

Exploring the impact of Bowen's Systems Coaching on the Work-Related Psychological Health of Clergy

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Bowen Systems Coaching

Murray Bowen (1913-1990), an American psychoanalyst and first generation family therapist proposed that psychological difficulties do not reside within an individual, instead they reside within relational systems.

The repetitive, predictable sharing of chronic anxiety within these systems is established in one's family of origin. It impedes one's ability to think and increases emotional reactivity both individually and within relationships, ultimately leading to psychological problems (Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

Bowen proposed that we establish relational patterns in our working life that reflect our family of origin and this can lead to poor work-related psychological health. Bowen coaching seeks to bring insight into these behaviour patterns and encourages practical steps to increase one's level of differentiation.

Work-Related Psychological Health (WRPH) of Clergy

Substantial societal changes over the past twenty years together with the professionalisation of the Church of England have greatly impacted the clergy role (Robbins & Francis, 2014). While clergy continue to gain a great deal of satisfaction and accomplishment from ministry (Francis et al., 2009), one third of all clerical sickness within the Church of England (CoE) is now due to stress, anxiety or other mental health issues (St Luke's, 2010).

Research exploring the aetiology of clergy WRPH indicates the fundamental role of relational risk factors such as conflict & role expectations within the development of negative psychological health (Berry et al., 2012). Positive psychological health also relies on relational variables including levels of support from family and congregation (Proeschold-Bell, 2015).

Differentiation: How one functions in response to anxiety (Kerr & Bowen, 1988)

Individual Dimension

The degree of fusion between one's thoughts and one's feelings



Relational Dimension

The degree to which one merges with another within a close emotional relationship

Aim 1: To explore whether Bowen Theory offers a model for understanding Clergy Psychological Health

Method

Participants: 291 full-time, parish-based Church of England clergy participated in a randomised, quantitative cross-sectional online survey (Mean Age = 56, Female = 54%, Mean Years in Ministry = 19).

Measures included:

- Level of Differentiation of Self & Role (Beebe, 2007)
- WRPH - Burnout (EMS, 2015), Work Engagement (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2006) & Spiritual Dryness (Büssing et al., 2013)
- Additional relational measures

Results (Preliminary Analysis)

- Pearson's correlation analysis found a significant negative correlation between differentiation and burnout, $r = -.537$ and spiritual dryness, $r = -.442$ (both $ps < .001$). Additionally differentiation was positively correlated with Work Engagement, $r = .290$, $p < .001$.

Aim 2: To examine the impact of Bowen Systems Coaching on Clergy Well-Being

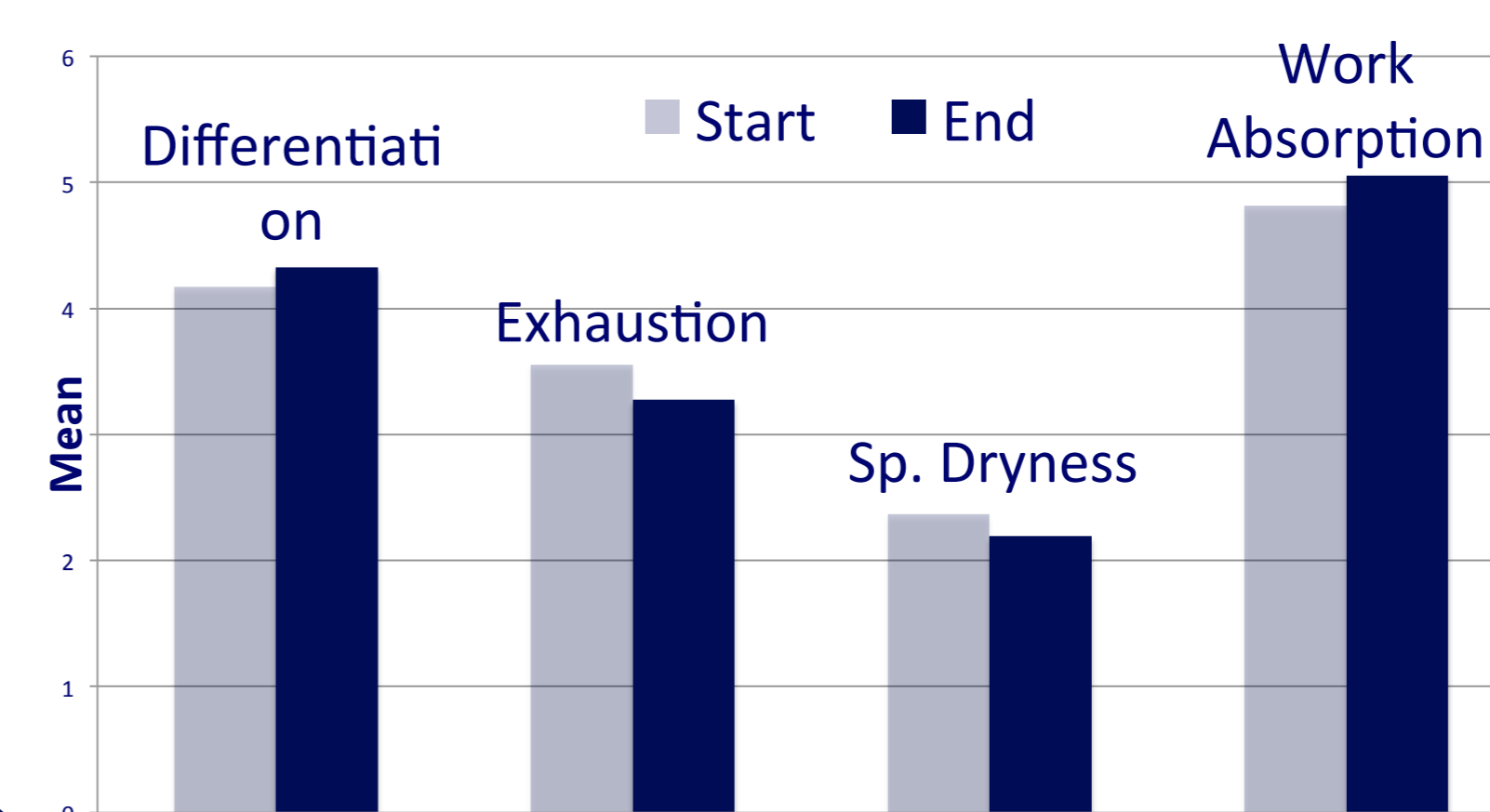
Method

Three Bowen coaching groups were formed from 18 self-selecting CoE parochial clergy (Mean Age = 52, Female = 54%, Mean Years in Ministry = 11). Each group met for six half-day sessions over a seven month period and were led by experienced facilitators. Participants completed the same survey measures as the XS study at the beginning & end of their coaching.

Results (Preliminary Analysis)

Paired-samples T-Tests indicated that at the end of coaching the Bowen Group participants showed:

- A significant increase in differentiation, $t(17) = -2.03$, $p = .058$, representing a small effect size (E.S), $d = -0.25$
- A decrease in both exhaustion (small E.S, $d = 0.25$), the first stage of burnout, and spiritual dryness (small E.S, $d = 0.31$)



- An increase in work absorption (small E.S, $d = 0.23$)
- A reduction in the negative impact of work on home life (small E.S, $d = 0.34$)

Conclusion

This research indicates that Bowen Theory potentially offers a systemic and relational approach to understanding and supporting clergy work-related psychological health. The results suggest that Bowen coaching positively impacted both individual psychological health and external relationships. Qualitative results support these quantitative findings and also reveal potential work-related benefits for clergy leadership and pastoral roles.

Limitations

Small sample sizes limit the generalisation of the results and focus the analysis on effect sizes. Non-specific factors such as belonging to a committed group will also have impacted results.

Application to Counselling Psychology

Burnout and work-related stress are increasingly experienced within a wide variety of occupations. This research suggests that Bowen coaching may offer a valuable intervention to support other professionals' mental health.

This research highlights the importance of considering the relational and systemic dimension of psychological health when working with individuals. It also suggests that focusing on the work-specific relational domain can produce positive changes in other relationship areas.

"Discovered that remaining differentiated can help calm situations and encourage helpful conversations even when there's no agreement."

"Understanding how to increasingly be myself in Ministry has improved my relationships and leadership."

"A series of sessions like this is valuable enough to be made compulsory."

"I have developed a better balance between work and family life, boundarying my time better."