

Bowen approach on family therapy psychology essay



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The Bowenian theory was developed by Murray Bowen. The Bowenian theory is based on two goals to helping clients resolve their clinical problems. The goal of this theory is to help clients reduce the anxiety and help clients find a relief. Another goal of this theory is to increase each member of the family's differentiation. Bowen recognize that there was no need for family member to confront each other of to get even with each other, but rather saw the need for families to reestablish contact to help resolves issues of conflict. The Bowenian theory is based on eight concepts. Bowen felt it necessary that when utilizing his theory in counseling sessions that the session is more cognitive controlled than based off of emotion.

Bowen Theory: Bowen Approach on Family Therapy

Murray Bowen is the developer of the family system theory. Bowen's family systems theory was one of the first comprehensive theories of family functioning. Bowen's theory received major attention in Austria and New Zealand, and continues to be very influential in the practice of family therapy in North America (Hurst, Sawatzky, & Pave, 1996). Bowen was an evolutionist, who based his theory on the idea that people are the result of an evolutionary process, although all processes are common in nature (Larson & Wilson, 1998). Murray Bowen was born in 1913 in Tennessee and died in 1990. He trained as a psychiatrist and originally practiced within the psychoanalytic model. At the Menninger Clinic in the late 1940s, he had started to involve mothers in the investigation and treatment of schizophrenic patients. In 1954, he began to shift from an individual focus to an appreciation of the dimensions of families as systems. At the NIMH, Bowen began to include more family members in his research and

psychotherapy with schizophrenic patients. In 1959 he moved to Georgetown University and established the Georgetown Family Centre, where he was director until his death. Rather than developing a theory about pathology, Bowen focused on what he saw as the common patterns of all 'human emotional systems'. With such a focus on the qualitative similarities of all families, Bowen was known to say frequently, 'There is a little schizophrenia in all of us' (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). In 1966, Bowen published the first 'orderly presentation' of his developing ideas (Bowen, 1978). Around the same time he used his concepts to guide his intervention in a minor emotional crisis in his own extended family, an intervention which he describes as a spectacular breakthrough for him in theory and practice (Bowen, 1978). Bowen proceeded to encourage students to work on triangles and intergenerational patterns in their own families of origin rather than undertaking individual psychotherapy.

Bowen's theory is also based on the concept of multigenerational transmission and each generation moves toward a lower level of differentiation. A downward spiral will continue from generation to generation until unresolved emotional attachments and cutoff are dealt with successfully. Bowen made the hypotheses that each family's emotional system is rooted in its own multigenerational history, therapy is aimed at change in individuals or couples who are capable of affecting each other family members (Bartle-Haring, Lal, 2010).

There is a pervasive view amongst many proponents of Bowen's work that his theory needs to be experienced rather than taught (Kerr, 1991). While this may be applicable if one can be immersed in the milieu of a Bowenian <https://assignbuster.com/bowen-approach-on-family-therapy-psychology-essay/>

training institute, such an option, to my knowledge, is not available in this country. Bowen's own writings have also been charged with being tedious and difficult to read (Carter, 1991). Hence it seems pertinent to present this influential theory in an accessible format.

Bowen saw the family as an emotional unit, a network of interlocking relationships which are best understood when analyzed from a multigenerational framework. Although his therapeutic techniques are more cognitive than affective, he postulated either concept to identify the emotional processes taking place in a nuclear as well as extended family (Nims & Duba, 2011). Bowen's theory also placed a great emphasis on self-differentiation. Self-differentiation begins with one individual and progresses into the transforming of relationships in the entire family system. Self-differentiation is an individual's ability to separate his/her intellectual and emotional functioning while maintaining autonomy from the emotional issues of others and is able to function on the basis of reasoned principles (Beevar, 1972). The Bowenian theory is based on the premise that problems do not lie in the individual but rather the role of the family emotional system extending over several generations is the cause of the individual's problem (Klever, 2005). Bowen felt that multi-generational trends had a great impact on the family emotional system. It is his belief that his theory is more about life rather than families. Families are just one of many types of systems and families are a result of an evolving process (Kempson, Conley, & Murdock, 2008).

The Bowenian theory is comprised of eight concepts. Six of the concepts identify emotional processes taking place in the nuclear and extended

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family. The other two concepts emotional cutoff and societal regression identify the emotional process across family generations (Titelman, 2003). The underlying premise of all the concepts is chronic anxiety, which is an inevitable part of nature and life according to Bowen. Bowen defines anxiety as, “ arousal of an organism when perceiving a real or imagined threat” (Goldberg, Family Therapy, 1996, p. 169). The eight concepts are differentiation of self, triangles, nuclear family emotional system, family projection process, emotional cutoff, multigenerational transmission process, sibling position, and societal regression.

Differentiation of self involves separating one’s intellectual and emotional functioning process from others. Differentiation is a process or a direction in life, not a goal to be achieved (Larson & Wilson, 1998). The idea is not to be emotionally detached or to become overly objective with little or no feelings, but rather for the individual to strive for balance by achieving their self-definition but not at the expense for losing their ability for spontaneous emotional expression; here, there is a need for a balance of feelings and cognition (Larson & Wilson, 1998). Differentiation is a process or direction in life, not a goal to be achieved. Fusion is the opposite of differentiation. When an individual is fused within the family system, they find it difficult to differentiate themselves from others they fuse very easily whatever emotions are sweeping through the family and the more highly they are fused the more difficult it is for them to operate from reasoned principles (van Ecke, Chape, Emmelkamp, 2006). According to Bowen’s theory, “ a person marries a person of the same level of differentiation. The poorer differentiated the two spouses are the more they become fused and the

function of this new nuclear family will be dysfunctional in proportion to their fusion" (Larson & Wilson, 1998). Maturity and self-differentiation require an individual to become free of unresolved emotional attachment of his/her family origin. Individuals are inner-directed, establish their own goals, and assume responsibility for their own lives.

The triangle is the basic building block in the family's emotional system according to Bowen. When under stress, a dyadic emotional system in a family will recruit a third person into the system to lessen the intensity and anxiety and to gain stability. The triangle normally dilutes the anxiety as the triangle is more flexible and stable. When stress is dissipated, the third person in the triangle has a higher tolerance for dealing with stress (Rootes, Jankowski, & Sandage, 2010). When there is an increase in anxiety it is increased with a new triangle, and thus another person is brought into the system until there are a number of people involved and there are several triangles existing. According to triangulation there are four possible outcomes: 1. A stable dyad can become destabilized by a third person (birth of a child brings conflict to a marriage) 2. A stable dyad can also be stabilized by removal of a third person (child leaving home and no longer available for triangulation) 3. An unstable dyad being stabilized by the addition of a third person (conflictual marriage becoming harmonious after the birth of a child) 4. An unstable dyad being stabilized by the removal of a third person (removing the person who takes sides). Bowen felt that if a therapist could not remain neutral than they should never triangulate with the couple and remain detached from the emotional climate (Rootes et al, 2010).

Bowen believed that people marry people within the same level of differentiation in the nuclear family emotional system. The greater the anxiety the greater likelihood that anxiety will be present within the family and the family seeks resolution through fighting and distancing between each other. Bowen suggested that there are three patterns that are likely to occur when anxiety reaches a sufficient level. Those three patterns are physical/emotional dysfunction in a spouse, overt chronic, unresolved marital conflict, and psychological impairment in a child (Beevar, 1972). Physical or emotional dysfunction in a spouse can be chronic within a spouse if anxiety is generated by the family members and absorbed disproportionately by the spouse experiencing dysfunction (Rabstejnek, 1984).

The family projection process requires that parents transmit their lack of differentiation to their children. The emotional fusion between spouses produces anxiety which will result in marital conflict and tension. Family projection processes are related to the degree of undifferentiating and immaturity of parents and the level of stress and anxiety that the family experiences (Hurst, Sawatzky, & Pave, 1996).

Emotional cutoffs are the ways that people handle their attachments to their parents or their family of origin at the point of separation. According to Bowen, "the child may attempt to isolate themselves from the family of origin, take flight from the family when they leave home, and may attempt to do this by geographic relocation, through psychological barriers, such as not talking with family, or by believing they are free of family ties when in reality all they have done is broken contact" (Bartle-Haring, Lal, 2010). When one cuts themselves off emotionally from their family of origin often <https://assignbuster.com/bowen-approach-on-family-therapy-psychology-essay/>

represents an effort by which to deal with unresolved fusion with one of both parents.

The multigenerational transmission process occurs over several generations. Poorly differentiated people marry similarly differentiated people and thus this emotional dysfunction and fusion is passed down through generations. The level of differentiation transmitted across generations is not constant but each generation moves toward a lower level of differentiation increases emotional fusion.

Sibling position in the nuclear family affects a child's personality characteristics. Toman (1976) offered ten basic personality sibling profiles (such as older brother, younger sister, middle child, only child, twins, etc.) and suggested that the more closely a marriage duplicates one's sibling place in the childhood, the better will be the likelihood of success (Kempson et al, 2008).

Societal regression depicts Bowen's thinking of society's emotional functioning. Bowen felt that society had been digressing for several decades and in order for society to make better rational decisions rather than short-term solutions, he called for better differentiation of intellect and emotion in society.

The Bowen therapy system occurs in stages. The first stage is to allow the therapist the opportunity to access both past and present emotional systems by utilizing evaluation interviews and measurement techniques. It is important that the therapist is cautious of becoming too overly responsive during the initial interview. The therapist must remain emotionally detached,
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meanwhile ensuring the family that they are considered about their wellbeing. During the interview it's important that the therapist begins with finding out the history of the presenting problem focused on the systems and how it impacts the person or the relationship. A major technique that can be utilized is questioning. Questioning allows the therapist to continually stay in touch with their clients problems. Bowenians are particularly interested in the historical patterns of the family's emotional functioning, the anxiety level experienced by the family at different stages of its life, and the amount of stress experienced in the past compared to the present (Hurst et al, 1996). The final part of the interview attempts to comprehend the nuclear family in context to the extended family systems, both maternally and paternally (Titelman, 2003). Multigenerational patterns of fusion and the degree of emotional cutoff of either of both of the spouses since each nuclear family embody the emotional processes and patterns of proceeding generations.

Bowen explored multigenerational patterns through the use of genograms which gives family history of three generations. The genograms displays each family's background. From the genogram you can find an individual's names, birth and death dates, sibling position, marital status, marriages, divorces, live-in patterns, ethnicity, major family events, religious affiliations, medical data, occupations, geographic locations, socioeconomic status, education, and relationships such as fusion (Klever, 2005). Genograms can also show emotional patterns for each member of the family.

Those who are involved in family therapy sessions according to Bowen should be more cognitive and controlled than based off emotions. It's

important that each partners thinking is externalized in the presence of each
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other by talking to the therapist (Nims & Duba, 2011). Interpretations are avoided and questioning should always remain calm. Partners are not allowed to blame each other or ignore their differences, but each partner is encouraged to focus of their part in the relationship problems.

Part II

The Bowen model of family therapy is a great tool for therapist to utilize to discover symptoms in depth beyond what is seen on the surface. The theory places a great focus on the emotional processes over the generations as well as the individuals' differentiation. Bowen's model plays attention to the emotional interaction of therapist and their clients with the expectation that the process of therapy but be applied to the therapist personal lives. There are many who recognize that there is a possible drawback to utilizing the Bowen model because many therapists only want to address symptom relief in the nuclear family (Young, 1991). For those therapist that use the Bowen theory symptom reduction is seen only as the ground work for which families can proceed less anxiously towards working on detriangling and improving level.

Christians that work in psychology and mental health learn to be wary of any secular counseling that could assume moral authority in deciding and declaring what is right and wrong way to live and behave in a relationship. Approaches that promote the human's capacity to become essentially good and achieve full potential through self-effort (Rootes et al, 2010). Approaches that promote life goal of an endless effort towards self knowledge can only be at odds with the Biblical cal to love and know God with all your heart,

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mind, and strength. Col 3: 1-2, " Since then you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above where Christ is seated at the right hand of god. Set your minds on things about not on earthly things".

The Bowen family systems theory does not tell humans how they should live, but is an effort towards science that describes how humans predictably react in relationships. In the Bible we learn of symptoms that are possible causes of disharmony in humans and their relationships, and these symptoms effect how people take control over their lives (Rootes et al, 2010). Bowen theory describes the patterns of relationship and emotional symptoms in the lives of believers. According to Bowen theory the key variable is a person's level of differentiation. This theory describes observations of the instinctual ways that human's behave to reduce the discomfort of sensing discord in relationships, through losing thoughtful boundaries to create a feeling of harmony (fusion), through the distancing in the face of difference (emotional cut off), side taking or focusing on a third person to return a sense of security (triangles), and being overly helpful to others at the expense of their self management (over and under function). The Bowen theory is helpful knowledge based on the generosity of God's grace to humanity.

The Bowenian therapy has been embraced by some leading feminist such as Betty Carter and Harriet Goldhor Lerner. There are some such as Deborah Leupnitz (1998) points out that Bowen along with other male family therapy pioneers, has paid rather too much attention to the mother's contribution to symptom development in the child. Informal forms of marriage and family counseling have been around for a long time. Counseling was most likely provided by family, friends, doctors, clergy, and lawyers. The different

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approaches of family therapy are very diverse. Families are seen as functional within their own context. In family therapy, the whole family is the client.

Another important factor of family therapy comes from the general systems theory. General systems theory examines the interactions and the processes of parts of a whole system. Within the general systems theory, feedback refers to the patterns of communication. The two basic types of communication are linear and circular. Linear is the type of communication that goes one way while circular feedback allows each member of the system to affect the other. Family therapy has many contributing authors, but one that is most notable is Murray Bowen. Bowen presented the concepts of self-differentiation, triangulation, fusion, and emotional cutoff. Self-differentiation is an individual's ability to distinguish his or her own thoughts and feelings from the system and remain an individual. The key to self-differentiation is to remain connected but separate. Families have a way of pulling individuals back to homeostasis and ensuring their loyalty to the system. The term triangulation refers to the tendency of a dyad to pull in a third member when the stress and anxiety is too great. The third person becomes the stabilizer as the anxiety is shifted around. Fusion occurs when a family's boundaries are very weak. The relationships become enmeshed and dependent upon one another for their sense of identity. Emotional cutoff can occur when the stress and anxiety is too great. The individual may emotionally disconnect from the family in order to gain some distance and a sense of individuality.

Bowen also looked at the influence and impact of multiple generations on the family. He believed that individuals find spouses of the same level of differentiation as they are. Their level of differentiation is then transmitted to the next generation. The genogram is a great diagramming tool used to map the intergenerational transference that occurs within families. Family Systems Therapy is very consistent with my religious and spiritual beliefs. The Bible uses the analogy of family on many occasions. The concept of self-differentiation and is seen within the Biblical text. As in the body of Christ; each member is an individual yet connected to the other. Outside the body of Christ, there is no membership. Likewise, families must be individuals yet connected. Because of my spiritual background, this is a concept I can help my clients gain and understand. Family therapy offers the Christian counselor a framework to work with clients from a Biblical perspective. The flexible boundaries, structure, and the definable roles found within family therapy, is consistent with my Christian views.

Triangles have always been significant. In Christianity there is the holy trinity, the father-son-and-holy ghost. In politics we find the Roman triumvirate - a three person system of ruling. More recently the framers of the U. S. Constitution created the tripart checks and balances system of the executive, legislative and judicial branches. In medieval European music, three beats to the measure (3/4 time) was called perfect time (whereas 4/4 was called common time). In psychology, Freud's id-ego-superego construct revolutionized the way the individual was conceptualized. Today, the field of family therapy uses the triangle as one of its conceptual bases. One of the purposes of this paper is to review the extent to which the concept of

triangles (in their various permutations) is being researched and if there is any empirical support for the concept. In order to understand the emotional dynamics, the therapist must examine the triangle. Bowen (1978), states that “ the triangle, a three-person emotional configuration, is the...basic building block of any emotional system, whether it is in the family or any other group” (p. 373).

Family therapists needs to know how to manipulate these variables in order avoid being triangulated. Bowen (1978) suggests that therapists should control their reactions by “ getting outside” of themselves (1978). If the therapist remains neutral, the emotional problem will automatically resolve (1978). As difficult as this is, neutrality is one of the most powerful therapeutic inputs (Bowen, 1971 cited in Aylmer, 1986). One of Bowen’s most successful strategies is to work with the family until he learns their triangular strategies. Then he works with the parents, anticipating and diffusing the triangulating maneuvers. This forces the parents to focus on the problem (1978). Other successful strategies in remaining de-triangled are seriousness and humor.