Bowen Family Systems Theory

Differentiation of Self: To Be or Not to Be?

A Presentation
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Bowen Family Systems Theory

- Originated by Murray Bowen, MD (Psychiatrist)
- (Born 1913; Died 1990)
- Theory developed in the 1950’s & has evolved
- Based on his work with nuclear families
- Theory of human behavior that views the family as an emotional unit and uses systems thinking to describe the complex interactions in the unit. The emotional system affects most human activity and is the principal driving force in the development of clinical problems
- Consists of eight interlocking concepts
Bowen Family Systems Theory
Eight Concepts

- Triangles
- Differentiation of Self
- Nuclear Family Emotional System
- Family Projection Process
- Multigenerational Transmission Process
- Emotional Cutoff
- Sibling Position
- Societal Emotional Process
Differentiation of Self
(The Second Concept)

It is the only concept of Bowen Theory that considers in depth a description of those characteristics of the individual, rather than describing the “traits” of the family or group.
A progressive, internal interplay between autonomy (separation) and connection (togetherness) while progressing toward developing and known goals . . . not to differentiate is to fuse (the failure to become a separate person) with others and to place responsibility on others (or on situations, predicaments, and hurdles) for the way in which our lives develop. To differentiate is to provide a platform for maximum growth and personal development for everyone in your circle of influence.

Rod Smith, DIFFERENTIATION, TRUST  25 March 2006
Roberta Gilbert says,

• It is about individuality force – a force that is present in all individuals.

• And the degree of individuality each has depends on how fused we were/are in our family relationships.
• The concept of differentiation of self includes all aspects of health or life adaptation - physical, emotional, social, etc. It is not simply emotional maturity, which has been thought to be “fixed” by a person’s age.

• It stands as a challenge for all of us at any age.
Differentiation of Self Scale
Differentiation of Self Scale

- Ranks people on a spectrum between zero, the lowest possible level of differentiation, and 100, the highest potential level.

- Most of the population lives at points between these two.

- Most of the population scatters below 30. Fifty would be unusual, 75 “would come along once in several hundred years.”

- It is not possible to measure because of wide shifts in the functional level of pseudo-self in low scale people. Can probably only be measured over a lifetime.
Lower Functioning

• There is relationship fusion (give up or take on more of self in relationships).
• People live in a “feeling” controlled world in which feelings and subjectivity are dominant over the objective reasoning process most of the time.
• Major life decisions are based on what “feels” right.
• Primary life goals are oriented around love, happiness, comfort and security.
• Degree of anxiety present results in fusion between thinking and feeling parts of self (being undifferentiated).
High Level Functioning

• Further up the scale, all of this tends to reverse, progressively.

• There is less relationship fusion and more separation between thinking and feeling.

• There are more reliable and accurate perceptions of how things really are, and more of the decisions and planning have desired outcomes.
Components of Self
Another Way of Looking at This

- **Pseudo or Functional Self:** The part of ourselves that participates in the relationship exchange involved in fusions. It is the immature, automatic, thoughtless reactivity in us; it is where most of us live, most of the time. It lets in the anxiety from the system; it borrows self from another or gives up self to another (undifferentiated part of self).

- **Basic or Solid Self:** vies with pseudo-self against togetherness and for individuality. It is the best that it is in us. The basic self takes “I” position stances such as ‘These are my beliefs and convictions. This is what I am and who I am and what I will do, or not do’.
Boundaries and Guiding Principles

• The pseudo-self has permeable boundaries, whereby self and anxiety leak through easily – and the less differentiated the person is on the scale, the more permeable the boundaries (and vice-versa). Guiding principles are absorbed from the culture, parents, and other important systems.

• Boundaries of the basic self are not permeable, since the basic self does not take part in exchanges of self or anxiety in relationships. The basic self takes on the other’s emotions by choice. It is not an automatic response. The self is guided by actual thought-through principles that are in the awareness of the person.
A Biological Approach: Cellular Differentiation
DIFFERENTIATION OF SELF
Five Characteristics
(Definition of Self Within Relationships)
(www.emu.edu)

SELF-DEFINITION
1. A SENSE OF MY OWN LIMITS, AND THE LIMITS OF OTHERS

- A clear understanding of where I end and someone else begins

- Respect for the right of others to be the way they are, but refusing to allow others to intrude upon one’s own rights

- Defined from *within*, rather than adapting to please others or defining self over against others
2. CLARITY About What I Believe

- What would I die for . . . and what’s not worth it?
- Of what am I certain, and of what am I not so certain?
- Convictions, values, beliefs
3. COURAGE To Take Stands

- Defining where I stand, what I believe, in the face of disapproval
- Refusing to give in to another when it is a matter of principle
- Capacity to stand firm in the face of strong reactions! (You can’t think, act, feel that way and be a part of this community)
DIFFERENTIATION OF SELF
Five Characteristics

SELF-REGULATION
4. The Ability to STAY ON COURSE

- Resolve to follow through in spite of sabotage
- Emotional and spiritual stamina to follow a vision and not let others’ reactions change your course
5. STAYING CONNECTED In Spite Of It All

- Maintaining a *relatively* non-reactive presence with those who are reacting to you
- Resisting the impulse to attack or cut off from those who are most reactive to you, or to adapt to them to avoid their displeasure
- Managing one’s own anxiety, not others’ anxiety
AN ALTERNATIVE WAY OF STATING or (REALLY) REMEMBERING THIS IS . . .

Think of a three legged stool
First Leg Is: SELF-DEFINITION

1. Sensing limits, know where self and others begin and end, making the distinction between self and non-self, yet being aware of part self plays in relationship.

2. Knowing what you believe, being aware of your goals, and values, letting your own convictions determine your behavior.

3. Taking a stand, articulating your position (and in doing this not having to change the other or change oneself to please the other), seeking clarity.
4. Staying on course, having resolve, possessing emotional stamina, persevering, accepting challenge.

5. Controlling or changing the part self plays in emotional processes, being calm and reflective, focusing on one’s own functioning rather than on the functioning of others, very little blaming or attacking.
Third Leg Is: SELF-OTHER

6. Staying connected to others (if self is surrendered, it’s an act of self, it is chosen, not instinctive.

7. Going beyond self-promotion, being aware of the “other,” being as invested in the welfare of the relationship as in self.
Just Remember . . .
Every time you feel yourself getting pulled into other people's nonsense, repeat these words:

NOT MY CIRCUS,
NOT MY MONKEYS.

~ Polish Proverb
A FINAL WAY OF LOOKING AT THIS

by Dr. Jonathan Camp . . .
Friedman's Theory of Differentiated Leadership
Are there any “side effects” or concerns with being a well-differentiated person/leader that we should be aware of?