The Bowen Family Theory and Its Uses

Toward a General Theory of Human Behavior

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TOWARD A GENERAL THEORY OF HUMAN BEHAVIOR

The Bowen theory describes emotional phenomena in families. Although the theory has been used primarily for Family therapy and for research on behavior in families, diverse applications are possible. A comprehensive theory of emotional behavior can relate to many circumstances. Emotional pressures and tensions are a powerful influence in any group context.

The relationship between emotional systems theory and other theories in organizational behavior and the social sciences is extremely complex. A review of existing literature suggests that organization theory does not adequately conceptualize emotional pressures and interdependencies in organizations. Emotions tend to be dealt with in fragmented and incomplete ways. Most discussions of emotions in organizations (Roethlisberger 1953, Rogers 1961, Bion I948) do not extend beyond an individual psychology of emotions and the relevance of this to individual emotional health and interpersonal

communications. Some scholars (Lewin 1947, Bales 1950, Homans 1950) incorporate emotionality as part of a broader theory of small group behavior or treat it as a residual element of group processes (Shepherd 1964).

Bion and others of the Tavistock School have described the nonrational, or emotional, behavior of groups. However, they have not dealt with issues such as the quality of emotional interdependencies within groups or the impact of emotional tensions resulting from the past history of the group and the individuals in it. Some theories focus on intimacy and control (Bennis and Shepard 1956, Schutz 1958).

Social systems theory describes a variety of social pressures and outlines the structure of informal groups. However, it does not provide many meaningful leads on the nature of the emotional interdependencies and processes that bind a system together.

Emotional Systems Theory

An Organic Model. Organization theory has already conceptualized human groups as systems (Henderson 1935, Boulding 1956, Wolf 1959) and human relationships within them as being

intrinsically organic, flexible, fluid, and evolving (Scott and Mitchell 1972, Burns and Stalker 1961). The Bowen concept of emotional systems may be viewed as a refinement and elaboration of this basic model. Unlike the closed, rigid, and insensitive interrelationships of a machine, an emotional system is living and changing. Like other organic systems emotional systems manifest simultaneous tendencies toward equilibrium, growth, adaptation, interdependency, and increasing differentiation. These processes are considered primarily in terms of reflexive and reactive patterns of emotional interaction and response.

Equilibrium. from the perspective of emotional systems theory, equilibrium is most accurately conceptualized as a steady emotional state that expresses a balance between the two major countervailing emotional tendencies: a drive toward differentiation of self and an opposing force toward togetherness (fusion). The opposition of these drives or forces is perhaps most visible in the nuclear family, where the continuous struggle of children toward autonomy is balanced by their equally strong yearning for dependency. Emotional systems theory postulates that these tendencies exist in all human groups and that the two major forces influence all individual and social behavior.

Interdependency. One of the principles of general systems theory is the concept of interdependency. A change in one part of the system is thought to be followed by changes in other parts of the system and eventually in the system as a whole. Emotional systems theory suggests that change in the emotional level or behavior of a particular member or in the emotional inputs into the system produces predictable responses and reactions among system members.

Differentiation. A primary characteristic of an emotional system is an overall tendency toward differentiation. Bowen's concept of differentiation is similar to the biological process of specialization among and within species in nature. Emile Durkheim documented preliterate groups as more "like-minded" and more functionally unspecialized than civilized peoples (Durkheim 1947). He postulated that more evolved groups were specialized and pluralistically integrated.

Bowen suggests that differentiation occurs largely at deep-seated emotional levels of behavior. Organizations that superficially appear alike frequently manifest a wide range of emotional responses to similar crises. Each organization's characteristic latent patterns of

reactivity persist, regardless of whether or not the organization is a particular size or structure.

Differentiation is also an individual process. Emotional systems theory postulates that there is an evolutionary tendency for individuals to seek greater emotional independence and autonomy as well as to share togetherness with others. An important part of changing a position in an emotional system is to relinquish reflexive postures and behavior and to substitute thoughtful, reflective, and goal-oriented postures and behavior.

In the context of organizational behavior, career changes can result from the effective differentiation of self. Power and authority displacements, which may temporarily imperil production efforts, can be system responses to changes in the emotional dependence of one or more of its significant members.

Adaptation. Like other organic systems, emotional systems manifest many modes of adaptation. Evolutionary adaptation can be constructive or destructive. Emotional systems theory postulates that constructive adaptation is characterized by increased flexibility in

behavior, decreased intensity in dependence, and increased emotional auto n o my of individual members. In abetter functioning family, for example, a wide range of behavior is "accepted" by both parents and children, and there is a fairly marked degree of independence of each member.

Formal organizations also manifest constructive or destructive adaptations. Although young companies may thrive on high levels of emotional interdependency between their members, in the long run an organization must show a flexible tolerance for individual differences in order to be viable.

Energy. An emotional system is essentially a biological phenomenon characterized by fundamental energy forces. Emotions are more deep-seated than feelings and are more influential in human behavior. Anxiety is a manifestation of basic emotional energy.

An individual who experiences a given level of emotional pressure or strain may express "uptightness" or "stress" in a number of ways. A significant property of an emotional system is that it translates basic emotional energy into a set of clearly identifiable,

predictable, and interrelated behavior patterns and feeling responses. An emotional system is sufficiently powerful to be able to effectively "program" its members to respond in certain prescribed ways (Broom and Selznick 1963).

Organizations program their members to respond to frustration or emotional stress in a variety of prescribed ways. However, the effectiveness of an organization appears limited by its members' previous programming experiences, especially in the family, and by individual emotional styles (Athos and Coffey 1968).

Emotional Overload. an emotional system is a network of relationships bonded together and enmeshed by flows of energy. As one member of the system expresses emotion, an other may absorb it. The complexities of interdependencies in a given situation precipitate stresses that are reacted to or absorbed by one or more members of the system. The level of absorbed emotional energy, tension, or pressure eventually reaches a saturation point, and individual members of the system are prompted to behave in ways that reduce the overload of stress and tension. Anxiety is relieved most effectively by certain patterns of interaction. When it is not possible to reduce the

emotional overload, individuals or the organization become dysfunctional. The potential for emotional overload in organizations is great. The dissatisfaction, tension and productivity problems widely reported in American business (Tarnowiesky 1973, Work in America 1972) may be destructively expressed emotional phenomena.

Loss. A loss has a significant impact on an emotional system. A family and a work system, automatically seek to replace an individual lost through death, dismissal, or voluntary withdraw al. This reactive response is characteristic of an emotional system. The aftermath of a loss is a difficult phase of readjustment. For the system to recuperate from the loss, emotions invested in the lost person must ideally be redirected to a replacement.

The process of striving to replace a loss has not received much attention in management literature. It is recognized that an organization that loses a chief executive faces a difficult transition period, but not that the same process operates to some extent when any member is lost. Even when an individual who has been perceived as destructive to an organization is removed, the displacement of emotional dependencies necessarily precipitates a somewhat

disruptive period of readjustment.

A group is also strongly influenced by the intensity and number of its cut-offs, which can produce reactions similar to those generated by a loss. If a member is physically present but does not communicate with the group, there are maladaptive consequences for the group as a whole. The severity of the resulting dysfunctions depends on the intensity of the cut-off.

If an organization has a high level of anxiety, the potential for overload and dysfunction is high. One manifestation or consequence of overload is increased withdrawals or cut-offs in the organization. A loss or closure in an emotionally charged system may result in a chain reaction of other losses and closures, accompanied by disruption and dysfunction.

Concepts

An essential characteristic of emotional systems concepts is that they are interlocking and overlapping. No single concept can be described adequately without considering it alongside the others. The emotional systems orientation identifies dependencies between

variables and is not based on cause-effect thinking, which arbitrarily selects particular variables as "cause" and "effect." For purposes of clarity, each concept is described in comparative isolation from the other concepts.

Differentiation of Self. Several writers have observed the powerful emotional processes of differentiation and togetherness in small groups (Bennis and Shepard 1956, Schutz 1958, Bion 1948, Lawrence and Lorsch 1967). Emotional systems theory suggests that there are two major life-forces that operate in all groups. One of these drives moves toward individuation, whereas the other moves toward togetherness (fusion). A member of an emotional system functions from a position of tension resulting from the opposition of these two forces.

When balance or equilibrium between these two drives is characterized by less individuation and more togetherness, behavior manifests emotional dependence, reactivity, and automatic reflexes. A person at this level of functioning may be described as constantly identifying with others—doing what they do and feeling what they feel. This individual tries to merge identity with an other or others in

the system. This behavior is similar to Kelman's identification process (1961), although Bowen specifies emotional rather than cognitive influences.

When an individual's balance between these two drives consists of strong individuation or differentiation and less striving for togetherness, behavior is directed toward individual goals and is influenced by the approval of others. Differentiated individuals are aware of and comfortable with the distinctions between their thoughts and feelings and those of the group. Differentiated behavior is more reflective and thought directed than automatic and responsive.

Triangles. a triangle, which consists of three participants, describes the smallest relationship unit of an emotional system, as a couple or twosome are not considered stable. Under stress, dyads break down or become emotionally overloaded, predictably drawing a third party into the twosome to relieve the tension.

An organization is a series of interrelated and interlocking triangles. Coalitions within triangles have been conceptualized in 270 detail (Mills 1954, Stryker and Psathas 1960). Hare (1962) notes that

coalitions of two against one in three-person groups are so potent and enticing that other characteristics of the group may not be developed.

All kinds of interpersonal relationships can be conceptualized as active or dormant triangles. Overlapping and interrelated triangles are usually more visible in families than in formal organizations. Although each group member has potential relationships with the others, triangles frequently only become activated and externalized around stress-producing or emotionally charged issues.

The concept of triangles is essential for an understanding of emotional systems. Most management and behavioral science literature deals primarily with dyads or group networks, although some discussion on triangles exists (Caplow 1968).

Core Group Emotional System. The concept of core group emotional system describes and defines emotional field forces between "inner group" members in a broad relationship network. An individual perceives members of a core group to be those who are emotionally closest, having interacted with them most persistently and most frequently over along period of time.

In a work setting, the core group is the informal social group with which an individual identifies most strongly. The core group does not necessarily correspond to an "in" social group, to a leadership group, or to a task group within the organization. Although core groups may follow social or organizational groupings, they frequently cut across them. The determining factor in a core group is the degree of emotional investment of the participants. An organization can be described as a complex of interdependent core groups.

Each core group is characterized by a small number of members and unique patterns of behavior. To a certain extent core groups reflect or respond to dependencies and anxiety in the larger system. Core groups also manifest a higher level of emotional intensity and more frequent interaction than the wider system. A result of the increased activity and intensity in core groups is that emotional overload is common and frequently unavoidable.

Emotional overload in core groups can be handled in several ways. The most usual responses are emotionally reactive: conflict between major participants in the core group, dysfunction of one or more members of the core group, or projection of tensions to an other

individual or group. Projection or scapegoating is frequently the most ineffective way to handle overload in an emotional system.

Projection Process. Emotional projection is likely to occur when differentiation in a relationship system is low and anxiety is high. When tensions are high between two key members who are unable to differentiate self or function separately from each other, a third person is triangled into the twosome. The third person is trapped in the emotional field between these two members, and eventually symptoms appear in the behavior of the third person. The third person absorbs much of the emotional tension generated by the twosome, the degree of dysfunctioning of the third party resulting from the degree of unresolved tensions between the original two members. This process is often conventionally referred to as scapegoating.

Projection frequently occurs in organizations or between groups in organizations. Projection is most easily observed in cohesive departments of divisions that increase their unity by blaming an outside group for their own internal problems or by viewing an outside group negatively. Projection may occur when there is an increase in the emotional intensity or tensions within and between

departments.

Emotional Cut-Off Emotional cut-offs are breaches and blockages in the relationship network of a group. Bowen points out that the frequency of cut-offs or emotional divorces in families perpetuates relationship difficulties or precipitates symptomatic behavior. Whenever cut-offs are effectively bridged, anxiety is lowered and relationships within the family become more flexible and more viable.

Formal organizations and other social groups frequently manifest emotional cut-offs. Co-workers who find it difficult to get along with each other are inclined to distance themselves to deal with the high level of tension between them. Members of the same organization may be emotionally distant from each other but may work physically close to each other. Proximity is not a sufficient condition for enabling meaningful interaction.

In a large organization, a small group within the whole may be cut off from the rest of the network. This group will predictably function ineffectively unless concerted efforts are made to bridge the gap with meaningful emotional contacts.

The concept of emotional cut-off suggests that the most effective behavior of an individual or a group includes maintaining contacts with a wide range of others or other groups. For example, effective management cannot be focused too intensely on a single work unit if the unit is to function effectively in the long run. All kinds of contacts at each level of the organizational hierarchy, must be activated to ensure that a particular work unit remains or becomes a viable part of the whole.

Emotional cut-offs frequently develop without conscious effort. They are largely automatic responses to tension, and much effort may be needed to bridge a cut-off successfully. The individual or the group attaining this objective achieves a raised level of functioning.

Multilevel Vertical Transmission Process. This concept describes processes that are activated in a chain-reaction sequence of events at different hierarchical levels of an emotional system. Patterns of behavior are visible and predictable at different levels in an organization. They are integral parts of "up-and-down" processes in the system.

One typical sequence of events in a multilevel vertical transmission process is the increasing intensification and repetition of patterns of reactive behavior. Trends and tendencies at the top or center of an organization become more distinct and more predictable at each lower level of the emotional system. Emotional systems theory suggests that members of an organization who are lower in the hierarchy or newer to the system are more vulnerable to pressures and more responsive to others' emotional dictates. The behavior of these individuals is less independent and less effective. They are more likely to absorb intensity and anxiety from other p arts of the organization.

Multilevel repetitions of behavior become increasingly automatic through time. They show a strong inclination to be perpetuated unless individuals or subgroups make conscious efforts to reverse or change them. Patterns of conflict, dysfunction, projection, and other emotional processes—including the isolation of different segments of the system —are frequently manifested across a range of generations or hierarchical levels in an organization.

Personnel changes and logical discussion have little impact on the

tenacity of the repeated patterns of behavior. Individual members of a particular group feel an overwhelming pressure to respond in the same ways with which the group has responded over time. The communication of a pattern of behavior may or may not be verbalized, but the selected response is clear, even to an outsider. This emotional reactivity may contradict the external appearances of the situation, norms in the group, rules and policies of the organization, or the verbalized "rational" directives of the group's leader. Changes in behavior patterns are possible only if changes are made in the emotional participation within and between groups.

The automatic tendency to repeat established patterns of behavior can be described as an organizational climate. This concept, which encompasses the total effect of any given situation, was originated by Lewin (1951) and discussed more recently by Litwin and Stringer (1968) among others. These authors do not focus on emotional reactivity, but they suggest that the emotional environment of an organization has an important relationship to the behavior within it. Emotional systems theory conceptualizes feelings, repeated patterns of behavior, and reactivity as major components of organizational interaction. These responses are considered

programmed into the system by multilevel vertical transmission processes that exert a powerful influence on individual and organizational effectiveness.

Sex and Seniority Positions. American cultural mythology has long suggested that the intensity and form of emotional responses in organizations partly depend on sex and seniority. Emotional systems theory hypothesizes that although sex and seniority may have considerable influence in an organization, emotional behavior results from programming within the system rather than from the particular sex, tenure, or age of an individual.

As emotional energy circulates within an organization, it may be transformed into a wide range of emotional responses. To a certain extent the variation in responses depends on the sex and seniority of the individuals involved. Communication may be grossly distorted in this process, and identical messages may elicit contrasting responses from different members. Incentive programs based on power or prestige will also elicit a wide range of responses, depending on the level of anxiety in the system and the level of anxiety of the individual concerned.

Emotional Process in Society. To the extent that the strongest currents of emotional process in society move more toward either differentiation or togetherness, all kinds of activity in that society will be influenced in that direction. If a society is in a crisis of intense togetherness, behavior in organizations and in other groups tends to be more limited and more repetitive than in a society that has a lower level of anxiety. When the overall emotional process in a society is directed more toward differentiation than toward togetherness, behavior in organizations and in other groups tends to be more flexible and less automatic than in a society that has a higher level of anxiety.

Although the emotional climate of any organization largely derives from the intensity of its own relationship network, the boundaries between an organization and society are not impermeable. In the same way that broad organizational drives toward individuation or togetherness affect behavior within any part of an organization, societal processes of individuation or togetherness influence drives and patterns of behavior in an organization.

The Bowen family theory describes a microcosm of emotional

processes. Emotional process in society and in organizations is generally less visible and less predictable than emotional process in families, but many of the same principles of reactive dependency operate in all these contexts.

Conclusion

The Bowen family theory can serve as a general theory of emotional systems in human behavior, and its many applications and implications make it extremely versatile. Although the Bowen family concepts have an important set of consequences for family research, new associations become possible when the Bowen family theory is used as a means of understanding interaction in other settings.

The applications and implications of the Bowen family theory are perhaps more clearly defined in relation to formal organizations than in relation to other social settings. A work system is similar to a family, especially in terms of continuing membership, frequency of interaction, and multilevel organization.

The Bowen family theory suggests a new view of society and human nature. A focus on emotional dependency in personal

relationships highlights some generally underemphasized characteristics of interaction. Some of the implications of this innovative perspective on social reality have been described here, but many remain unacknowledged and are subjects for further research.

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