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Healthy Family Systems: Bowen and Boundaries

Abstract

"It is helpful to have close family relationships, but within certain family subsystems and between individual family members, it is still important to have boundaries."

Posting about Thomas Bowen's Family Systems Therapy (FST) from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/healthy-family-systems-bowen-and-boundaries/>

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Healthy Family Systems: Bowen and Boundaries

Erin Olson

For many of us, the COVID-19 pandemic has meant spending a lot of time at home together as a family. Maybe this unexpected extra time together has helped identify some concerns in regards to your family's communication and behavior. One pattern I have continued to identify in our family during our extra time at home is *triangulation*.

I first noticed it around the time our third (and final) child turned four or five, and I began wondering if my husband and I had made a mistake in thinking that three kids was the right number for our family. I started to notice my kids would pair off and go against the other one. There was never a consistent pattern of who paired off with whom and it would not happen every day, but they would consistently find reasons to act this way. This became frustrating for us as parents and often we would find ourselves siding with the "left out" child in order to balance out this relationship pattern. It was then that I realized my kids were enacting a common behavior identified in family systems therapy/theory. They were triangulating each other. When either my husband or I join with the "outsider" without exerting too much parental power, we can usually offset the triangle for at least a little while. The concept of triangles in family relationships was developed as a part of Family Systems Theory (FST).

Murray Bowen developed FST in the 1960's based on relationship patterns he saw in patients with schizophrenia he was treating and in his own family of origin. The basis of the theory is found in the emotional nature of family relationships. Families are often characterized even when someone identifies as being "disconnected" from their families; this is often more representative of

“feelings not facts.”¹ Bowen recognized how “people solicit each other’s attention, approval, and support and react to each other’s needs, expectations, and upsets.”² This interplay of feelings, needs, and interactions can be healthy and normative, but sometimes this can become problematic for family members when the family relationships become too *enmeshed*. Enmeshment happens when boundaries become too permeable or become unclear altogether. It is obviously helpful to have close family relationships, but within certain family subsystems and even between individual family members, it is still important to have boundaries.

Family Systems Theory (FST) is based on eight key concepts developed by Bowen. The first is the one I mentioned above—triangles. Bowen determined that this pattern identified in families is often dysfunctional and leads to further communication problems. Because communication between a pair of people is often the most intense, in many situations people will attempt to bring in a third person to make the group more stable and alleviate some of the intensity. Sometimes that third person is left as a sort of outsider, but at times of disagreement or tension, the third person may be brought into the argument or discussion in order to help bring support to one side or another. This can be problematic when the pair is the parental subsystem and one of them brings in a child to help neutralize a disagreement, or when it’s like my kids and one kid gets “ganged up on” by the other two.

The second concept is the *differentiation of self* which refers to an individual’s capacity to become their own person apart from the needs, wants, and desires of their family members. God created the family system to provide a safe, nurturing environment where each individual family member and the family as a whole can grow into their full potential. In situations where enmeshment happens, individual family members can become too dependent on the opinions and feelings of their family members, and therefore end up unable to see themselves as independent (and yet interdependent) from their family. The *nuclear family emotional process* can make differentiation difficult for individual family members to form their independence, especially in situations when there are periods of prolonged stress or tension. This tension, often in the form of marital conflict, dysfunction in one spouse, impairment in one of the children, or generalized emotional distance can lead to emotional enmeshment or disconnection from the family of origin. Enmeshment and disconnection can make self-differentiation difficult and can also lead to generational problems in the family of procreation.

Multigenerational transmission can occur when problems manifested in previous generations also develop in current family dynamics. This emotional dysfunction can sometimes lead to a person deciding that *emotional cutoff* is the best option—this cutoff can range from partial to complete. Emotional cutoff

often leads to increased importance of the role of other relationships in that person's life. For example, if a woman decides to cutoff from her family of origin, she will often look to fulfill some of those needs in her spouse once she marries. Bowen assumed that all people had unresolved family of origin issues but found that more differentiated people had less unresolved issues than those who were less differentiated.³ While children can inherit many strengths from their parents, they can also inherit emotional problems as parents *project* these issues to their children. This process is cyclical and looks something like this: first, the parent focuses attention on the child out of fear that something is wrong with the child. Then, the parent starts to interpret the child's behavior considering their fears. Finally, since it seems the "problem" has been confirmed, the parent starts to treat the child as if something is truly wrong with them which completes the cycle.

The final two concepts from Bowen's theory are *sibling position* and *societal emotional process*. Bowen thought that a child's birth order position had a lot to do with their feelings and subsequent behavior. Older children tend to lead and be over-achievers while younger children tend to follow and be less concerned about achieving some outside, but the characteristics specific to each position should not be considered better or worse. These characteristics, according to Bowen, can be more or less exaggerated depending on the personality of the individual and the reality of the family situation. Finally, societal emotional process refers to applying Bowen's concepts to other societal groups outside of the family. Bowen theorized that you could often see these eight concepts in work groups, committees, and even within groups of friends.

So how can we create healthier family systems based on Bowen's concepts? Here are some ideas:

- **Create clear and specific boundaries.**

Boundaries are most important between the parental and child subsystems, and when these boundaries are blurred, problems tend to erupt. God has given parents the responsibility for leading and guiding their children, and when children are brought into decision-making discussions it blurs those boundaries and confuses everyone. As children get older there can be more negotiation, but never should adolescent or teenage children feel like they have as much say in family matters as their parents do. Boundaries help ensure that families do not become enmeshed and help create healthy, self-differentiated adults. In situations of deep enmeshment, family therapy may be needed to help a family recognize where boundaries have been blurred and where family members have felt unable to develop as interdependent individuals.

- **Do not overemphasize birth order characteristics.**

I am guessing we have all been guilty of this both in ourselves and in our children. We see characteristics in our children which we tend to let become self-fulfilling prophecies where the kids continue to live into what we see and speak. We could see ourselves exhibiting certain characteristics we think are specific to our birth order and continue to live into those characteristics. For example, I am the middle child and I will often blame my conflict avoidance on my birth order, citing that peace-making is one of my personality characteristics. Peace-making can be good, but when it is used as a justification for my behavior rather than an opportunity to confront someone when it's needed, then it can be problematic. While birth order characteristics may have some truth, allowing ourselves and our children to use those characteristics as a crutch or as an explanation for all their behaviors is not healthy.

- **Identify unhealthy communication patterns (like triangles) and change them.**

Maybe when you and your spouse are having an argument, you like to get the support of one of your children (or maybe you even call in the support of someone not living in your home, like one of your parents, siblings, or a friend). This is especially problematic for a child who is likely to feel conflicted about which "side" to take in an argument between their parents. It is also unfair to get the support of someone outside of the family because it is likely you'll look to someone most likely to support you either way.

- **Do a deep dive into your relationship with your family of origin. What unresolved issues might you be bringing into your current family relationships?**

How are these issues affecting your current family relationships? Maybe you were the youngest child in your family and therefore you have a little bit of learned helplessness because people were always doing things for you. If you go into a marriage expecting that your spouse will fulfill that role for you, it may cause problems in your marriage and even in the relationships you form with your children. One book I would suggest to help you think through these relationships in a way that is reflective of God's norms for families is *Seven Desires: Looking Past What Separates to Find What Connects Us* by Mark & Debra Laaser. The Laasers identify seven key desires within each person and also help identify ways that those desires have been met or unmet in our families of origin. They have seen in their practice that unmet desires in a family of origin can lead to difficulties within marital and future family relations.

God created families and values them, but he did not intend them to become an idol in our lives. Our relationships with our families are important, but they are not the *most important*. Following Jesus sometimes means giving up

relationships with friends and relatives. In Matthew 10:37-19, Jesus said, “Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it.” Jesus warns that following him will mean sacrifice and difficulty, and sometimes it will mean giving up our most valued human relationships. This does not mean that Jesus is trying to negate the God-ordained purpose for families, but he is demonstrating that while family relationships can be meaningful and valuable, they also cannot be more important than following him.

Throughout scripture the analogy of family is often used as a mirror for our relationships in Christ. We are told that as followers of Jesus, we have been adopted by him as sons and daughters and we are to view fellow believers as brothers and sisters in Christ. Placing too much importance on our relationships with our kin can lead to dysfunctional patterns and individuals who might be confused about who they are apart from their families. We should work toward keeping perspective on family in light of the sacrifice made at the cross and also recognize the omnipotence of God and his will in the lives of our families. We can lay our families at the foot of the cross as we seek to follow God’s leading within our families both individually and communally.

FOOTNOTES

1. Bowen Center for Family Therapy, 2019
2. Bowen Center for Family Therapy, 2019
3. Bowen Center for Family Therapy, 2019