TRIANGLES: THE “GLUE” OF BOWEN FAMILY SYSTEMS THEORY

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Bowen family systems theory is a descriptive theory about emotional process in the human species. The theory describes several interlocking concepts. This paper presents a brief discussion of the concept of the “triangle,” which was critical to integration of the theory. Until Bowen “saw” the centrality of triangles to emotional process, integration of the theory eluded him. Once Bowen saw triangles, he “became a different person.” The paper also offers several comparative examples from the realm of human and nonhuman behavior to illustrate the concept of the triangle.

INTRODUCTION

Murray Bowen (1913-1990) devoted over forty years to observing emotional process in the human species, developing concepts to describe that process, integrating the concepts stemming from those observations into a coherent theory, and testing the theory that bears his name with hundreds of human families. Bowen family systems theory examines the human as an emotional species whose members have instincts for self-preservation and reproduction, interest in their own well-being, a capacity for living together in complex relationship systems, a capacity for distinguishing fact from imagination, and a capacity for choice. Many of the patterns of behavior observed in humans in their relationship systems also seem to be present in other animal societies.

In its present form Bowen theory is the integration of the concepts of differentiation of self, triangles, nuclear family emotional system, family projection process, multigenerational transmission process, sibling position, emotional cutoff, and societal regression into a coherent theory about human emotional functioning (Bowen 1978, Kerr and Bowen 1988). Integration of the concepts into a coherent theory did not occur overnight. It was not until August 1966, about two decades into his quest for a science of human behavior, that Bowen discovered the “glue” that cemented the concepts together.

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into an integrated theory about emotional process in the human species. That glue was the concept of triangles.

Once Bowen “saw” triangles, he “became a different person,” (Kerr and Bowen, 379) and “finally knew one way through the impenetrable thicket which is the family emotional process.” (380, italics in original). Defining his family in terms of triangles and interlocking triangles and making contact with “every important triangle in the family,” he brought representatives from all of those triangles together “in one living room” in 1967. “By the time this new meeting was thirty minutes old,” Bowen knew he had the key to understanding family emotional process (379).

WHAT IS A TRIANGLE?

A triangle may be defined as the smallest emotional unit in which the stresses of living together can be managed at a given level of intensity, which varies from individual to individual and also with time and circumstances. A triangle is a three-individual system. The fundamental triangle in human social systems is a child and its two parents or primary caretakers. In this triangle, the child learns basic patterns of adapting to life’s challenges and assumes a functioning position in relation to the parents. The emotional maturity of the parents in managing the intensity of the emotional process in the marital relationship will strongly influence the degree to which the child will be able to function as a separate self, rather than as an appendage of the parents and stabilizer of the marital relationship. In the triangle with the child, the parents, within limits, are able to manage the stresses of the marital relationship.

After years of research, Bowen came to regard the triangle as a fact of life. Until he “saw” the relationship of mother, father and child, he was not able to explain fully enough the individual behavior and functioning he was observing. Before seeing the relationship among mother, father and child, he was not able to understand the intensity and persistence of the attachment between mother and child. Seeing the relationship among the three explained the functioning positions of each in maintaining the stability and persistence of the relationship system and the difficulty in achieving fundamental shifts toward greater flexibility in making the choices to meet life’s challenges. Seeing the triangle as part of a multigenerational process helped to explain the intensity of emotional process being observed.

Through his work at the Menninger Clinic and at the National Institute of Mental Health, Bowen ultimately came to understand
triangles and interlocking triangles as basic building blocks of the social systems to which humans belong. These systems include the family and the workplace, as well as the larger society (Bowen 1978). Triangles and interlocking triangles reflect the proposition that to understand individual behavior and functioning it is necessary to understand the context—the relationship system—in which the basic patterns of functioning are laid down.

What makes triangles so central to social systems? Social systems are purposeful systems. They contribute to the well-being and sometimes survival of the members. Members coordinate and cooperate in making the system work and endure. They have functioning positions within the system and enter into reciprocal relationships with one another, in which the functioning of one can only be understood in the context of the relationship with the other. However, living and working together involve stress, even under the best of circumstances. No individual can have his own way all of the time. Maintaining the well-being of the system requires give and take. Under conditions of relative scarcity members must cooperate and coordinate with competitors for access to resources—and almost anything can be a resource! Simply put, triangles help individuals to manage the stresses of living together (Comella 1997).

Membership in a social system carries with it inescapable costs in the form of membership-induced stress, which engenders automatic responses to threat. The stress may vary from member to member and may change with time, but it is endemic to the system. When a living organism forms an appraisal of threat, it responds automatically (LeDoux 1996). Bowen called response to threat “anxiety.” Anxiety is unavoidable and is a cost of membership. The stress is highest in two-individual relationships where the relationships have special importance to survival or well-being. A way of managing the intensity of the emotional process and the level of stress is by converting the two-individual relationship to a three-individual relationship. Doing so lowers the intensity of the emotional process between the two by diffusing it into the larger three-person system. It makes the relationship more manageable, more bearable, and more durable. Presumably, the triangle preserves the benefits in sufficient measure while ameliorating the relationship-induced costs. In this manner, triangles contribute to the survival of the social system and the well-being of its members.

Consider life within reproductive units (harems) of the gelada baboon, where comfortable twosomes may ameliorate conditions within the social groups. (Dunbar 1984.) Harems are headed by an
adult male (the harem-master) and may include one or two younger male followers not yet physically mature enough to secure mastership for themselves, or older male followers who have lost mastership. Despite their premier status as sires of offspring during their tenure, harem-masters do not “call the shots” when it comes to social structure or harem size: the females do. The female dominance hierarchy affects female access to the harem-master and fertility. Females gain advantage through partnerships, particularly enduring ones between mothers and elder daughters, and thereby accomplish together what they could not accomplish alone in the female dominance hierarchy. Although described as coalitions, the partnerships have meaning only when viewed in the context of the advantages the partners gain through their association vis a vis other members of the reproductive unit.

De Waal (1989a) describes life in a captive colony of chimpanzees, a naturally “closed” social system because emigration is not an option available to the captives to manage their relationships with each other. Two young chimpanzees, members of the colony, were playing together. As so often happens among playmates, they got into a squabble. The mothers of the two were watching and becoming increasingly uncomfortable. One mother summoned a third female, Mama, who had a history of peaceful interventions. The peacemaker separated the two young chimpanzees. Neither was hurt and the relationship between the mothers remained undisturbed.

The therapeutic relationship is yet another example of a triangle. Freud postulated that in the relationship with the therapist, an individual would automatically replicate a significant early relationship (the transference). The therapist had the potential to act out significant past relationships in a countertransference. In other words, the seemingly dyadic relationship between therapist and patient could not be fully understood without reference to the relationships “transferred” or “counter-transferred” into the therapist-patient relationship. Underlying the therapeutic application of Bowen theory is the premise that if one member of a family system enters into relationship with a neutral therapist (vis a vis the family issues), who avoids a countertransference, the individual can relate to members of the family differently. Thus, the individual’s relationships with family members can be conceptualized as triangles that include the neutral therapist.

Here are a few other examples of triangles and interlocking triangles and questions they prompt that illustrate the underlying utility of the triangle in managing relationships. Does the introduction of a third make a relationship between two more manageable?
An individual who wants to make contact with a stranger uses an intermediary who is a mutual friend. Is the individual making contact with a stranger through a mutual friend more likely to get an interview?

Headhunters, matchmakers, mediators and negotiators assist in managing sensitive relationships between other parties. Is a “no” through a matchmaker or headhunter easier to accept than a “no” to one’s face?

An individual who can no longer occupy the number one position becomes and stays number two by relating to each of the rivals for the number one position. Isn’t the power behind the throne sometimes as powerful (or more so) than the occupant of the throne?

An individual tells one colleague about a troublesome aspect of his relationship with another colleague or the boss. Doesn’t one usually feel better after complaining about “unfair” treatment to a trusted colleague or friend?

A student is under pressure to perform at a higher level, the teacher is under pressure to raise the test scores, and the headmaster is striving to enhance the academic reputation of his school, the student’s underperformance becomes a focus for the teacher and headmaster. Isn’t an underperforming student a good focus when there is a potential for teacher and headmaster to fail to meet expectations?

The mannerisms of the new boss remind one of the old boss and the reaction is as if to the old boss. What goes on in a new relationship when the new person reminds one of a favorite relative or worst enemy?

A dog is resting peacefully by the side of his human companion; a cat climbs onto the companion’s lap and begins fiddling with the dog’s tail; the dog gets onto the floor. Is the cat envious of the relationship between the dog and human?

A toddler invariably makes mischief every time his mother is on the telephone. Why does the toddler seem to hit the baby only when his mother is on the phone?

A safety commissioner returns from a grueling Congressional hearing about the level of safety of a controversial technology and shortly thereafter votes to increase safety requirements governing use of the technology. Is it possible that a desire to avoid another confrontation with the senator has influenced the vote?

What makes triangles so difficult to see? Triangles are likely to operate out of awareness. The content of the issues may mask the underlying process. Also, humans and members of other species
seem to have an intuition about the efficacy of triangles in smoothing relationships or making them more manageable. So they are ordinary. It is just that they probably are not recognized as being part of emotional process nor as a basic building block of emotional systems. Yet an understanding of triangles is critically important to interpreting relationships observed in a social system, whether human or nonhuman. DeWaal, Strum, Fossey, and Dunbar, to name just a few observers of nonhuman species, all document triangles and emotional process, even though the label “triangle” might not be affixed to their observations.

Not recognizing triangles as such afflicted Bowen and his research team at the National Institute of Mental Health with “observational blindness” in the 1950s:

Man can fail to see what is before his eyes unless it fits into his theoretical frame of reference. For instance, man had been looking at the bones of prehistoric animals for centuries without really “seeing them”; he believed the earth had been created exactly as it is now, and he could not “see” the bones until there was a theory of evolution. . . . Increasing ability to “see” the family, plus the increased intensity of the relationship characteristics, were sufficient for the new observations to break through. Once seen, the new relationship phenomenon was so forceful that it pervaded the entire operation. It was then possible to see the phenomenon in concurrent work with out-patient families in which the phenomenon was less intense in its manifestations. (Bowen 1978, 119)

In the three examples that follow, I illustrate the triangle in nonhuman and human systems. First I give the nonhuman example, then the human example. The first two human examples are drawn from the workplace, an important arena for applying Bowen theory. The last illustrates interlocking triangles and the transmission of culture.

EXAMPLES

Getting to Know You
The first set of examples demonstrates parallels in the way humans and nonhumans employ intermediaries to gain membership in a new group.
Ray wants to join a new community. He’s completed his investigations and he knows what he wants. However, he doesn’t know anyone in the community and the community is very selective as to who may join it. Also, Ray doesn’t know anyone who can arrange an introduction for him. He’s on his own. He watches and waits, trying to find an opportunity for entry. He begins to notice a pleasant female with a small child who always seems to be on the periphery of the community’s social gatherings. The child is curious about Ray. The pleasant female is protective of the child. It is through the child, however, that Ray and the pleasant female make contact. Over a period of time Ray and the female become friends, and gradually his circle of acquaintances within the community widens. The children become curious about him, and the mothers see no harm coming from Ray’s contact with them. Slowly, Ray is able to move freely within the community. But moving freely in the community is not all that Ray wants. Ray wants to be a community leader. To accomplish this, Ray needs to be part of the coterie of the reigning matriarch of the community. One day Ray makes contact with the matriarch. Things go well. However, the males in the coterie are not happy to have a newcomer in their midst and relationships between Ray and the males are pretty testy for a while. When Ray and the matriarch try to meet, Ray has to deal with the male leaders first. Finally, tensions escalate and there is a confrontation, complete with gesturing and “words.” No one gets hurt, but thereafter the male leaders accept Ray. He is part of the inner circle. As long as he observes proprieties with his male peers, he can engage the matriarch freely. From *Almost Human: A Journey into the World of Baboons* (Strum 1987).

An academic wants to strengthen his and his department’s working relationships with a renowned research institution. An energetic, creative, go-getting student of his is just finishing his doctoral studies. The academic calls a colleague in the institution and the student joins the institution as a post-doctoral research associate. The department’s contacts with the institution and involvement in its programs increase.

*Eternal Triangles*

The second set of examples illustrates how triangles may be used to manage relationships among members of a system to achieve through a third what can not be achieved directly:

Yeroen used to be alpha male, but as he ages he no longer has the energy to stay on top. He is forced to retire to the sidelines.
Neither Nikkie nor Luit, the two younger males vying for supreme control, have Yeroen’s experience, wile or cunning in managing community politics and relationships. Whoever is in power needs Yeroen’s cooperation and support to continue as alpha male and Yeroen takes steps to ensure this is so. By deftly shifting his alliance between the two younger males, Yeroen assures that he remains number two regardless of whether Nikkie or Luit is number one. From *Chimpanzee Politics* (de Waal 1989a) and *Peacemaking among Primates* (de Waal 1989b).

Tom is bright, young and ambitious. As part of building important relationships with the superiors of Harry, his boss, Tom prepares “think pieces” which he delivers to the top floor after Harry has gone home for the day. Tom’s activities do not escape Harry’s notice, however. One day, Tom receives a “special assignment” which results in his immediate transfer to a distant part of the organization. Suffice it to say, Tom no longer has access to the top floor, but Harry does.

*Entraining the Future*

The third examples illustrate how roles within a social system may be transmitted intergenerationally through interlocking triangles.

Rhesus monkeys live in a matrilineal society. The females in a lineage live together throughout their lives. Sons leave home at an early age and often move away to join a new social group. Several lineages comprise the larger social system, and relationships among the lineages are ordered by rank. The social status of a daughter depends upon that of her mother. De Waal discusses the relationship phenomenon:

It is a well-established fact that hierarchies among female macaques are virtually independent of weight, physical condition, and other indicators of fighting ability. The status tradition is primarily a social institution. Juvenile members of high-ranking lineages behave dominantly only when their relatives are nearby; their rank depends on the presence of supporters, rather than on some inborn predisposition. . . . Young females have to wage countless battles before settling at the predestined status level. It is no easy task to break the resistance of the heavier and stronger adult females of lower-ranking lineages. The youngsters consistently receive the necessary support from relatives, but there is also evidence that the female community as a whole supports the kinship system. From *Peacemaking among Primates* (de Waal 1989b).
On an island where I lived, there is a community renowned for its resistance to change. It sits out on a spit of land, jutting into the sea. Generation after generation, its men become fishermen. The women marry fishermen. They live in small row houses, which line narrow streets, winding down to the sea. I walk down one of these streets toward the sea. It is a school day when all school-aged children are supposed to be in school. Children are everywhere. I reach the shore. A rocky beach stretches before me. To my left are three generations of women and girls hanging laundry on lines running from poles jammed among the rocks. The older women and some of the younger women wear black. They are the widows of fishermen. The girls are of school age. The taller girls help to hang the laundry. The smaller girls watch. To my right are three generations of men and boys. The men are coiling their fishing lines, checking hooks, and otherwise readying for sea. The boys are of school age. The bigger boys help the men. The smaller boys watch.

CONCLUSION

Bowen family systems theory appears to have relevance to understanding behavior and functioning in human and nonhuman social (emotional) systems. The theory, however, with its multiple interlocking concepts, presents challenges to students of the theory, be they therapists, parents, members of the workplace or other social system, or researchers studying emotional process in nonhuman social systems. Integration of the theory’s concepts into a coherent theory foiled even Murray Bowen for a time. But, when he “saw triangles,” he “became a different person.” With this in mind, I thought that writing a paper about triangles might enhance my own understanding of the theory and, perhaps, assist other students in finding entrée into a theory that holds much promise as a tool for achieving insights into both human and nonhuman behavior and functioning. *

REFERENCES


