

# Bowen Family Systems Theory

## 8 Interlocking Concepts



*Angelika Olsen*

**LEADERSHIP COACH + FACILITATOR**

### Angelika Olsen

MBA, ACC

(541) 647-7704

[angelika@angelikaolsen.com](mailto:angelika@angelikaolsen.com)

[www.angelikaolsen.com](http://www.angelikaolsen.com)

**1 Differentiation of Self:** Differentiation of self describes how people cope with life's demands and pursue their goals on a continuum from most adaptive to least. Variations in this adaptiveness depend on several connected factors, including the amount of solid self, the part of self that is not negotiable in relationships. For example, a person with well thought out principles enhances a solid self, and will not be swayed by fads or opinions. A person with a less solid self will feel more pressure to think, feel, and act like the other. This fusion between two people generates more chronic anxiety as one becomes more sensitive to what the other thinks, feels, and does. Acute anxiety also plays a role. A fairly well differentiated person can develop symptoms under acute anxiety, but will probably return to adaptive functioning soon after. A less differentiated person may live in a stress free environment and therefore function quite well for long periods of time. Level of differentiation refers to the degree to which a person can think and act for self while in contact with emotionally charged issues. It also refers to the degree to which a person can discern between thoughts and feelings. At higher levels of differentiation, people maintain separate, solid selves under considerable stress and anxiety. They manage their own reactivity and choose thoughtful actions. At lower levels of differentiation, people depend on others to function, and they develop significant symptoms under stress. They act, often destructively, based on anxious reactions to the environment. Their intellectual reasoning fuses with emotionality. Even highly intelligent people can be poorly differentiated. One cannot actually

measure the level of differentiation because it requires observation of multiple areas of functioning over a life course. The process of differentiating a self involves a conscious effort at strengthening or raising the amount of solid self by defining beliefs and principles, managing anxiety and reactivity, and relating differently to the family system. People engaged in these efforts reap positive benefits for their own functioning, and they automatically raise the level of differentiation in the whole system.

**2 Triangle:** Triangles are the basic molecule of human relationship systems. A two-person dyad becomes unstable once anxiety increases. Then, one or both members of the dyad usually pulls in a third person to relieve some of the pressure. In a three-person system, anxiety has more places to go, and the relationship where it originated experiences some relief. When the three-person system can no longer contain the anxiety, it involves more people and forms a series of interlocking triangles. Bowen researchers consider triangles a natural function of living systems. Triangles can have either negative or positive outcomes depending on how their members manage anxiety and reactivity. Bowen postulated that if one member of the triangle remains calm and in emotional contact with the other two, the system automatically calms down. On the other hand, with enough stress and reactivity, members lock into a triangular position, and develop symptoms.

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**3 Nuclear Family Emotional Process:** The nuclear family manages differentiation and anxiety with conflict, distance, over and underfunctioning reciprocity, which at extremes can lead to dysfunction in a spouse, and child focus. People engaged in conflict fight, argue, blame and criticize each other. Partners who distance tend to be emotionally unavailable and to avoid potentially uncomfortable, though important, topics. Reciprocity in relationships occurs when one person takes on responsibilities for the twosome. The two people slide into overadequate and underadequate roles. This can become so extreme that one partner becomes incapacitated either with an illness or a general lack of direction. Child focus is discussed more under the next concept.

**4 Family Projection Process:** The fixed triangle is evident in the family projection process, where parents in a nuclear family focus anxiety on a child and the child develops problems. Parents then usually attempt to get the child to change or they ask an expert to "fix" the child. Experienced Bowen family systems consultants report that when parents can instead manage their own anxiety and resolve their own relationship issues, the functioning of the child automatically improves.

**5 Emotional Cutoff:** An extreme distancing posture constitutes the concept of emotional cutoff, where family members discontinue emotional contact with each other. This has significant implications for the functioning of future generations, as the emotional family unit is severed in such a way that anxiety has fewer places to be absorbed in the extended family system. Consequently, chronic anxiety increases. People look for other relationships to substitute for the cut off relationship. These new relationships intensify and people become vulnerable to symptoms.

**6 Multigenerational Transmission Process:** Differentiation of Self is transmitted through the multigenerational transmission process. This concept describes patterns of emotional process through multiple generations. It offers a way of thinking about family patterns that goes beyond a dichotomy of genes versus environment. One of the ways family patterns are transmitted across generations is through relationship triangles.

**7 Sibling Position:** Sibling position, a concept which Bowen adopted from the research of Walter Toman, affects variation in basic and functional levels of differentiation as well. Oldest, youngest, and middle children tend toward certain functional roles in families, influenced also by the particular mix of sibling positions in it and the sibling in it and the sibling positions of parents and other relatives.

**8 Societal Emotional Process:** The last concept Bowen developed is societal emotional process. It refers to the tendency of people within a society to be more anxious and unstable at certain times than others. Environmental stressors like overpopulation, scarcity of natural resources, epidemics, economic forces, and lack of skills for living in a diverse world are all potential stressors that contribute to a regression in society.



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