Bowen Family Systems Theory: Systems Thinking and the Emotional System

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Family Systems in Context

The family process movement is a blend of four streams of thought -- structural functionalism, inductive empiricism, what might loosely be called “family relations” and finally, general systems theory. Structural functionalism sets out to interpret society as a “body” wherein the structures interplay with each other to form a coherent whole. The “organs” of the body, namely norms, customs, traditions and institutions, as delineated by Herbert Spencer make up the social system of structural functionalism in basic terms. Functionalism was quite abstract and this led to the development of inductive empiricism which was the attempt to create a more positivist theory, as the name implies. The theorists behind inductive empiricism, writing in the 1970’s were mainly concerned with cause and effect approaches and linear explanations (Burr, Hill, Nye, & Reiss, 1979), and moved away from concepts distinctive to the systems approach in an effort to be more practical and practice-able. The “family relations” specialists were academics who sought to synthesize these streams (including general systems theory outlined in more detail below) into a somewhat integrated body of theory. These were general theorists who taught in academic departments such as Human Development and Family Relations and Family Science (Broderick, 1991, pp. 5-35).

Bowen Family Systems Theory or Bowen Theory (BT) is best understood as one of the major currents of Ludwig von Bertalanffy’s general systems theory, the fourth of the streams listed above. Bertalanffy sought to coordinate and categorize all social phenomena into a hierarchy or network of systems and create a universal systematization for the social sciences -- a “hard” science akin to biology. This ambitious project was not entirely successful, but Murray Bowen managed to create a
true general systems approach to individual and family therapy by taking a systems approach seriously and conceptualizing and treating the family as such. Bowen is careful to explain in his writings that BT is not a direct extrapolation of von Bertalanffy, but draws from research in evolution, biology, and natural systems. Bowen welcomed the comparison of his theories with general systems theory but was adamant that BT is not synonymous with general systems theory or intellectual descendents of it (Bowen, 1978, p. 359). His followers have reflected this same tendency to speak less of “general systems” and more of biology. Their writing is replete with references to protoplasm, the cerebral cortex, genetics, morphic resonance, cell division, etc.

Bowen was a psychiatrist who treated psychotic children. In 1954 he began a project that involved bringing the families of schizophrenic girls together into the therapeutic process. Involving families in this way was an unusual approach at the time and was not an accepted practice in the Freudian tradition. Bowen observed that seeing the families and addressing them as units expedited the recovery process and he began to adjust his practice and theory accordingly. His early breakthroughs involved observations of patterns and interlocking relationships in the families of the symptomatic patients. This led him to reevaluate the accepted individualized approach. Bowen recalls these early experiences:

The mothers were the active, decision making dominant family members who assumed roles of strength and adequacy. Both patients were helpless, irresponsible babies. Both fathers were weak, conforming, and devoted in the relationship to the mother. Both normal siblings appeared more mature than their years. The day to day clinical course, especially in the early months, was characterized by much disagreement, high emotion, defensiveness, blaming, and contradiction (Bowen, 1978, p. 13).
His curiosity about the similarities and emerging prototypes he was observing in the families spurred him on to continue the novel approach and then he began to see positive results in the process itself. After a year of therapy Bowen would make some preliminary conclusions:

The families are more comfortable and the anxieties are more understood and contained. Research observations are more complete and are considered more accurate. The observations made from watching and hearing a family member in relationship to his family is different than composite observations assembled from other sources. It is suggested that a family member is different when in relationship to family symbiotic attachments than in relationships with other figures. The meetings also provide a clearer picture of staff involvement with the families (Bowen, 1978, p. 14).

These early observations and experiences contain the seeds of what would become Bowen Theory, a perspective that appeals to a systems view of the world and to therapists who think in universals rather than in the “immediacy of symptom relief” (Friedman, p. 136). Bowen practitioners insist that BT is not essentially about families but about life, an extrapolation of natural systems in biology and unified field theory in physics. BT seeks to conceptualize therapeutic challenges as wholes rather than discreet parts. It attempts to reconcile dichotomous components as continuous and process oriented fields and treat the entire nuclear family as a unit of analysis. BT’s approach to psychoanalysis is generally distributed among eight core ideas, as Bowen himself described them (Bowen, 1978. pp. 285 – 320). I have consolidated these to four foundational concepts with consideration to all eight. The eight are differentiation, emotional system, multigenerational transmission, emotional triangle, nuclear family, family projection process, sibling position, and societal regression. Bowen later began to add a ninth, spirituality, but never fully developed it. Bowen’s followers sometimes
consolidate these eight into four or five general categories as well (Broderick, 1993; Freidman, 1991; Kerr & Bowen, 1988). The four foundational constructs are interdependent on each other and require an understanding of all of them to fully appreciate any one of them; they are: differentiation, emotional system, multigenerational transmission, and the emotional triangle.

Differentiation

Anxiety is often defined as fear without a specific foundation or vague angst. Anxiety tends to be chronic and according to Bowen less a matter of thinking and more a biological symptom that all life shares in common (Bowen, 1978, pp. 6 – 8). In other words it tends to be automatic and activated within a field, traveling within an emotional system, in fact defining an emotional system. Therefore, addressing anxiety is more about one’s awareness within a potentially toxic emotional environment and less about “fixing” or ameliorating the presenting content of the anxiety. This self-awareness and self-regulation is at the center of BT and described as the unique Bowenian concept of differentiation. If anxiety is a product of “stuck-togetherness” or “un-differentiated” individuals creating a field of infectious anxiety, the answer is not to “separate” or “cut-off” from the group, but to define one’s position, take personal responsibility, and react less to the reactivity of others while remaining connected to one’s relationships (ibid, p. 376 – 379). Bowen describes differentiation as a continuum or scale to emphasize the process-oriented nature of differentiation as a therapeutic principle, as opposed to a methodology or technique:
This scale is an effort to classify all levels of human functioning, from the lowest levels to the highest potential level, on a single dimension. In broad terms it would be similar to an emotional maturity scale, but it deals with factors that are different from “maturity” concepts...it has nothing to do with emotional health or illness of pathology. There are people low on the scale who keep their lives in emotional equilibrium with out psychological symptoms, and there are some higher on the scale who develop symptoms under severe stress...The greater the degree of undifferentiation (no-self), the greater the emotional fusion in to a common self with others. (undifferentiated ego mass) (Bowen, 1978. P. 472).

Bowen goes on to describe the implications of differentiation on the self and the pseudo-self:

The basic self is a definite quality illustrated by such “I position” stances as, “These are my beliefs and convictions. This is what I am, and who I am, and what I will do, or not do.” …The basic self is not negotiable in the relationship system in that it is not changed by coercion or pressure, or to gain approval, or enhance one’s stand with others...The pseudo-self, acquired under the influence of the relationship system, is negotiable in the relationship system (ibid, p. 473).

Differentiation, then, is the process of expanding what Bowen calls basic-self in contrast to the pseudo-self. The basic-self is not defined primarily by relationships, culture or one’s immediate circumstances but rather by principles, facts and thinking things through, as well as staying appropriately grounded relationally with primary people in one's life, especially one's family of origin. As one moves up the scale, one experience less anxiety and less symptomatic behavior. The purpose of the scale is not to create a form of achievement, “actualization,” or similar sounding ideals such as “individuation,” but to create a model for insights and modes of thinking that other models do not afford.

Differentiation is the only BT core concept that focuses on the individual as an individual, but the key to grasping its significance lies in the insight it provides to
understanding over and under-functioning individuals and the importance of remaining connected to relationships (while differentiating) and not simple withdrawing or cutting off. Differentiation demands that one define self, take clear positions, and hold one’s ground against the gravitational pull of the anxious group; the struggle against what Bowen theorists call “herding” (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). BT’s unique contribution as it relates to the concept of differentiation is that it encourages therapists, as well as family member clients, to consider their own level of differentiation in the therapeutic context. It deemphasizes the intrapsychic experience of the individual and spotlights the dynamics of the system so that the individual can forge a more powerful and life-giving role within the system. Differentiation shifts attention from the personality and dysfunction of individuals and empowers them through the recognition of their scripted roles within any given emotional system and their emotional effectiveness and responsiveness within it.

Emotional System

The terms nuclear family emotional system, extended family emotional system, and social system are used to describe the same emotional process in different ways, but the primary unit of observation is the nuclear family (Bowen, 1978, p. 203). In BT the nuclear family comprises the basic system for analysis and this concept entails the most distinctive “systems thinking” component of BT. In BT, emotions circulate through the system; they are not merely the psychic product of individuals. Emotional fusion begins in the marital relationship as described by Bowen:

There is a spectrum of ways spouses deal with fusion symptoms. The most universal mechanism is emotional distance from each other. It is present in
all marriages to some degree, and in a high percentage of marriages to a major degree. Other than the emotional distance, there are three major areas in which the amount of undifferentiation in the marriage comes to be manifested in symptoms. The three areas are marital conflict; sickness or dysfunction in one spouse; and projection of the problems to children (Bowen, 1978, p. 377).

Bowen is suggesting that symptoms in one member of the family affects all the others, easily moving from one to others; and that “self” is diminished through fusion with the family system resulting in anxiety becoming higher and cognitive clarity becoming lower. Intrinsic to this process is over-functioning/under-functioning reciprocity described by Bowen as the dynamic between the dominant and adaptive spouse: “The dominant one gains self at the expenses of the more adaptive one, who loses self…the one who functions for long periods of time in the adaptive position gradually loses the ability to function and make decisions for self” (Bowen, 1978, p. 377, 379). Although Bowen uses first the marriage relationship, then the nuclear family as the primary unit of analysis, anyone spending time together can form an emotional system and that is why BT may be applied to many contexts and social formations thus claiming universal applicability to many contexts (Friedman, 1999).

“Systems thinking” is at the heart of the concept of an emotional system. It is less important in BT to know the cultural and environmental background of family members; less vital to grasp gender or ethnic differences between individuals than understanding the emotional processes and the positions individuals occupy in the system. In this sense it clearly resists reductionism in favor of field theory or “morphic resonance” (Sheldrake, 1988, p. 135), the idea that previous structures of activity influence subsequent structures across space and time. The implications of this theory is that for
change-agents, whether they be family members, therapists, or organizational change agents, the crucial factor in facilitating positive change is not technical, managerial or administrative solutions, but emotional maturity or self-differentiation as defined by Bowen for individuals in strategic positions within the emotional system (Friedman, 1991, p. 147). It also implies that a family’s history is important and that a wider and deeper generational perspective is necessary to understand a family system.

Multigenerational Transmission

According to Bowen, levels of differentiation can be traced through the generations of a family and this process is useful for diagnosing patterns and structures of the larger family system. Bowen therapists build genograms and catalogue family issues such as longevity, health, reproductive history, divorce, death, educational level, mental illness, etc. According to Bowen:

If we follow the most impaired child through successive generations, we will see one line of descent producing individuals with lower and lower levels of differentiation. The process may go rapidly a few generations, remain static for a generation or so, and then speed up again (Bowen, 1978, p. 384).

Significant events may shed light on current conditions and dynamics in the family and may help bring perspective. The goal is not so much to “fix” these patterns or to “diagnose” the individual. Sometimes a larger perspective serves to diminish anxiety in the family and move less differentiated family members toward greater responsibility and self-awareness by enlarging their frame of reference. The goal is not to blame or displace responsibility, but to provide balance of perspective and de-personalize
emotional issues. As an example, Bowen explains the trauma of death and the opportunities a family has at this time to “integrate” and establish “equilibrium:”

The equilibrium of the unit is disturbed by either the addition of a new member of the loss of a member. The intensity of the emotional reaction is governed by the functioning level of emotional integration in the family at the time, or by the functional importance of the one who is added to the family or lost to the family…professional persons can help surviving relatives to achieve a better level of emotional functioning by calmly facing the anxiety of death (Bowen, 1978, p. 324, 335).

Bowen’s point is that symptoms are recycled through generations and that the illusory effect of the presenting problem often obfuscates the larger, significant dynamics within the family. The primary question is not what is presently occurring in the family or who is symptomatic at the moment, but what conditions have conspired at particular moments over time to create similar conditions that mirror current problems; and then how do families unlock and interpret their own unique stories together in more life-giving ways. BT seeks to understand the root system of a tree and not just the current state of fruitfulness or barrenness.

BT also seeks to add perspective through generational analysis by seeking to anticipate issues before they surface. For instance, a couple considering marriage might construct family genograms and consider the implications of their conjoined family histories. They are armed then, with a sense of their own generational landscape, its contours and unique “weather conditions.” This process does not make their eventual problems any less difficult, but does potentially provide insight for a strategy of pre-marital preparation as well as equip them with a less-inflammatory response to painful conflicts when they arise.
Emotional Triangles

The basic building block of the family, is, according to BT, the emotional triangle – either three persons or two persons and an issue. Natural systems suggest that triangles are another example of family systems which reflect natural phenomena (Kerr, 1981). Triangles are not more prevalent in one gender over another, one culture over another, or in one century over another, they are universal and observable. The triangling aspect of BT is a sub-category to the emotional system. It is discussed here and weighs in heavily in all BT texts because it is used as a unit of analysis in BT for clinical practice and used to diagnose and interpret the other three major components of Bowen Theory (Friedman, 1991, p. 150). The emotional triangle is a good example of how BT insists on the operational value of its principles to the therapist’s own differentiation in therapeutic practice. If a couple in therapy, for example, is allowed to create a triangle with their therapist and the therapist becomes caught up in the emotional processes of the couple, the effectiveness of the therapist is greatly reduced. In BT this “disinterested” state of the therapist is more than professional distance or objectivity, it is the key element of recovery for all symptomatic families as practiced by the therapist: self-definition, calm in the face of anxiety, and clear-headed and clearly communicated positions. Bowen explains:

I chose triangle in order to convey that this concept has specific meaning beyond that implied in triad. The theory states that the triangle, a three-person emotional configuration, is the molecule or the basic-building block of any emotional system, whether it is in the family or any other group. The triangle is
the smallest stable relationships system. A two-person system may be stable as long as it is calm, but when anxiety increases, it immediately involves the most vulnerable other person to become a triangle. When tension in the triangle is too great for the threesome, it involves others to become a series of interlocking triangles (Bowen, 1978, p. 373).

BT suggests a few basic questions to ask when addressing an emotional triangle: First, Where is the triangle? Second, What are the dynamics? If one is “triangled” how does one become more emotionally neutral while staying in touch with the other two participants? How does one “detriangle?” That is, how does one help the “other two” work through their anxiety without over-functioning or taking on the “electrical current” of their anxiety? And third, how may one become more aware of reactivity and anxiety in self so as to not exacerbate the situation? One cannot be an insightful observer either of one’s own triangle or another’s if self is not sufficiently regulated and differentiated. “Detriangling” is not so easy as simply cutting off from the triangle, for the “other two” will triangle with someone else. The task is to be in the system and differentiate while remaining connected. The emotional triangle concept emphasizes and conceptualizes the general BT principle that stress is positional rather than personal or quantitative. Additionally, the emotional triangle concept crystallizes in therapeutic and everyday practice the principle that the content of an issue is not as important as the system itself, the behavioral history of the system, or the differentiation of individuals in the system.

Observations and Critique

I have considered BT as a scholar and practitioner. I have found BT helpful in family and work situations. It has provided me with insights and leverage points relating
to conflicts and emotional dilemmas I’ve faced as a husband, father, pastor and consultant. As is true of systems thinking in general, BT does not provide “answers” as such, but perspective and a wider lens for observing emotional issues. This is significant of course, because emotional processes are the most difficult to analyze and discern correctly, especially when one is a participant in the system. Even in therapeutic or consulting relationships, it is very easy to become emotionally enmeshed in the system to the degree that one becomes significantly unable to provide help. In fact, it is in the most emotionally unstable environments that one is most apt to lose objectivity and yet the most important ones to remain differentiated within.

Conceptually and practically, I find a handful of problems with BT. First, I find Bowen difficult to read as he sometimes lapses into extended metaphor and esoteric explanations. I realize that this is a common characteristic of systems language but it often obscures, rather than elucidates, BT principles. He seems quite negative in his language about marriage. Granted, his discussions of marriage are always in the context of fusion and “undifferentiation,” and so he is almost always using the marital bond as a negative example, but it strikes me as a misplaced illustration of enmeshed relationships when he uses marriage as his exclusive negative example, at least in *Family Therapy* (1978).

He also employs sexist language throughout his writings, and this fact, coupled with his choice to use negative examples of “dominant” maternal figures in schizophrenic patients' families, adds to the impression that he is allowing some personal biases to color his observations. His writing is also replete with undocumented claims. For instance, “the fusion” between married couples with little clarification of
when this is functional or dysfunctional (Bowen, 1978, pp. 377 - 384) and a zero-sum explanation style (either dominant or adaptive, for instance) that is especially misplaced, in my view, within a systems perspective. Also inherent, I suppose, within a systems-based approach is an embedded weakness for overgeneralization, apparent to me in Bowen’s conclusions about the families involved in his schizophrenia research (ibid, p. 12 – 15).

Second, Bowen’s scale of differentiation potentially breaks down in practical use because it does not have an adequate reinforcing feedback loop or counterbalance. Is there any value or meaning to the “scale” if it is entirely a subjective determination? How does one know when one is adequately “differentiated?” How does one know if one is “differentiated” or merely cut-off? I concede that the power of the scale is to create additional ways of conceptualizing emotional systems that other models do not furnish, but without other models, BT could very quickly become circular in its reasoning.

Third, while I appreciate the value of objectivity over empathy that BT provides, it may under-emphasize the importance of feelings, especially if clients have different goals than the therapist, namely, to alleviate emotional trauma. This is not a criticism of the theory itself, but an observation of the tension that may develop between the immediate needs of the client and the process-orientation of the consultant. BT’s emphasis on the big picture, systems, genograms, triangles, and historical flow can become a real barrier to people looking for symptom relief. While I generally agree with the principles and perspectives of BT, I have also experienced the value of well-placed empathy and identification. I employ only slight exaggeration in saying that these
qualities of empathy, identification or God-forbid, *vicariousness*, are a little less than anathema in BT circles.

One final intuitive hypothesis I have is that BT is under-referenced by organization and leadership theorists. I suspect that this is because his ideas, although quite original and groundbreaking, are common-sense and generic-sounding once they have circulated through a few publications. This has been pointed out within the family process movement (Brown, 1999, p. 94) but I suspect it is prevalent in leadership and organization theory as well. I’m not implying any direct form of plagiarism, just an observation that BT may be a more common and established way of thinking in some circles than might be acknowledged. When the BT jargon is removed and the principles uncovered, I see the outlines of it in positive psychology (Seligman, 2002), popular leadership and organization literature such as Senge (1990) and Schein (1999); as well as significantly present in *appreciative inquiry* ideas (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005).

The greatest benefit derived from BT as it relates to emotional systems is the simple shift in focus it offers, especially when potentially new perspective comes in the heat of emotional confusion. “If one does not see himself as part of the system, his only options are either to get others to change or to withdraw. If one sees himself as part of the system, he has a new option: to stay in contact with others and change himself” (Kerr & Bowen, 1988, p. 272-273).
References


