



The Bowen Family Systems Theory

Bowen family systems theory, developed by the late American psychiatrist Dr. Murray Bowen (1913-1990), provides a new paradigm for conceptualization of human behavior and treatment of human problems. It is a theory about relationships. Instead of seeing individuals as an emotional unit of his own, or as a separate entity, and the individual as the basic unit of treatment, Bowen deemed that individual functioning should be understood in the context of his relationships, that each person's emotional functioning is closely interconnected with each other, with reciprocal impact on each other.

Linkage with the natural sciences

Bowen formulated the family systems theory from knowledge of natural sciences, evolutionary biology, and his research on families. It is a natural systems theory, where Bowen sees that the human family system, like any other living forms, is a part of nature, and is governed by relationship processes similar to other forms of life on earth, that a change in any part of the system will automatically entail compensatory changes in other parts of the system. He sees that these emotional processes as transcending cultures, and regulate the functioning of different social groups.

Four Foundation Concepts

1. *Anxiety*

Anxiety is seen as an important variable in the functioning of individuals, families and organizations. Anxiety refers to the organism's response to real or current threat. Bowen sees that there are two kinds of anxiety: acute anxiety and chronic anxiety. Acute anxiety occurs when the threat is real, and is short-lived. Acute anxiety is about one's reactions to stress. However, much of our problems are affected by our chronic anxiety which lingers on though the threat is no longer existent. Chronic anxiety is about people's reacting to other people's reactions to stress. It is the fear of what



might happen and can be long-lasting, and is transmitted from earlier generations. It results in exaggerated responses, sustained wariness, suspicion, physical tension and ailments, fatigue and irritability. It plays an important role in our emotional health and adaptability.

2. Two basic life forces

Bowen stipulates that every organism or system is governed by two counterbalancing life forces: the force towards togetherness and the force towards individuality.

The force towards togetherness drives our need for social support, affection and love. In the striving for fulfillment of the togetherness need, there grows the tendency to expect self and others to be alike - to think alike, to act alike, and to feel alike e.g. acting on behalf of the others, sacrificing in order to get other's approval, dominating over others so that others will act in accordance with one's ideas. When chronic anxiety is high, the force towards togetherness will be strong, and symptoms will emerge.

On the other hand, we are also driven by the need to be of our own person, striving to be unique and to be different. A high functioning person has the capacity to stand on his ground, act on good principles and be responsible for himself, while also in meaningful relationship with his important people.

3. Emotional system

Bowen posited that much of human functioning (both in individuals and families) is governed by the emotional system. This refers to the innate or instinctual guidance system of an organism which is shaped by evolution. It includes mechanisms for driving and guiding the organism through life, and governs processes such as mating, resting, feeding and nesting. The responses involve both reflex-like, automatic responses as well as learned responses which have become automatic. Bowen deemed



that this guidance system operates in all living things in which many of the biochemical and mechanical processes are

similar. Bowen opined that humans are regulated by the emotional system to a far greater extent than we realize. While the emotional system is the only guidance system available to animals, human beings possess a feeling system and an intellectual system.

The feeling system appears to be the link between the emotional system and the intellectual system. The feeling system is the cognitive or conscious expression of emotion which is generally not felt. The intellectual system comprises the ability to comprehend, and to communicate complicated and abstract ideas. It serves as a second guidance system for the individual. Both guidance systems, the emotional and the intellectual, are useful, depending on the conditions facing the person. The ability to separate and choose between the emotional and the intellectual system to guide behavior is an important asset.

4. The Family as an Emotional Unit

Bowen viewed the family as an organism, whereby it has properties that are greater than the sum of its individual parts, and that each part is emotionally dependent on each other. A change in the system will automatically bring forth changes in the other parts of the system. The family system is characterized by automatic, instinctual, reflex-like processes which evolve over the generations. It points to the fact that our functioning in families are very much emotionally influenced by one another, and that our emotional interdependency on each other is much more than we realize. Symptoms in individuals (e.g. physical, emotional and social dysfunction) are conceptualized as reflective of the intense emotional process in the family and not as pathology in the individual.



The Eight Emotional Processes

1. *Differentiation of Self*

This is the cornerstone of the Bowen Theory. It refers to the ability (a) to separate thinking from feeling, and to be guided by the rational capacity; and (b) to maintain a solid sense of self even in the midst of social pressure to conform, while at the same time being able to maintain close and meaningful relationship with others.

On the intra-psychic level, a person with low level of differentiation has difficulty of distinguishing his feelings from his thinking. He often acts simply because it “feels” right, without careful consideration of the facts or the actual realities of the situation. He is overwhelmed by his emotions, and leads a life that is dominated by his feelings. Subsequently, his life is like a roller-coaster, with many stresses, instabilities and hardships. A person with high level of differentiation has good awareness of both his thinking and feelings, and can distinguish them. He can access his emotions and express them freely and spontaneously. His actions are guided by gathering of relevant facts, logical reasoning, and well thought-out principles. He makes appropriate decisions, and leads a fulfilling life.

On the interpersonal level, a person with low level of differentiation yields to social pressure easily. He is easily affected by other people’s opinion, feelings, thoughts and behaviours. He gives up his own opinion in favour of others’ ideas (losing self) without much thinking through. A person with low level of differentiation may also show contrasting behaviour of being dogmatic and intolerant of other’s differences from him, imposing his own thinking and values on others, thus “extending self” to others. There is a rigidity of roles, blurring of personal boundaries and responsibilities. These are phenomena of fusion with others. A person who is well-differentiated can state his “I” position calmly, and act according to his life principles, while at the same time, also enjoys meaningful and intimate relationship with people.

2. *Triangling*

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When there is anxiety in a two-person relationship, one party (usually the one feeling the discomfort more) will automatically move to involve a significant person to decrease the tension in the relationship. According to Dr. Bowen, a triangle is the smallest stable relationship unit, and that nearly all significant relationships are shadowed by third parties such as relatives, friends, hobbies and even memories. Triangling involves shifting alliances, and people behaving in a reactive way to each other. Triangles reflect anxiety in the emotional system. The greater the anxiety, the more intense the triangling process will be. Interlocking triangles will be formed when the original triangles can no longer contain the anxiety, and more people are involved, leading to more chaotic and complicated interactions.

Triangles can relieve the tension in the relationship in the short run, but they damage the relationship and complicate the interpersonal problem in the end as they divert attention from the main source of the problem.

3. Nuclear Family Emotional Processes

When chronic anxiety in the nuclear family is high, four patterns will emerge:

a. Reactive Distance

The spouses use distancing to avoid discomfort or reactivity to each other. This distancing can be –

- Actual – physical distance or avoidance of each other through work, travel or other involvements.
- Internal – Displaying silence, distractability, disinterest or chronic irritability.

b. Marital Conflict

Marital conflict is one of the ways a couple manages anxiety and maintains a degree of equilibrium. A couple in conflict usually displays the following



characteristic behaviour patterns – being critical, blaming and accusatory of each other, focusing on the other person’s faults /shortcomings (other-focused) rather than focusing on one’s own part in the problem (self-focused), rigid and insistent on one’s own viewpoint, and behave abusively towards each other.

While on the surface the couple might be eager to assert their polarized standpoints and insistence that the other person is wrong, marital conflict actually reflects the emotional dependency between the couple. Each partner is eager to tell the other partner that he/she has violated the dependency and what needs to be done to correct the situation.

c. Reciprocal Functioning

The couple deals with tension and anxiety in the relationship by dysfunction in one of the spouses. One spouse becomes the caretaking partner – taking charge of the situation, caring and sacrificing for the other spouse, and presenting to be functioning increasingly well. The other spouse becomes the yielding partner – giving up his own responsibilities, increasingly turning to the other spouse for decisions and guidance, and appearing weak and helpless.

Both spouses report sufferings in this reciprocal process. The caretaking spouse often feels trapped, burnt-out, bitter and resentful, exploited, unappreciated, burdened with responsibilities, and restricted in the freedom to pursue his/her own life goals. The yielding partner feels oppressed, abused, dominated, and controlled. He /she often displays physical and emotional dysfunction.

The reciprocal functioning can be adaptive and functional, with each spouse yielding to each other in one situation or another. However, this reciprocal balance might be upset when one of the partners cannot tolerate the situation anymore.



d. Projection of Problem onto a Child

The tension between the couple is spilled onto a particular child in the family. This child becomes the focus of the parental anxiety. The more the parents focus on this child – becoming more anxious and reactive to him, the more the child reacts to them. He becomes more sensitive and reactive to the attitudes, needs and expectations of the parents than his siblings. This over-focusing, reactivity and sensitivity of the parents towards the child result in impairment of this child's functioning. The parents usually become cooperative and calm with each other, joining hands to find solutions for the child's problems.

4. Family Projection Process

This describes the main way that parents transmit their emotional problems to a child. A particular child will be exposed to more parental anxiety or immaturity for various reasons. Subsequently, this child will be more fused with his parents (having greater emotional dependence on his parents, and greater difficulty to separate feelings from thinking). He will subsequently exhibit the following behaviours – difficulty in meeting other's expectations, great need for recognition and approval, blaming others, feeling responsible for other's happiness or that others are responsible for his own happiness, and impulsiveness. His functioning will be lower than that of his/her other siblings who are less focused by his parents and who thus have more life energy to pursue their life goals.

5. Multigenerational Transmission Process

This describes the process how chronic anxiety, patterns, themes and roles are passed down from generation to generation through the projection process mentioned earlier. In every generation, the child most focused by the parents (and thus most fused emotionally with the parents) moves toward a lower level of



differentiation of self while the least focused child will move towards a higher level of differentiation.

Bowen opined that we usually marry people of similar differentiation level. When a person (second generation) who was focused by his parents (and thus has less differentiation than his parents) marries, the family subsequently created by this new couple will have greater anxiety than his parents' family. This new family will undergo more intense and active emotional processes (e.g. reactive distance, marital conflict, and family projection process) with greater anxiety focusing on a particular child. This child (third generation) most focused by his parents will become less differentiated than his parents, less able to regulate his emotionality; while his siblings (who are less focused on by his parents) will have greater freedom and opportunity to develop themselves and fulfill their life goals. It therefore follows that the past has great impact on the present and future. It also explains why different descendents of a clan will have very different functioning over the generations.

6. Sibling Position

Bowen agreed with Walter Toman (1976) that our sibling position has significant impact on our personality, and characteristic behavior patterns. e.g. The eldest usually develops more leadership qualities, greater sense of responsibility, and identifies more with power and authority. The youngest child tends to be more care free, dependent, unconventional and creative. Middle child may feel neglected in the family, and often plays the role of peacemaker or mediator relationships. Only child enjoys the exclusive attention of and resources from the parents, and is more comfortable with relating with adults or older people.

Bowen was also interested in the sibling position in the functional sense, i.e. a person can be chronologically the youngest, but acts functionally as the eldest child, taking up major decisions and responsibilities for the family due to the chronic illness of the eldest child.

Understanding our sibling position helps us to understand our roles / behaviour patterns in



relationships, as well as our part in the emotional processes of the family (e.g. which sibling position will be most focused by the parents in a particular family). It also allows us to learn how to overcome the limitations of our sibling position and maximize the strengths that come with the specific sibling position. Understanding our sibling position can also help us develop greater insight into our couple relationship, parent-child relationship and workplace relationships.

7. Emotional Cutoff

Emotional cutoff, or extreme emotional distancing, may be used to deal with tension and anxiety in the relationship. It can be actual – by physically moving away or eliminating any contacts, or emotional – by psychologically withdrawing or emotional isolating oneself from others. It reflects fusion between the generations, and attempts to reduce the anxiety by eliminating contacts. However, cutoff generates greater problems, as it deprives a person of resources by isolating him from people who might render valuable help, leading to greater anxiety and more intense emotional processes in the nuclear family. It has great consequences for marriages. The more cutoff a person has with his parents, the greater tendency he will use cutoff to deal with his tension with his spouse. Therefore, bridging cutoffs, and taking responsibility for one's own part in the cutoff is an important part of family-of-origin work.

8. Societal Emotional Processes

Bowen observed the above emotional processes also operate in the larger society. Conditions of chronic stresses (such as unemployment, poverty, depletion of natural disasters, and political instability) engender an anxious social climate, more pressure for togetherness, conformity, and less room for individuality, creating a vicious cycle of greater anxiety and greater regressive behaviours.



Development of Symptoms

When anxiety is high, the emotional interdependence drives people to trade “selves” or form fused relationships. One member will be especially vulnerable to the tension, absorb the anxiety, and give up self or gain self in order to obtain people’s attention, or approval. This individual will subsequently manifest problems such as alcoholism, depression, acting out behaviours and various forms of emotional dysfunction.

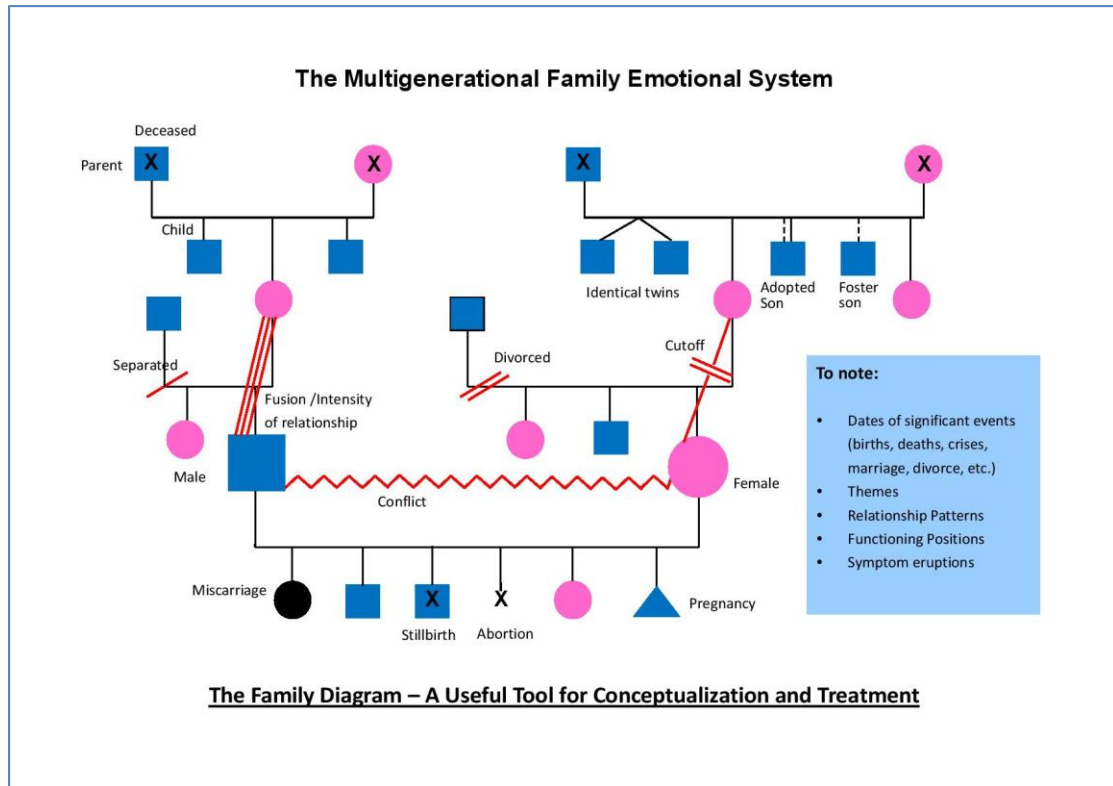
Systemic way of looking at relationships

Bowen advocated a systemic way of looking at relationships. i.e. instead of seeing relationships in a linear way as cause and effect (the aggressor and the victim), we should look at the reciprocal influence of behaviours on each other, how we are both the cause and effect of the interactional chain. This way of seeing relationships does away with blame and accusation; instead, it highlights attention to the part each of us play in the interaction. It helps us to look at the contribution of each of us in our transactions with others, focusing on our own responsibilities, and self-change.

A broad view of the situation

To effect change, Bowen deemed that it is useful to identify the patterns that families developed to cope with anxiety over the different generations, and not just focus on the identified patient. Intervention strategies can then be developed. A Family diagram

is a useful tool to gather information of the family over at least 3 generations, e.g. about relationship patterns, family composition and structure, individual and family functioning, and significant events over the generations.



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