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APPLICATION OF BOWEN THEORY
WITH A CONFLICTUAL COUPLE

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ABSTRACT

In this article, Bowen theory was applied to a couple experiencing marital conflict. The objectives for treatment included increasing the differentiation of the marital dyad, detriangulating the system, tracing patterns of emotional reactivity, and pointing out multigenerational fusion. Various interventions were utilized to address these goals.

BOWEN THEORY

Bowen developed his theory over a lifetime of research on families as an emotional unit (Gilbert, 1992). Four of the major constructs of Bowen theory are self-differentiation, triangles, emotional systems, and multigenerational transmission.

According to Bowen (1978), there is a natural desire for togetherness, as well as the need for differentiation. Differentiation is achieved when a person can maintain selfhood and yet remain part of the family unit. The term has its roots in embryology, wherein the fertilized egg repeatedly divides into cells that perform different functions (Papero, 1991). Bowen related this differentiation process to an individual's ability to separate emotionally from the family of origin in order to adapt to life's challenges and reach personal goals (Gilbert, 1992).

Most people struggle to separate emotionally from their families of origin and establish individuality (Friedman, 1991). This can be achieved by setting well-defined boundaries and identifying "well thought-out beliefs, standards, values, and priorities" (Gilbert, 1992). It is also important to recognize triangles in the family system (Bowen, 1978). Triangles develop when an unstable dyad seeks a third

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Family Therapy, Volume 25, Number 3, 1998
Libra Publishers, Inc., 3089C Clairemont Dr., Suite 383, San Diego, CA 92117

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party to reduce stress, tension, and anxiety (Walsh, 1980). This person is often one of the children, but can be a parent, coworker, lover, or even a lawyer, doctor, or pastor (Gilbert, 1992). If a single triangle fails to diffuse the anxiety, interlocking triangles may be formed (Paterno, 1991).

The multigenerational transmission process is responsible for the tendency to repeat family-of-origin patterns (Gilbert, 1992). For example, parents may focus their anxiety on the children, who subsequently pass this on to their children (Friedman, 1991). In addition, a child who fails to develop emotional maturity will as an adult usually choose a mate on the same emotional level, facilitating the transmission process (Roberto, 1992). Understanding emotional patterns in the family of origin helps to prevent the occurrence and transmission of similar interaction patterns (Friedman, 1991; Gilbert, 1992).

In this article, Bowen theory is applied to the case of a couple experiencing intense marital conflict, in order to increase their differentiation, help them detriangulate, explore their emotional fusion and reactivity, and point out multigenerational transmission processes. Appropriate Bowenian goals and interventions were used.

CASE STUDY

Lucille and Arthur (not their real names) had a problem getting along with their own mothers, but Lucille especially had difficulty relating to her mother-in-law. Arthur visited his mother seven or eight times a week. When the children were taken to visit Arthur's mother, the couple had different views of the experience. According to Arthur: "Mother gives them loving care that they rarely get at home." Lucille felt otherwise: "His mother tries to condition the children against me."

Lucille was hurt that Arthur's mother seemed never to have liked her. This feeling was exacerbated by Lucille's belief that her mother-in-law always felt Arthur had made a mistake in marrying her. Arthur admitted he was waited on "hand and foot" by his mother, something Lucille refused to do. Lucille admitted she was a poor housekeeper, but resented her mother-in-law's coming to their house and cleaning up. This conflict resulted in Lucille screaming at her mother-in-law.

A month before the couple came for counseling, Lucille had become so frustrated she forbade Arthur to invite his mother to their home again. Lucille also did not want Arthur to visit his mother and made him promise not to go to her house anymore, although she realized that he would go anyway and might even lie about his whereabouts.

Moving to a distant town seemed to be a solution to this mother-in-law triangle when the couple first married. However, they returned after only two months. The reasons they gave differed. Lucille felt that "he couldn't stay away from mama," while Arthur noted, "I had a bad job, my boss was impossible to work with, and we didn't like the area." Lucille fought with her own mother, but "out in the open," so she knew where she stood. Lucille seemed to want that kind of a relationship with her mother-in-law, but Arthur's mother, when confronted, "just looks hurt and tries to do even more things around the house." Lucille was so frantic about the situation that she threatened divorce. Lucille's hurt over Arthur's taking his mother's side was apparent from such statements as, "He never says anything to his mother in my defense." Arthur saw taking Lucille's side in this conflicted triangle as "punishing or castigating his mother." He realized that, as an only child, he was his mother's only interest in life, a situation that had been made worse by his father's death. Arthur knew his mother needed a great deal of attention and admitted he felt he should oblige her. Yet, he was torn between wanting to move across town, as Lucille insisted, and feeling guilty that the move would mean "abandoning" his mother.

PRESENTING PROBLEMS AND STRENGTHS

Arthur's undifferentiated qualities were evident in his attachment to his mother and lack of autonomous identity. Lucille's undifferentiation was manifested in her inability to separate thinking from feelings and fighting as a form of communication. Triangulation occurred when Lucille and Arthur drew their in-laws into the marital conflict. Intense emotional fusion was apparent in the couple's conflictual interactive patterns and the emotional cutoff between Lucille and her mother-in-law. These behavior patterns and undifferentiation were multigenerational.

In spite of these identified problems, one obvious strength was the couple's desire to stay together and raise their children. Lucille's strengths also included an ability to take a firm stand on what she wanted from Arthur and to maintain a consistent relationship with her mother. Arthur sincerely wanted to make things easier for Lucille and took an active interest in his children. In addition, he wanted to bridge the gap between his children and his mother by taking them to visit her. He obviously respected and cared for his mother.

Setting Goals

One of the goals of therapy was to help increase the self-differentiation and adaptation of both spouses by addressing emotional cutoffs and conflicts. A second goal was to detriangulate the family system by tracing patterns of intense anxiety and interlocking triangles between Arthur, Lucille, and each of their mothers. A third goal was to decrease emotional reactivity. The final goal was to address multigenerational fusion patterns in order to help the couple develop one-on-one relationships with their in-laws, children, and parents.

Interventions

Increasing self-differentiation. To move the couple toward a higher level of self-differentiation, the therapist helped them separate their thinking from their feeling processes. Questions to Lucille included: "What do you think would occur if Arthur stood up for you in the presence of his mother?" "How do you think Arthur would react if he came home every night to a clean, orderly house?" "What do you think would be the result if you and Arthur went on a vacation, leaving the children with his mother?" Questions to Arthur included: "What do you think the outcome would be of a family gathering that included your nuclear family, your mother, and your mother-in-law?" "How do you think Lucille's actions would be different if you stayed home with her every night?" "What do you think would be different about your family if you moved across town from your mother?"

It was also crucial to address what triggered their marital conflict and devise ways to disrupt the cycle. Questions to Lucille included: "How have you and your mother been able to talk about issues and still stay friends?" "What would happen if you baked some cookies for Arthur to take on his next visit to his mother?" Questions to Arthur included: "What would happen if you began making mother-in-law jokes about your own mother? Do you think Lucille would begin sticking up for her?" "What would happen if each time you went to visit your mother, you told Lucille you would be home in time to take her out to dinner?"

Detriangulating the system. To address anxiety in the family system, the therapist explored triangles in both Arthur's and Lucille's families of origin. The couple identified family themes, secrets, myths, rules, cutoffs, displays of affection, and conflict patterns (Friedman, 1991; Gilbert, 1992). They were taught to recognize the impact of reacting emotionally instead of cognitively. This helped the couple learn to manage their relationships, in both their families of origin and nuclear family, without resorting to triangles.

It was important for the therapist to remain outside of any triangle (i.e., neutral), as well as calm when conflict erupted. One way this was accomplished was through the use of humor (Papero, 1991; Gilbert, 1992).

Assessing emotional systems. Assessing past and present emotional reactivity not only helped the couple recognize affective responses that sustained marital conflict, but also revealed ways in which they could promote relationship success. Arthur and Lucille explored current emotional patterns, which included cutting each other off, distancing, and anger, and traced these learned patterns back to childhood. It was also important for the couple to observe the emotional process during family gatherings.

To begin healing the emotional rifts, Arthur and Lucille were encouraged to interact frequently with the children and watch for opportunities to practice direct, nonreactive communication with them and each other. Lucille was encouraged to write her mother-in-law an informal note of family news in order to further close emotional distance. In addition, Lucille telephoned her own mother using the direct, nonreactive communication style. This call was practiced beforehand to help her avoid being seduced into old patterns.

Understanding multigenerational transmission patterns. Multigenerational transmission patterns were explained. The therapist pointed out the causal factors behind the lack of differentiation and fusion between Arthur and his mother, and Lucille's open conflict with her own mother.

In sum, the intervention focused on family strengths, reduced anxiety and emotional distance, and taught the family a more open, direct communication style.

CONCLUSION

Bowen advocated examining the past in order to revamp the future. The genogram is one visual tool the therapist can use to direct family members away from family-of-origin triangles, emotional cutoffs, and multigenerational fusion and toward new patterns of self-differentiation (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). The therapist can also teach clients to keep their thoughts and emotions separate; that is, choose between "thoughtful behavior and reactivity" (Papero, 1991).

Clients can also be taught new relationship skills, to be applied in their nuclear family as well as families of origin (Papero, 1991). They can learn to divest themselves of the victim role regarding family con-

fact, maintain one-on-one relationships rather than forming triangles, refrain from self-criticism and the blaming of others, and maintain contact instead of using emotional cutoff (Gilbert, 1992). Progress will be made as clients work on self-differentiation, detriangulation, and healing the emotional system, especially since a change in one part of the system will affect other parts (Walsh, 1980).

Bowen theory can be used with clients who have AIDS, cancer, and other chronic illnesses (Papero, 1991). It also seems appropriate for divorced clients. It might be beneficial for clients with addiction problems, helping them identify their strengths in order to counteract weaknesses (Gilbert, 1992). Bowen theory, which was so useful in the case of Arthur and Lucille, appears to have a broad spectrum of applications.

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"IF I AM NOT TO BLAME, DOES THAT MEAN I DON'T HAVE TO BE RESPONSIBLE?" POSSIBLE EFFECT OF A SYSTEMS APPROACH ON PERSONAL ACCOUNTABILITY WITHIN FAMILIES

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ABSTRACT

Therapeutic literacy and awareness of the need for congruence between therapist and client/family values have recently been recognized as important for participant satisfaction and positive outcomes. Yet, systems theory has Eastern ideological roots that appear to be antithetical to the traditional Western Judeo-Christian belief schema. The possible effect of this lack of fit between "systems" family therapists and their "traditional" clients is considered.

In the period following World War II, family therapy began to supplement and sometimes supplant individual therapy, which had previously been the treatment of choice when an individual exhibited problematic behavior (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 1991). Psychopathology in one family member, who often was diagnosed as schizophrenic—which had been seen as an aberration residing within the individual—came to be viewed not only etiologically as a family (systemic) dysfunction, but the *family* became the *identified patient*. This new therapeutic approach was based on general systems theory, which adopts a holistic outlook (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 1991). As contrasted with the psychoanalytic approach in which an identified patient presented for therapy, general systems theory contends that individual symptomatology is simply indicative of systemic family dysfunction: "Focusing on the functioning of one element (member) becomes secondary to understanding the connections or relationships among family members and the overall organization of the system" (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 1991, p. 35).

However, to lump all systems theorists and therapists together into a homogeneous, undifferentiated group is naive and superficial. Haley and Madanes' emphasis on problem solution and strategy, Minuchin's focus on structure and hierarchy, Selvini Palazzoli's use of paradox and invariant prescription, Bowen's concentration on transgenera-

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Family Therapy, Volume 25, Number 3, 1998
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