

An Investigation of the Family Systems Theory

To what extent is the Family Systems Theory a reliable means of accurately identifying and diagnosing social and cognitive development issues within family members?

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Introduction

Dr. Murray Bowen, an esteemed member of the psychiatric community, originally started his work in the Army as a general medical officer. Proceeding his time serving and observing soldiers suffering with PTSD, he spent almost a decade at the Mellinger Clinic completing his residency in psychiatry, with a specific focus on Freudian psychoanalysis; he would later continue working with members of families who suffered from different forms of mental illnesses. It was during his residency that he had come to a particular conclusion: he believed that Freudian psychology and method of analysis on a patient was too [subjective]. He theorized that each person's ability to interpret a situation was entirely too dependent on their personal feelings or intuition. He believed that there had to be a better way to analyze human behavior, a more "objective" method that could be more reliable because it would be rid of impartiality (Perelli, 2018). He continued to pursue this idea and worked to later formalize an eight concept theory, known as the Family Systems Theory (FST) well into his late career as the "Clinical Professor of Psychiatry and Director of the Georgetown University Family Center" (Perelli, 2018). This theory is still currently being developed, tested, at the Bowen Center for the Study of the Family at the Georgetown Family Center by his successor, Dr. Michael E. Kerr as well as assessed by other researchers.

Family Systems Theory interprets a family as "an emotional unit that uses systems thinking to describe complex interactions within the unit" (Kerr, 2016). Based on this idea, that behavior or an emotional response is interconnected with patterns seen within the familial dynamic, Bowen developed eight concise concepts that would help to analyze specific behaviors and the situations that caused these behaviors to originate. According to the Center for Family Systems Theory, it is specified that along with these concepts there are 2 very specific

implications; first, the state of emotional well-being of a family member is directly related to the medical, mental and social well-being of another member and second, “treatment need not be directed at the symptomatic person” (Perelli, 2018). For a theory to manage the claim that it can account for the specific issues within a family that cause emotional strain and directly lead to dysfunction, then ultimately for the theory to retain its credibility, it needs to account for the issues that would alter the course of social and cognitive development that would result in abnormal human behavior that could alter or change the course of development for family members. This breeds the idea for the focus of this investigation: **To what extent is the Family Systems Theory a reliable means of accurately identifying and diagnosing issues in social and cognitive development within family members?** This question is worthy of investigation because it explores the validity and reliability of these 8 concepts; this is especially significant because Bowen Theory claims to have “the potential to replace most of Freudian theory” (Perelli, 2018), which is considered to be a staple of the psychological community’s initial understanding of human behavior. Furthermore, FST can be recognized as the origin of plenteous new research that’s been conducted in the field of psychoanalysis (Noone, 2016) and is currently referenced as an established theory in the on going development of adolescent psychology (Lerner and Steinberg, 2009).

This investigation will be concentrated on assessing three of these eight concepts, including Emotional Cutoff, Sibling Positions, and Family Triangles in order to flesh out the specific claims made in these concepts and compare them with findings of conducted research and theories that discusses similar aspects of development. In addition to this, this exploration will further asses the ethical validity of the concepts and their applicability.

Family Systems Theory

The Family Systems Theory, or Bowen Theory, is a human behavioral theory that identifies a family as an interconnected emotional unit. Having such a great dependence on one's family, it's understood that families "profoundly affect their member's thoughts, feelings, and actions that it often seems as if people are living underneath the same 'emotional skin'" (Kerr, 2016). A person's goals, aspirations, and views on life are first introduced to a child by their parents or intimate family members; it is implied that within the unit members constantly seek approval from one another. If there is a shift or imbalance in the anxiety levels of one or more family members, reciprocally the state of emotional stability of the entire familial unit becomes at jeopardy. The traditional family roles established in the unit may become blurred, forcing others to compensate for different responsibilities, which can often cause a member to instinctively act out (Kerr, 2016). To outline the situations where this can occur, Bowen developed his 8 concepts (1978) adapted from Dr. Michael Kerr's "One Family's Story: A Primer on Bowen Theory", which can be outlined below:

Family Triangles: Triangle refers to a three-person relationship, where there is a constant 'insiders' vs. 'outsider' normalcy (Kerr, 2016). The two insiders form an in-group and actively favor each other while rejecting the outside party. When there is an emotional strain that arises between the two insiders, one of them will attempt to seek comfort from the outsider. If tension continues to grow, it will shift the balance and create a new set of insiders.

Differentiation of Self: As stated in the theory, family influences one's behavior, but specifically, "individuals vary in their susceptibility to groupthink and groups vary in the amount of pressure they exert for conformity" (Kerr, 2016). Thus, it is implied that a

matured sense of self is correlative to the state of familial relationships during childhood and adolescent development. Those with a “poorly differentiated sense of self” (Kerr, 2016) tend to rely on the opinions and favor of others, or in contrast will try to force those around them to conform to their own opinions.

Nuclear Family Emotions: This concept addresses four specific family situations that can cause an emotional dissonance between family members because they demand a change in the role of a presumed member; these situations include the following: “*Marital Conflict*”, “*Dysfunction in One Spouse*”, “*Impairment of One or More Children*”, and “*Emotional Distance*” (Kerr, 2016).

Family Protection Process: This is described as the process by which parents “transmit their emotional problems to a child”. It has a cause and effect pattern. (1) Parents become overly apprehensive, worrying if their child has become erratic. (2) Parents interpret their child’s behavior as an affirmation of their initial anxieties, believing that there is an irregularity in their child and (3) in turn, they treat them as if there is something wrong with them. As they grow, the child becomes confined to these fears that it significantly controls their development (Kerr, 2016)

Multigenerational Transmission Process: This describes how the smallest differences in the level of self- differentiation are carried down generations through “conscious teaching and learning of information” and “unconscious programming of emotional reactions and behaviors” (Kerr, 2016). Through this process, the development of a child progresses, and their level of self-differentiation can be determined (Haefner, 2014).

Emotional Cutoff: Unresolved emotional issues between family members causes there to be a distinct lack of contact between the unit. Family members will create a rift between those they feel have wronged them by spending minimal time with that member, or completely moving geographical locations--- hence the term ‘cutoff’ (Haefner, 2014). As a result, members will look to their social life to find alternative relationships that replicate the same level of intimacy as the relationship they lost.

Sibling Position: This concept is based on research conducted by Walter Toman on the influence of sibling relationships on the development of children. The basis of his findings are centered around the idea of “complementary” positions. An older sibling is more inclined to be the leader, while a younger sibling is likely to be a follower. Toman’s research extended into relationships later into adulthood. He asserts that in a work environment, if one could identify two people who collaborate “unusually well” together, it may be due to their personal sibling position. Despite the lack of genetic similarity, an eldest leader could subconsciously collaborate with a youngest follower. Toman also asserts that sibling positions may also play a large role in the success of marriages and likeliness of divorce (Kerr, 2016)

Societal Emotional Processing: This premise established that these eight concepts are not privy to just family and they may be applied to emotional systems on a “societal level” (Kerr, 2016) Furthermore, it states that society “parallels anxiety on stress on the family” (Haefner, 2014). Similar to added stresses in a family unit, added stresses to a society like over population or even a lack of natural resources can cause a retrograde.

One's brain is perpetually internalizing information from the world around them and as neurons fire and make connections, the brain "[directs] behavior to adapt to the environment" (Noone, 2016). In their entirety, the Bowen Theory concepts advertised by the Bowen Center for the Study of the Family cover an array of possible environmental situations that suggest plausible reasoning for human behavior as well as suggest that there are significant development disparities as a result of these emotional imbalances. Although these distinctions exist and there is a high degree of specificity, a theory so elaborative and expansive needs to be assessed in its validity, reliability, and ethics.

Emotional Cutoff

A key component in Emotional Cutoff is that once tension causes a family member to limit interaction with the opposing member that they feel has inherently wronged them, they look to other sources to fill the roles to remedy the missing components that one receives from that specific relationship. In its entirety, this concept solely focuses on expressing the imbalances and anxieties that occur, but other research that suggests widening one's environmental social circle may prove to be significantly beneficial to one's development. Robert Weiss proposed a theory centered around the idea of social provisions that one would receive, or want to receive in a relationship, this theory was later put to test to study relationship and social patterns that children harbor (Weiss, 1994, adapted from Furman and Buhrmester, 1985). In this study, they developed a Network of Relationship Inventory, 30 questions that would assess 10 social provisions, 6 of which were Weiss's original provisions. This consisted of "(a) reliable alliance, (b) enhancement of worth, (c) guidance, (d) companionship, (e) affection, (f) intimacy" as well as Buhrmester and Furman's added "(a) relative power of the child and other, (b) conflict, (c) satisfaction, and (d)

importance” (Furman and Buhrmester, 1985). All of these provisions can be implied as important in assessing roles in a relationship, or general familial roles, which is consistent with the idea of specific established roles in FST. The subjects, fifth grade boys and girls, answered questions about immediate family members, step-parents, grandparents, best friends, and teachers. Regarding importance, “85% of children mentioned teachers and 60% mentioned grandparents” (Furman and Buhrmester, 1985). The results indicate that important relationships are not only limited to a small family unit; these provisions that are considered the key to a healthy relationship can be identified, even by 11-13-year-old children in non-immediate family suggesting that whether or not the relationship was initiated to aid in filling a different void of intimacy, they considered it to be a beneficial relationship. These findings can be corroborated with that of Human Ecological theory, which communicates that “a person’s quality of life depends on the quality of their environment” in addition to the idea that “humans are social beings who depend on other humans” (Jansen, 2017). Jansen argues that the the expansion of a youth’s social circle, specifically to that of extended family members, can be a positive experience that engulfs them with support that can aid in the toll that mental illnesses, including depression, can have on continuing development.

Furthermore, another theory that identifies developmental benefits of an expanding external environment is Bandura’s Social Cognitive Theory. SCT asserts that people’s behaviors are conclusive of their personal understanding gained from the observation of their social environment (LaMorte, 2018). Within this relationship, one’s social cognition develops as their external environment expands; one’s interactions will expand to gatekeepers, or significant members of a culture or society that influence their group’s way of thought and their actions. This is correlative with the understanding that as children’s social and cognitive development

expands, it is necessary for their social circles to expand to allow for their brains to gain the most information. While understanding that Emotional Cutoff refers to searching for an outside relationship, it lacks in its legitimacy because it does not acknowledge positive development as a result of expansion of social contact.

Sibling Position

In accordance to Bowen Theory, siblings have complementary roles regarding birth order, but FST does not attempt to elaborate on how a leader-follower relationship might have an effect on cognitive development. In contradiction to this lack of developmental acknowledgement, when comparing the intelligence of an only child to the intelligence of a same age eldest sibling, the eldest sibling would achieve a higher rate of intelligence, because having a younger sibling provides a “teaching function” (Zajonc, 1976). In addition to this, having an older sibling allows for more exposure to information and learning opportunities for the younger sibling. To elaborate, studies that were conducted on two sibling households that tested intelligence when each sibling was of the same age showed that younger siblings scored higher than their older counter party (Zajonc and Sulloway, 2007). Their results are corroborative with the idea that having an older sibling is indeed beneficial to the younger sibling’s cognitive development, as they were able to significantly perform and test better because of the learning and observational advantages that were cultivated in a sibling environment. In addition to this, even though there were significant differences in their level of intelligence performance, both parts of a sibling party would have scored higher than that of an only child because of the learning outcomes of their experiences with an older or younger sibling such as the leader-

follower relationship suggested by Bowen's Theory (2018), or the teaching role of an older sibling, suggested by Zajonc (1976).

In addition, predicting day to day behavior, FST also claims that it can account for behavior in the success of marriages. In Toman's "Family Constellation" he identifies eleven different sibling positions ranging from twins, eldest male, youngest female, only female etc. In addition to this, he writes that one's social experiences are learned from observations and interactions from one's immediate family circle (Toman, 1976); therefore, when one is involved in new relationships, it is implied that the social and cognitive development gained from their sibling position is infused in this new relationship. Toman furthers his claims saying that these sibling positions dictate the success of marriages. He claims that having two complementary sibling positions, like an eldest son and a youngest daughter, in a marriage breeds for a long-lasting relationship (Kerr, 2016, p. 37); reciprocally, he also asserts that relationships with people of the same sibling position are likely to fall apart. Although Bowen interpreted Toman's results as conclusive, multiple researchers testing the Birth Order Theory have found their own results incompatible with Toman's. To exemplify, in a study reviewing the applicability of Toman's research as well as other researchers that set out to test birth order, it was concluded that "the data indicated no significance between birth order and three types of successful romantic relationships", despite showing correlative data that showed connections between failing relationships and birth order (Schilling). It's exemplified that these two components that should fall hand in hand do not seem to corroborate with one another, implying that correlation does not equal causation, which is precisely why after fifty more years of research Birth Order Theory remains inconclusive. Furthermore, sibling position is confirmed as having a vital role in development as well as the "understanding of how families influence individual development"

(Dunn, 2013). In Toman's specified roles, there is a recognized lack of personal attributes to the position of a middle child and their contributions to a relationship, simply stating that they tend to be closer to another sibling position without specification. This shows a distinct lack of recognition of the developmental roles that middle children could play in a familial unit, as well as the lack of recognition in the marital outcome claim. This furthers the protestation because when viewing the research, he conducted on birth order effects on marital status, it lacks in deep consideration for relationships that include those of middle sibling positions. Furthermore, as the concept of sibling positions continues to expand and be studied worldwide, specified attributes associated with a specific sibling position may change as a result of different familial roles associated with a culture, or ethnicity.

Family Triangles

The concept of triangles comes from the premise that the triad is the smallest foundation of a complex, but secure familial relationship. With that said, Bowen sees this to be true because tension can indefinitely continue to move throughout the triangle while still remaining intact. If tension escapes it's said that it moves to "a series of 'interlocking' triangles", which can aid in stabilization (Kerr, 2016). As exemplified, Kerr recognizes that the dynamic has issues, as it may call for outside assistance, but this still doesn't account for families of greater size, assuming that FST has considered that significant or problematic issues that might arise in larger family environments. Furthermore, in "One Family's Story: A Primer on Bowen Theory", Kerr provides a hypothetical family triangle to assist in explaining its nature; the triad consisted of a father, a mother, a child, and illustrated the development and movement of tension as the child entered into the family. The speculative scenario did not provide an explanation for how the origin and

movement of these tensions may have differed had it been a same sex couple or had the couple had a boy or a girl. The lack of gender consideration in the triangular environment makes it difficult to pinpoint social or cognitive traits of development that would lead to a prediction in behavior. Furthermore, similar to gender, there is a lack of clarity in whether or not triangles account for a familial unit where parents are missing; in this case siblings may compensate for absentee parents. These roles are important to acknowledge because studies show that the intimacy between siblings can “buffer children from stress and depression” associated with the lack of a parental figure (Gass, Jenkins and Dunn, 2007, Milevsky, 2005, adapted from Lerner and Steinberg, 2009). This further shows that the lack of specificity in Family Triangles does not account for the various types of familial situations to predict accurate behavior and therefore, accurate development. In addition, FST claims that an insider or outsider within the triad may cultivate a specific response to a situation that is directly related to the presumed role they have in the family (Perelli, 2018), but familial roles in cultures worldwide differ greatly. For example, a woman or wife’s role in Asian cultures and a man or father’s role in North African cultures can be described as very defined, leaving a child with a lasting cognitive understanding of what each familial role entails. A large part of understanding one’s culture is associated with the exchange of language, which is predominantly tangentially related to narratives, or an exchange of stories or “account of events occurring over time” (Bruner, 1991). These narratives establish a culture’s expectations and help a developing mind make sense of how to act and what to believe as a part of that culture. To reiterate, the existence of thousands of languages worldwide suggests that there is a large degree of different narratives that establish normalcy within a culture and therefore an expansive variation of opinions on what aspects constitute acceptable maternal or paternal behavior and overall role. FST is slowly gaining traction in the psychological world,

whether or not it will be able to account for the differences of cultural narratives worldwide should be considered when addressing its applicability because currently, the roles that family members are said to assume are based on Western familial ideologies. This generalization of what a parental role appears to be, more Western centered, doesn't account for the various different roles that parents are perceived to take, as established by a multiplicity of different narratives within the Eastern world; therefore, it becomes difficult to attempt to predict the pattern in which tension moves within a family if there is an already existing favoritism for the decisions or actions made by the matriarch or patriarch of that family unit. With this understanding, predicting an accurate course of problematic development becomes extremely difficult because a narrative establishes an incredible amount of what one's personal understanding of the role of a parent and the latter understanding of how to parent, as it's expected that "different cultural groups possess distinct beliefs and behave in unique ways with respect to their parenting" (Bornstein, 2012). Thus, for the concept of Family Triangles to retain its credibility and be applied in a therapeutically affective manner, the understandings and predictions of cursors for emanating tensions need to be modified for each individual family's cultural and religious roots that may allot for a unique understanding of the attributes of a parental figure.

Conclusion

This exploration of the currently used Family Systems Theory deeply investigated and fleshed out three of the eight concepts: Emotional Cutoff, Sibling Relationships, and Family Triangles, and assessed each claim and its connection to social and cognitive development by comparing it to similarly conducted research and assessing its proficiency in accounting for

gender and cultural considerations. The concepts each embodied different familial dynamics, their problems, and how their origins would result in a pattern of predicted behavior or development. To retain the credibility of the claim that FST can account for instances of specific behavior, then it should also account for the issues that would change the course of social or cognitive development that would lead to these behaviors.

After conducting an analysis, it can be concluded that Family Systems Theory, while it may seem artificially organized, demonstrates a large lack of explanation in how behavior is developed because of its expansive nature. FST covers an entirety of significantly different concepts that can ultimately stand alone as their own theories. This is substantially also the reason why this analysis only deeply reviewed three of the eight concepts--- there is too much to attribute to all eight. In comparison to the three analyzed concepts, the research used that covered similar premises as each of the concepts, was especially specific, resulting in legitimate results, contrary to the Bowen Center's hypothetical application of the eight concepts. While it adapts features of development, there is an extensive amount of other research, with similar claims that is able to account for significantly more details in the progression of social and cognitive development. Therefore, through the use of all concepts, FST cannot be deemed reliable for identifying possible issues within the social and cognitive development of a family unit, due to its unrealistic application of its vast size and large generalizations made about the nature of familial roles and lack of gender recognition. However, if the eight concepts were to be reviewed and tested separately, its plausible to say they can yield significant results, seeing that researchers are already looking into similar ideas and finding new input to contribute to the developmental studies. In summation, it can be difficult to agree with the claim that Bowen Theory can be seen as a more "objective" (Perelli, 2018) method of interpreting human behavior in comparison to

Freudian theory because, like the latter there are significant considerations not taken that invalidate its applicability; therefore, if the concepts of FST were thoroughly and separately broken down and evaluated, they may constitute applicable findings that can identify and aid in the diagnoses of issues of social and cognitive development.

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