Considerations and Applications of Murray Bowen’s Family Systems Theory

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Family: The basic social unit in society. Descendants of a common ancestor. These are the typical entries you will find when trying to navigate and explain the phenomena of family. But, is family not more than that? Certainly, at the most uncomplicated level this is the definition of what a family is, but isn’t there more to it? Is there not some underlying humanistic connection between family members that impacts and dictates their every interaction? A connection so deep that it connects family members emotionally whether they understand it or not. Murray Bowen believed so. The Bowen family systems theory is a theory of human behavior that seeks to understand and describe this connection between the family unit, or the emotional unit, and to explain complex interactions within it.

This intense connection to family is what is felt between members when they feel the need for distance, or the need for closeness. Families have such an immediate and intense effect on each other that “it often seems as though they are living under the same ‘emotional skin.’” (Kerr, p.1) There is an interdependence between family members that effects the way their actions and words are understood. The members of the unit crave attention, approval, and encouragement and react to needs of others in the unit. Their actions are reciprocal in terms of their understanding of the other members’ needs, expectations and upsets. This being the case, each and every member within the unit or system has an impact on the unit as a whole. When one member of the system is effected, the entire system shifts and reacts in order to make accommodations for the system.

When the system remains in balance and when there is relative calm, the interdependence can be productive and cooperative. But, when there is heightened tension, this can throw the system into imbalance and disarray. When there is anxiety, for example, in a member of the system, the anxiety can spread throughout the system and the connectedness can become overwhelming and stressful rather than reassuring and comforting. Certain members of the system overcompensate or accommodate more than others in an attempt to reduce tension, but this can lead to overloading and overwhelming feelings. Often, the member who attempts to do the most accommodating can be the one who ends up feeling out of control or isolated. This puts this member at greater risk for problems such as alcoholism, depression, physical illness among others.

Bowen’s theory described 8 interlocking concepts that used systems thinking to connect and describe the knowledge of family research within the context of knowledge of the human species. One core assumption within the theory is that “an emotional system that evolved over several billion years governs human relationship systems” (Kerr, p.1). This emotional system, then, is capable of influencing each and every human activity and it is that which is responsible for the development of clinical problems. Understanding how this emotional system operates can offer more effective strategies in dealing with members who present these problems.

**The Eight Concepts**

1) Differentiation of Self

Within the structure of a family or social group, there is a substantial influence from one member to another. The amount of pressure each member can withstand without conforming is a reflection of the development of their sense of “self”. A member with a less developed sense of “self” is easily persuaded and influenced, that is, the other members of the unit have a more meaningful and lasting impact on that member. These members usually have a better developed and more concrete sense of “self”. Where this fusion exists, anxieties may be heightened as one member becomes more aware and influenced by another’s thoughts, actions, and feelings. Anxieties play a role in the interactions that develop and the symptoms that prevail. A member’s sense of “self” and understanding of their own differentiation can help to keep the system more in balance, and thereby, less anxious. Although “self” seems to be determined and set fairly early in life, the process of understanding and differentiating a self can be strengthened by defining beliefs and principles, managing reactions and anxieties, and by understanding the relationship of each member to the family system.

2) Triangles

An emotional triangle represents the smallest stable structure within a human relationship system. Where a dyad can appear stable for a while, when anxieties arise, a third member is often introduced. In a three person system, there is more room for anxieties to be shared and explored, thereby relieving pressure in the original dyad. When this three-person system can no longer sustain the anxieties, it will involve additional members which leads to interlocking triangles. These interlocking triangles can serve to de-escalate anxieties if one member of the triangle is able to remain calm in interactions with other members, thereby effecting the reactions of the rest of the triangle(s). Alternatively, with enough stress and reactivity, members can be negatively locked into the triangulation and experience symptoms.

3) Nuclear Family Emotional Process

The nuclear family, as a unit, tends to experience conflict and anxieties in 4 main areas including intimate partner conflict, concerns or problems within one emotional partner, emotional distance, and impaired functionality in children. Members engaged in conflict argue with, blame and criticize each other. Partners who create distance between themselves tend to create symptoms by becoming emotionally unavailable and thereby avoiding uncomfortable, but often important, topics.

­­­­­­­­4) Family Projection Process

In the family projection process, anxieties and stresses are focused on the child, part of the traditional triangle structure. These result is that a child develops a problem. Parents then attempt to rectify the problem by creating changes in the child and or enlisting the help of a professional to “fix” the child. Often, the management of the couple’s own anxieties and focus on the couples own relationship issues can lead to better functioning in the child.

5) Emotional Cutoff

Extreme distancing of family members can develop into emotional cut-off or a discontinuation of contact. This can lead to significant implications for future generations as this can lead to heightened anxieties, but less places for the anxiety to be absorbed and dealt with. In an attempt to deal with this emotional cut-off, surrogates are often enlisted which can lead to pressures on new relationships and symptoms can surface.

6) Multigenerational Transmission Process

Differentiation of Self is transmitted through the multigenerational transmission process. This concept describes patterns of emotional process through multiple generations. It offers a way of thinking about family patterns that goes beyond a dichotomy of genes versus environment. One of the ways family patterns are transmitted across generations is through relationship triangles.

7) Sibling Position

A concept adapted from the research of Walter Toman, sibling position postulates that the differentiation of self relies on the functional role of siblings within a system. Oldest, youngest, and middle children will exhibit characteristics and be influenced by their birth order and relative functional roles that this order dictates. Sibling position of parents and other relatives will also impact the relationships of members within the family system.

8) Societal Emotional Process

Societal emotional process is the last concept that Bowen developed. It described the nature of people within a society to be anxious and stressed at times of relative societal instability. Changes in society that have a direct impact on members within a family system can bring about stressors that can contribute to a regression in society.

**The Family Diagram**

Along with the family systems theory, Bowen invented the concept of the genogram to be used alongside his understanding of family systems to develop a true piture in which to understand the family and the impacts of family dynamics. The information contained in a genogram goes far beyond that contained in a family tree. In addition to the typical information about names, genders, dates of birth and death, a genogram contains important data including major life events such as weddings, divorces, chronic illnesses, education, and natures of family relationships. Extensive genograms can contain information about disorders and illnesses that can be passed generationally including alcoholism, depression, diseases. There is no limit to what can be included in a genogram and it is only limited by the person who creates it. A clinician using a genogram to amass information about a family and its relational system can draw parallels and gather insight into the way a family may function and dysfunction.

**Implications for the Educational System**

In regards to the use of the family systems theory in the educational system, it is a very relevant and informative way to look at the relationships we, as educators, deal with each and every day. Day in and day out, we are confronted and challenged with finding meaning and reason within the actions and reactions of our students. Having the “whole picture” when interacting and dealing with our students can give us the “inside scoop” on what a child may be feeling at any point throughout the day. When, in current events, a teacher brings up a seemingly benign topic, why can it lead to anxiety and behavioral reactions in children? It is because we often do not have enough information to know the impact our words will have on our students. In considering the family systems theory, it is possible to glimpse the complexities that surround a family and the amount of intrinsic and extrinsic factors that affect each and every person’s understanding of self and their relationships with family, let alone their place within the larger societal context. The students with whom I interact are still, according to Bowen’s theory, still differentiating their sense of “self” and are working towards developing their understanding of their place within the family to which they were born. Understandably, they have very little idea how their interactions with family members serve to reinforce or to challenge the very nature of their family dynamic.

Take, for example, a young 11-year-old boy, Paul[[1]](#footnote-1), with whom I have recently had many negative interactions. Through the articulation process, Paul’s current teacher met with his grade 5 teacher to discuss concerns for Paul in his learning. Paul’s former teacher expressed concern over his increasing defiance, work avoidance, and anxiety. A new concern began early in the new school year as Paul was often absent from school. When Paul’s teacher contacted his mother about the absences, she responded that Paul had been suffering from recurring stomachaches and that she was worried that he was not fitting in at school so might be having stomachaches because of it. The mother went on to explain that her older daughter had experienced the same thing when she had come to middle school. After conversing for a few more minutes, the mother admitted that she had told her children about her own anxieties and how they had manifested themselves in stomachaches as a child. She said that she was unsure if this was a real concern for Paul, or if she had, in fact heightened the situation by talking about it with Paul. The parent was then asked to come in for a meeting, where more of the family dynamic was unveiled. Paul’s parents were divorced and Paul lived with his older sister and mother. Paul’s mother communicated that she was often unsure about the best way to parent. She spoke of the roles that each family member played, of the lack of communication between herself and the children’s father. With this information, a clearer picture of Paul and the struggles and anxieties he was carrying began to form. Through the lens of the family systems theory, there was evidence of the interlocking triangles with parents, grandparents, and siblings – although some more stable than others, which presented some of the first symptoms of anxiety and complexity. Paul’s sibling order put him in a place of inferiority with his sibling, but also in a place of control with his mother as she wanted to make sure he was not left alone and catered to his every whim. Working with the family systems theory and using it to guide the understanding of the intricacies of the family structure can lead to deep investigation of the nature of the family structure. Indeed, with time and with the help of a clinician, more could be uncovered about the additional symptoms this family is experiencing. In addition to use of the theory, the genogram could truly lend some further insight into the development of these relationships and the generational impacts which may have had an effect on the family structure that currently exists.

Having an understanding of Bowen’s family systems theory and the eight concepts that it entails, gives us another way of approaching and understanding the dynamics that come along with each and every family. Not only do we need to consider the child, but we need to look past each individual and see them as part of a larger, familial unit that carries with them an immense amount of emotional and genealogical baggage. Being open and attuned to this can better prepare us, as educators, to explore possibilities and to be compassionate to limitations that may not be immediately obvious.

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1. Name changed to protect student’s identity. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)