



Bowen and Friedman: Two Systems Thinkers



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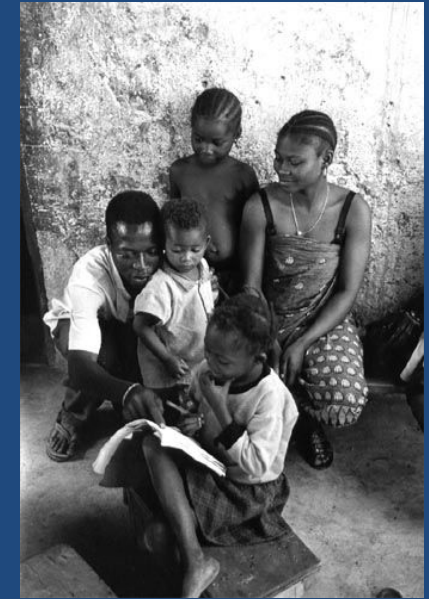
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How do we not conflate the two?



Bowen sought to create
a science of human behavior
grounded in the human family's place in the
natural world.





In the eight concepts, he sought to describe the emotional process in the human family based in evolutionary history and common to all human families.

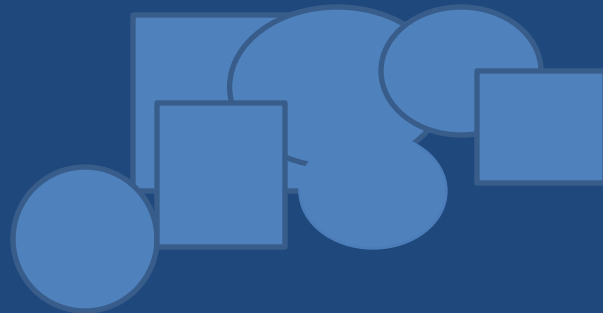


Natural Systems Theory

- The capacity of the system to adapt.
- Differentiation is based on variation.
- Anxiety fuels reactivity and inability to self regulate.

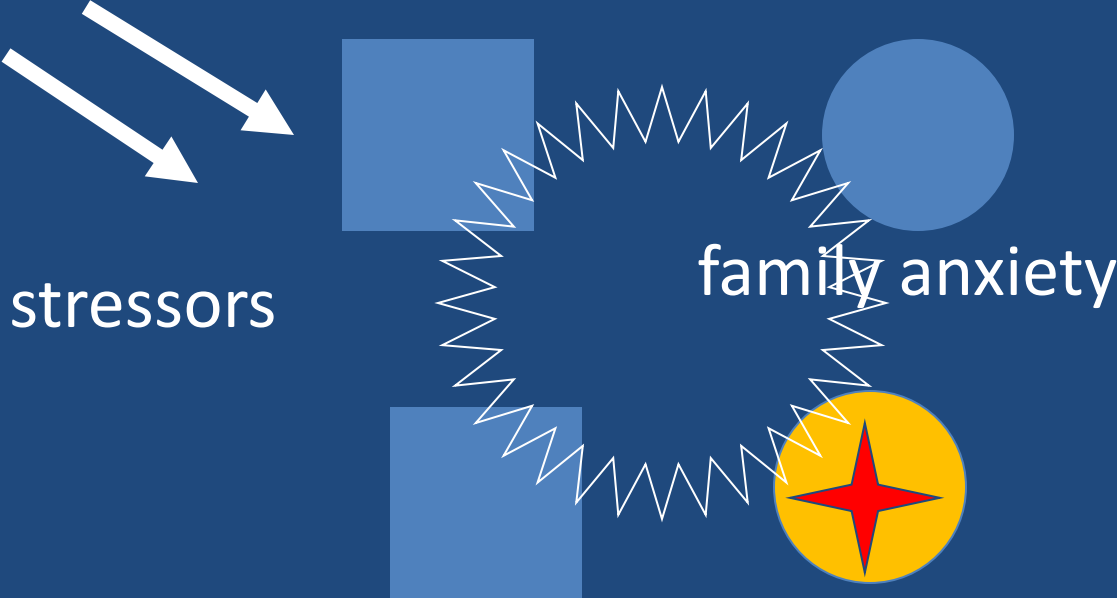
The family system is an emotional unit.

The family system “is considered to include those family members most involved in the family interdependence”.



Bowen, FTiCP 113

A symptom in an individual reflects a family's (congregation's) inability to adapt to the challenges it faces.



Edwin Friedman

- A brilliant and charismatic proponent of systems theory.
- He introduced a whole generation of clergy and the mental health professionals to systems ideas.

Friedman

- was engaging, funny, and entertaining.
- made system ideas accessible to congregational leaders.
- used fables and metaphors to make ideas of emotional process understandable.
- was able to communicate how anxiety and reactivity got in the way of clear leadership in a congregation.

Friedman: Field theory

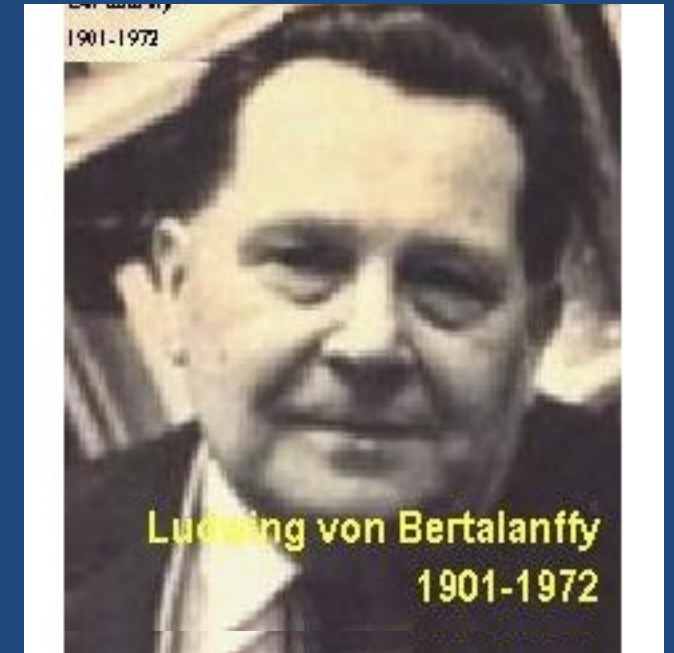
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Friedman: Field theory

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- Webster: field theory is any theory in physics consisting of a detailed mathematical description of the assumed physical properties of a region under some influence (as gravitation).

Von Bertalanffy: General Systems Theory

- “There exist models, principles, and laws that apply to generalized systems or their subclasses, irrespective of their particular kind, the nature of their component elements, and the relation or 'forces' between them. It seems legitimate to ask for a theory, not of systems of a more or less special kind, but of universal principles applying to systems in general.” (1968)



The virus as a metaphor

- The virus is a cell that does not reproduce and is not self-sufficient.
- It depends on the host cell to survive but takes over.
- Some people behave like viruses or pathogens, so the task of the leader is to better regulate her reactivity when faced with heightened anxiety due to irresponsible behavior.
- When the leader can work on managing reactivity and stay connected to the relationship system, he can ward off the invasion of virus type behavior.

Evil in the world

- Friedman cites examples in WW II such as Chamberlain, who failed to stand up to the evil of Hitler.
- The cancerous attack on Jews and others was an example of not warding off the evil.
- When bad behavior (the virus) is not challenged in congregations, the congregation becomes unhealthy.

- General Systems Theory (Field Theory) and Bowen theory as a natural systems theory have two different foundations and lead to two different outcomes in approaching emotional process in a relationship system.

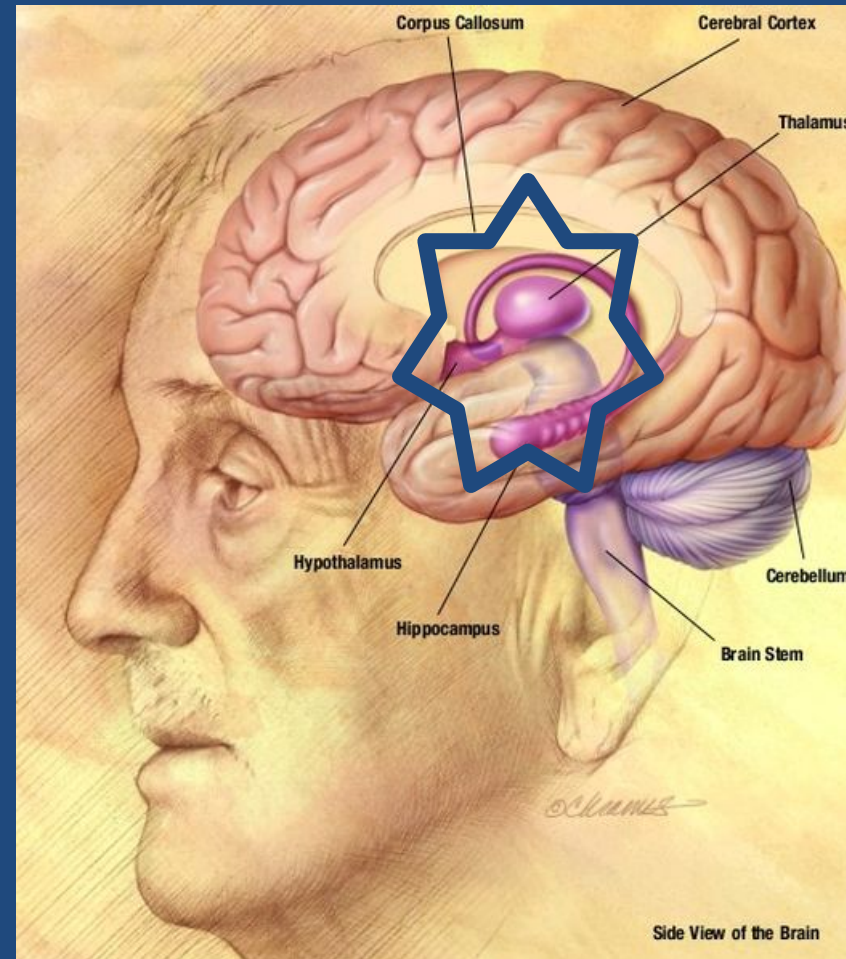
Bowen: Two variables: differentiation of self and level of anxiety

- “On a broad level, there are two major variables in the theory. One has to do with the level of integration of self in a person. This has to do with the differentiation of self concept. The other variable is the level of anxiety. A poorly differentiated person can appear “normal” in an anxiety-free field, but he is the first to develop his usual symptoms when the anxiety increases. Those with the best levels of differentiation are among the least reactive to anxiety and the least likely to develop symptoms in an anxiety field.”

Bowen, p.407

A basic human emotion is anxiety.

Anxiety is a patterned responsiveness at emotional, physiological, and behavioral levels over time and across generations.



What is differentiation of self?

- The capacity to see the system and one's part in it.
- Emotional flexibility and objectivity about the relationship system.
- Separation of emotional and intellectual systems.
- Clear set of principles by which to live.
- Capacity to define self in face of social disapproval.

Variation in the level of differentiation

- Is a natural process based on the capacity of the human family to adapt to stressors in the environment.
- Over generations families vary in the capacity to adapt and the variation is passed on in families and to individuals in succeeding generations.

Anxiety and the projection process

- In Bowen theory, a symptom (family, congregation, society) is a result of the level of anxiety and the way that anxiety is handled in the system.
- Projection on a vulnerable part of the system is an outcome of way emotion is handled in the whole.

Friedman: Self-differentiation

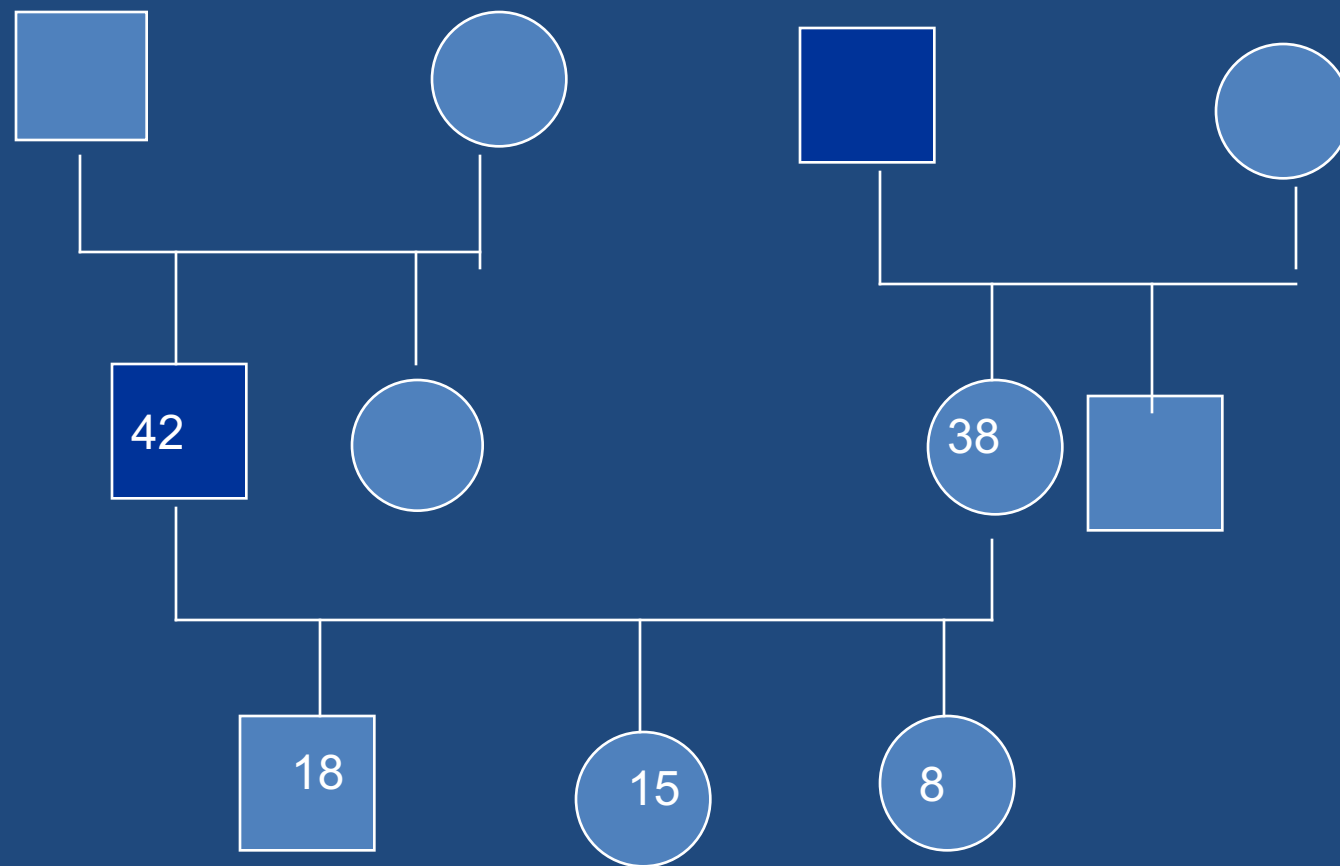
- Defining a self in relation to the problematic person in the system.
- With the analogy of the virus, it is to overcome and expel the infection while remaining non-anxious.

Sabotage

- Those in the system who are up against one who is differentiating will attempt to “sabotage” those efforts.
- This connotes that an individual is the problem, rather than a symptom in an anxious system in which the “leader” also plays a role.

How do these two conceptual frameworks lead to different ways of approaching a family or congregation?

The Smith family



Bowen

- The family has functioned over generations fairly well until their capacity to manage stressors was exceeded.
- The husband is not the pathogen, but a part of an anxious interactional system in which he is absorbing the anxiety.
- The wife's reactions to his sobriety reflected the level of differentiation and shifting anxiety that was a predictable part of the family changing.
- If the husband can stay on course and not react, the family will settle down at a better functional level.

Friedman

- The father was originally the pathogen.
- The homeostasis of the family was disturbed by the father's sobriety.
- The family sought to sabotage his efforts.
- The father needs to take on and confront the sabotage.

Bowen: The role of the coach

- Manage self thoughtfully as a resource to an individual, family, or system.
- Stay out of the emotional field of the system.
- Be aware of the triangles.
- Be a resource to responsible functioning for motivated individuals.

Friedman: Paradoxes and Reversals

- Friedman took a more directive approach, giving assignments that would disturb the homeostasis of the family (congregation).
- Coach people in self differentiation to take on the pathogen in a congregation with a non-anxious presence and with the goal of staying connected.

Friedman

- Friedman's system ideas are based on field theory which is an aspect of General Systems theory. It's origins are in physics.
- Self differentiation was based on standing up to the problems in a congregation (in a non-anxious and defined way).
- In the metaphor of the virus, the virus invades the host and can overwhelm it (the problematic ones can take over the congregation) and the leader needs to have the nerve to take it on.

Bowen theory

- Bowen theory, based on the idea that the human is part of evolutionary history, is a descriptive theory of the emotional reciprocity in a relationship system.
- Theoretically, symptoms or problems flow from a lack of differentiation of self and the level of anxiety in the system which is projected on or absorbed by a vulnerable member.
- A problem indicates the inability of the system to adapt, not an invasion of a pathogen.
- Differentiation is about becoming a responsible member of a system by understanding one's part in the process and taking action on one's own emotional functioning.

Take away

- Friedman brought many people to system's ideas.
- He was brilliant, engaging, a wonderful writer and presenter.
- He took aspects of Bowen theory and integrated them with his own ideas.
- These were useful to many clergy.
- It is not useful to conflate the two theorists, but to allow them each their own ideas.