The Bowen Family Theory and Its Uses

The Eight Processes

C. Margaret Hall

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Differentiation of Self

Differentiation of self is a key concept in the Bowen family theory. Any given level of differentiation represents the extent to which a person is embedded in the emotional matrix that binds human beings together. An individual may have a relatively separate self, with a calm posture to others, or a“soluble” self in the emotional field, with intense and anxious bonds with others. Three important factors that influence differentiation are the degree of bonds with others, the level of anxiety in self and the relationship network, and the degree of emotional cut-off with others.

Bowen hypothesizes that any relaxation in efforts to be a self leads toward the obliteration of self. Anxiety in self and in the relationship system tends to annihilate self, as the more social and changing parts of self become increasingly soluble in the emotional matrix.

Bowen originally described the ranges of differentiation of self in terms of a scale with score from 0 to 100. However, this scale was merely a working hypothesis about various characteristics of human functioning, rather than a

precise ranking or tool of measurement. To avoid oversimplifying the complexities of any given situation, scores and intermediate numbers were not assigned to specific levels of differentiation. In recent years, Bowen has discontinued use of the scale and has focused more on the qualitative aspects of differentiation of self.

The terms *hard-core self* and *pseudo-self* may clarify some of the complex meaning elements of differentiation of self. Hard core self, or solid self, is nonnegotiable with others and is composed of an individual's firmest convictions and most integrated beliefs. Pseudo-self, by contrast, is negotiable with others. Pseudo-self consists of others' opinions absorbed as one's own without any personal conscious commitment to the beliefs and convictions underlying the opinions absorbed. The changes that occur through differentiation generally affect both hard-core self and pseudo-self. As a person becomes more differentiated, the importance of hard-core self increases and the influence of pseudo-self correspondingly decreases.

Although a few isolated indicators of differentiation can be operationalized in research settings (Winer 1971), it is not possible to make accurate day-to-day or week-to-week evaluations of all the complexities of differentiation. Wide shifts in the functioning of pseudo-self characterize those who are not well differentiated. Furthermore, the functioning of undifferentiated individuals vacillates considerably with small environmental

changes. On the other hand, it is possible to make fairly accurate estimates of general levels of differentiation from detailed information on family behavior during time spans of years or generations.

Summary descriptions of contrasting levels of differentiation serve as a guide to further research in this area. Less differentiated people live in a“feeling-controlled” world, in which their emotions and subjectivity dominate objective reasoning most of the time. These individuals do not distinguish feeling from fact, and their primary life goals revolve around relationship characteristics such as love, happiness, comfort, or security. More differentiated people make up a smaller proportion of the population. Such individuals have a fairly clearly defined autonomous self, or basic self, and a greater capacity for goal-directed activity. They can distinguish between feelings and objective reality more accurately than less differentiated individuals.

Differentiation of self describes a range of thinking, feeling, and emotional behavior. The life-style of a well-differentiated individual is clearly distinct from that of someone who is less well differentiated. People with contrasting levels of differentiation have such dissimilar life-styles that they do not choose each other for personal relationships.

The concept of differentiation of self is a product of systems thinking.

The range of behavior defined by differentiation eliminates any need for the conventional concept of "normal." The indicators of this process are not directly related to mental health, illness, or pathology, although there is some overlap between the conventional meaning elements of "emotional maturity" and those of differentiation of self. Although differentiation has social consequences, there is no direct correlation between differentiation and either intelligence or socioeconomic achievement. Higher levels of differentiation indicate responsible autonomous behavior rather than such attributes as occupational attainment or social class.

The level of an individual's differentiation represents that person's *basic* self. Basic self includes " I" position action statements such as the following: "These are my beliefs and convictions. This is what I am, who I am, and what I will and will not do." Basic self consists of integrated beliefs, convictions, and ideas—which can change from within and through new knowledge and experience. It is not negotiable in relationships and resists external coercion or pressure. Basic self is not changed merely to gain approval, enhance one's standing with others, or share beliefs with others.

A second level of self, which is related to hard-core basic self, is described as *pseudo-self* because of its fluid and shifting characteristics. Pseudo-self is amass of heterogeneous and frequently contradictory observations, beliefs, and principles that have been acquired in the context of

the prevailing emotions in an individual's relationship systems. The components of pseudo-self include what one thinks one is supposed to know and beliefs borrowed or accepted from others as a means of enhancing status. Unlike basic self, pseudo-self is negotiable with others in relationships.

Reflexive, or automatic, behavior in families moves toward undifferentiation or fusion with others. The condition of fusion is the "eclipse" of one self by another self or by a relationship system. When fusion occurs, an individual loses personal distinctive attributes and becomes lost or submerged in the characteristics of the other or the relationship system. Fusion takes place with either the loss of pseudo-self or the apparent loss of both basic self and pseudo-self. An undifferentiated person tends to manifest a greater degree of emotional fusion with others than a person who is more differentiated. The less self one has, the more one depends on a common self for direction and energy.

Fusion is an interaction process in both overcharged and undercharged relationships. Fusion generally reaches its greatest intensity in marriage. In the emotional closeness between spouses, two partial selfs fuse into a common self. Sometimes this degree of closeness is only tolerable if the spouses distance themselves from each other rather than operating as a combined self. The intensity of the resulting fusion largely depends on the spouses' differentiation before marriage.

Fusion takes place between any two or more individuals. Extreme fusion frequently occurs between a parent and child. The parent is emotionally dominant in the twosome with a child, functioning at the child's expense. In this process, the adaptive child gives up self and becomes submissive.

In his family theory, Bowen conceptualizes differentiation more clearly than he does fusion. He emphasizes the clinical importance and personal significance of differentiating self for each individual. A particular level of differentiation is considered a"balancing point" between the two major emotional thrusts of differentiation, or individuation, and fusion, or togetherness, in families and other social groups. As the level of differentiation increases, the discomfort and less effective functioning associated with fusion is partially resolved or relieved. However, much personal effort is necessary to increase differentiation of self.

Bowen suggests that a well-differentiated individual has more basic self and is less likely to fuse with others than a poorly differentiated individual. In contrast to differentiating processes, fusion is a spontaneous and automatic emotional response in a relationship setting. As many complex feelings are generated in a fused response, effective functioning by the individuals concerned is inhibited.

Research

Although differentiation is a general concept applicable to a large variety of groups, I refer to it only in the context of research on families. A family is considered a prototype of emotional system, as patterns of wide ranges of interpersonal behavior are more prevalent and more clearly delineated in families than in other social groups.

Bowen's concept of differentiation of self does not include reference points of "normal" or "abnormal." His distinctions between activities at thinking, feeling, and emotional levels suggest new dimensions of behavior for further research. Bowen's emphasis on the importance of observing and describing process in interaction highlights phenomena not usually accounted for in substantive descriptions. Behavior that demonstrates adequate or inadequate functioning, characteristics of contrasting levels of differentiation, can be used as a basis for comparing individuals and families. For example, functioning can be evaluated in terms of its contribution to adaptation, maladaptation, or extinction. Within this frame of reference, symptomatic functioning would eventually be disruptive to the development of a family, in that family needs for growth and change cannot be met.

One approach to estimating differentiation is an examination of individual and family functioning at times of crisis or during nodal events in a family's history. A*nodal* event is a significant change, such as a migration, that

brings with it many related changes. In retrospect, a nodal event appears as a turning point in the intergenerational history of a particular family. Patterns of interaction in these periods generally reflect important characteristics of the overall functioning of a family.

Nodal events also include birth, marriage, death, divorce, illness, institutionalization, and occupational change. These complex major shifts in a family's relationship network trigger automatic behavior patterns that may or may not be adaptive for the family undergoing these changes. Flexible responses, rather than rigid reactions, indicate higher levels of differentiation of self. Other influences on differentiation processes include sibling position, quality of multigenerational contacts, degree of isolation between family members, and level of intensity in the relationship system.

Assessments of basic self and pseudo-self also indicate specific levels of differentiation. If an individual's beliefs are integrated and clearly defined, behavior will be more differentiated than if beliefs are confused, contradictory, and rigidly narrow.

Therapeutic Considerations

The concept of differentiation of self makes it possible to examine people and relationship anxiety more objectively. This improved facility is important for the development of the discipline and clinical success of

psychotherapy. However, differentiation of self is a suggested goal of psychotherapy, rather than a diagnostic tool.

Although specific levels of differentiation cannot be precisely correlated with pathology, some generalizations about relationships between differentiation of self and symptomatic behavior are offered. Less differentiated individuals are more vulnerable to stress, and their recovery from symptoms is generally slow or impossible. However, less differentiated people do not necessarily manifest behavior symptoms when under stress, and they may keep their lives in emotional equilibrium fairly effectively. More differentiated individuals may also develop symptoms, especially when under severe stress. Unlike those who are less differentiated, more differentiated individuals are generally less vulnerable to stress and they tend to have comparatively rapid recoveries from any symptoms.

One goal of Bowen's family psychotherapy is to increase differentiation of self. As an individual becomes more differentiated, dysfunctional symptoms in individual behavior and in patterns of family interaction decrease. The general alleviation of stress and recovery from symptoms in a family are more effective when one family member becomes more differentiated.

Improved differentiation is an ideal goal of psychotherapy, rather than a

goal that can be easily achieved. It is frequently not possible for an individual to become more differentiated during a course of psychotherapy. The pervasive inability to change self may result from emotional symptoms that have become rigid and immovable through time or from lack of motivation.

When there is no unusual stress in a family, any small move toward differentiation will predictably be accompanied by pressures to return to patterns of former functioning. Much of the difficulty involved in becoming more differentiated is the opposition of the thrusts of individuation and togetherness, the two major forces in an emotional system. Togetherness inhibits individuation, and individuation inhibits togetherness.

Most of the problems dealt with in a clinical setting are related to fusion or loss of self. The feeling of being trapped in intimate relationships is characteristic of fusion. Coaching the adaptive or submissive individuals in a fusion to behave in more differentiated ways optimally culminates in their becoming more able to function autonomously. Differentiation is a complex combination of processes through which awareness of personal unique qualities and of the potential for growth and autonomy is increased.

At all stages of psychotherapy, a well-differentiated therapist is more effective than a therapist who easily becomes fused in ongoing relationships. In Bowen's view, therapeutic success results from a differentiated clinician's

ability to remain relatively outside the emotional field of the clinical setting. A well-differentiated therapist does not allow self to be draw n into a family's fusion. Any resolution of the intensity of this fusion generally occurs through the activation of latent relationships in the family, rather than through emotional involvement on the part of the therapist.

A primary goal of a family systems therapist is to maintain a differentiated " I" position despite any pressures to take sides on a particular family issue. The ability of a therapist to remain differentiated in a clinical setting depends on the quality of the therapist's own relationship between self and family of origin.

One's Own Family

Differentiation cannot occur in a vacuum. Differentiation describes a posture of direct meaningful emotional contact with one's family emotional system at the same time one is sufficiently outside the family fusion to be reasonably objective about self and others. Differentiation involves establishing personal relationships with extended family members and communicating with as many relatives in different generations as possible. To perceive self more objectively, an emotional "twin" in an earlier generation is identified through genealogical research. The discovery of someone in a similar functioning position and network of dependencies to self generally

clarifies one's view of emotional processes in living generations. The broadened perspective also facilitates objectivity about self.

Optimal conditions for differentiating self in one's own family usually include a certain degree of unrest, anxiety, or disequilibrium. If these conditions do not already exist, one may create or respond to a "tempest in a teapot" (Bowen 1972). When tension exists, a more effective and durable "I" position can be taken. Family members tend to pay more attention to a differentiating self and to hear that person more willingly during conditions of stress than of *peace-agree* togetherness. If anxiety increases, family members are more likely to accept and respect differentiating acts than if there is a rigid status quo in the relationship system. If the individual differentiating self is able to maintain the higher level of differentiation and remain in meaningful contact with other family members, those closest to the person differentiating self eventually function at higher levels of differentiation of self themselves owing to their dependency on that person.

Pervasive change in a family may follow the differentiation of self of a single family member. This broader change occurs only if the person differentiating self simultaneously maintains emotional contact with other family members and remains relatively outside the fusion and togetherness of the family. Becoming more differentiated generally enhances one's attractiveness in the view of other family members, and that individual

becomes more of a focus of interest. F or example, a differentiated person's company becomes more sought after, and that individual appears increasingly indispensable to the emotional system.

Characteristics of higher levels of differentiation of self include effective functioning, goal-directed activity, and responsible behavior. As basic self is defined, there is less of a tendency or a need to put self in the position of others. By not being overly responsible for others, a differentiated self is less inclined to be irresponsible. A differentiated self focuses on "I" and "owned" beliefs and convictions and refrains from telling others what to do. Rather than spending time and energy criticizing the shortcomings or solving the problems of others, differentiated individuals examine the extent to which their own acts are motivated by the pressure of others or by inner beliefs.

Differentiation in one's own family proceeds more effectively if one acts as a self in the primary triangle, or three-person relationship system, with one's parents. As individuation generally cannot be achieved directly with one's parents, three-person relationships that include a parent, a member of that parent's extended family, and oneself are activated. Differentiation results from activating emotionally significant relationships in one's family and remaining outside the various three-person systems.

People tend to marry those who have the same level of differentiation as

themselves. Also, children tend to maintain the same level of differentiation as their parents. Even though differentiation consists of a wide range of different processes and patterns of behavior, only slight changes in levels of differentiation of self are accomplished during two or three generations.

Triangles

The concept of triangles describes structural characteristics and emotional processes in relationship systems. The use Bowen makes of the terms *to triangle, to detriangle,* or *to be triangled* suggests some of the action dimensions of this concept. Triangles are considered *reflexive*, as they indicate relatively predictable emotional interdependencies and patterns of interaction in families.

Bowen's concept of triangles suggests a theoretical frame of reference for the observation of functioning patterns in families and emotional systems. This concept perhaps has more pragmatic and versatile applications and implications than other concepts in the Bowen family theory. For example, step-by-step descriptions of the functioning of the primary or parental triangle and related triangles in a family provide effective means for understanding the relationship system for psychotherapists, researchers, or family members. The nature of the distribution of flexible or rigid processes and relationships in triangles indicates overall patterns of functioning in

families or emotional systems.

A family is considered a complex network of interlocking three-person relationship systems. Each triangle is related to all triangles in the overall family system. The degree of overlap or interrelatedness of the triangles influences the emergence of chains or waves of reactivity in families. Emotional forces within and between triangles operate as predictably and as automatically as reflex behavior. The extent of reactivity depends on the degree of interdependence between members of a single triangle and related triangles. A change in one triangle in a family is accompanied by predictable changes in other triangles in the same family when members of the first triangle stay in contact with members of other triangles. Knowledge of the predictability of "chain reactions" in the relationship system can assist family members in modifying their positions.

A triangle is the basic molecule of a family or emotional system. In contrast to a triangle, a dyad, or two-person relationship, is inherently unstable and cannot maintain its existence through time. Under stress, a twosome draws a third party into its emotional field, and the two-person relationship then becomes a triangle. The new three-person system has a lower level of anxiety than the original twosome.

The intergenerational network of a family is characterized by specific

patterns of behavior. These regularities in interaction reflect the levels of functioning in each triangle of the family, and the patterns are crystallized over long periods. The behavior in each triangle reinforces the postures and levels of functioning of members.

Over short periods, emotional forces are observed to shift around triangles. These tensions appear in perpetual motion. Patterns and repetitions can be discerned only when interaction is observed over extensive periods. However, all triangles are emotional systems that are continually in motion. To the extent that some "focus points" of emotional forces in a family become consolidated, triangles also have relatively static qualities.

The meanings Bowen gives to the concept of triangles suggest the pervasive existence of predictable structures and processes in families and other emotional systems. Fairly accurate predictions can be formulated about moves that will be made within and between triangles when overall levels of tension in the triangles and in each member of the triangles are known. Similar patterns of triangling are found in all emotional systems. When differentiation is low and anxiety is high, the prediction of reactivity and symptoms in triangular interaction is easier to make and more accurate. Triangling is most visible in families, as these systems are highly charged with emotion and persist through time.

Functioning in triangles consists of fairly predictable sequences of events. When tension mounts in a twosome relationship, one person becomes more emotionally uncomfortable than the other and *triangles in* a third person. The first person may tell the second a story about a third. Storytelling relieves some of the tension between the first two parties and shifts it to the emotional field between the second and third. If tension arises in the outsider, that person's next predictable move is to form a twosome with one of the original parties, leaving the other original party an outsider.

The emotional forces within a triangle move from moment to moment and over long periods of time. This fluctuation is an essential characteristic of triangles and is manifested most clearly when triangles are active. A person who attempts to detriangle self in a family is in a more advantageous position for observing the triangular substructure in the family than if no moves are made.

When a triangle is calm, the relationships within consist of a comfortable twosome and an outsider. In these circumstances, the most preferred position is membership in the comfortable twosome. When a triangle is in a state of tension, the outside position is the most preferred.

The emotional forces operating in triangles are manifested most clearly as the members attempt to gain closeness with each other or to escape from

tension. Each move by a member of a triangle predictably requires a compensatory move by another member of the same triangle. This high degree of interrelated activity suggests a strong human need for closeness with others.

Although any triangle can be activated fairly easily, the circuits of a triangle can lie dormant for considerable periods. Also, the field forces of one triangle can become more active in a different triangular position in the same emotional system. For example, conflicts in one triangle may be "fought out" in related triangles. A particularly anxious family triangles in more and more outsiders. Neighbors, schools, police, clinics, and others participate in the family problem. The family reduces its anxiety by triangling members of the community into its emotional system. Family tension is consequently fought out largely by the outsiders, often within their own respective groups.

The relatively "fixed," or more predictable, characteristics of triangles are easier to operationalize than their more changeable characteristics. As positive and negative emotional forces constantly shift back and forth, ranges in patterns of behavior can be documented in related triangles. The complexity of triangle formation in a family increases as these forces shift. Primary and secondary triangles alternate in importance as they become activated in response to different issues.

A pervasive triangle pattern in families, especially in the United States, is a close emotional twosome between the mother and child, with the father in an outside position. The triangle between mother, father, and child is the basic primary triangle in most families and in general is highly charged with emotion. When a symbiotic closeness and dependency builds up between two members of this primary triangle, the probability that one of the twosome will develop symptomatic behavior increases.

The flexibility and versatility of the concept of triangles make it particularly useful for describing and defining patterns of interaction and change processes in a family. Unlike many conventional relationship concepts, the concept of triangles does not focus on intrapsychic phenomena. The meaning elements that describe triangles emphasize modifiable characteristics of dependency behavior. Any pattern of family interaction can be conceptualized in terms of triangles. As basic triangular configurations of emotional functioning in a family are delineated, the probability of being able to modify positions in this network increases. For example, conflict between two siblings can be viewed as a triangle between a mother and her two children, the mother having a different amount of emotional investment in each child. Conflict breaks out between the children who attempt to adjust the imbalance in their mother's emotional investment. This unproductive sequence of reactivity is changed most effectively if the mother is able to see the triangle forces operating and changes her own input to the two

relationships and the surrounding emotional system.

Detriangling self, or losing the emotional intensity of a fused twosome in a triangle, is synonymous with differentiating self. A well-differentiated family member is aware of multigenerational triangles and at the same time is able to remain relatively outside their strong emotional forces. A less differentiated family member is perpetually "caught up" in different triangles, especially in those that are multigenerational. One consequence of family triangles is an increasing tendency to automatically repeat previously established behavior patterns and symptoms. These continuing sequences appear in individual behavior or in shared patterns of behavior through several generations, and the patterns and symptoms are frequently intensified through time.

Family projection is a particular pattern of triangling found in a nuclear family. In this triangle, a"vulnerable" child is pulled into the anxious twosome of undifferentiated parents. Multigenerational transmission consists of repeated family projections or extensive intergenerational triangling. Sibling position can be a significant predisposing factor in these processes, as seniority and sex distribution frequently suggest which individuals are most likely to be triangled into the relationship network.

Research

The hypothesis that social interaction is essentially triangular rather than dyadic or linear, as is conventionally believed, is not new. Georg Simmel described properties and distinguishing characteristics of two- and three-person relationships as social systems in his writings as the turn of the century (Caplow 1968). However, the application of these principles of social interaction to families and emotional systems constitutes a new theoretical orientation and a new series of hypotheses.

Although Simmel first discussed triads or three-person relationship systems in 1890, social psychologists in the United States did not begin until the 1950s to experiment with different types of triadic interaction in a laboratory setting. Giving each person in a triad the letter *A, B,* or *C,* a triad is defined as asocial system containing the three relationships *AB, BC,* and *AC.* a triad is the only social group with an equal number of members and relationships.

Some contemporary experimentation with triadic relationships suggests that one of their most significant properties is the tendency to divide into a coalition of two members against the third. Particular coalitions in triads are fairly predictable if the relative power of the three members is known. Generalizations from research findings of the study of three-person relationship systems provide a basis for a“social geometry” (Caplow 1968).

Recent social psychological research on structural and dynamic aspects of triads is only indirectly related to Bowen's concept of triangles. Caplow and other researchers who examine triads differ from Bowen in that they do not account for ranges of emotional intensity and dependency in three-person relationships. For example, their much used concept of "power" does not adequately describe the full spectrum of complexities and nuances of emotional responsiveness and reactivity in family relationships. from the Bowen theory perspective of emotional systems, power more accurately represents specific aspects of relationships.

Research findings cannot yet provide accurate assessments of the influences that different groups have on their members or on society at large. Patterns of family interaction are not usually conceptualized as significant determinants of behavior in the social sciences, even though families manifest more emotional intensity and have more clearly identifiable patterns of behavior than do other groups. Bowen's concept of triangles provides a means for strengthening and clarifying some of the research dealing with family and group influences on individual and social behavior.

Therapeutic Considerations

A therapist is constantly subject to becoming a significant participant in the emotional system of those coached in the clinical setting. A Bowen family

therapist's primary goal is to remain detriangled from the family emotional field by not taking sides with individual family members in the ongoing therapy or during discussion of "ho t" issues. By refusing to take sides, a therapist can more effectively encourage the involvement of family members in triangles in their own family. The Bowen theory suggests viewing transference as triangling. The development of a transference attachment or emotional alliance between the therapist and a family member results in their becoming locked or triangled into their relationship with each other. This relationship rigidifies in the transference, and little action for self can be taken by either party.

An emotionally "freeing" move in a triangle that includes the therapist is to encourage increased involvement between the other two members of the triangle. This action enables the therapist to maintain an outside position in the triangle. The therapist can achieve this effect in a clinical setting by asking a "leading" question or by making a comment that precipitates emotional reactivity on the part of one or both members of that triangle. Detriangling is achieved by actively encouraging the engagement of the other two members in positive or negative feelings. As the emotional field between the twosome intensifies, the therapist, to maintain a detriangled position, must remain outside the interdependencies expressed.

Psychotherapy based on the Bowen theory consists of coaching one or

two family members to become increasingly aware of triangles in their families and to assume new functioning positions in relation to the triangles. A coached family member is given direct or indirect suggestions about how to detriangle self from “locked,” static triangles or from parts of the relationship network where members are “ paralyzed” in the family emotional field. Changes in self occur only very gradually and usually simultaneously with becoming more detriangled from the relationship system. Multigenerational detriangling consists of freeing moves made by family members in three different generations. Multigenerational detriangling is a particularly effective means of accomplishing change in self and in a family.

The Bowen therapy emphasizes the importance of an individual’s ability to objectively observe the primary emotional system and the part the individual plays in it. Once this ability is sufficiently developed, conscious control of the individual’s programmed reactiveness to the emotional system becomes possible. The degree of reactivity of behavior is largely a function of the intensity of the triangles concerned.

The observation and control of self are extremely difficult to accomplish. Observation and control are closely interrelated in that observation allows for increased control, and increased control allows for more accurate observation. As along-term consequence of the different moves a person makes, interaction in the entire family will gradually be

modified. The intensity of the interdependency of the triangular substructure of a family is a strong influence on the quality and extent of the "chain-reaction" throughout the system.

When the therapist's own responsiveness to emotional reactivity in the clinical setting is controlled, anxiety in the others present decreases. If the therapist is able to remain in emotional contact with those in the clinical setting, their functioning will improve. If the therapist cannot remain in emotional contact in the clinical setting, the others present will try to triangle in another person to decrease their anxiety. The ability to remain detriangled while in emotional contact with clients depends on the extent to which the therapist is detriangled and simultaneously in emotional contact with his or her own family of origin. When a therapist controls emotional involvement with others, those coached are also able to control their emotional involvement.

One's Own Family

One's level of differentiation in work and social systems depends on the degree to which one is both detriangled and in emotional contact with one's own family, particularly in relation to the primary triangle with parents. Only when major triangles in the family are identified can a posture relatively outside the emotional processes be achieved.

A working knowledge of the triangles in one's family suggests which personal contacts would be most productive for 70 establishing and improving the quality of person-to-person relationships in the family. It is frequently not possible to work directly on person-to-person relationships with significant family members such as parents. This difficulty may be aggravated conditions such as emotional resistance, "unavailability," institutionalization, or premature death. An alternative for changing the relationship between self and a key family member is to approach a family member who is emotionally close to the significant person concerned, such as the latter's parent or sibling. By establishing meaningful contact with someone who is emotionally important to the significant family member, a triangle is activated. This change in the emotional system modifies the relationship between self and the significant person who was contacted indirectly. The modification occurs when a triangle is activated between self, the person sought after for a personal relationship, and the one emotionally important to the person chosen for a personal relationship.

The activation of triangles and accompanying moves to detriangle self gradually opens an entire family system. Through these processes, a rigid emotional system with automatic reactive responses slowly becomes more flexible and has increasing numbers of meaningful emotional contacts between members. Although these changes may not be achieved in a single lifetime and certainly not in a short period of time, one can establish a

direction for self in one's family that optimally will contribute toward the increased differentiation of other family members.

A prerequisite for successful application of the concept of triangles is a knowledge of the strength of emotional forces and their interdependency in an emotional system. A change in one part of a family is predictably followed by changes in related parts of the same family owing to the complex interrelatedness of the triangles in the relationship system. Changes in one's position are effective and persist over time if one is able to maintain emotional contact with other family members throughout all efforts to make changes.

Nuclear Family Emotional System

Bowen's concept of nuclear family emotional system most closely approximates what is conventionally known as "the family" or "the nuclear family" in the United States today. To some extent, the meaning of nuclear family emotional system was articulated before Bowen's other family concepts. (In the early stages of theoretical development, Bowen used the term "undifferentiated family ego mass," rather than nuclear family emotional system.) The concept of nuclear family emotional system describes qualities of the emotional field between "inner- core" family members rather than processes throughout the intergenerational network. Several nuclear family

emotional systems can be identified within any given extended family.

The level of differentiation of self of spouses in a nuclear family largely determines the intensity of the triangles that make up that family's emotional system. When spouses are less differentiated, the intensity of relationships in the nuclear family system is greater than when spouses are more differentiated. The probability of certain kinds of behavior in nuclear family emotional systems also depends on complex stress factors and the overall level of anxiety in the families. Fairly accurate predictions about patterns of interaction can be made when there is intense emotional "stuck togetherness," or fusion, between spouses or between parent and child in a nuclear family. The intense fusion precipitates reactivity, and the tight interdependence between members of the nuclear family system restricts their behavior options.

Levels of differentiation of self in spouses' families of origin influence the degree of the spouses' emotional fusion in a nuclear family. The ways in which spouses handle undifferentiation largely determine the areas in which the fusion is absorbed by the nuclear system, and the kind of symptoms that are expressed in times of stress.

A nuclear family emotional system has three major mechanisms for dealing with an overload of anxiety between the spouses: marital conflict,

dysfunction of a spouse, and projection to one or more of the children. Most families resort to a combination of the three adaptive mechanisms. Symptoms surface most visibly when only one means is selected as an outlet for the surplus undifferentiation. Even when a major proportion of the anxiety is absorbed by one mechanism, a certain amount of "spill" of undifferentiation is generally absorbed by the other two mechanisms.

A family's ability to deal with the fusion in the nuclear emotional field largely depends on the level of differentiation of self of the most dominant person in the system. Marital conflict, which derives from excess fusion, usually develops when neither spouse will "give in" to the other. For example, the conflict may occur when an adaptive spouse refuses to continue giving in to a dominant spouse. Marital conflict is useful to the extent that it absorbs large quantities of the undifferentiation of spouses, thereby minimizing the probability of dysfunction of a spouse or projection to a child.

Spouses may also distance themselves from each other emotionally as an easier way of coping with a situation in which the two pseudo-selfs have fused into a common self. Unlike conflict between spouses, distance between spouses is not generally viewed as a behavior symptom. Either conflict or distance (or both conflict and distance) can develop into the dysfunction of one spouse. As fusion increases, one spouse gives up pseudo-self and the other gains a higher level of functioning self. The higher level of functioning of

one spouse in the fusion is thus bought at the expense of the functioning level of the adaptive spouse. These are the early stages of increased dysfunction of one spouse.

The degree of closeness and togetherness between spouses influences the extent of the more adaptive spouse's dysfunction in the nuclear family emotional system. The merger between spouses may suppress conflict and encourage increasing closeness. The dominant spouse, who gains self and does not become clinically symptomatic, is generally not aware of the problems of the adaptive one, who gives up self for the sake of the merger. Dysfunction of the adaptive spouse may include physical or emotional illness and social acting out such as alcoholism or promiscuity.

The habitual dysfunction of a spouse in a nuclear family emotional system is difficult to reverse. The dysfunction absorbs increasing amounts of undifferentiation in the spouses' relationship and encourages the fusion to perpetuate itself. The continued dysfunction of one spouse allows the other to gain strength and ascendency in the emotional exchanges between spouses. The dysfunction simultaneously inhibits the eruption of marital conflict and the projection of the undifferentiation to a child. If a projection of the parental fusion to a child occurs, it eventually results in dysfunction of the child.

A fundamental function of the nuclear family emotional system is the

absorption of the immaturity, or undifferentiation, of the spouses. The amount and intensity of the undifferentiation absorbed is fairly fluid and shifting. The absorption increases during periods of stress, and more symptoms are manifested at these times. Borrowing and trading pseudo-self among members of the same nuclear family emotional system increase when the fusion is intense.

The intensity of an extended family's emotional system is less than that of a related nuclear family. However, the emotional system of the extended family is the next most intense and significant relationship system after the nuclear family. The interdependency of these two emotional systems is so great that a changed emotional input to the extended family significantly modifies the intensity of nuclear relationships. For example, a spouse's increased contact with extended family generally culminates in increased differentiation. When an increase in differentiation occurs, there is less undifferentiation to be absorbed by the nuclear family emotional system, and a reduction of symptoms in those relationships frequently follows.

Research

The tasks of the scientific enterprise are most effectively accomplished when research efforts have a relatively restricted focus. A nuclear family emotional system is a more clearly defined area of research than a complex

social form such as a political movement. When the conditions examined are limited to a small but representative group in society, research objectives and methods become increasingly manageable and productive. A nuclear family emotional system may be conceptualized as a fairly predictable unit of social interaction. When this relationship system is intense, participating members are anxious and their behavior is more clearly patterned and predictable.

To expedite the accumulation of integrated and useful knowledge in the behavioral sciences, some delimitation of the infinite number of variables possible in any field of social interaction is necessary. To some extent, increased clarity has already been accomplished by adopting hypotheses as delimiting tools in research. If observations of facts are inductively related to hypotheses, the selection of social forms and processes to be examined is as crucial to the successful outcome of the research effort as the selection of a particular hypothesis. A working knowledge of a prototypical emotional system such as a nuclear family, which is fundamentally significant in many kinds of socialization processes, may be a more effective basis for collecting additional data and generating further productive hypotheses about human behavior than knowledge of less influential groups.

Nuclear family emotional system is, to some extent, a developmental concept. The term describes patterns of reciprocal behavior that originate with courtship and plans for marriage and continue more or less consistently

throughout a marriage or a lifetime. Past and current emotional relationships outside the immediate nuclear unit, such as those of the spouses of the nuclear family and their parents, are important precipitating factors in the development and persistence of patterns of behavior in the related nuclear family. Patterns of interaction in a nuclear system tend to be directly or inversely correlated with patterns of behavior previously established in the family of origin of one or both spouses.

Other indicators of the most significant processes in a nuclear family emotional system are patterns of behavior during the spouses' adjustment to each other before they have children. Patterns of behavior during crises in the relationship of spouses, such as births or deaths, further specify the range of intensity in a given nuclear family.

The nuclear family emotional system is an arena for many kinds of nodal events, or major turning points in microscopic evolutionary processes. The accumulation of data on nuclear family systems can contribute toward increasing knowledge of the perpetuation of society as well as of the procreation and care of its young. Scientific knowledge of processes within nuclear family emotional systems is useful for the description and prediction of human behavior in general. Although patterns of behavior in nuclear families are usually more visible and more extreme than are patterns of behavior in other social groups, similar tendencies can be delineated in all

emotional fields.

Case history study is one of the most effective research methods for examining nuclear family emotional systems. When this approach is used, data are collected from a fairly small number of families, and attention is focused on the delineation of indicators to represent the variety of qualities of relationships observed. A research tool that facilitates collection of this kind of data is a diagram illustrating the range of intensity of the emotional forces in a given nuclear family system. A graphic presentation of the basic data of a family network provides a reasonably clear view of the "systemness" of a nuclear emotional field and provides a context for delineating primary triangles in a family.

Patterns of emotional reactivity in a nuclear family suggest the location of pressure points. Pressure points are junctions in the emotional network where undifferentiation tends to be absorbed, either as a routine occurrence or during a crisis in a period of stress. When the flow of emotional forces and pressures has been delineated, some predictions about the outcome of specific inputs to the nuclear family can be made, and an individual family member can then choose a posture in relation to the system rather than allow self to be absorbed or dominated by the system. Such a choice and posture are possible only when patterns of interaction in a family system are known fairly well.

The study of nuclear family emotional systems is directly related to research on broader change processes. Although some details of typical patterns of emotional reactiveness and behavior in nuclear family emotional systems can be defined through survey techniques, large-scale cross-sectional analyses of emotional systems do not provide the same wealth of multidimensional data as do longitudinal case studies. Many survey findings are subject to a considerable "built-in" distortion of facts. This bias is frequently attributable to subjects' inaccurate reporting in response to impersonal written questionnaires.

Case history studies are usually conducted by means of a fairly long series of personal interviews. These continuing exchanges can provide much data about emotional processes. The data from case history studies can be double-checked in separate interviews, especially when the information requested is invested with feelings and several family members are questioned. Detailed historical data on past behavior in a nuclear family, which can be accumulated in several interviews, also appear more pertinent in terms of accurately representing an emotional field than information collected through surveys. By contrast, survey techniques generally provide a rather arbitrary and superficial series of indicators of interaction and at best merely suggest the presence of emotional processes.

Some research findings on nuclear family emotional systems indicate

that there is a direct correlation between the intensity of the systems and the specific structural characteristics of those nuclear families. For example, in the most intense nuclear systems, there may be a lack of procreation or a high incidence of premature death. An important question arising from the exploration of these kinds of correlations is: To what extent can nuclear family structures be changed by modifying the degree of intensity of emotional relationships in the system?

Therapeutic Considerations

Central concerns of the Bowen family therapy include a systems description of emotional malfunctioning and a meaningful selection of means to work toward a more differentiated level of self. A knowledge of the complex dependencies in a nuclear family emotional system is a reliable basis for specifying such therapeutic measures.

Although one family member may be singled out as a "patient," this person may not actually dysfunction or may not be undifferentiated. An "identified patient," as in the case of a child, is frequently not as emotionally impaired as those who identify the patient. It is more accurate to consider the whole family a"client" when dysfunctioning by a single member is reported. If the therapist views the entire family network as client or patient in a clinical context, the nuclear emotional system can be considered one of the most

representative units of the whole, thereby indicating tendencies in characteristic behavior patterns of the wider network.

The Bowen theory suggests a course of therapy where the person coached begins to learn how to identify triangles and how to detriangle self. Although detriangling may be more easily accomplished in the extended system than in the nuclear family, knowledge of the nuclear system is indispensable for ensuring the effectiveness of moves in the extended network. The immediacy and intensity of emotional forces in the nuclear family must be dealt with to some extent to arrive at some degree of objectivity regarding the whole family. For example, multigenerational transmission processes cannot be delineated until the emotional forces in member nuclear systems have been defined.

Knowledge of the nuclear family emotional system facilitates the measurement of change in a course of psychotherapy. This knowledge is also needed by a therapist for dealing with the impact of changes in a family. For example, members of a nuclear family may be so reactive to a person who is trying to differentiate self that they may appear to an uninformed observer to be preventing, rather than resisting, change. A firm stand for self is only possible when the person attempting differentiation has a working knowledge of the emotional forces in the nuclear family.

One's Own Family

Discerning the characteristics of the nuclear family system may be so difficult that an individual member of the nuclear group may not know what it means to be either "in" or "out" of this emotional field. The degree of intensity of the nuclear processes distorts many of the perceptions its members have of each other.

The strength of the feelings invested in the nuclear system facilitates differentiation of members of the nuclear group most effectively when many meaningful person-to-person relationships are established and maintained with members of the extended family. Objectivity about the nuclear group results from a knowledge of the perceptions and experiences of extended family members. If an individual achieves differentiation, deep-seated tendencies to accept the perceptions of emotionally significant other members in the nuclear system as one's own are counteracted. " Buying" others' perceptions is characteristic of the nuclear processes. This fused exchange occurs automatically unless conscious efforts are made to act for self.

When relating to extended family members, emotional contact with members of the nuclear family should optimally be maintained at all times. Changes in the nuclear family occur following differentiating moves in the extended system to the extent that contact between the nuclear and extended

systems is maintained.

An exploration of trends and patterns in births, marriages, deaths, and other nodal events in previous generations and in other nuclear systems in one's family adds significant dimensions to knowledge of the emotional forces in one's immediate nuclear system. The structure of past generations provides indicators of the pervasiveness and intensity of the family emotional processes, and a more objective view of repeated patterns of behavior and symptoms becomes possible. For example, sibling position can be considered the product of the emotional processes in a family as well as a particular structural characteristic of a family. Rank ordering and sex distribution of siblings do not appear to be as random as is conventionally believed.

Differentiation of self in one's family of origin is frequently facilitated by the greater degree of emotional and geographical distance that exists between members of the family of origin than between members of the nuclear system. By diluting the intensity of the emotional processes in the nuclear field, the emotional engagement made with members of one's family of origin automatically opens up the nuclear system. The investment of feelings in an increasing number of meaningful relationships in the extended emotional field draws emotional investment out of the nuclear group. Whatever moves one makes in one's extended family, differentiation of self in the nuclear system remains a high priority.

Family Projection Process

Family projection process is closely related to the concept of nuclear family emotional system. Family projection describes an important pattern of interaction that appears in many nuclear families. The "surfacing" and visibility of family projection within a nuclear family does not mean that the projection derives solely from this group. The emotional forces that precipitate projection are an integral part of the entire family system. A sequence of projections in different generations of the same family influences the extended family as well as a particular nuclear unit.

Family projection is a mechanism for dealing with surplus undifferentiation in a nuclear family emotional system. Family projection become symptomatic when the level of differentiation of spouses is low and the resulting need for absorption of undifferentiation is high. The differentiation level of each spouse is a precondition of the degree of fusion in their relationship and the amount of undifferentiation in the nuclear family that must be absorbed. The intensity of a projection process increases when anxiety in a family is high.

The ways in which spouses routinely handle fusion in their relationship stabilize patterns of behavior, especially in the specific areas where undifferentiation is absorbed and symptoms appear under stress. Projection to one or more children, marital conflict, and dysfunction of a spouse are

areas in a nuclear family where symptoms may be manifested. Most families deal with undifferentiation in a combination of ways. Family projection is most frequently accompanied by some marital conflict and some dysfunction of a spouse.

Family projection is a mechanism through which parents transmit a substantial amount of their own emotional immaturity to a child. Immaturity is a component of the undifferentiation of fusion of the parents who use this adaptive mechanism. The most pervasive pattern of projection in families in the United States is close bonding between mother and child, with the father supporting the mother's overinvolvement. In the closely interdependent twosomes between mother and child, the mother generally overfunctions and her child reacts by underfunctioning. The mother is able to reduce her own high level of anxiety by focusing it on her child, seeing her child as a problem or in need of her help and protection.

Among the many complex factors which influence the selection of a particular child for projection are the sibling positions of parents and the intensity of the parents' dependency on their parents. Traumatic events during a pregnancy or soon after the birth of a child and the distribution of highly charged or emotionally invested relationships in a family also influence which child will be singled out for the projection process.

One of the most critical family events that influences the selection of a particular child for projection is the death of a key family member. If a birth occurs soon after the death of a close family member such as a parent, an older sibling, or a grandparent, the newborn child is more likely to become a focus of family projection than if no death had occurred at that time. Family projection may also be precipitated by other emotionally significant losses in a family, such as divorce, geographical separation, or institutionalization.

The child most trapped by a family projection is the one who is most emotionally attached to the parents. This involvement may be either an overt closeness or an intense repulsion. The recipient of the family projection eventually becomes less differentiated than the parents, largely because of an emotional response to being caught in the parental emotional field. The intensely dependent relationships between parents and between parents and child prevent the child from being able to take a differentiating posture in relation to either or both parents. Such dependent relationships are reinforced and perpetuated through the projection process. The focused child is inextricably triangled in the fused togetherness of the parents.

A child who grows up outside the projection can become more differentiated than either the child who is the object of projection or the parents. It is easier to become more differentiated outside a family projection, as the degree of objectivity necessary for differentiating moves generally

cannot be attained by the principal recipient of projection.

Research

If the intensity of a family projection and the levels of differentiation of parents are measured fairly accurately, the differentiation of the children can tentatively be predicted, especially where a child is clearly focused by the family projection. To the extent that family projection represents the most intense emotional interdependency possible between parents and a child, it must be considered one of the most significant influences on behavior in a nuclear family. Although a family projection can be directed to an older relative or to a member of the extended family, the process is most frequently and most visibly generated from parents to a child. A child is usually more vulnerable to these emotional forces than other family members, as a child is, of necessity, extremely dependent on the parents.

The most critical determinants of the potency of a family projection are the level of undifferentiation between parents, which must be absorbed by the nuclear family, and the level of anxiety in that system. Other significant influences include the amounts of marital conflict and dysfunction of spouses in a nuclear family. To describe how a family projection eventually manifests itself, some assessment must also be made of the varying degrees of vulnerability to the projection of each child in a nuclear family. Whether or

not a child becomes the object of a projection depends on factors such as the child's functioning sibling position, established patterns of behavior in the nuclear and extended systems, and crises or nodal events in the family relationships.

Clinical data substantiate the proposition that the child who receives the most emotional investment from parents becomes the "victim" or object of the family projection. Oldest, youngest, and only children are frequently recipients of family projections, although children who function in those roles are perhaps more vulnerable to projection than are children chronologically in those positions. Seniority is not as strong an influence as the nature of the active dependencies in the family relationship system. In contrast to extreme or symptomatic family projection processes, "healthy" projection meets a child's real needs and does not go beyond them.

Although many complex variables influence projection, the scope of scientific research on these processes is fairly clearly defined. The sampling universe that best illustrates projection is a family. Within the family, the differentiation and fusion of grandparents, parents, and children are assessed and patterns of emotional reactions and responses are examined. A proposition of the Bowen theory is that in families where there is little evidence of marital conflict and dysfunction of a spouse, projection to a child is fairly predictable.

To have a comprehensive and objective view of family interaction, the scientific description and prediction of projection within nuclear families should be accompanied by the description of patterns of emotional behavior in related extended families. These wider influences contribute directly to the maintenance and persistence of family projection over several generations. A broadly based study of this kind may indicate the ways in which the forces leading to and maintaining a projection are related to characteristics of a particular nuclear family, its extended network, or both systems. A detailed examination of family projection may shed light on the complex issue of the nature of the interdependency between nuclear and extended family systems.

Family projection is a sufficiently versatile concept to generate several hypotheses for different kinds of applied research. Further examination of this particular aspect of the interdependencies in a nuclear family emotional system might contribute toward a fuller understanding of some of the problems identified by families and society.

Formal research studies of family projection are more productive if they are longitudinal in design and multigenerational in scope. Descriptions of family projection at one point in time and within a fragment of a family network are inadequate, as they are not representative of the whole system. In addition to maintaining a broad perspective, the projection process in terms of a particular child should be studied.

A family where a child is clearly focused by projection is frequently so stable that it may be described as unchangeable. The pervasiveness of this pattern of family interaction has several implications for society. A child who is object of a family projection is more likely to have behavior symptoms or to be viewed as delinquent than is a child who is outside a projection. As society must ultimately be concerned with the effectiveness and meaningfulness of its interpersonal relationships and with its overall ability to meet group needs, research hypotheses that examine the consequences of projection for a family and for society might suggest practical measures or preventive strategies to deal with the impairing processes.

Closely related to how a child is selected by a family projection and how a family projection operates is the question of what contributes to a nuclear family's selection of projection to absorb undifferentiation or fusion rather than the alternative mechanisms of marital conflict or dysfunction of a spouse. In general, either marital conflict or dysfunction of a spouse presents fewer long-range problems for families and society than does projection. If patterns of behavior leading to the selection of a child for projection and family projection processes themselves are described more accurately, people's ability to avoid or neutralize projection may be increased.

Therapeutic Considerations

Family projection is a strong influence on the development of various forms of emotional disorders and symptomatic behavior. Much psychotherapy is an attempt to deal with the consequences of this powerful mechanism. Even if nuclear families stabilize their dependencies through marital conflict or dysfunction of a spouse, the latter may have resulted from family projection in the families of origin of either or both spouses.

A primary goal in psychotherapy is to relieve family members of the intensity and destructive effects of projection processes. A reduction of projection is a prerequisite of increased responsible behavior by key family members as well as of the alleviation of symptoms.

When family projection processes are active, one family member is singled out as a“patient” or a“problem” by those who are in strategic positions in the emotional system. A therapist or coach who works with families that have a child-focus, for example, may present alternative perceptions of the focused child to the other family members to encourage increased objectivity about the family system. If these members are able to direct their attention to the complexities and intricacies in the broader emotional network, the family “fix” on one person’s behavior or on one problem may be loosened. Families with projection to one child are among the most difficult to change through psychotherapy.

Only when a parent of a child who is caught in a family projection becomes aware of some of the emotional processes involved can a first step be taken to defocus and free the child. An increase in the differentiation or functioning of one of the parents decreases the fusion between spouses that had previously been absorbed by the projection. Where there is less change in a spouse's behavior, there is no change in the projection or merely a shift in the symptoms of the projection. When a child is no longer an exclusive focus of a projection, increased marital conflict or increased dysfunction of one of the parents may occur. Although a shift in symptoms may or may not precede more permanent changes, shifting symptoms suggest less serious impairment than conditions where there is no movement of symptoms either during or following psychotherapy.

One's Own Family

Projection in one's own family may be so difficult to observe with any degree of objectivity that family members may consider such processes nonexistent until a focused child behaves symptomatically. One's position in relation to projection in one's nuclear family cannot be modified, however, until projection in one's family of origin and, to a certain extent, in the family of origin of one's spouse, is identified. Delineating projection in these contexts and taking a differentiated posture in relation to the processes precipitates changes in one's family of origin, one's spouse's family of origin, and

eventually in one's nuclear family if emotional contact with these systems is maintained.

One's family of origin may provide clearer evidence of projection than one's nuclear family. It is generally easier to assess which of one's siblings has had the most symptoms over a time span of many years than to evaluate the behavior of one's own children. Indicators of adequate functioning include academic and occupational achievement, physical and emotional health, and marriage and procreation. The extent of projection in one's family of origin can be partially estimated by comparing projection symptoms with characteristics of the marital conflict between one's parents and the degree of dysfunction of one or both of them. An assessment of the potency of projection includes an examination of patterns of behavior when symptoms are manifested, a delineation of precipitating factors in symptom development, and the observation of conditions of the termination or regulation of symptoms.

It is easier to delineate details of projection behavior in one's family of origin by focusing on relationships in the periphery of that system than by examining only the central nuclear family. Members in this outer network include grandparents and relatives in the grandparent and earlier generations. The lessened degree of emotional involvement with more removed family members enables more accurate observation of behavior in

these relationship systems. Public records of births, marriages, and deaths can provide at least minimum information for a reconstruction of projection processes in the past if substantial data on previous generations is not available through personal contacts. In some respects, a reconstruction from public records may be more representative and more reliable than use of data that has been filtered through the perceptions and memories of living family members in the nuclear and extended emotional fields.

Data from public records indicate extreme manifestations of family projection more clearly than milder varieties of projection. Some of the more acute projections suggested by public records include early death, no marriage, no procreation, and conception or birth before marriage. The more detailed information that appears on public records in the last few decades, such as data on occupations or migrations, permits clearer and more accurate descriptions of projection.

Emotional Cut-Off

The concept of emotional cut-off describes extreme cases of distancing between family members. High levels of anxiety in self and in the family relationship system are preconditions for the development of emotional cut-offs. Increases in anxiety or the perpetuation of the same degree of anxiety reinforce existing cut-offs and predispose the system to develop new cut-offs.

Emotional cut-off may be used as a means of dealing with fusion in intimate relationships. Each person who participates in an emotional cut-off plays apart in the complex estranging processes. Although each party has a strong need for the other, neither is able to handle that need effectively. Going away from each other emotionally and perhaps geographically is chosen as the easiest and most effective way to deal with the intensity and demands of the interdependency.

The existence of many cut-offs in a family's emotional system indicates a high level of anxiety. A considerable number of emotional cut-offs is associated with symptomatic behavior, illness, and premature deaths. In families where anxiety is low, there are few cut-offs in important relationships and between nuclear and extended parts of the family. Families with few cutoffs have few symptoms and only minor disabilities.

Although several reasons are usually given for an emotional cut-off in a family, such as geographical migration, these tend to be rationalizations for anxious reactions rather than accurate descriptions of existing conditions. Moreover, single incidents tend to be inappropriately cited as significant factors in precipitating emotional cut-offs. In reality, estrangements take long periods of time to develop, perhaps several generations.

Although it is difficult to measure the intensity of an emotional cut-off,

the duration of a cut-off is an indicator of the investment of feelings each party has in continuing the repulsion. When anxiety is high in a family relationship, the probability that a cut-off will occur or will be perpetuated increases. These conditions may be inevitable unless one of the parties involved makes conscious efforts to reverse the interactive estranging processes. If one is able to bridge cut-offs in one's own family, there will be significant benefits for self and others throughout the entire relationship system. Bridging a cut-off is a differentiating move to the extent that emotional contact is maintained with other family members as the cut-off is bridged.

People find many ways to cut off from each other. A close examination of the triangular substructure of the family relationship system facilitates the prediction of cut-offs and contributes toward describing cut-offs that have already occurred.

The pervasiveness of loneliness and misunderstandings between members of different generations in contemporary society suggests high frequencies of emotional cut-offs in families and other relationship systems. Although loneliness and distance between generations have always existed to some extent, these phenomena have reached problem dimensions in contemporary society.

Before social and geographical mobility were possible for large numbers of people, cut-offs appear to have been largely handled by intrapsychic and somatic mechanisms, such as withdrawal, sickness, or accidents. Although it is difficult to determine precisely what part self plays in a cut-off, a cut-off is more than a defense mechanism for an individual. Emotional cut-offs have implications for others beyond a single individual's withdrawal from an anxiety-laden relationship.

Emotional cut-offs in families have intergenerational consequences. One of the more predictable and more visible outcomes is that when a parent generation cuts off from the grandparent generation, there is a strong likelihood that the children of these parents will also cut off. Hypothetically, the more an individual cuts off from the family of origin, the more that person's children are likely to cut off relationships in the future. A cut-off from the parent generation is frequently justified as making a break from a difficult past for the sake of living in a more ideal present. However, such reasoning is an emotional reaction to the anxiety in the relationships that have been cut off.

The ultimate emotional cut-off is death. Premature and accidental death are ways in which a person or a family may deal with overload anxiety. One possible sequence of events is that intense emotional cut-offs are followed by symptomatic behavior and premature death. Although this pattern of events

is crude and extreme, its outlines are manifested to some extent in a variety of families. It is possible to make some moves toward closing a cut-off between a dead person and self. These moves consist of contacting persons who were close to the cut-off deceased family member and trying to piece together the life- history of the deceased individual.

As with other Bowen family concepts, emotional cut-off can be considered scientific in terms of its predictive capacity. Some of the more predictable sequences of behavior related to emotional cut-off include the following:

1. Where anxiety is high in a family, there is a high frequency of intense cut-offs.

2. When a cut-off is bridged in a family and emotional contact with family members is maintained, the probability of effective differentiation increases.

3. When cut-offs exist between parent and grandparent generations, a cut-off between parents and children in the next generation is more likely to develop, especially when the children are old enough to leave their parental home.

4. As emotional cut-off is not a constructively adaptive means of dealing with fusion and intimate relationships, cutoffs may be followed by symptomatic behaviors, including premature death.

5. The degree of cut-off in a relationship is an indicator of the degree of fusion or undifferentiation in the same relationship.

6. All members of a family play some part in the cut-offs that exist and are perpetuated in that system. To the extent that emotional cut-offs reflect the degree of fusion and anxiety in a family, their distribution is largely determined by characteristics of the substructure of triangles in this system. Close togetherness in triangle frequently occurs at the expense of cutting off from the third member of the triangle. In this situation, emotional cut-off assists in coping with the overload of anxiety or fusion in a triangle and the relationship system.

Activity that culminates in cutting off emotional contact with other family members is frequently an ineffective effort to achieve independence. These moves do not differentiate self, and the process is almost the opposite of differentiation. Any gain in pseudo-self through creation of an emotional cut-off provides only temporary relief from the intense anxiety in a relationship system. The cut-off merely makes self more vulnerable to a new mode of intense togetherness with others, which also tends to annihilate self. The degree of cut-off oversensitizes self and predisposes the cut-off individual to participate in other fused relationships. The greater a cut-off from past relationships, the higher is the probability that intense fusion in future relationships will develop.

An estimate of the number of cut-offs in a family is easier to make than an estimate of the intensity of the cut-offs. The manifestation of symptoms in a family provides some indicators of the intensity of cut-offs in the emotional system. Children who are cut off from their grandparents generally have more problems in performing at school than children who are in meaningful contact with their grandparents. If a child becomes delinquent or is chronically sick, the intensity of the cut-off between generations tends to be greater than if a child's behavior is mildly symptomatic.

Duration through time is an indicator of the intensity of cutoffs. If a cut-off has persisted for a decade, this cut-off is more intense and is a product of a more anxious relationship system than if it had lasted for a short period of time. The stability and rigidity of a cut-off suggest the strength of the feelings invested in the cut-off. The stronger the feelings invested, the more rigidified the cut-off becomes. These kinds of indicators provide a basis for measuring and refining the concept of emotional cut-off for further research.

Emotional cut-off describes a pattern of family interaction that can be observed fairly easily. Generalizations about the social consequences of cut-offs and about the incidence of cutoffs in the wider society may be inferred from accumulated data on families. Data collected in clinical settings suggest some practical applications and implications of the concept of cut-off. The Bowen theory views emotional cut-off as an integral part of emotional

process and change within families and in society.

A few meaning elements of the concept of emotional cut-off can be highlighted by referring to Bowen family theory ideas that describe obverse processes. Whereas an effective differentiation of self culminates in changes in basic self, emotional cut-off is an immature and less successful attempt to separate self from fused family relationships. Whereas fusion is intense togetherness, with each participant sacrificing self to the unit twosome, an emotional cut-off is an attempt to deal with the same relationship intensity without sacrificing self. However, in spite of the contrived distance, other characteristics of the rigidly fused relationships remain. Fusion is a significant counterpart of an emotional cut-off.

emotional cut-offs are generally less apparent within nuclear families than is fusion. Cut-offs are easier to observe between parent and grandparent generations, and this kind of cut-off intensifies the emotions of the nuclear system. If a cut-off between generations is acute and persists for along period of time, behavior symptoms will surface when the nuclear family is anxious.

Triangles are a substructure of a family that can generate emotional cut-offs. An emotional cut-off may develop when a close togetherness is created by extreme distancing from a third person in a triangle. In contrast to detriangling processes, by which the person in the outside position in a

triangle purposely maintains emotional contact with each party in the fused twosome, the distanced third person in an emotional cut-off loses contact with the other two. The members of the togetherness are so caught up in their cocoon of sharing each others' beliefs and perceptions that each loses contact with the third party. In contrast to family projection, by which a third person is trapped in the emotional field between the fused twosome, a cut-off essentially expels the third person from the triangle. Nevertheless, the twosome may maintain strong bonds with that person, and these latent ties may surface in time of stress or they may be driven further underground through time.

Cut-offs are often repeated between succeeding generations. These repetitions intensity, rather than neutralize, the multigenerational transmission process. When cut-offs persist without being bridged, patterns of related symptomatic behavior may be automatically repeated by members of different generations, and the symptoms may intensify in this process. Making attempts to bridge cut-offs and maintaining emotional contact with members of several generations in the same family are some of the means that can be used to protect self and others from the crystallization of problem behavior in a family.

Research

Formal research is needed to describe and define the characteristics of cut-offs in families. The perceptions of individuals who are emotionally estranged from each other can be used as a basis for selecting indicators to describe emotional cut-offs. An individual who is cut off from a parent is more likely to express either strongly antagonistic or completely indifferent feelings for that parent than someone who has a viable day-to- day relationship with a parent. The estranged person's views can provide a tentative measure of the intensity and quality of emotional cut-offs in the family network. The greatest distortion of objectivity occurs in the midst of the most intense cut-off processes.

A measure of the frequency of cut-offs in a family can indicate the extent to which the distribution of cut-offs influences the behavior of family members. Research in this area could assess the consequences of the intensity and number of emotional cutoffs for a family. The extent of symptomatic behavior in a family appears positively correlated with a high frequency of emotional cut-offs or with fewer more intense emotional cut-offs. This evidence suggests that the existence of emotional cut-offs can be detrimental to the functioning of all family members. Clinical data indicate that cut-offs are generally pervasive and intense in families that have the most difficulty with maintaining viable patterns of behavior.

Emotional cut-offs can be researched to determine their predictability,

especially for times of stress. Another aspect of emotional cut-offs that could be documented is the consequences of bridging cut-offs. Exploratory clinical research tends to substantiate the hypothesis than when an individual is able to bridge a cut-off and maintain emotional contact with other family members, this person and eventually other family members function more effectively and become more differentiated than they were prior to the cut-off. A description of the ways that cut-offs can be bridged in a family may provide further indicators of the qualities of emotional cut-offs.

Emotional cut-offs are relationship phenomena. Systematic research efforts are needed to delineate the part all family members play in perpetuating emotional cut-offs in the relationship system and the ways individuals contribute to the processes of separation. An emotional cut-off is not a single person's achievement, even though an estrangement is frequently described by key participants in the cut-off as the result of the behavior of the one who ends up outside the overt togetherness of the other family members.

Therapeutic Considerations

Effective psychotherapy with families frequently includes or results in bridging emotional cut-offs in those families. When a cut-off relationship is meaningfully reestablished, anxiety in the family is visibly reduced and behavior symptoms are, at least, temporarily relieved. The family members

most active in bridging the cut-offs and maintaining emotional contact with other family members may eventually become more differentiated in their behavior, thereby improving the functioning of other family members. A fairly accurate indicator of improved family functioning is that children's behavior often becomes symptom-free at the same time that a parent or other key member of the family invests feelings in previously estranged relationships. This kind of change is particularly apparent in families where there have been cut-offs between the parents of symptomatic children and their parents or significant members of their families of origin.

A therapist can encourage the bridging of cut-offs in a family by suggesting to the individuals coached that estranged family members might have interesting perceptions about inner-core family members and nodal events in the family. One can become more objective about one's perceptions of one's family by comparing views with individuals who have withdrawn from the relationship system and who have been pushed out of the active emotional exchanges between family members.

In some families, cut-offs that occurred several generations earlier may affect the functioning level of living family members. If family members can discover information in the past about these cut-offs, some bridging becomes possible, even though the parties concerned may be deceased. An initiation of personal contacts with relatives or close friends of a deceased cut-off family

member can improve an individual's functioning and open up the entire family system. For these constructive consequences to occur during a course of therapy, there must first be sufficient symptom relief. Only when some objectivity has been attained, can systematic moves to bridge cut-offs be made.

emotional cut-offs in a family may develop after the geographical separation of family members. Geographical separation may also follow the development of emotional cutoffs. Moves away from the locale of one's family of origin are generally precipitated more by persisting estrangements between family members than by the conventionally stated reasons, such as a promotion or a more temperate climate.

Families who request therapy are often geographically scattered or splintered. Therapeutic effort may be successful in creating or reestablishing meaningful contact between family members in spite of geographical separations. This kind of bridging activity can be exhausting, but visits and communications with distant relatives can reinvest feelings in isolated parts of the family system, resulting in a variety of beneficial outcomes for the whole family.

Although such extensions of psychotherapy are possible, many families in a clinical setting remain cut off from their families of origin in a variety of

ways. Most symptom relief and differentiation appear to occur where the complex effects of emotional cut-offs with parents and grandparents are minimized.

One's Own Family

It is much easier to accept others' perceptions of one's family than to formulate one's own perceptions. For example, most people share their dominant parents' view of other family members. In the early years of life, the depth of this programming is not questioned. One grows to accept certain family members as "in" the family, and others as essentially "out" of the family. The dividing line between being in or being out of a family usually reflects the outreach of the more active and viable part of the family emotional network. Cut-off processes generally exist at points where certain members are defined or viewed as being outside the core family group. One way to identify cut-offs in one's own family is to question others about who makes up the family. The repeated exclusion of particular family members and the degree of negative resistance to such questioning frequently indicate the number and intensity of cut-offs in one's family.

In many situations, there are more dividends for self and for one's family if cut-offs are bridged effectively than if other kinds of differentiating moves are made. Consistent bridging of cutoffs while maintaining meaningful

contacts with family members may eventually open up the entire family system. Throughout these processes, an individual becomes more centrally significant in the network of communications and feelings in the family.

After bridging a cut-off in one's family, other family members may follow this example by investing feelings in their own relationships with the "outsider." The person who first bridges the cut-off is gradually respected by other family members, even though there may have been considerable opposition to the bridging moves when they first occurred or if one revealed plans and intentions to other family members before making the bridging moves. It is usually more productive not to discuss plans for approaching a cut-off individual with other family members before making these efforts. The negative reactions of other family members can be discouraging and may make one's actions less effective by introducing unnecessary complications into an already difficult situation.

Frequently, the person who has cut off and who has been cut off from a family knows "inside information" or secrets about the family. This knowledge or assumed knowledge may have initially precipitated cut-off processes. Much significant information may be derived from contact with the estranged individual.

Although travel to visit geographically distant family members is costly,

the advantages of personally following through these leads can be rewarding. The material costs involved in reaching distant family members may be more than offset by the "priceless" gains of enriched perspectives, a new view of self, and a more differentiated or effective functioning position in one's family. Moreover, older family members are generally very receptive to a younger person's efforts to establish contact with them. These older family members appear to thrive from the attention and new investment of feelings, and they frequently contribute unique oral histories of family events.

The process of establishing emotional contact with those who are cut off in one's family of origin draws feelings away from a marriage or from a focused child in a nuclear family. A beneficial consequence of these bridging activities is a reduction in the degree of interdependency or overdependency in one's marital and parent-child relationships. The emotional pullout creates conditions whereby marital and parental relationships can become increasingly flexible, viable, meaningful, and enjoyable.

In some respects, there may be no end to the quantity and quality of cut-offs that one can improve in one's family. Efforts to bridge cut-offs, together with an awareness of the pervasiveness of this phenomenon, must be continual if one is to maintain a differentiated position in one's family.

Multigenerational Transmission Process

The concept of multigenerational transmission process describes broad patterns of behavior between members of different generations in the same family. Although the meaning elements of this concept are based on observations of the life- course of the child who is most impaired by emotional projection in a nuclear family, the applications and implication of multigenerational transmission process have more ramifications than do differentiation of self, nuclear family emotional system, or family projection process. Multigenerational transmission process describes and suggests possible outcomes of differentiation of self, dependencies in the nuclear family emotional system, and family projection over several generations.

Multigenerational transmission process is a living context for the description of qualities of change in various generations of the same family. One of the most important modifications a family system can undergo is shifting levels of differentiation of self of key family members through the influence of multigenerational transmission processes. The open-ended comprehensiveness of the concept of multigenerational transmission process suggests that family emotional systems are an integral part of evolutionary processes and adaptation.

The concept of multigenerational transmission process illustrates sequential projections over continuous generations in a family. The multigenerational process describes ways in which nuclear families program

particular ranges of differentiation of self from one generation to another. However, whereas family projection culminates in a lowering of the level of differentiation of self between parents and a child in two generations, multigenerational transmission describes more “open” and diverse processes by relating to a wider range of possible levels of differentiation of self.

The concept of multigenerational transmission process does not explain biological inheritance through the generations. Multigenerational transmission process focuses on specific emotional system mechanisms that influence the differentiation of members of succeeding generations. from this broad perspective, the effects of marital conflict or of dysfunction of a spouse may be as significant for the functioning of members of future generations as the effects of family projection.

Multigenerational transmission describes how a series of succeeding generations manifests trends and tendencies in levels of differentiation of self. The trends and tendencies in multiple generations are formed as successions of children emerge from their parental families with slightly higher, equal, or slightly lower levels of differentiation of self than their parents. Patterns in these processes are most visible when behavior in more than three generations of linear descent is examined and recorded or diagramed.

An example of multigenerational transmission that culminates in a lowering of differentiation in succeeding generations illustrates one way in which this process operates. People generally select spouses whose differentiation is basically the same as their own. When a person emerges from the parental family with a lower level of differentiation than the parents have, a spouse selected by this person will have an equal level of differentiation. If this marriage produces a child with a lower level of differentiation, the next marriage will be to a person who has the same lower level of differentiation. When this marriage produces a child with an even lower level of differentiation who marries on that same level, a transmission process can be considered to move from generation to generation toward lower and lower levels of differentiation.

If a family has trends of maintained or increasingly higher levels of differentiation, children from succeeding generations of marriages have levels of differentiation corresponding to those of their parents. There is no clear evidence that a particular evolutionary direction or momentum automatically generates a rise or decline of differentiation in subsequent generations. Rather, parents seem to produce offspring who cannot easily move beyond the same level of differentiation that the parents have. In most circumstances, a family tends to perpetuate its level of differentiation. As only one or two children in a given generation are focused by a family projection, they, and not their siblings, will have a lower level of differentiation than their parents.

Siblings who remain outside the family projection will have about the same level of differentiation as their parents, or they will be slightly more differentiated. When differentiation and projection are delineated in several related nuclear families, some segments of the extended system may appear to be becoming more differentiated at the same time that other sections of the system appear to be becoming less differentiated.

The consequences of multigenerational transmission are limited by the range of changes possible in differentiating self. There cannot be substantial leaps or gaps in levels of differentiation between succeeding generations of a family. What may appear to be significant changes in differentiation in a family are often merely shifts in functioning. More marked differences in levels of differentiation of members of the same family may perhaps be observed at the extreme points of a wide range of generations. These changes in levels of differentiation are the product of an exceedingly slow transmission process, which has raised or lowered specific personal levels of differentiation through many generations.

Influences in Marital Conflict

Case history materials have been used to define and document specific family influences on marital conflict and the patterns of behavior generated by marital conflict. Wherever possible, longitudinal studies of family

interaction were made over several generations, and genealogical data was used to supplement this information. These exploratory studies indicate the following trends and tendencies in family relationships:

1. The volume and intensity of marital conflict appear to depend more on past family relationships and experiences than on contingencies and characteristics of the present marriage.

2. The level of intensity of the relationship of each spouse in the marital conflict with the parent of the opposite sex is a fairly accurate predictor of the proclivity for conflict that each spouse manifests. For example, when conflict exists between the husband and the husband's mother, the tendency of the husband and wife to have a conflictual relationship is correspondingly high.

3. The sibling positions and sex distributions in the families of each spouse and of each parent of the marriage partners influence the probability of conflict between the spouses.

4. Although habitual conflict between spouses does not resolve the issues disputed, the intensity of the spouses' feelings invested in the marital conflict shields children from projection as a result of parental anxiety in the family.

5. Where conflict between spouses is not overt, husband or wife may become dysfunctional, or the conflict may be projected to a child or grandchild.

Family interaction cannot be described and defined accurately with reference only to the nuclear family setting and to behavior observed at a few points in time (Mishler and Waxier 1968) or to family networks that include many friends as well as relatives (Speck and Attneave 1973). Conflict is a means of dealing with high levels of anxiety in the entire family (Boszormenyi-Nagy and Spark 1973) and is not "contained" by the two parties who appear to be those most actively engaged in it. Triangular interaction in the family emotional system over several generations selects which spouses are combatants and influences the extent to which tension can be dealt with in a constructive way—that is, without impinging on the behavior of others.

Research

Predictions about individual families can be verified by applications of the concept of multigenerational transmission process. Experimental research that includes this kind of verification describes characteristics of the emotional system of several past generations of a family or families with data accumulated from public records and other documentary courses. from the functioning facts of past generations, some predictions are made about how family members might interact in the present generations of the researched families. When these predictions have been made, characteristics of the emotional system of present generations are examined and the data from

current behavior patterns are used to substantiate or refute the trends predicted from the data on past generations.

The research procedures described have limited usefulness because the relatively small number of families that can be examined by these in-depth longitudinal methods cannot provide a numerically representative sample of the whole population. Also, operationalization of these research techniques is extremely time-consuming. In spite of these limitations, multigenerational transmission process is a significant concept to use in the formulation of meaningful hypotheses for examining the impact of emotional processes in a family's past generations on present generations. When predictions about patterns of interaction in present generations of individual families are accurate, multigenerational transmission is an effective means of describing change processes in a family. Furthermore, this concept may provide leads for the more accurate description of broad evolutionary processes.

Unless research on families is conducted with a perspective or a frame of reference that accounts for behavior in several past generations, data selected for scientific analyses tends to be incomplete and skewed by a built-in bias that overestimates the importance of interaction. A present-based research focus of this kind distorts empirical reality and does not accurately represent patterns of behavior that occur throughout the more global aspects of the extended relationship network of a family. An awareness of the

consequences of this kind of error recommends three generations as a minimum base for meaningful family research and for representative generalizations about emotional processes in families.

Although the concept of multigenerational transmission is not easy to operationalize, it is fairly limited in its scope compared with other social change concepts. In this respect, the concept may have considerably more practical and more versatile applications and implications than concepts such as social class, which relate to broader and more complex aspects of the wider society.

Some of the possible research on multigenerational transmission can fall into two major categories. First, research could begin with an issue or information relating to past generations and work forward to present generations. This research focus and direction could include predictions for present or future family interaction. Second, research could begin with an issue or information relating to present generations and work backward to past generations. The second research focus and direction could include predictions about how past generations might be reconstructed from information gathered from family members in present generations or from genealogical data.

The information a researcher collects in studying the effects of

multigenerational transmission optimally could provide new evidence for an assessment of the degree of order in human life. Indicators of a life-course could include occupation, geographical location, marital status, and the number and spacing of children. from a family systems perspective, a major substantive concern is the circumstances of significant deaths in a family. Questions that relate to this issue might include the following: What changes in family processes followed a significant death? What factors appear to have contributed to the timing of a particular death? another major substantive concern from a family systems perspective is the circumstances of significant geographical moves or migrations in a family. Questions that relate to this issue might include the following: What factors appeared to precipitate a particular geographical move? What changes in a family preceded, occurred simultaneously with, or followed a migration by some of its members? What circumstances might have prevented the geographical migration of other family members?

When these kinds of events are researched through several generations of a family, findings are more likely to be objectively accurate and representative of the whole system than when only a cross section of present facts and events is researched. Research hypotheses on the impact of death and migration through several generations of a family could constitute ways of documenting and measuring changes in differentiation at the times of death and migration. Some indication might also be given of the extent to

which death and migration contribute to lowering, raising, or maintaining differentiation levels in a family.

Research on multigenerational transmission could include studies of the range of family structures that result from specific kinds of emotional processes over several generations. To what extent can the concept of multigenerational transmission suggest how a given family comes to produce more men than women? Which transmission patterns contribute to an increase in separation and divorce over several generations?

Although the examples of research already given largely indicate basic research projects, this concept may also be used in applied research. For example, insofar as emotional impairment is viewed as a culmination of along chain of events that lowers differentiation, the etiology of emotional disorders can be approached by describing characteristics of the multigenerational transmission processes that have contributed to particular symptom manifestations.

Therapeutic Considerations

The concept of multigenerational transmission suggests that emotional impairment is a product of a sequence of intergenerational processes in a family. One way to describe and define some of the factors that have contributed to dysfunctional behavior is to examine characteristics of the

broad family network and the different qualities of emotional processes that have occurred through several generations.

The ongoing work involved in accumulating data that describe the nature of emotional processes in prior generations may be an essential integral part of psychotherapy. Information gathering on past generations is a significant activity not only for the therapist or coach, who needs substantive details on several generations in order to be effective, but also for the "identified patient" or the person being coached. The latter benefits from making contacts and building relationships with an increased number of members of the extended family, as well as from getting the information itself. The acts involved in pinpointing facts about one's family may be as "therapeutic" for the person being coached as the clinical sessions themselves.

A person can only begin to discuss events in past generations objectively when that person is not functioning under stress. However, the increased emotional distance from events in past generations may facilitate overall objectivity about one's family. The working relationship between therapist and client may also be improved by a focus on behavior in past generations of a family, especially when dependency issues between the therapist and client have dominated previous sessions.

Psychotherapy is usually most effective when a client is able to increase personal relationships in the extended family system. Clinical sessions are productive to the extent that they contribute to motivating an individual to take stands for self on day-to-day happenings in the family. Multigenerational detriangling is one way to achieve or maintain an effective "I" position in relation to the relentless forces of multigenerational transmission while also relating to members of the extended system.

In most cases, people attend clinical sessions with minimal information about their family structures and processes. Under optimal conditions, a systems psychotherapist "coaches" the other on how to collect information to describe the quality of emotional processes in a few generations of that person's family. To ensure that therapy is as effective as possible, this information should be gathered for self and not for other family members or for the therapist. Through the therapist's indication of the other's responsibility for self in this task, the client may become more responsible for self in a variety of behavior and contexts.

Some of the dangers inherent for a therapist in examining processes of interaction in different generations with other relatives include the strong tendency to become overly involved with a client's perceptions of these generations. A therapist may also be influenced by a client's perceptions of multigenerational patterns of behavior. Individuals easily allow themselves to

become impeded in their explorations for information by overreacting to the content of past emotional issues without an examination of the quality of intergenerational exchanges around the issues and their impact on the entire family. Making personal contacts with more family members is usually an effective means, for both client and therapist, of safeguarding against difficulties of this kind.

One's Own Family

Some of the most effective kinds of contacts that one can have in one's family of origin are with family "leaders" in the oldest generations. Members of the grandparent generation frequently have more information about the family than do other relatives. Intergenerational contacts also provide the broadest possible range of ages for personal relationships in one's family.

A significant outcome for a person from a young generation who relates to members of older generations is that parents or others in intermediate generations are affected emotionally by the contacts made. Some of the most effective detriangling in one's family may be accomplished on such a multigenerational level.

Documents may have to be used to detail research on multigenerational transmission in one's family. For example, genealogical records can complement and check the memories of elders. However, the systematic

research of genealogical records is time-consuming and demands personal commitment, and this project may necessitate taking an unpopular " I" position in relation to other family members. In spite of these difficulties, the dividends from one's efforts to research several generations are usually qualitatively superior to research focused solely on living generations.

Differentiation through studying multigenerational transmission in one's family may include making known some of the findings of one's research. An indiscriminate dissemination of information is not as effective or constructive for differentiating self as making careful choices to communicate particular details to specific family members. A tentative guide in this selection process is to give information to family members who will respond emotionally to the disclosures. In this way, the information can precipitate different patterns of interaction and activate a rigid system.

Additional care and thought are necessarily involved when one decides to divulge astonishing or shocking information. This content is emotion-laden, and family members may easily overreact to its communication. Information about events in earlier generations are sometimes more difficult for a family to deal with than are other kinds of information because of the length of time that the facts have been not known. However, differentiation can occur most effectively in one's family when there is some degree of anxiety in the system.

Sibling Position

Bowen has referred to general ideas about sibling position in families throughout most of the period he has been developing his family theory. During the 1960s, he became more familiar with Toman's research on sibling position (Toman 1972), and recognized that Toman's findings were largely consistent with his own. Toman's particularly significant contribution, in light of Bowen's own interests and work, is in his detailed observations and descriptions of behavior considered typical of different sibling positions. Bowen made similar observations and arrived at similar conclusions in a less structured way than Toman did and from a systems perspective as opposed to the psychoanalytic frame of reference Toman used.

As well as describing behavior in particular sibling positions, the Bowen concept of sibling position relates to ways in which levels of functioning and differentiation are influenced by certain sibling positions and distributions. Bowen accounts for how the family emotional system modifies sibling behavior expectations based on chronology or sex. One's functioning sibling position in one's family of origin is considered a major determining influence on one's differentiation of self and on one's vulnerability to family projection and multigenerational transmission. Functioning sibling position strongly influences the probability of becoming emotionally trapped in a family.

One of the most frequent uses made of the concept of sibling position is

as a notation category in family histories. Information about sibling positions is collected routinely in family systems clinical work. In this respect, some of the applications of this concept are more visible and are easier to make than are other concepts in the Bowen theory.

The idea that structural sibling position in a family is an important influence on behavior is modified by viewing a person's "functioning" sibling position as a more accurate guide to behavioral expectations and predictions than chronological sibling position. Bowen's conceptualization of sibling position embraces this distinction, whereas Toman did not account for such differences in his work on sibling position. The difference between functioning and chronological position is illustrated by an only sister of brothers who may function as a youngest in her family, even though she is chronologically the middle child of five. Another example is the parental perception and functioning of twins. People are not used to dealing with twins, and parents frequently view one twin as being much older than the other. Although the first born twin is usually treated as the older of the two, the age difference between them tends to be exaggerated.

Family projection is the strongest influence on the discrepancies that can exist between chronological and functioning sibling positions. Regardless of chronological position, the child who is the "object" of a family projection is frequently treated as a youngest, and that child behaves accordingly. One

impairing consequence of being the focus of a family projection is that a child is encouraged to be more dependent on the parents than are the other siblings in the family. Family projection may be viewed as a strong neutralizing influence on the effects of the chronological ordering or sex distribution in a family and this process is an integral part of the family emotional system.

Studies of sibling position behavior add another dimension to predicting family interaction. The collection of data on sibling positions can be an important step in identifying the essential characteristics of a family. Information about sibling positions in earlier generations makes prediction more accurate because the distribution of sibling positions reflects characteristics of the broader emotional network.

The most predictable sibling behavior occurs when there is no oversaturation of emotional intensity in the family system. Lower functioning levels than the predicted profiles are attributable to the intensity of the impact of emotional influences, such as family projection, multigenerational transmission, loss, or cut-off.

Data on the sibling position of parents and an assessment of whether the functioning of each parent is typical of those sibling positions are fairly reliable indicators how a family may adapt itself to life, to emotional forces in

the extended family, and to a course of psychotherapy. This information is particularly useful for predicting behavior in families with an only child, where the sibling position of the parent of like sex may strongly influence that child's development and perceptions.

Quality of fusion also depends on sibling position. For example, the intensity of fusion is influenced by the sibling positions of participants in the relationship. Depending on which sibling positions are involved, the twosome behaves distinctively in conflict, in routine exchanges, and under stress.

Research

Chronological sibling position is easy to record accurately and control in an experimental setting. Whether research focuses on families or on behavior in the wider society, sibling position is an objective category of information generally not distorted by the emotional investment of family members.

The major sibling position categories outlined by Toman are the following: the oldest brother of brother(s), the youngest brother of brother(s), the oldest brother of sister(s), the youngest brother of sister(s), the oldest sister of sister(s), the youngest sister of sister(s), the oldest sister of brother(s), and the youngest sister of brother(s). In addition to the eight basic sibling positions are two intermediary positions: the only child and twins. Individual sibling positions can be further classified by noting the

sibling position of parents. This more complex categorization suggests that the life-style and differentiation level of two oldest brothers of brothers contrast with each other if the father of one is the oldest brother of brothers and the father of the other is the youngest brother of sisters (Toman 1972).

The sibling position of children and parents can be used as a basis for mapping structural and process characteristics of a family. For example, diagrammatic presentation of several generations of sibling distributions highlights any clustering or thinning out of family members. From a scientific standpoint, this information provides leads for more detailed descriptions of emotional forces in a family. The accuracy of oral reports and the overall objectivity of the study can be checked by referring to written records.

Scientific research on sibling positions optimally includes the study of sibling behavior in a variety of social settings. Performance in groups other than families is influenced by differentiation. Both social performance and family activity can be used to assess variations in behavior in identical sibling positions. For example, one person's behavior may appear more effective in social groups than in that person's family. Although it can be postulated that oldests rather than other sibling positions tend to become leaders in society, only oldests who function effectively in both social groups and the family are well differentiated. An oldest who appears an effective leader in society but simultaneously participates in a significant family cut-off or does not function

as an oldest in the family is less differentiated. In this instance, apparent social differentiation is neutralized or negated by low family differentiation. Documentation of this sort may contribute toward the substantiation of the hypothesis that sibling position influences the life-course of less differentiated persons more strongly than that of more differentiated individuals.

Research studies could compare the capacity of individuals in different sibling positions to initiate and accomplish change in self. Another research focus could be descriptions of the tendencies to deviate from the behavioral expectations for particular sibling positions. Sibling behavior that differs from expectations may reflect the impact of emotional forces and processes within a family, including the strivings for differentiation of self.

Another influence on sibling position behavior that could be documented by systematic research is the impact of the loss of a significant family member through death, divorce, or institutionalization. For example, an oldest brother of sisters whose father had died when he was young and whose mother had not remarried would behave differently from an oldest brother of sisters who had not lost his father. The oldest brother who lost his father would probably be pressured and programmed into taking his father's place in the family emotional system.

Research on sibling positions from a family systems perspective could begin to describe and define ranges of behavior characteristic of each major sibling position. For example, expectations for youngests could include behavior of more differentiated youngests as well as of less differentiated youngests. Such comparisons of different levels of differentiation in the same sibling position might indicate some of the most significant properties of becoming trapped in the family's emotional processes.

Therapeutic Considerations

Descriptions of sibling position differences for the purposes of psychotherapy optimally include an assessment of the "emotional vulnerability" of the different positions. The assumption of responsibility is another behavioral characteristic that differs according to sibling position and influences the course of psychotherapy. For example, oldests frequently assume more responsibility than their siblings, and youngests may assume correspondingly less responsibility than their siblings. Felt responsibility for others, or taking responsibility for the whole family, are major influences in a person's day-to-day behavior and long-range planning. However, it is easier to coach an overresponsible person to become responsible for self than it is an underresponsible person.

Another issue related to sibling position and psychotherapy is the kinds

of responsibilities expected of an oldest in a family. The specific emotional forces that reinforce a youngest's being viewed as irresponsible are also significant. The togetherness pressures that define the degree of responsibility for sibling positions substantially influence how a family selects a patient or problem.

Although overresponsibility in certain sibling positions may be problematic, the characteristics of underresponsibility are generally considered more severe. Conventional public opinion and more traditional psychotherapy are relatively unconcerned about symptoms or problems of overresponsibility. Overly dependent behavior becomes a focus for family and therapeutic concerns more readily than overly independent behavior.

A child who is the object of a family projection is more likely to become an identified patient than a child who is in a particular chronological position in a family. In a family where the child who is object of a family projection is not the youngest, the youngest in that family will have correspondingly fewer characteristics of a youngest.

One's Own Family

Sibling position characteristics can suggest criteria for evaluating one's own functioning in relation to the expectations for behavior in one's sibling position. A contrast between expected and actual behavior may indicate a

particular level of differentiation. For example, better functioning and more effective behavior in a particular sibling position than the expectations for that position suggest a high level of differentiation of self. An oldest who is not overly responsible in conducting daily affairs appears more differentiated than an oldest who acts in overresponsible ways. Also, a youngest who is responsible in conducting daily affairs, especially in relationships with other family members, is perhaps more differentiated than a youngest who is not responsible for self.

A useful starting point for assessing and comparing sibling behavior in one's family is to document characteristics of functioning in the various sibling positions. A disadvantage of defining sibling position in functional rather than chronological terms is that subjective and intuitive perception can displace factual components of the more crude chronological descriptions.

The intervals between births in a family influence sibling behavior. A lengthy spacing of more than five years can have a more significant influence on behavior than a particular rank order of birth or the sex distribution among siblings. Children born a considerable number of years before or after their siblings may resemble an only child in their behavior or they may essentially create another family within the family.

The sibling positions of a multigenerational "line" of same-sex ancestors

appears to be a significant influence on behavior in the younger generations of a family. For some women, the sibling position influence of the mother, grandmother, and other maternal ancestors may be more significant than that of the father and paternal ancestors.

Data on the sibling positions of relatives in early generations of a family can add useful dimensions to the limited information of names, birth, marriage, and death dates. The "horizontal" information on sibling positions is essential for making an accurate estimate of the quality of a particular family emotional system. Productive descriptions of emotional forces in past generations largely depend on the extent of information available on sibling distributions in several of those generations.

Emotional Process in Society

Emotional process in society, along with emotional cut-off, is one of Bowen's most recently developed concepts, and it is less refined than other concepts of the Bowen family theory. Emotional process in society represents the broadest possible tensions between individuation and togetherness, tensions that Bowen had already described and conceptualized in the context of individual family units. This concept expands Bowen's theoretical system through its accounting for the impact of social influences on family processes and for the impact of family processes on wider society.

Some of the emotional processes in society move toward societal extinction over long periods of time. Constructive and effective adaptation is another possible outcome of the interdependency and interaction of emotional processes in society. When adaptation is successful, the related emotional processes are more flexible and more conducive to growth. These processes generate constructive social changes in the wider society. Although particular sections of society may manifest different qualities and rates of change at any given point in time, an overall trend toward adaptation or toward extinction is frequently suggested by a variety of evidence.

In families, one of the two strongest overall thrusts of emotional process is toward togetherness. In society also, one of the two major thrusts of emotional process is toward shared togetherness. Insofar as togetherness or fusion forces predominate in society, they impede the differentiation of individuals and groups. Growth and development are stunted in the conditions of fusion, as individuals and groups are unable to function effectively in such an intense and restrictive emotional climate. Differentiation continues to be extremely difficult to accomplish as long as it is counteracted by the strong togetherness forces in society.

Bowen suggests that in certain periods in history, there have been tendencies for society to move in the direction of either differentiation or togetherness, and these tendencies are likely to continue. When

differentiation predominates, social improvements and constructive developments follow: When fusion predominates, a society is considered stagnant, manifesting destructive forms of change. In times of high anxiety fusion predominates and people are pressured to make short-term, tension-ridden decisions rather than more deliberate, long-range decisions. Responsible decision making is more apparent in societies where differentiation forces are more prevalent than togetherness forces. High crime rates, violence, arbitrary political leadership, and high rates of divorce can be considered indicators of the potency and dysfunctional consequences of togetherness forces in a societal regression.

The quality or intensity of emotional process in society is an important influence on the level of functioning of individual families. Although family systems are significant emotional units in themselves, they are generally sufficiently open that they can be strongly influenced by broader societal forces. When the emotional process in society is intense, individuals frequently try to avoid responsibility for self both in the context of their own families and in other social groups.

The concept of emotional process in society has broader ramifications than Bowen's other concepts in that it represents a variety of large-scale trends over extended periods of time. The complex network of emotional interaction examined and described is more than an accumulation of isolated

family experiences. Emotional process in society is an abstraction that epitomizes how families interact with each other within particular social settings and within particular historical time periods.

Both families and societies manifest differentiation and fusion tensions. The level of anxiety in society largely determines whether the emotional process in society will move toward differentiation or toward togetherness. When anxiety is low, differentiation is more possible. When anxiety is high, togetherness is automatic. These broad emotional forces influence family and individual behavior, just as individual and family behavior influence emotional process in society. Thus, emotional process in society is more than a background for viewing specific patterns of family interaction.

When phenomena such as large numbers of emotional cutoffs and high anxiety levels in families are pervasive in society, they intensify emotional process in society and increase tendencies toward regression and extinction. If sufficient numbers of people are triangled into family emotional processes, conditions that are more conducive to societal regression or extinction will develop.

Research

The global perspective implied by the concept of emotional process in society may improve objectivity in observing family interaction and other

patterns of social behavior. An examination of human behavior in this context adds dimensions of reality and accuracy to the more usual short-range observations of family and social behavior. from a conceptual base of emotional process in society, a focus on continuity through time is automatically incorporated with on-the-spot examinations of a variety of behavior. The concept of emotional process in society also provides a basis for comparing and documenting differences of large-scale change in present and past societies.

In addition to their usefulness in the observation of seemingly qualitatively distinct kinds of human behavior, the meaning elements of emotional process in society suggest that specific degrees of predictability and probability exist in complex social and emotional forces. One hypothesis is that where togetherness or fusion prevails as the dominant emotional force in society, patterns of behavior are less productive than if differentiating forces are dominant. A related hypothesis is that the more anxious a society is, the more individual members strive for togetherness. The more a society strives for togetherness, the greater is the probability that problem behavior will be manifested, leading to increased societal regression. A high level of societal anxiety precedes and accompanies problem behavior in a societal regression. If a society follows these tendencies for a long period of time, one outcome may be gradual extinction of that society.

Some tentative predictions can also be made for societal processes of differentiation or effective and constructive adaptation. To the extent that there is a low level of societal anxiety, there are more constructive patterns of behavior, more individual contributions, and more progressive trends of social change. Relationships are freer, and there is less frequent reactivity between individuals and groups. A conceptualization of the diverging tendencies of regression and progression within emotional process in society suggests that a continuum ranging between fusion and differentiation could be used as a tool to order the vast variety of social and individual behavior manifested.

Although the scientific usefulness of the concept of emotional process in society is perhaps more difficult to substantiate than that of other concepts of the Bowen family theory, emotional process in society may provide a more accurate and realistic context for understanding the consequences of differentiation and togetherness forces for families and society than Bowen's other concepts owing to its broader scope of application. Perhaps it is in the context of emotional process in society that complex patterns of behavior, such as multigenerational transmission, may be defined and observed more accurately.

At present, the concept of societal regression is a working hypothesis that cannot be operationalized in specific research terms. In the present

exploratory phase of formulation, it is useful to accumulate a wide range of descriptive data to clarify salient meaning elements of the concept and to design appropriate methodologies for more rigorous research. Data on societal trends in crime, violence, and political activities can be used as indicators of different levels of societal anxiety and different degrees of differentiation or fusion. Although testing for direct or inverse correlations between certain kinds of social behavior and specific patterns of interaction in families is an overly simplistic way of establishing the validity of the concept of emotional process in society, research that describes and defines linkages between social and family behavior may provide constructive leads for understanding some of the complexities in the interplay of these influences.

Comparative research on trends of human behavior in different societies is another means of describing the range of qualities of emotional process in society. Although the Bowen family theory was developed in the modernized society of contemporary United States, each concept suggests directions for research on other kinds of societies and for the study of animal behavior.

To the extent that emotional process in society describes social trends over long periods of time, historical source materials may be used to articulate the substance and interplay of constructive and destructive modes

of adaptation. Anthropological data may indicate characteristics of emotional process in society that lead toward extinction. Such data sources would have limited usefulness as a means of substantiating this concept and related hypotheses, however, as the data were not originally collected for this purpose.

The difficulties involved in specifying viable research procedures for confirming the validity of the concept of emotional process in society should not minimize this concept's importance as an innovative context for viewing and understanding family and social interaction. The unique strength of the Bowen family theory largely reflects its focus on a little-researched order of phenomena. It will take a considerable period of time before formal research can begin to definitively substantiate or refute hypotheses generated by the concept of emotional process in society.

Therapeutic Considerations

The concept of emotional process in society suggests a shorthand description of the climate of anxiety in society, one of the most significant influences on family interaction. It also facilitates deeper understanding of human interaction and dependency. The pervasiveness of characteristics such as cutoffs between generations, divorce, influence of peer groups, loneliness, and denial of death appear to have a strong and significant impact on the lives

of individuals and families. Well- differentiated and flexible family systems are more durable and more able to withstand these kinds of external impairing influences than are fused family systems. Fused relationship networks are brittle and, because of their rigidity and intensity, may collapse or explode under stress.

An effective course of psychotherapy gradually dilutes an individual's overinvestment in nuclear family relationships or in social groups by increasing that person's emotional investment in the family of origin or extended family. This rechanneling of feelings increases the flexibility of the individual's position in a family, and eventually increases the flexibility of the entire intimate relationship network.

Effective psychotherapy in large numbers of families may reduce anxiety and symptomatic behavior in the wider society, thereby increasing the possibility of more widespread differentiation. Where psychotherapy is not effective or not sufficiently pervasive to have such an impact, the societal level of anxiety may be raised by the perpetuation or increase of anxiety in families. Increased differentiation or continued fusion during a course of psychotherapy indicates whether a particular family contributes toward societal regression or toward effective adaptation.

One's Own Family

Although changing one's position in one's own family does not appear directly related to the concept of emotional process in society, the overall climate of anxiety in the broader social setting has some impact on the facility or effectiveness of one's level of differentiation and on how one's differentiation is viewed by other family members. Where togetherness forces in society are strong, differentiating moves are correspondingly difficult for the individuals making these efforts and for members of their families.

When the emotional process in society is intense, socially accepted goals and standards of behavior tend to be incompatible with responsible individual inner beliefs. When togetherness forces are strong, one tends to sacrifice self for others' needs and to act from pseudo-self. In such an emotional environment, individual thinking is so difficult that action integrated with self and personal convictions is almost impossible; decisions tend to be made in response to anxiety of the moment; and one is less able to formulate an effective plan for differentiating moves in one's family. As geographical moves under conditions of fusion may be followed by continued overinvolvement in substitute feeling systems, spatial distance cannot increase objectivity about one's family. In general, emotional dependency is transferred, rather than dealt with, when societal fusion is strong.

Emotional process in society may be less easy to apply to one's own

family than are other Bowen concepts. However, the concept of emotional process in society can be used to some extent, and some implications of this broad influence for individual emotional functioning in one's family, can be explored.

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