

*The Bowen Family Theory and Its Uses*

# THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES



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# **Theoretical Perspectives**

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# THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

## Historical Background

Bowen has been developing his family theory for more than twenty-five years. In the United States in the early 1950s, Murray Bowen, Nathan Ackerman, Virginia Satir, Don Jackson, and other pioneer family clinicians used a family perspective to examine and understand individual behavior. Bowen's early family research at the National Institutes of Mental Health focused on mother-child relationships in families with a schizophrenic child. To work more effectively with these families and to describe other family relationships and other patterns of behavior, Bowen articulated a series of concepts that represent the family as an emotional system, and schizophrenia as a family problem. Bowen postulates that these concepts describe emotional processes in all families rather than emotional processes peculiar to families in clinical populations.

## Data Sources

Large clinical populations have been used for the development and substantiation of these family concepts by both Bowen and myself, and additional data have been collected from the families of mental health professionals and of undergraduate, graduate, and medical students. Genealogical records have been used for longitudinal research on family interaction with smaller populations.

## **Theoretical assumptions**

1. Bowen's concepts describe emotional processes thought to have a strong influence on both human and animal behavior. Human beings are perceived as having an evolutionary heritage of primitive levels of functioning, which influence all kinds of behavior. Important examples of primitive behavior are the reflexive and reactive emotional responses between human beings, which are most visible in families and intimate relationships. The Bowen theory conceptualizes human behavior in a broad evolutionary context and assumes the existence of certain universals in human and animal behavior.

2. Bowen suggests that the intense emotional interdependency in families contributes toward making family interaction more

predictable than behavior in other groups or settings. Family interaction tends to crystallize in particular patterns through time, and these patterns are frequently repeated in several subsequent generations. When sufficient intergenerational data about a family are available, the degree of persistence in certain patterns of behavior or the intensity of system reactions to a disruption of established patterns of behavior and dependency can be estimated fairly accurately.

3. Families appear to exert a strong and compelling influence for the conformity of each member's behavior, but Bowen's theory suggests several benefits in resisting this pressure by changing functioning positions in the relationship systems.

## Basic Concepts

Eight major concepts have been developed from Bowen's initial conceptualization of a family unit as an "undifferentiated family ego mass." Bowen no longer uses the concept of undifferentiated family ego mass.

1. *Differentiation of self* Self may be thought of as both *solid self*,

which is nonnegotiable with others, and *pseudo-self*, which is negotiable with others. A more differentiated person behaves from a basis of a more fully integrated solid self and less pseudo-self than does a less differentiated person. It is extremely difficult for anyone to move up or down from a given level of differentiation. A lifetime of efforts to differentiate self may culminate in only slight changes in solid self. At the higher levels of differentiation, behavior is influenced by thinking and self-selected goals. At the lower levels of differentiation, behavior is more *automatic* and is largely controlled by emotions and the anxiety of the moment.

2. *Triangles*. The smallest relationship system in families and other social settings has three members rather than two. A triangle is the basic unit of interdependence and interaction in a family emotional system. When anxiety in a two-person relationship reaches a certain level, a third person is predictably drawn into the emotional field of the twosome. Where triangles in a family are not readily apparent, they remain dormant and can be activated at any time, particularly in a period of stress.

3. *Nuclear Family Emotional System*. The most intensely



interdependent part of a family is the nuclear group. Three mechanisms are used in most families to deal with the overload of anxiety that frequently amasses in the nuclear system. The adaptive mechanisms are marital conflict, dysfunction of a spouse, and projection to a child. Most families use a combination of all three mechanisms to dilute the unlivable intensity resulting from an overload of anxiety.

4. *Family Projection Process.* Parents stabilize their relationship with each other and lower the anxiety in their undifferentiated twosome by viewing a child as their shared “problem.” This overinvestment of feeling in a child frequently impairs the child’s capacity to function effectively in the family and other social settings.

5. *Emotional Cut-off.* In an attempt to deal with the fusion or lack of differentiation in their intimate relationships, family members or segments of the extended system may distance themselves from each other and become emotionally divorced. Cut-offs are particularly frequent between the parent and grandparent generations of a family. One direct consequence of emotional cut-off is the burdening of the nuclear system with an equivalent overinvestment of feelings and

expectations.

6. *multigenerational Transmission Process.* The strong tendency to repeat impairing patterns of emotional behavior in successive generations culminates in lowered levels of differentiation of self for certain members of the younger generations. Unless conscious efforts to modify these impaired patterns are made, such behavior is usually repeated automatically.

7. *Sibling Position.* Seniority and sex distribution among siblings in the same and related generations has a strong influence on behavior. A more differentiated individual is able to neutralize some of the programming for the typical expectations of that person's sibling position.

8. *Emotional Process in Society.* The strength of the emotional forces in society may make differentiation difficult or impossible. When togetherness forces in society are strong, anxiety is high and problem behavior is pervasive. Extreme behavior sequences, such as violence and destructive political leadership, are more likely to occur when the anxiety level of the emotional process in society is high than

when less anxiety exists in society.

## **Sociological Contributions**

1. Bowen's concepts suggest universals in human behavior that extend beyond the descriptive studies of family cultural variations characteristic of the field of sociology. His work is an attempt to show that human nature and human behavior are components of evolutionary processes rather than products of historical or cultural contingency.

2. Bowen's family concepts have a broader scope than role analyses. According to Bowen, behavior emanates from a self which is only partly influenced by wider cultural forces.

3. As any group can be considered an emotional system, Bowen's family theory can be applied to behavior in other social settings. It may be thought of as a middle-range theory, as the empirical context of this family paradigm is a limited social setting, which can be documented more easily and accurately than other concepts.

4. Bowen's concepts suggest prediction as well as description.

Although many of these predictions may remain substantively unverified for generations to come, some limited predictions can be made in individual families from accumulated case histories.

5. The Bowen theory indicates the possibility of viewing family dependency and patterns of family interaction as independent variables in research on human behavior. Although a division between independent and dependent variables may be artificial and overly simplistic, Bowen's concepts postulate that family dependency and patterns of family interaction play a more significant role in influencing all kinds of human behavior than is reflected in current sociological family research.

6. Bowen's view of the family as an emotionally interdependent unit suggests that change in one part of the system will bring about changes in related parts and ultimately of the whole. This sequence of changes does not necessarily culminate in a return to the original position of homeostasis. Under optimal conditions, a new level of functioning or differentiation for the entire family is created. Bowen's concepts articulate a specific theory of family change and imply a broader theory of social change.

7. The analogies and theoretical models Bowen uses to describe emotional processes are drawn from biology. Sociologists may criticize this orientation as “reductionist,” but a view of family as an ecological unit specifies the interrelatedness of all living phenomena more adequately than sociological models.

8. Bowen’s family theory extends and modifies Freud’s emphasis on instinctive behavior. Bowen attempts to describe systematically more socially expressed rudimentary behaviors, such as a human need for togetherness, than Freud did. Bowen also suggests the existence of collective automatic strivings for the survival of the human species rather than individual struggles.

9. Bowen defines some of the limits to changing individual behavior and patterns of family interaction. He is more concerned with possibilities and probabilities than with modes or norms of behavior; a preoccupation with the latter is typical of much of the sociological literature on family.

10. Bowen consistently maintains a view of a family as a multigenerational system. Longitudinal genealogical research on past

generations enhances his view and neutralizes the apparent sociological overemphasis on the importance of interaction in nuclear families.

## **Family Systems and Cross-Cultural Studies**

The Bowen family systems theory is sufficiently versatile to be particularly useful for international cross-cultural research. Its emphasis on universals in human behavior, biological analogies, and an evolutionary context allows for a wider variety of cultural applications and international comparisons than family theories based on cultural differentials and normative descriptions.

International research in family behavior has proliferated in recent years, and systematic syntheses of the different findings (Aldous and Hill 1967) are much needed. A large part of the existing family research describes cultural variations of family behavior without reference to explicitly articulated theory. The family systems theory may be viewed as a middle-range sociological theory. The systems concepts could be used to interpret or reinterpret family data already collected, as well as to provide an alternative orientation for

future international comparative studies.

Family systems theory is a beginning formulation of a general theory of emotional systems. A family system consists of human dependencies and emotional needs present in all societies at all times. Although it is extremely difficult to substantiate hypotheses that link specific family data to accurate indicators of evolutionary change, measurement problems do not nullify the significance and usefulness of these ideas for viewing family behavior. The emotional systems extension of the Bowen theory also suggests that it is possible to pinpoint common denominators of behavior in families and other social settings, as these characteristics are also present in all societies at all times.

## **History**

Bowen's family systems theory was developed within the discipline of psychiatry (1960, 1966, 1971a). As Bowen's theoretical orientation has relieved symptoms in families and has precipitated changes in functioning in families and in the wider society, however, his propositions might be utilized successfully in a variety of research

settings.

Some disadvantages of the family systems conceptualization may limit its general applicability to comparative international studies. The theory evolved in the post-World War II era in the United States from data largely drawn from white middle-class families. Such a sampling introduced a certain amount of bias and error into its formulations; however, the theory has since been operationalized in a large variety of clinical settings with a broad spectrum of different types of families. Many of the families in these clinical samples had international and intercultural backgrounds, as well as low socioeconomic status. Clinical findings indicate that there are distinct similarities in behavior and patterns of interdependency within and between the different national, cultural, and socioeconomic groups.

## **Theory**

Bowen's family systems theory consists of eight basic interlocking concepts. No single concept can be fully understood except in relation to the other seven concepts, and each has evolved in complex and distinct ways. The following discussion describes



selected meaning elements of concepts to pinpoint their applicability to international comparative studies. I will not discuss the difficulties involved in operationalizing the ideas, although this problem is inevitably a significant limiting influence in any overall evaluation of the usefulness of a family systems perspective.

*Differentiation of Self* a variety of behavior is described to represent degrees of emotional strength of self. These characteristic patterns can be delineated in any cultural setting. Functioning can indicate lower or higher levels of differentiation of self. When a self is less differentiated, behavior is largely emotionally responsive or reactive and shows little or no indication of being thought directed. When a self is more differentiated, behavior is goal directed, with a clear awareness of distinctions between thinking and feeling activities.

*Triangles.* Following the tradition of Georg Simmers “triadic” conceptualization of human behavior (Wolff 1950) and extending some of Theodore Caplow’s findings (1968), Bowen has defined the smallest relationship unit in a family as a triangle, or a three-person system. This relationship unit can be found in any family in any society. A triangle is a relatively stable group with shifting emotional

forces. The most uncomfortable participant in a dyad, or two-person system, predictably draws a third person into the twosome when sufficient stress occurs in the two-person relationship. This process creates a triangle in any family in any society.

*Nuclear Family Emotional System.* The inner core of a family, the two-generation group of parents and children, is the most intense emotionally interdependent part of a family. This degree of intensity exists in any nuclear family in any society. One family system has several nuclear families in its broader network. In nuclear systems where there is no clear differentiation of self between spouses, surplus anxiety must be absorbed. Mechanisms of adaptation that resolve these tensions include marital conflict, dysfunction of a spouse, and projection to one or more of the children. The surplus anxiety and mechanisms of adaptation are characteristic of all families in all societies. Many families use all three mechanisms to deal with an overload of tension.

*Family Projection Process.* The undifferentiation or fusion of parents can be projected to the most dependent child in a family. In some families there may be a projection to a dependent older person

in the family. This projection generally has less impairing consequences than projection to a child, as the latter's ability to function may gradually be affected. These impairing consequences can occur in any society. A family projection can be considered a scapegoating process in which one person is singled out as a family "problem." In reality, the problem is not localized in that person as much as in the entire relationship system of the family, especially in key members such as the parents.

*Emotional Cut-Off.* emotional divorces or estrangements in families reflect a high level of intensity. Emotional cut-offs also precipitate increased anxiety in surrounding relationships. These relationship tendencies exist in all families in all societies. Symptomatic behavior is most prevalent in families where there are many emotional cut-offs. Parents who have eliminated cutoffs with their parents are less likely to experience cut-offs with their children. Although much effort and courage is needed to contact a person who has cut off or has been cut off in a family, self can be strengthened by reestablishing such cut-off relationships.

*Multigenerational Transmission Process.* Repeated projection

processes through several generations in a family create an extended powerful emotional force, which eventually raises or lowers levels of differentiation in members of succeeding generations. This repetition and powerful influence exist between different generations of families in all societies. Genealogical data and observations of families over several generations provide evidence of a variety of repeated patterns of dependent behavior.

*Sibling Position.* Walter Toman (1972) generalized profiles of expected behavior from observations of different sibling positions. These expectations cross cultural boundaries and apply to all societies at all times. The probability of this typical sibling behavior occurring appears to depend largely on the level of anxiety in the family. Bowen emphasizes that sibling position behavior can also be greatly influenced by family projection.

*Emotional Process in Society.* emotional process in society represents a combination of the forces of togetherness (fusion) and individuation (differentiation). Any society manifests emotional process as a combination of these two forces. The level of anxiety in society influences how the emotional process is expressed. Emotional

process in society has an impact on each family member's behavior. The pervasiveness of particular patterns of family dependency also intensify or deintensify the general level of emotional process in society. Emotional process in society may be progressively adaptive or regressively maladaptive within the context of evolutionary change.

### **International Comparative Studies**

The following observations and propositions illustrate some of the implications of family systems for a synthesis of international comparative data from cross-cultural family research.

1. Families in any society can be conceptualized as emotional systems with a range of degrees of dependency. Family systems can be classified as relatively open or closed.

2. The degree of predictability of individual behavior in a family and in the wider society is greater if the family is relatively closed. Symptomatic and antisocial behavior is more characteristic of families with a closed relationship system.

3. Emotional processes perpetuated over several generations are

influential determinants of present behavior in a family. Specific patterns of behavior in a family tend to be repeated in different generations regardless of the extent of that family's exposure to different cultural influences through time.

4. The timing of major events such as deaths, births, migrations, or job changes has a significant impact on family behavior. Much human behavior can be described as responses to the timing of shifts in dependency in family emotional systems.

5. Individuals tend to behave according to the specific expectations for the sex and rank ascribed to them in their families of origin. Some of the observed variations in the behavior of members of a particular sex in the wider society are associated with the range of behavior patterns generated by the different distributions of sex and seniority in families. In general, males appear as emotionally dependent on females as females are on males.

6. Triangles have more predictable characteristics than other relationship systems. When triangles in a family are delineated, more accurate predictions of behavior can be made about behavior in that

family. Behavior in the wider society can also be predicted, to some extent, by examining the ways in which individuals participate in triangles in their own families, particularly in their families of origin.

7. An individual can be a self to the extent that he or she is aware of togetherness and individuating forces in the family and other social groups. Togetherness forces are more automatic and easier to delineate than differentiating forces. Differentiation of self is only possible when sustained conscious efforts are made. Efforts to differentiate self are more effective within the context of an individual's own family than in other social settings.

8. Most people have a moderate or mid-range level of differentiation. Each specific level of differentiation is a balancing point of togetherness and differentiation forces. Considerable changes in a person's level of differentiation are impossible. A significant move in a direction toward differentiation or toward togetherness is counteracted by the pull of the force not currently activated. Because of the intensity of the interdependence of these counterbalancing forces, it is extremely difficult to change an individual level of differentiation.

The family systems perspective implies that research on families is more useful if longitudinal data is used. Where multigenerational data has already been collected, interpretative analyses could pinpoint the frequency of transmission processes or other repeated patterns of emotionally dependent behavior. Although Bowen does not emphasize the influence of the broader social network on family behavior as much as do some other family researchers (Bott 1957), family systems concepts suggest some social policy directives and alternatives that could improve family functioning.

The systems perspective provides a new view of family problems currently described in conventional culture-based diagnostic or social-problem terms. Systems thinking crosses national boundaries in its specific applications by highlighting the emotional processes that enter into different varieties of traditional labeling.

A family is a prototype of emotional and social systems. International comparative research on families is epistemologically significant because of its potential for contributing to a fuller understanding of broader macrosociological forces within and between societies. Such research also provides more reliable empirical



indicators of evolutionary processes than research based on conventional concepts.

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