

# FUNDAMENTALS OF FAMILY THEORY

## 5. DIFFERENTIATION OF SELF

### 5.1. Introduction of Concept

The first concept is Differentiation of Self, or the ability to separate feelings and thoughts. Undifferentiated people cannot separate feelings and thoughts; when asked to think, they are flooded with feelings, and have difficulty thinking logically and basing their responses on that. Further, they have difficulty separating their own from other's feelings; they look to family to define how they think about issues, feel about people, and interpret their experiences. Differentiation is the process of freeing yourself from your family's processes to define yourself. This means being able to have different opinions and values than your family members, but being able to stay emotionally connected to them. It means being able to calmly reflect on a conflicted interaction afterward, realizing your own role in it, and then choosing a different response for the future.

Families and other social groups tremendously affect how people think, feel, and act, but individuals vary in their susceptibility to a "group think" and groups vary in the amount of pressure they exert for conformity. These differences between individuals and between groups reflect differences in people's levels of differentiation of self. The less developed a person's self, the more impact others have on his functioning and the more he tries to control, actively or passively, the functioning of others. The basic building blocks of a self are inborn, but an individual's family relationships during childhood and adolescence primarily determine how much self he develops. Once established, the level of self rarely changes unless a person makes a structured and long-term effort to change it. People with a poorly differentiated self depend so heavily on the acceptance and approval of others that either they quickly adjust what they think, say, and do to please others or they dogmatically proclaim what others should be like and pressure them to conform. Bullies depend on approval and acceptance as much as chameleons, but bullies push others to agree with them rather than their agreeing with others. Disagreement threatens a bully as much as it threatens a chameleon. An extreme rebel is a poorly differentiated person too, but he pretends to be a self by routinely opposing the positions of others.

A person with a well-differentiated self recognizes his realistic dependence on others, but he can stay calm and clear headed enough in the face of conflict, criticism, and rejection to distinguish thinking rooted in a careful assessment of the facts from thinking clouded by emotionality. Thoughtfully acquired principles help guide decision-making about important family and social issues, making him less at the mercy of the feelings of the moment. What he decides and what he says matches what he does. He can act selflessly, but his acting in the best interests of the group is a thoughtful choice, not a response to relationship pressures. Confident in his thinking, he can either support another's view without being a disciple or reject another view without polarizing the differences. He defines himself without being pushy and deals with pressure to yield without being wishy-washy. Every human society has its well-differentiated people, poorly differentiated people, and people at many gradations between these extremes. Consequently, the families and other groups that make up a society differ in the intensity of their emotional interdependence depending on the differentiation levels of their members. The more intense the interdependence, the less the group's capacity to adapt to potentially stressful events without a marked escalation of chronic anxiety. Everyone is subject to problems in his work and personal life, but less differentiated people and families are vulnerable to periods of heightened chronic anxiety which contributes to their having a disproportionate share of society's most serious problems.

## **5.2. The Key Concept of Bowen's Family Theory**

Differentiation of self is a key concept in the Bowen family theory. Any given level of differentiation represents the extent to which a person is embedded in the emotional matrix that binds human beings together. An individual may have a relatively separate self, with a calm posture to others, or a soluble self in the emotional field, with intense and anxious bonds with others. Three important factors that influence differentiation are the degree of bonds with others, the level of anxiety in self and the relationship network, and the degree of emotional cut-off with others. Bowen hypothesizes that any relaxation in efforts to be a self leads toward the obliteration of self. Anxiety in self and in the relationship system tends to annihilate self, as the more social and changing parts of "self" become increasingly soluble in the emotional matrix.

Bowen originally described the ranges of differentiation of self in terms of a scale with score from 0 to 100. However, this scale was merely a working hypothesis about various characteristics of human functioning, rather than a precise ranking or

tool of measurement. To avoid oversimplifying the complexities of any given situation, scores and intermediate numbers were not assigned to specific levels of differentiation. In recent years, Bowen has discontinued use of the scale and has focused more on the qualitative aspects of differentiation of self. The terms hard-core self and pseudo-self may clarify some of the complex meaning elements of differentiation of self. Hardcore self, or solid self, is nonnegotiable with others and is composed of an individual's firmest convictions and most integrated beliefs. Pseudo-self, by contrast, is negotiable with others. Pseudo-self consists of others' opinions absorbed as one's own without any personal conscious commitment to the beliefs and convictions underlying the opinions absorbed. The changes that occur through differentiation generally affect both hard-core self and pseudo-self. As a person becomes more differentiated, the importance of hard-core self increases and the influence of pseudo-self correspondingly decreases.

The concept of differentiation of self is a product of systems thinking. The range of behavior defined by differentiation eliminates any need for the conventional concept of normal. The indicators of this process are not directly related to mental health, illness, or pathology, although there is some overlap between the conventional meaning elements of emotional maturity and those of differentiation of self. Although differentiation has social consequences, there is no direct correlation between differentiation either intelligence or socioeconomic achievement. Higher levels of differentiation indicate responsible autonomous behavior rather than such attributes as occupational attainment or social class. The level of an individual's differentiation represents that person's basic self. Basic self includes "I" position action statements such as the following: "These are my beliefs and convictions. This is what I am, who I am, and what I will and will not do." Basic self consists of integrated beliefs, convictions, and ideas which can change from within and through new knowledge and experience. It is not negotiable in relationships and resists external coercion or pressure. Basic self is not changed merely to gain approval, enhance one's standing with others, or share beliefs with others. A second level of self, which is related to hard-core basic self, is described as pseudo-self because of its fluid and shifting characteristics. Pseudo-self is a mass of heterogeneous and frequently contradictory observations, beliefs, and principles that have been acquired in the context of the prevailing emotions in an individual's relationship systems. The components of pseudo-self include what one thinks one is supposed to know and beliefs borrowed or accepted from others as a means of enhancing status. Unlike basic self, pseudo-self is negotiable with others in relationships.

Reflexive, or automatic, behavior in families moves toward un-differentiation of fusion with others. The condition of fusion is the eclipse of one self by another self or by a relationship system. When fusion occurs, an individual loses personal distinctive attributes and becomes lost or submerged in the characteristics of the other or the relationship system. Fusion takes place with either the loss of pseudo-self or the apparent loss of both basic self and pseudo-self. An undifferentiated person tends to manifest a greater degree of emotional fusion with others than a person who is more differentiated. The less self one has, the more one depends on a common self for direction and energy. Fusion is an interaction process in both overcharged and undercharged relationships. Fusion generally reaches its greatest intensity in marriage. In the emotional closeness between spouses, two partial selves fuse into a common self. Sometimes this degree of closeness is only tolerable if the spouses distance themselves from each other rather than operating as a combined self. The intensity of the resulting fusion largely depends on the spouses' differentiation before marriage. Fusion takes place between any two or more individuals. Extreme fusion frequently occurs between a parent and child. The parent is emotionally dominant in the twosome with a child, functioning at the child's expense. In this process, the adaptive child gives up self and becomes submissive. In his family theory, Bowen conceptualizes differentiation more clearly than he does fusion. He emphasizes the clinical importance and personal significance of differentiating self for each individual. A particular level of differentiation is considered a balancing point between the two major emotional thrusts of differentiation, or individuation, and fusion, or togetherness, in families and other social groups. As the level of differentiation increases, the discomfort and less effective functioning associated with fusion is partially resolved or relieved. However, much personal effort is necessary to increase differentiation of self. Bowen suggests that a well-differentiated individual has more basic self and is less likely to fuse with others than a poorly differentiated individual. In contrast to differentiating processes, fusion is a spontaneous and automatic emotional response in a relationship setting. As many complex feelings are generated in a fused response, effective functioning by the individuals concerned is inhibited.

### **5.3. Therapeutic Consideration**

The concept of differentiation of self makes it possible to examine people and relationship anxiety more objectively. This improved facility is important for the development of the discipline and clinical success of psychotherapy. However, differentiation of self is a suggested goal of psychotherapy, rather than a diagnostic tool. Although specific levels of differentiation cannot be precisely correlated with

pathology, some generalizations about relationships between differentiation of self and symptomatic behavior are offered. Less differentiated individuals are more vulnerable to stress, and their recovery from symptoms is generally slow or impossible. However, less differentiated people do not necessarily manifest behavior symptoms when under stress, and they may keep their lives in emotional equilibrium fairly effectively. More differentiated individuals may also develop symptoms, especially when under severe stress. Unlike those who are less differentiated, more differentiated individuals are generally less vulnerable to stress and they tend to have comparatively rapid recoveries from any symptoms.

One goal of Bowen's family psychotherapy is to increase differentiation of self. As an individual becomes more differentiated, dysfunctional symptoms in individual behavior and in patterns of family interaction decrease. The general alleviation of stress and recovery from symptoms in a family are more effective when one family member becomes more differentiated. Improved differentiation is an ideal goal of psychotherapy, rather than a goal that can be easily achieved. It is frequently not possible for an individual to become more differentiated during a course of psychotherapy. The pervasive inability to change self may result from emotional symptoms that have become rigid and immovable through time or from lack of motivation. When there is no unusual stress in a family, any small move toward differentiation will predictably be accompanied by pressures to return to patterns of former functioning. Much of the difficulty involved in becoming more differentiated is the opposition of the thrusts of individuation and togetherness, the two major forces in an emotional system. Togetherness inhibits individuation, and individuation inhibits togetherness.

Most of the problems dealt with in a clinical setting are related to fusion or loss of self. The feeling of being trapped in intimate relationships is characteristic of fusion. Coaching the adaptive or submissive individuals in a fusion to behave in more differentiated ways optimally culminates in their becoming more able to function autonomously. Differentiation is a complex combination of processes through which awareness of personal unique qualities and of the potential for growth and autonomy is increased. At all stages of psychotherapy, a well-differentiated therapist is more effective than a therapist who easily becomes fused in ongoing relationships. In Bowen's view, therapeutic success results from a differentiated clinician's ability to remain relatively outside the emotional field of the clinical setting. A well-differentiated therapist does not allow self to be drawn into a family's fusion. Any resolution of the intensity of this fusion generally occurs through the activation of latent relationships in the family, rather than through emotional involvement on the part of the therapist. A primary goal of a

family systems therapist is to maintain a differentiated "I" position despite any pressures to take sides on a particular family issue. The ability of a therapist to remain differentiated in a clinical setting depends on the quality of the therapist's own relationship between self and family of origin.