The Bowen Family Theory and Its Uses

One's Own Family of Origin

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The efforts described here are selected from six different contacts with my families of origin over a period of eighteen months. During five of these visits, I went to my parental home in England. For one visit, my mother came to the United States. This was her first visit to the United States, even though I had lived in the United States for more than ten years before her visit. I describe my families of origin before my attempts to differentiate self, focusing on the location of significant triangles and multigenerational transmission in my family. A chronology of family contacts made and a review of precipitating events for each family visit from May 1971 to august 1972 precedes a description of the six visits. Changes in self and in my family during the eighteen-month period are assessed, and some tentative conclusions and theoretical proposition are formulated.

I had been exposed to the Bowen family theory for several years before I tried to apply some of the systems concepts to my own position in my family. The research I describe here attempts to

replicate some of Bowen's work on differentiating a self in one's own family (1972). I was motivated, for personal reasons, to make organized efforts to free self in my family in this particular time period.

Before the six visits with my family of origin took place, I gave much thought to the particular kinds of family processes I had already observed in my family. Two major ideas from the Bowen theory guided my preparations:

1. An individual can differentiate self in a family more effectively at a time of slight unrest in the system.

2. After differentiating moves in one part of the family, there are automatic related changes in other parts if the person differentiating self simultaneously maintains emotional contact with other family members.

Some of the specific family systems concepts and strategies I used to increase the effectiveness of my efforts to differentiate self included the identification of significant triangles and multigenerational transmission in my family of origin; the construction of fairly specific plans before each visit; and an articulation of detriangling moves,

including multigenerational detriangling, and the creative use of reversals. An important assumption made at this time was that the outcome and effectiveness of my efforts to differentiate self in my family of origin would very much depend on the accuracy and comprehensiveness of my plans before and during the visits with my family.

Family of Origin

Location

For several generations, both my father's and my mother's families have lived in the same small industrial town in the north of England. I left England after my marriage in 1959 and have lived in the United States since 1962. The practical considerations and dramatic implications of this geographical separation are significant. Visits to England are necessarily limited, as they involve great financial sacrifice and much investment of effort. On the more positive side, my presence is usually welcomed by my family because of the infrequency of my appearance, and I am also usually given immediate audience when I choose to make contacts.

Significant Triangles

I am the only child of a father who was the only son and middle child of three children and of a mother who is the younger sister of a brother. My father ran a family business, which was started by his paternal grandfather and continued by his father. My father became deaf when he was a teenager.

Since the death of my mother's mother in 1963 and the death of my mother's brother in 1968, my maternal grandfather became an increasingly significant person in my family of origin. Although my maternal grandfather did not live with my parents, my mother or my father visited his home daily with food, laundry, and other personal items. My mother idealized her relationship with her father, which she frequently referred to with the names " Romeo" and "Juliet."

Several important triangles can be identified in my family of origin, such as those with the siblings of my parents or with my only cousin. I decided to focus on two triangles in which I am usually the outsider of an intense twosome. These two triangles were with my father and mother and with my mother and grandfather.

Multigenerational Transmission

An examination of five generations of my father's and mother's extended families indicates that there is an increasing tendency for both systems to "die out." Both families show less frequent marriage, less reproduction, and more deaths, including accidental deaths and suicides. I have only one cousin, who is in my father's family, and 132 I was the only grandchild of my maternal grandparents. from 1963 to 1969, there were eight deaths in these extended systems and only three births. In each family, there were at least three cutoffs between "close" relatives. These characteristics of my family of origin suggest rigidity and relative closure in the emotional system.

Events

Visit 1

May-June 1971 (nine days, with all three daughters): "Getting reacquainted." I had not been to my home in England for almost four years prior to this visit, and my visit in 1967 had also been made after an interval of four years. Although I had been in touch with my family by letter throughout this time, relationships had been considerably

strained and distant. This tension was partly the result of anxiety waves following the three deaths of my mother's mother, my father's sister, and my mother's brother and strains in my own nuclear family in the United States. As well as wanting to reestablish general contacts with my family of origin, I planned to follow up a visit my cousin had made to me in the United States in 1970. She had come to my home on her way to a visit with one of her friends after I had initiated contact with her by letter. This was a new exchange in our relationship; my cousin is nine years older and our respective families had played a part in our being separate from each other for most of our lives.

Visit 2

January 1972 (five days, alone): "A breakthrough visit." I reached what I thought was an impasse in the work I was doing by letter in my family of origin. I also wanted this visit to England to be an introduction to a first visit to my "cut-off' maternal grandfather's brother and his son, who live in Massachusetts. This great uncle left England in 1911, but because of an estrangement between him and my grandfather over the past sixty years, I had only recently learned of his presence in the United States.

Visit 3

April 1972 (five days, with my oldest and youngest daughters): "maintaining an T position." After a second visit to my great uncle in Massachusetts, I wanted to consolidate what I thought were differentiating moves of self in my earlier January visit to England. I wanted to put in action my decision not to "two-step" in my family of origin.

Visit 4

July 1972 (two weeks, with all three daughters): "My father's funeral." My father died suddenly of a first heart attack at the beginning of July at his place of business. My mother opposed my bringing my daughters with me for the funeral.

Visit 5

July 1972 (two weeks, alone): "My grandfather's funeral." My grandfather fell and had to be hospitalized on the day that my father's ashes were interred. He died from pneumonia sixteen days after my father's death.

Visit 6

August 1972 (four weeks, mother with me, my husband, and my three daughters): "My mother in the United States."

Neither of my parents had visited me in the United States during the ten-and-a-half years I had lived here. I wanted to improve my personal relationship with my mother and to introduce her to her uncle and her cousin in Massachusetts, who she had never met.

Observations

Visits 1, 2, and 3.

Visits 1 and 3 were necessary initiating and consolidating stages of my more specific efforts to differentiate a self in visit 2. Much of the uniqueness of these visits was the result of changes made in my relationship with my only cousin. Before her trip to the United States in 1970,I had not seen my cousin for twelve years. In January 1972, I met her two children, aged twenty-two and twenty years old, for the first time.

I created a "tempest in a teapot" by my letters before visit 2.

Messages included my anxiety about my nuclear family, a report on the health of different family members with "reversal" suggestions about how they might be cared for, and my observations on a "suspiciously" intimate relationship between the husband of my father's sister and my mother.

A working knowledge of triangles in my family emotional system gave way to fairly effective detriangling efforts. I made visit 2 to my parents' home alone. This was my first visit alone with my parents in fourteen years. For the first two hours of this visit, my parents voiced their "united" disapproval of my recent letters and ideas. Neither had wanted me to visit at this particular time, and so my very presence was a theme for argument. Both parents emphasized their distress at the "changes" in me. My mother accused me of taking drugs, and my father told me I was "crazy" like his younger sister. Some modifications of the emotional system of the two basic triangles in my family of origin seemed to follow the conflict that developed. After some efforts to change my part in the usual patterns of communication in these two triangles, the system became calmer and more "respectful" to my changed " I" position. My father and I had more personal exchanges than we had had in many years, perhaps in a

lifetime, and I went to his parents' grave with him at the end of this visit.

As well as the differentiating moves described, I made new contacts in the extended families of my parents during these visits. Each parent reacted emotionally to any new contact I made in the extended system, and triangles between myself, mother or father, and the person contacted were activated. I was able to detriangle myself from my relationship with the parent involved in each new triangle by diffusing some of the feelings that had previously been invested in me. I freed self, to some extent, by creating a situation where my parent would react to a significant other in the emotional system rather than directly to me.

Visits 4, 5, and 6.

Against my mother's wishes, I took all three of my daughters to my father's funeral. Owing to some of my detriangling efforts, I was able to participate in many different activities, often with my children, related to the death of my father without denying the reality of his death or evading this involvement. Although my father's only living

sister refused to come to my father's funeral, the increased contacts between family members seemed to open up my father's family system, at least during this period.

Visit 5 occurred when I learned that my grandfather had died while I was leaving England after visit 4. My children and I were the last people to see my grandfather alive, as he died at the same time that our plane left England. There were two days between visits 4 and 5.

My mother's family was also somewhat opened by the death of my grandfather. I met many members of my mother's family whom I had not known prior to my grandfather's death. Within sixteen days, my mother lost both her husband and her father, who had become increasingly significant to her since I left my parental home in 1955. This untimely and unwanted "gap" in her life moved my mother to accompany me to the United States for the first time ever and to my own home for the first time in twelve years.

Not one of visits 4, 5, or 6 was conflict-free, especially not in relation to my mother. Conflictual exchanges and disagreement

provided opportunities for me to establish a more solid " I" position with my mother and my family of origin. During visit 6, my mother met her uncle and her cousin in Massachusetts for the first time.

Throughout visit 6, there were many opportunities to communicate with my mother in mature and personal ways, and sometimes I was able to do so. My mother invested much feeling in her three granddaughters, especially in my youngest daughter. For the first time I allowed myself to feel the depth of my emotional attachment to my mother, and for the first time the relationship between my mother and my daughters came alive. Although these changes perhaps indicate some improvement in my functioning position in my family of origin, my greatest awareness was how much more sustained effort is needed to continue differentiating self effectively in my family of origin.

Changes

A precondition of any changes in self was the maintenance of continuous emotional contact with other family members when attempting to differentiate self. Apart from the structural changes in

my family of origin as a result of the deaths of my father and grandfather, the quality of emotional relationships in this system appears to have changed considerably. By increasing the number of personal contacts in the system, relationships between myself and other family members became more fluid and diffuse. My anxiety was reduced, and the anxiety in both my family of origin and my nuclear family was also lowered.

Throughout the year prior to my father's death, members of the extended system and community commented to me and to my mother on how much improved my father's health had seemed and on how he had appeared to be less anxious and worried. During the same period of time, there was a marked improvement in the health of some family members. The increased flexibility of relationships in my family of origin is also manifested by the tendency for more humor and less seriousness in the system. During visit 3, my mother commented that she could not remember a time she and my father had enjoyed themselves as much as they had during that visit with myself and two of my daughters.

There were also shifts in more extended parts of the system. For

example, my cousin's husband and both her children have been able to make career decisions that had previously proved too difficult for them to make.

Conclusions and Propositions

These six visits provide some data to support the hypothesis that a person can differentiate self more effectively in a time of slight unrest in a family than in a climate of congenial togetherness. Another hypothesis supported by data from these efforts is that after a person makes differentiating moves in one part of the system, there will be automatic and related changes in self and in other parts of the system if the person differentiating self is able to maintain emotional contact with other members of the system. A series of unrelated propositions include the following:

1. The effectiveness of differentiating moves depends on an adequate working knowledge of family systems concepts and the degree to which moves can be planned and predicted before actual encounters with family members.

2. Detriangling self is the achievement of an " I" position that is relatively outside the automatic emotional system.

Detriangling is a means to attain a comparatively calm level of self, to reach a level of relative objectivity, and to become a more responsible "I."

3. Gathering information about extended family creates a personal relationship with the person who gives the information and at the same time checks perceptions about different family members, thereby increasing the degree of objectivity of these observations.

4. Family members who are cut off from the family frequently supply markedly more and different information from those who are "in" the system.

5. Similarities in the thought and behavior patterns of family members both "in" and "out" of the system suggest that geographical and physical separation from the family does not necessarily imply emotional separation from the system.

6. With repeated efforts to differentiate self, one gains objectivity in viewing self and other family members. Levels of anxiety in the family, especially in response to differentiating moves, become increasingly predictable.

7. After the conflict and tension that necessarily accompany differentiation, the respect and appreciation of other family members for the differentiating efforts become more apparent.

These findings appear to endorse others' findings on factors that contribute toward or that limit the differentiation of self in one's family of origin. Perhaps additional common denominators will be identified among detailed case history data from many more families.

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