions seek to uncover family belief systems as well as the way relationships have shifted in response to loss. Tracking symptoms and exploring related themes over at least three generations makes it more difficult for individuals to blame one another for individual deficiencies. As therapist and family members see how patterns repeat over generations, it is possible to identify the automatic reactions of family members towards each other. The ability to act on the basis of more awareness of relationship process (not blaming self or others, but seeing the part each plays) can, if done repeatedly in important relationships, lead to some reduction in emotional reactivity and chronic anxiety.

Detriangling

This is probably the central technique in Bowenian therapy. The client is first helped to recognise both the subtle and the more obvious ways that they are triangled by others, and the ways in which they attempt to triangle others in their turn. The therapist uses questions to facilitate the family members' awareness of their roles in family triangles. Simple open ended tracking questions, using what Herz Brown terms the four 'Ws' (who, what, when and where) help clients to become 'detectives' in their own interpersonal systems. It is often very difficult for family members to identify the triangles they participate in, and the sometimes covert ways in which they detour anxiety. An example would be a client who was struggling to understand her negativity towards her father. When questioning included her mother's role in these emotions, the client began to see that her view of her father was influenced by her position in a triangle. As her mother's ally in this triangle, she viewed her father as the inadequate husband who left her mother feeling needy. Once triangles have been identified, family members are helped to plan ways of communicating a neutral position to others, leaving the dyad to communicate directly with each other. The goal is for a family member to find a less reactive position in the face of the other's anxiety. This will require different stances in different systems, ranging from refusing to discuss the deficiencies of another behind his/her back, to reversing one's usual reaction in a triangle. For example, when the predictable pattern in the family system is to keep distance between those who haven't been able to work out their problems, the therapist helps a family member to plan strategies that shift their usual role in maintaining the avoidance. The family member might encourage more involvement between the conflictual twosome, or change the subject when invited to discuss the conflict.

Reversal is a key detriangling technique. When for example a family member 'A' complains about how uncaring another person is, person 'C' reverses the predictable sympathetic response, substituting a casual comment about how considerate person 'B' seems for not putting demands on 'A's' time and energy. Unlike a strategic intervention, the goal of any detriangling stance is not to change the other's relationship but to express one's neutrality about it. A calm and thoughtful neutral stance prevents one from anxiously reacting to the tension of another relationship by taking sides.

10.3. Coaching: Family Therapy with an Individual

Another distinguishing feature of Bowen's model is its validity in working with a single adult. The term coaching describes the work of the therapist giving input and support for adult clients who are attempting to develop greater differentiation in their families of origin. Clients should feel in charge of their own change efforts, with the therapist acting as a consultant. Bowen thought that a person's efforts to be more differentiated would be more productive when the focus shifted away from the intensity of the nuclear family to the previous generation. The emphasis is on self-directed efforts to detriangle from family of origin patterns. An individual's efforts can modify a triangle, which in turn ripples through to change in the whole extended family. Bowen described 'coaching' as family psychotherapy with one family member. This therapy takes on the flavour of teaching, as clients learn about the predicable patterns of triangles. The therapist supports their efforts in returning to their families to observe and learn about these patterns. Clients practise controlling their emotional reactivity in their family and report their struggles and progress in following sessions. During family of origin coaching, clients use letters, telephone calls, visits and research about previous generations to gain a systemic perspective on their family's emotional processes and a sense of their own inheritance of these patterns. The therapist prepares clients for the anxiety they will encounter if they shift from their customary roles in their families of origin. Any such changes will inevitably disturb the predictable balance of family patterns and therefore heighten anxiety and resistance. Change is viewed as a three step process where:

- a. one takes a new position,**
- b. family members react and**
- c. the new stance is maintained in the face of pressure to revert to the original position.**

Bowen emphasised that it is what happens in step 'c' that really determines whether change occurs.