

# Differentiation of Self and the Emotional System

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The knowledge of life on planet Earth as an intricate, interrelated process has moved forward at an amazing pace in the past few decades. The view of "spaceship earth" from the moon and the increasing degree to which the human is disturbing the balance of nature have both added to this awareness. "Ecosystems" is now a part of the popular vocabulary. Despite this recent increase in awareness, however, the human being continues to have difficulty in seeing self as *a part of* rather than *apart from* nature.

The knowledge of life's interrelatedness has been developing for a longer time. Ancient tribes had an intuitive sense of this. In the early 19th century increasing evidence was pointing in the direction that life had developed over a significantly longer time than had ever been imagined. Darwin came along at a time when there was a heightened interest in both observing the natural world with its great variety of life forms and in attempting to understand how this had come to be.

Based on his careful observations, Darwin developed a theory which could account for the tremendous variety of life forms and could link all of life with a common ancestry. Observations over the past century have supported his theory and today it is the central theoretical framework for all of the life sciences. That evolution has occurred is now largely accepted as factual. Knowledge about the exact rates and mechanisms by which it occurred continues to be modified with the introduction of new evidence.

Einstein stated that "theory determines what one can see." Conventional theory regards the human as separate and different from other forms of life. When the primary focus is on the internal or subjective aspect of *Homo sapiens'* existence, the view of the broader process is obscured. Though we share a common heritage with all life and exist as a part of the interdependent tissue of life called the biosphere, the explanations for human behavior remain largely based on that which is unique to our species. That which is similar or related to other life forms is excluded or included in an incidental manner.

These comments are not intended to convince anyone of these views. They are simply intended to convey a belief that the Family Systems Theory developed by Murray Bowen offers an alternative way of looking at human behavior than is offered by conventional theory. Central to this theory, and probably the least understood, are the concepts of the emotional system and differentiation of self. Generally these concepts are viewed through the lens of conventional theory. It appears a basic shift in thinking is required if they are to be understood. For most, if this shift does take place, it does so slowly over a significant period of time. They are concepts that

basically cannot be taught but they can be learned. In the effort to understand these concepts it is easy to make them more complicated than they are. This essay will touch on a few broad points related to the emotional system and differentiation of self as simply as possible.

It is an assumption of Bowen Family Systems Theory that human behavior is related to lower forms of life. If you skim through a text on comparative anatomy, the connections in physiology between *Homo sapiens* and other vertebrates are unmistakable. The reproductive, digestive, nervous, muscle, skeletal systems, etc., are basically identical though increasingly complex as you move toward the primates. The same underlying similarity is found in analyzing the basic biochemistry of our distant relatives. Living systems operate with great regularity and stability across the generations.

The human family also operates in a highly patterned and stable manner. As a self-regulating system, the family and its members function with a level of predictability that is observable. Dr. Bowen developed the concept of the emotional system to account for the highly regulated behavioral patterns observed. Families and individuals vary in the degree to which their behavior is regulated or automatic; he developed the concept of differentiation of self to account for such differences.

The human being lives in relationship systems. For most, the primary relationship system centers around the reproductive process. Most begin their lives in a family and most, but not all, continue to relate to a family group through most of their lives. Relationship patterns operating in the family can be observed in other relationship systems as well. Though the make-up of the family may vary across the planet and over the centuries, the central relationship patterns appear to be so basic they are believed to operate across cultures.

A child is born following nine months of development in the stable environment of its mother's womb. After birth the infant continues the slow, steady maturational process toward adulthood with increasing ability to manage self. The degree to which an individual moves toward autonomy from an initial symbiotic relationship is largely determined by the family emotional system. The mother's ability to allow her child to assume increasing responsibility for self is related to the degree of emotional autonomy she has attained in relation to her mother and father and in relation to her mate. This holds true for the father as well. The child, then, lives in a relationship system which maintains a fairly stable balance of individuality and togetherness. A balance in families entailing less individuality results in increased pressure on the individuals to be for the group. The anxiety resulting from this pressure is managed or adapted to by the family by means of distance, conflict, or reciprocal dysfunctioning and overfunctioning. These patterns become more pronounced with increasing levels of anxiety.

Each child in a family varies slightly in the degree to which he or she emotionally separates from parents and this in turn influences the individuality/togetherness balance of the nuclear families formed in the next generation. Each family then is capable of spawning lines leading toward increasingly higher levels of functioning and lines leading toward lower levels of functioning. This process is remarkably stable and yet generates a wide range of variation in basic levels of functioning in as few as six to eight generations. These patterns are observable in all families yet they generally occur outside of the awareness of the individuals involved.

The view of the family as a self-regulating system whose members function in reciprocal interdependence had not been seen before. This discovery opened the door to a new way of thinking and a different level of observation. Bowen's concept of the emotional system accounts for this highly predictable, automatic process. The concept is not synonymous with the feeling process which emerged more recently in mammals. The emotional system refers to the automatic guidance system directing an organism through its life course. It refers to a process which can be observed in single-celled organisms as well as in self-regulating systems of multiple organisms. It is seen as basic to all life and as including the genetic system but not limited to it. It is an enormously rich concept in that it goes beyond the tendency to segment the life process. Though the effort to define this concept more clearly is an important challenge for the future, to define it too precisely at this time can rob it of some of its basic utility. The concept of the emotional system provides the link between the behavior of the human and the behavior of all life forms.

The birth of the nervous system in multicellular organisms led to an increasingly specialized system. Along with the immune system and the endocrine system, it plays a central function in the self-regulation of the more complexly organized animals. The evolution of the brain, at the top of this nervous system, has allowed organisms, particularly primates, to respond to the environment in a more resilient, less automatic fashion. This process has reached its most exaggerated form in the development of the prefrontal cortex in the human, which enables the human being to become aware of the automatic emotional process and to have the potential to have some choice about whether to respond automatically or not.

This thinking capacity emerged from the emotional system. It is not separate from it. It is highly integrated with the rest of the brain, the nervous system, and the other physiological systems of the organism. It can also be thought of as being highly integrated with the relationship system of which the person is a part. It is unique, however, in its potential for being aware of messages coming from the internal and external environments and in its potential for responding to

those messages in a non-automatic fashion.

Human beings vary in their ability to respond less automatically or with more choice. This characteristic is a highly stable one in individuals. When highly stressed or challenged, the automatic systems become more influential, but over an individual's life course the extent to which one's life is directed by choice or by the emotional system remains quite stable. Bowen's scale of differentiation describes the range of variability among individuals in this capacity.

The level of an individual's differentiation of self is related to the degree to which the emotional unit of the family has been able to allow that individual to grow toward emotional maturity. The degree to which this has occurred can be observed in an individual's functioning in other relationship systems and in the degree to which his or her life course is determined by self.

Despite the fact that one's level of differentiation of self is determined by the emotional system of the family, the human's remarkable brain generally entails the capacity to increase this level. This appears to occur only after a thoughtful and persistent effort over a significant period. This effort is achieved in the context of the relationship system. A byproduct of Bowen Family Systems Theory was the development of a method for directing such an effort.

The concepts of differentiation of self and the emotional system are central to Bowen Family Systems Theory. Though they are rich concepts, they are relatively simple. The fact that they are neither widely nor easily grasped is more likely due to the tendency to view them through the lens of conventional theory, which predominates in the human behavior field and in society. The predominant view appears to view human behavior as the product of one's personality which is caused by one's parents. Society or genes can also be inserted as causal factors. Bowen Family Systems Theory includes such factors but only as components of a much broader, basic underlying process which is not unique to the human being.

Historically a significant new theory is usually only accepted after a number of generations. It has taken Darwin's theory over a century to be widely accepted even though the evidence was there. It is possible that a better theory will be developed to fit the facts of human behavior. I believe, however, that in the next century, the third quarter of this century will be looked back upon as marking a time when a significant shift took place in the observation and understanding of human behavior, a shift which led to viewing human behavior in the context of natural systems and as rooted in the larger process of life's evolution. The concepts of the emotional system and differentiation of self will be seen as central to this shift in thinking.