The Bowen Family Theory and Its Uses

A Voluntaristic Model of Woman

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From *The Bowen Family Theory and Its Uses* by C. Margaret Hall

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A VOLUNTARISTIC MODEL OF WOMAN

Sociology as an academic discipline has been criticized on many different levels, including its views of women. In spite of a growing awareness of the implications and consequences of the persisting subordinate social position of women in society, sociology's efforts to reach a goal of transcending sex have been ineffective. Biases in substance and methodology have continued to make sociology a science of male society or a male science of society (Bernard 1973).

Owing to its emphasis on the strength of the influence of cultural factors on socialization, particularly on early socialization, sociological research has tended to ignore or even to deny the significance of the personal options available to men and women, minimal though the range of this freedom of choice may be. Many socialization research studies on sexual roles examine cultural influences on females without accounting for the existing diversity in responses to these influences and without indicating how individuals may neutralize the effects of the cultural influences (Weitzman 1972).

The sociological orientations that tend to overemphasize the impact of cultural influences do not tolerate an alternative or ultimate explanation of human behavior in psychological terms (Homans 1964). Perhaps a more accurate appraisal of the present situation in social science research is that we need a“recovery of persons” in sociology, especially in women’s studies (Lynd 1939). This refocusing would necessitate a radical shift in theoretical perspectives, so that woman could be found in the center of social studies (Fichter 1972), instead of being an empty statistic.

Unless such a reorientation comes into being, women’s studies are likely to continue biased and largely descriptive. In some respects, it is difficult to understand what has influenced the widely held view of woman and man as creatures and products of culture in Western history since World War II and the accompanying lack of interest in thinking of woman and man as creators and producers of culture (Fichter 1972).

Most existing research on women describes patterns of conformity rather than ways in which women deviate from norms (Epstein 1973, Heidensohn 1968). If sociological research is to be

action-oriented—that is, participating in social change processes—studies that extend beyond role descriptions and an examination of conformity pressures are essential.

The Bowen family theory can be applied to the position and behavior of women. Some of the concepts of Bowen's family systems theory appear particularly appropriate for an exploration and documentation of sexual role differences in human behavior, including an examination of the wide range of behavior of both sexes. The Bowen theory is used as a middle-range sociological theory to highlight specific interdependency aspects of the reference group and role behavior of women.

Woman as a Self

The Bowen family theory suggests that both women and man are emotionally dependent beings, who are essentially products of the intensity and complex interdependency of emotional field forces in their nuclear and extended families. Unlike many sociologists who suggest that women are intrinsically different from men in their normative behavior (Parsons and Bales 1955), Bowen emphasizes the

importance of similarities in the behavior between the sexes. He postulates that both men and women have equal emotional dependency needs; men can be as adaptive to women as women are to men. Only when women or men mature and behave with fewer emotional demands on others, is "liberation," or the achievement of some degree of freedom from family programming and cultural conditioning, likely to occur.

The efforts and processes an individual must initiate to become less emotionally dependent on others are described by Bowen as both challenging and anxiety-provoking. These moves also tend to produce tensions and stresses in the immediate family of the person who is trying to differentiate self. Both men and women experience similar kinds of negative emotional reactivity from close family members after they accomplish some degree of increased autonomy. The slow, tedious, and difficult route toward achieving a modicum of emotional maturity is thought to follow a fairly predictable sequence of events.

Voluntarism

The Bowen family theory suggests that it is prohibitively difficult

for an individual to differentiate self if that person has been consistently adaptive to a parent or spouse. Bowen postulates that only a slight degree of change of self is possible in a lifetime. Man or woman can merely become a little less emotionally dependent on each other as a consequence of sustained individual efforts to change self. An important underlying assumption is that although either man or woman may choose to change self, the range of options available to both is narrowly restricted by the emotional programming received in earlier years and by the programming and expectations that have been perpetuated in present relationship systems, especially in one's family of origin.

The restrictions on voluntarism in behavior are largely a product of patterns of behavior that have been repeated through several generations. The family systems perspective endorses the view that the grandmother-mother-daughter reference group has a greater degree of influence on a woman 's behavior (Epstein 1973, Toman 1972) than the grandfather-father-daughter influence (DeJong, Brawer and Robin 1971). Also, emotionally intense and closed family systems provide fewer possibilities for voluntarism in behavior than do less emotionally intense and more open family systems.

Voluntarism may be specifically defined as an individual's choice to be an " I," or to be that person's own self. Bowen states that voluntarism is necessarily limited by the push and pull of conformity forces or the togetherness of a group, and most particularly by the intense emotional togetherness of a family. Voluntarism is an integral part of the individuation (differentiation) force in a family—which can be considered as hared drive, or life-force (Bowen 1972). A self, or an " I," is an individual position or a balancing point between the two major forces of differentiation (individuation) and togetherness (fusion) in a family relationship network. The strength of the tension between these two forces makes it particularly difficult for individuals to change their functioning positions in a family and in the wider society.

When a woman attempts to strengthen her position of self in her family, other family members predictably resist her moves. Those who are emotionally closest to her try to draw her back into the shared togetherness they had at her former functioning level, and they eventually threaten certain consequences for her if she does not revert to former behavior. If the woman maintains her changed position of self in spite of the opposition from other family members and simultaneously stays in meaningful contact with them, she eventually

gains their respect and they automatically improve their own levels of functioning.

This fairly predictable sequence of events is illustrated by the case of a husband and wife who have a close togetherness until the wife begins to define herself in ways other than through her relationship with her husband. Her move away from the emotional closeness with her husband predictably provokes at least an initial negative reactiveness from him. The husband may even decide to leave or divorce his wife if she does not conform with his pressures to change back to her former self. If both spouses are able to both withstand the necessary emotional upheaval of the wife's change and sustain meaningful contact with each other throughout this difficult process of differentiation of self, there will be more tolerance and increased respect for each other in their relationship as well as more flexibility and elasticity.

Further Research

The large number of assumptions made and "taken for granted" about the behavior of women should be further questioned in a

systematic way. It may be more useful to expand interpersonal or behavioral research on women than to continue the already preponderant culture-focused research (Rubin 1968, Orden and Bradburn 1968, 1969). The Bowen family theory, with its emphasis on the significance of emotional interdependency in human behavior, generates hypotheses regarding influences in the interpersonal behavior of women and ultimately in their participation in events and activities in the wider society.

By conceptualizing woman primarily as a participant in a family emotional system, predictions can be formulated not only about the probability of particular behavior within the family but also about behavior in groups such as friendship and work systems. Moreover, longitudinal studies of patterns of interaction over several generations —for example, between grandmothers, mothers, and daughters in different families— appear to define continuing influences on behavior more clearly and more accurately than do studies that pinpoint only present cultural influences.

Woman is a person and not a robot. She has a choice of responses to cultural conditioning, although this choice may lie within a narrow

range of possibilities. Sociological research on women must move beyond the substantiation of theories of social and cultural determinism if research studies are to suggest new options for women and men and new directions for social change.

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