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## **Bowen Theory in Parenting** **(Bowen 理論在親職教育的運用)**

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### **Introduction**

Parents of today face unprecedented challenges. Problems of children are becoming more complicated, ranging from simple disobedience, academic underachievement, behavioural and emotional dysfunction, to substance abuse, sexual acting out, delinquency, isolation, and inability to enter the job market or the larger society. Many parenting models have sprung up. The majority of the therapeutic approaches are focused on treating the problem-bearer, giving the child different kinds of treatment, hopefully to make the child feel better and behave better. Even though parent may be involved, it is about how parents can help to modify the behaviours of the child. The child is the “centre of investigative universe”, as Dr. Roberta Gilbert (1999) pointed out. Many of these therapeutic approaches are technique-oriented. Bowen family systems theory takes on a new direction. The focus is not on the problem-bearer, but on the parents. The goal is to enhance the emotional maturity or the differentiation of self of the parents, so that they can become more effective leaders of the family, and be better able to connect with their children. Mature parents raise mature children. Studies show that those young people who have better

connections with their parents, had less chance of getting delinquent. As quoted by Gilbert (1999,p.35), Michael Sullivan 'study of juvenile offenders found that "70% of the adult offending group had a cutoff with a parent compared to 5% of the non-offending group".

In this presentation, I will describe how Bowen theory provides a good framework for parents to work on their own maturity, so that they can nurture emotionally mature children, benefitting the society as a whole.

### **1. Adopting a broad perspective, defocus the problemed child**

Most of the current models focus on the weak and the person with problems. School principals, teachers, parents and medical practitioners often rally around the children with problems, diagnosing them and offering them all kinds of treatment. Bowen theory stresses defocusing of the problemed child, and instead, advocates focusing on the bigger picture (Bowen, p. 50). The problem manifestation is not seen as the individual pathology of the child, but as a reflection of a dysfunctional family system. The child's dysfunction is seen as a symptom that reflects the underlying undesirable interactional patterns that have been going on for some time and culminating in the present behaviours of the child. Being able to see that the child's presenting problem is actually reflective of something bigger, of established ineffective patterns of behavior in the larger family system is important to understanding the symptom. Seeing beyond the child's problematic behaviour and understanding the interactional patterns, the relational processes of the family across the generations can throw light on solving the problems.

### **2. Adopting a systemic perspective**

Adopting a systemic perspective, and noting the reciprocity of interactions can help us see parenting issues and children's problems in an entirely new light. By thinking systems, the parents learn to see the more objective picture, that there are many players in the field (many different members of the multigenerational family system co-creating the present situation through their unique ways of interacting with each other), and the reciprocal impact of people's behavior on each other. By not seeing the phenomena as simply cause and effect between the problem-bearer and his/her family members, it diminishes blaming and accusations. By seeing the reciprocal nature of the interactions, parents can review the part they play, and can control or change their part which is within their control, rather than trying to change the child which is outside their control and nearly impossible.

### 3. Understanding anxiety in self and in the family system

Dr. Bowen noted that anxiety has a big impact on our functioning in the family system (Bowen, p. 410). Anxiety is the organism's response to threat. There are two kinds of anxiety, acute anxiety and chronic anxiety. Chronic anxiety hampers our sound judgement, and results in exaggerated emotional reactions which are often maladaptive. The more chronic anxiety, the more automatic and intense our emotional reactions will be. Children with serious dysfunctions often come from families with severe chronic anxiety. Severe chronic anxiety propels the parents to have a strong force towards togetherness in their relationship with their children, and undermines the child's room for individuality. The life force of togetherness pushes people to think, think and act the same, and results in emotional interdependency between the family members. Any small change in the other will result in automatic reactions or shifts in the other.

Out of the chronic anxiety and strong force of togetherness of the parents, the following four patterns will develop, resulting in parent-child fusion:

- Overfunctioning and underfunctioning reciprocity -

This may take the form of over-involvement with the child's life. The parent over-functions and does a lot of chores for the child which should be done by the child himself. She may be involved in many or all of the activities and decisions of the child, and micro-manages the child, lacking the faith that the child can do things at his level of development. This often describes the state of the "helicopter" / "snowplough" parents. The parent often feels that she knows best for her child, and does much thinking, planning and action on behalf of her child. It is difficult for parent of this state to realize that her child has needs, wants and expectation different from hers. She is keen to implement what she herself thinks onto her child. The more chronic anxiety that the parent has, the more intense that she wants her child to act in accordance with her wishes.

Some parents may be emotionally involved with their children in being over-positive with their children. The parent may feel more excited about and invested in the child's achievement than the child himself, or may feel more pain and sorrow than the child himself about difficulties encountered. The parent revolves her life around the child, and lives her life through the child. Such heavy emotional involvement in the child inadvertently creates great pressure for the child which may result in the child's passivity, distancing, or conflicts with the parent.

There is a blurring of boundaries with the child. The child's responsibilities may be taken up by the parent and vice versa. The child may be exempted from having to endure the natural consequences of his behaviours, as the parent cannot bear to see the child not getting the best.

When the parent overfunctions, her child will automatically adapt, and give up his selves, and remains underfunction. The more anxiety there is, the greater the fusion with the child, and the more problematic the behavior. The parent takes charge of the child's life, and the child is left more emotionally dependent on the parent.

Likewise, parents may underfunction when their chronic anxiety is high. The parent may not be able to carry out her regular duties and relegate her authority to the child, which may result in the child being over-responsible, perfectionistic or abusive.

Realizing the reciprocity of the interactions help us not to identify the child's dysfunctional behavior as the problem from within him, but as the product of the interchange between the family members.

- Conflicts, and blaming amongst the parental pair is another pattern stemming from anxiety in the family. Such will increase the tension for the child and his reactive behaviours.
- The couple's distancing from each other as a way to deal with the anxiety in their relationship will also have impact on the child, e.g. one parent might be over-close with the child, while the other might be rejecting of the child.
- Focusing on one of the child –resulting in child-focused family  
Through the family projection process, parents with high anxiety displace their marital tension and immaturity onto one of the children, who subsequently develops symptoms. By focusing on the child, being hypersensitive to and vigilant of the child, caretaking and treating him, the couple relationship becomes calmer, but the child is impaired. The child receives larger amount of anxiety and immaturity from the parents, and has little energy to pursue his own interests and goals.

Understanding the great impact of chronic anxiety on the family system and on the child free us from being stuck with the presenting problems of the child, but to address the anxiety and the emotional processes of the family, esp. the heavy emotional interdependency between the parents and child.

#### **4. Understanding our own functioning pattern**

Bowen theory calls for parents to be aware of how their functional positions and interactional patterns with others were developed, and how these patterns were carried onto their children. The multigenerational transmission process describes how families pass down anxiety or undifferentiation to members of the family across the generations, and also explains the varying level of functioning of family members across the generations. Through this process, some branches of the family decline in their functioning, while those whose parents have higher differentiation are able to increase their functioning over the generations. Parents having better understanding of their functional position and automatic reactivity patterns, and who work on enhancing their emotional functioning will have better chance of nurturing more functional children in their family life. This echoes one of the Chinese sayings, “This generation is not as good as the previous generation. This crab is not as good as the previous crab”, or “The green outshines the blue”, “The later tides of the Yangtze River are pushing against its earlier tides”. (「一代不如一代，一蟹不如一蟹。青出於藍、長江後浪推前浪」。)

#### **5. Being self-focused, principled and a neutral observer**

Managing self – identifying their own emotional triggers, learning emotional self-regulation, and developing their I position, instead of focusing on correcting the problems of their children is one major step for the parents. Focusing on self requires the parents to be aware of the stimuli that arouse their heightened emotional reactions, and affect their rational judgement.

Bowen highlighted the importance of being a neutral and objective observer (Bowen, p.349). Emotionally mature parents rely on facts, instead of their feelings. They are able to distinguish that their children’s problems or needs are different from theirs. An important gift of the parents for their children is to present the reality, or the true picture to their children.

Defining self - developing and identifying guiding principles (e.g. I will not render my help if the child can do the tasks by himself.) that form the basis of one’s behaviours is an essential task for parents. As Dr. Michael Kerr stated, establishing I positions refers to the ability to specify statements such as “I believe, I am, I will do” (Kerr & Bowen, p. 101). By having I positions and principles that guide the parents in their decisions and problem-solving behaviors, the parents can grow into a mature self, and enhance their capacity to connect with their children.

## 6. Towards an open, separate and equal relationship with our children

The goal is to build better connections with our children through nurturing an open, separate and equal relationship with them. Effective parent-child relationship is characterized by open and effective communication between parent and child; separate and clear boundaries between them; and the children are recognized for their equal worth as a human while also making clear the authority of the parents. (Gilbert, p. 139).

Bowen theory is about addressing the strengths of the family system. It has much to offer for parents. It aims to facilitate the parents to grow into a mature self and become effective leaders of the family, by promoting calmness and thoughtfulness; by helping parents to understand and lower their anxiety, define their principles and positions, adopt more functional relationship patterns with their family members, so that they can build better connections with their children.

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