

## **A BRIEF SUMMARY OF BOWEN FAMILY SYSTEMS THEORY**

**Patricia A. Comella, JD**

Bowen family systems theory is about the emotional functioning of the human species. The theory is grounded in known facts about human functioning and about the human species as part of life on Earth.

To date, major expositions of Bowen family systems theory have inextricably bound together the presentation of the theory in the therapeutic setting. This is natural as psychotherapy provided both the context and the laboratory in which Dr. Bowen developed the concepts of family systems theory.

As more becomes known about functioning and emotional process in the human and other species, however, it is clear that the theory has and will have applications other than the psychotherapeutic. For example, the theory is being applied to understanding the role of the emotions in the course of physical diseases such as cancer and psoriasis. It is being used to understand organizational behavior and functioning. It is likely to offer insights into the behavior of other species, and it had the potential for wide application in understanding the complex societal and institutional issues of our day.

Such applications involve disciplines other than those traditionally associated with psychotherapy. It becomes desirable, therefore, to develop a statement of Bowen family systems theory which is independent of a particular application. The summary which follows is an effort to develop such a statement. Depending on the application, the statement may be amplified and illustrated with examples and discussion appropriate to the application and the audiences to whom the discussion is directed.

Presently, Bowen family systems theory is comprised of eight concepts. Each concept has been added only after its factual basis has been established. The theory postulated that the human family is a multigenerational, natural, living system and that the emotional functioning of each member of the system affects the functioning of the other members in predictable ways.

An emotion is the automatic response of an organism to its environment, including others with whom the organism is in relationship. A natural, living system is one that is shaped by the selective forces of nature which affect whether and how the system survives from generation to generation. Each member of a natural, living system responds to these selective forces in basic, fundamental ways; that is, in emotional ways. Emotions may be transmitted between and among individuals who are members of the system and it is through this emotional process that each member of a natural living system may affect the functioning of other members of the system.

Emotions organize an individual's biology. One class of emotions is captured by the term anxiety. Anxiety is the response of an organism to a threat. The threat may be imminent, in which case the response is one of acute anxiety. The threat may be remote and may never even occur, in which case the response is one of chronic anxiety, extending over an indeterminate period of time. Anxiety, including chronic anxiety, constrains the range of responsive options available and in this manner limits functioning across the full range of responses.

Sometimes an emotion, especially anxiety, is so intense and sustained that it becomes impossible to contain it within the organism or within a two-person relationship. A third person is then brought into the relationship through the operation of emotional process. This process is described in the theory by the concept of triangles. The process may occur repeatedly through interlocking triangles.

The primary triangle of an individual is with the primary caretakers, usually the parents. The individual's basic patterns of emotional response are shaped in this triangle. There is a primary triangle between the parents of each of the offspring, as well as interlocking triangles among the members of this nuclear family emotional system.

The variation among individuals in their basic pattern of response is described by the concept of the scale of differentiation. Basic patterns of response within a nuclear family emotional system will show little variation among family members. The basic level of differentiation of the offspring will be largely shaped by the basic level of differentiation of the parents. The intensity of the basic responses is a function of the unresolved emotional

attachment of each of the parents to their own families of origin. This concept is described by the concept of the multigenerational emotional process. One implication of the multigenerational emotional process is that between any two generations, little variation in basic levels of differentiation is to be expected without unusual and unpredictable life circumstances.

Between the spouses, the unresolved emotional attachment will exhibit itself as emotional distance between the spouses, marital conflict, or underfunctioning in one spouse compensated by overfunctioning in the other spouse. These patterns of functioning are encompassed by the concept of the nuclear family emotional system.

The unresolved emotional attachment to the past generation may also take the form of transmission of the problem arising out of the unresolved attachment to the next generation. The family in which this occurs is said to be a child-focused family. When this occurs, the child who is the focus of the parent's anxiety will be less free of the multigenerational emotional process than his or her siblings. The concept, family projection process, describes this aspect of the nuclear family emotional process.

Siblings in a nuclear family emotional system occupy different functioning positions in the family according to their sex and birth order and according to the sex of the siblings who precede or follow them. The functioning position of the only child has unique aspects. These differences among siblings are encompassed by the concept of sibling position.

Individuals vary in their ability to separate themselves from the family of origin to begin their lives in the present generation and to begin the nuclear family out of which will come the next generation. The variation of ability to separate is related to the degree of unresolved emotional attachment to each of the parents in the family of origin. For example, some individuals may never leave their family of origin. Some individuals may break off contact with the families of origin altogether or maintain on superficial or sporadic contact. Others have the ability to remain in emotional contact with the family of origin while living out their lives in the present generation and rearing the next generation. The variation among individuals in accomplishing separation is encompassed by the concept of emotional cutoff.

Emotional process between and among individuals operates in all significant relationships. Thus, emotional process is not a phenomenon of the family alone, but a phenomenon of the larger society of which the family is a part. At different times and under different circumstances, emotional process at the societal level may be more or less intense and there may be periods of time during which societal emotional functioning is decreasing or increasing overall. These variations are described by the concept societal emotional process.

These eight concepts make up the theory today. As more facts about emotional process in the human species and about the human species as part of life on earth become known, the theory may change. Perhaps one day it even will be replaced by a new theory which is more accurate than the present theory.

Only when the automatic process is interrupted in some manner will the automatic outcome be changed. Out of this last implication come applications of the theory to achieve change.