



## REVIEW OF A CASE STUDY IN LIGHT OF BOWEN THEORY: DIFFERENTIATION OF SELF

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### ABSTRACT

The major purpose of this paper is to illustrate the theory, practice, and outcome of Bowen's Family Systems Theory. Murray Bowen is a founder of the family systems theory and one of the pioneers in family therapy. Bowen defined the term "differentiation of self" as a capacity to gain a balance between emotional and intellectual functioning without fusion. Bowen established this term in light of the family system theory and he believed self-differentiation is closely related to an individual's family life. Family system theory explains the causes of being undifferentiated in the concept of family relations, and it names some of the characteristics of the family that led to undifferentiation such as triangulation, marital conflict, sibling position, emotional cut off etc. Family systems theory demonstrates that differentiation of self is crucial to longterm intimate relationships. With this term, Bowen addressed emotional maturity and maintaining independent thinking during emotional relationships. A person's level of differentiation of self illustrates his capacity to distinguish feelings and thoughts under stressful situations. Bowen Theory has greatly influenced the world of family therapy and also studies demonstrated its effectiveness on individual therapy work. This article involves emphasizing the formulation of Bowen theory and application to a case example of an individual who struggles with differentiation. First, this paper will review the development of Bowen's theory, then, it will illustrate Bowen's eight interlocking terms. Finally, this paper will present a clinical example, applying family systems therapy to an individual who struggles with differentiation and discusses the outcomes.

### Key Words

*Family Systems Theory, Differentiation of Self, Case Study, Family Therapy*

## BOWEN TEORİSİ IŞIĞINDA BİR VAKA ÇALIŞMASININ GÖZDEN GEÇİRİLMESİ: BENLİĞİN FARKLILAŞMASI

### ÖZ

Bu çalışmanın amacı, Bowen Aile Sistemleri Teorisi'nin kuramsal yapılanmasını, terapi sürecinde uygulanmasını ve sonuçlarını göstermektir. Murray Bowen, aile sistemleri teorisinin kurucusu ve aile terapisinin gelişimindeki öncü isimlerden biridir. Bowen, teorisinde geçen "benliğin farklılaşması" terimini, bireyin füzyon olmadan duygusal işleyiş ve entelektüel işleyiş arasında denge kurma kapasitesi olarak tanımlamıştır. Bowen bu terimi aile sistemleri teorisi ışığında açıklamış ve kendini farklılaştırmanın bireyin aile yaşamıyla yakından ilgili olduğuna inanmıştır. Aile sistemleri teorisi benliğin farklılaşmamasının nedenlerini aile ilişkileri kavramı ile izah etmiş ve bireyde farklılaşmaya engel teşkil eden ailenin bazı özelliklerini; üçgenleşme, evlilik çatışması, kardeşlerin doğum sırası, duygusal olarak bağlantıyı kesmek vb. olacak şekilde listelemiştir. Aile sistemleri teorisi, benliğin farklılaşmasının uzun süreli yakın ilişkiler için çok önemli olduğunu vurgulamaktadır. Bu terimle Bowen, duygusal olgunluğa ve duygusal ilişkiler yaşarken de bağımsız düşünebilmeyi sürdürmeye işaret etmiştir. Bireyin benliğinin farklılaşma seviyesi, onun stresli durumlar altındaki duygularını ve düşüncelerini ayırt edebilme kapasitesini göstermektedir. Bowen'ın teorisi, aile terapisi dünyasını büyük ölçüde etkilemiş ve ayrıca yapılan çalışmalar Bowen'ın teorisinin bireysel terapi uygulamaları üzerinde de etkinliğini göstermiştir. Bu çalışma, Bowen teorisinin formülasyonunu açıklamakta ve farklılaşma ile ilgili sorun yaşayan bir danışana Bowen modeli terapi tekniklerinin uygulanmasını içermektedir. Öncelikle, bu çalışma Bowen'ın teorisinin gelişimini gözden geçirecek, daha sonra Bowen'ın teorisindeki farklılaşma ile ilgili olan sekiz önemli terimi açıklayacaktır. Son olarak, bu makale farklılaşma ile mücadele eden bir danışana aile sistemleri terapisinin bireysel terapidaki uygulanmasını içeren bir vaka çalışması sunacak ve sonuçlarını tartışacaktır.

### Anahtar Kelimeler

*Aile Sistemleri Teorisi, Benliğin Farklılaşması, Vaka Çalışması, Aile Terapisi*

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## Introduction

Murray Bowen is a founder of the family systems theory and one of the pioneers in family therapy (Haefner, 2014). While he was working with schizophrenic patients, he also worked with their families, in particular their mothers (Haefner, 2014). He noticed that for these families, one of the key factors that generate anxiety is having distance in their relationship. Therefore, he paid attention to enmeshed relationships in their families (Brown, 1999).

From this perspective, Murray Bowen (1966) defined the term “differentiation of self” as a capacity to gain a balance between emotional and intellectual functioning without fusion. Bowen established this term in light of the family system theory and he believed self-differentiation is closely related to an individual’s family life. Bowen indicated that a person’s level of differentiation of self illustrates his capacity to distinguish feelings and thoughts under stressful situations (Skowron & Dendy, 2004). With these words, Bowen (1976) emphasized the importance of control over the emotional process and also underlined the importance of self-differentiation to regulate emotions. Differentiation of self also enables emotion regulation includes soothing one’s own anxiety and not feeling overwhelmed by anxiety of others (Schnarch, 1997).

Family systems theory demonstrates that differentiation of self is crucial to longterm intimate relationships (Skowron, 2000). In terms of close relationships, differentiation of self appears as maintaining a sense of self and being capable to take I positions (Skowron, 2000). Differentiation addresses maintaining autonomy in intimate relationships differentiated persons are capable of supporting their spouse's without experiencing identity lost (Schnarch, 1997). With this term, Bowen also addressed the value of being autonomous and emotionally mature, and the importance of maintaining independent thinking during emotional relationships (Skowron & Friedlander, 1998).

According to Bowen (1976), poorly differentiated or undifferentiated individuals are surrounded by their feelings and they make their decision regarding their feeling. They live relationship-oriented lives and focus on comfort and balance in their relationship. In their research, Skowron et al. (2009) found that undifferentiated people greatly struggle with interpersonal distress (Skowron, Stanley, & Shapiro, 2009). In the relationship, they seek to gain acceptance, approval, and emotional closeness, which results in fusion or enmeshed relationships (Bowen, 1976). Bowen (1976) stated that if individuals are not differentiated, their emotional system will dominate over their intellectual system. They will become emotionally reactive under stress and they will show less flexibility, less adaptation, and more emotionally dependence to others (Bowen, 1976). According to Skowron (2000), less differentiated persons appear emotionally immature.

Contrarily, Bowen (1976) explains that well-differentiated individuals make their decisions using their logical thoughts. In their emotional life, they can experience intimacy and achieve closeness without fusion. They are able to deal with conflict, rejection, and separation (Haefner, 2014). In addition to better coping skills with stress, they experience significantly fewer relationship problems compared to undifferentiated people (Skowron et al., 2009). In their study, Murdock and Gore (2004) emphasized that under similar levels of stressful situations, well-differentiated individuals showed less psychological dysfunction. Well-differentiated individuals experience domination of intellectual functioning on their emotional functioning and under stress situations; they show more flexibility, more adaptation, and more emotionally independence (Bowen, 1976).

Skowron and Dendy (2004) underlined the similarities between Bowlby’s attachment theory and Bowen’s theory by stating both theories focus on autonomous self while staying emotionally connected to parents. Studies indicate that the undifferentiated self primarily requires love, approval, and security, which means non-threatening and non-increasing anxiety (Peleg-Popko, 2002). According to Skowron (2000), differentiated persons are less likely to experience fear of abandonment in their

relationships while less differentiated persons experience difficulty with closeness and separateness.

It was predicted that the level of differentiation is crucial for psychological well-being and healthy psychological development (Bowen, 1976; Skowron, Stanley & Shapiro, 2009). Skowron, Holmes, and Sabatelli (2003) conducted a research on 87 men and 134 women in total of 221 participants and assessed participants' differentiation of self and psychological well-being. In their research, found that men participants usually reported having adjustment problems related to lower emotional reactivity and developing a clear sense of self. In the same research, women participants usually reported self-regulation and interdependent relating problems. The findings of this research also supported that self-management skills and interdependent relatedness are crucial for women's wellbeing (Skowron, Holmes & Sabatelli, 2003). Bowen explained that undifferentiated people usually suffer from anxiety, dissatisfaction in marriage, and physical distress (Jenkins, Buboltz Jr, Schwartz, & Johnson, 2005). In addition to that, Peleg-Popko (2002) emphasized the relationship between low self-differentiation and high social anxiety and intensity of adolescent problems. The study by Jenkins et al. (2005) supported Bowen's idea by finding that levels of differentiation can anticipate adults' psychological adjustment.

Bowen (1976) believes the level of differentiation also affects family member's functioning. Skowron (2005) supports this idea by indicating parents' level of self-differentiation can be predictive of their children's competence. Since parents who have a good differentiation can modulate their emotional arousal and cope with stress efficiently, their children show competence, learn self-regulation, and maintain resiliency in stress situations (Skowron, 2005). Family system theory explains the causes of being undifferentiated in the concept of family relations, and it names some of the characteristics of the family that led to undifferentiation (Murdock & Gore, 2004). These characteristics were listed as eight interlocking terms and it is crucial to explain them to obtain a better understanding regarding theory.

### **Eight interlocking terms**

According to Bowen (1976), *triangulation* is an emotional structure of three people, which is also the smallest stable relationship system in the family. When tension in the relationship of two family member increases, triangulation starts by bringing in a third person in a relationship in order to lower anxiety (Haefner, 2014). Bowen (1976) illustrated the most common triangle as the father-mother-child (third person) triangle and the triangulated person. The most vulnerable person of the family is usually the first child or the youngest child (Bowen, 1976).

*Nuclear family emotional system* emphasizes that a family responds to stress, which is also transferred from past generations to future generations. In Bowen's theory, this shows itself in one of three ways: as marital conflict, dysfunction in one spouse, or impairment of one or more children (Bowen, 1976). Bowen explains this concept as this: An individual, who developed his differentiation in his family of origin, chooses a spouse who has the same levels of differentiation. Couples with a low level of differentiation become more intense in emotional fusion and they have greater problems. In this relationship, one spouse obtains the dominant role and becomes a decision maker, while the other is pushed to the adaptive role. When the dominant one gains self, the adaptive one loses self. More differentiated spouses usually show less fusion while less differentiated spouses experience more fusion, which leads to anxiety for couples. In order to deal with anxiety, couples become emotionally distant towards each other (Bowen, 1976).

According to Bowen, *marital conflict* is originated undifferentiation and this conflict generates powerful tension between couples. During the "make up" period, this emotional energy appears as closeness. During the conflict period, it becomes anger. Marital conflict determines the relationship cycle between couple such as: closeness, conflict, distance, making up, and closeness (Bowen, 1976).

*Dysfunction in one spouse* appears as a product of an intense level of undifferentiation in the marriage. Due to the fact that one of the partners becomes adaptive in these

types of marriages, he or she loses themselves and becomes absorbed by their dominant partner. In addition to losing his or her functioning, an adaptive spouse also loses their ability to make a decision for him or herself and they become totally dependent. When anxiety increases in the relationship, it triggers a dysfunction in the adaptive spouse, such as physical problems, emotional problems, or social problems that may develop into chronic illnesses. These illnesses reinforce absorbing the undifferentiation. Dysfunctional spouses might be compensated by the over functioning of their partner and this inhibits the idea of divorce (Bowen, 1976).

*Impairment of one or more children* implies parents' projection of anxiety to children by excessively worrying about their attitudes, health, or their future (Bowen, 1976). Bowen states that impairment of a child is actually a projection of undifferentiation and this process will prevent the child's self-differentiation (Bowen, 1976). *Family projection process* explains the process of emotional impairment of one or more children. In the beginning, projection is usually only towards one child. However, if the level of undifferentiation is very high, the other children may be involved (Bowen, 1976). The selection of a child is usually related to their mother's stress during their birth, the sibling position (the first child and the youngest child), the sex (being the only child of that sex), and their emotional closeness with parents (Bowen, 1976). Bowen states that the most familiar example of this is a mother's overprotective behaviors to her child in order to reduce her anxiety (Cook, 2007). When the mother feels anxious, the child also starts to feel anxious. Nonetheless, this anxiety was perceived by the child from his parents and the child receives overprotective care from the mother. This projection process causes emotional fusion in the relationship, which may also lead to dysfunction for the child (Bowen, 1966).

*Emotional cutoff* describes the separation and isolation from the family of origin in order to escape from conflict. Bowen states that running away from family of origin is a sign of emotional dependence, which also causes vulnerability (Bowen, 1976). Struggling to manage emotional problems with family members displays itself as a cutoff, which is the origin of unresolved attachment (Haefner, 2014).

Having an unresolved emotional attachment to their parents is a major issue for the differentiation of self. Bowen believes that when poorly differentiated individuals experience intense anxiety in the family, they are inclined to cut off emotional contacts within the family (Skowron & Friedlander, 1998).

Emotional cutoffs are usually transferred from the past generation to future generations, and they repeat (Cook, 2007). When there is cutoff with the past, it is likely to also have marital conflict, withdrawal, and emotional cutoff with the children. For this reason, having family cutoff with the previous generation leads to dysfunction in the family and poorly differentiated people (Bowen, 1976). In their study, Jenkins et al. (2005) supported Bowen's idea by stating that emotional cutoffs are in anticipation of psychological problems (Jenkins, Buboltz Jr, Schwartz, & Johnson, 2005).

The family projection process continues through multiple generations (Haefner, 2014). *Multigenerational transmission process* emphasizes the transfer of the conflict to other generations via family projection process. As it was mentioned before, after the impairment of a child, the child cannot differentiate themselves from the parents and shows dysfunction. Consequently, he or she carries their undifferentiation to other generations by leading their children to be undifferentiated (Bowen, 1976).

Bowen adopted the concept of *sibling position* from Toman's (1961) work, and he described the term as "significant characteristics of birth order in the family." This concept was substantial to explain the selection of a child during the family projection process. Bowen assumed the first child is usually chosen to be triangulated and they are the least differentiated person of the family, while the youngest child is usually the opposite (Bowen, 1976).

*Societal regression* illustrates the link between family system and society. Bowen believes that emotional problems in the family are similar to emotional problems in society. Where anxiety exists, intellectual functioning stops and emotional decisions appear to reduce anxiety in both systems (Bowen, 1976). This dysfunction might also

be repetitive and not only can be observed in a family, but it also appears in society. All in all, the anxiety causes regression to previous levels of functioning in both systems (Bowen, 1976).

After reviewing of Bowen's theory, it is imperative to employ it on a case study. The following case study was considered, showing striking similarities to characteristics of the theory and interventions.

### **Case Study**

Amy is a 41-year-old Caucasian woman who came to therapy because of the difficulties she has in her romantic relationship. She wanted to work on her constant crying, her heartbreak, and her communication with her partner. She has never sought psychological help nor was she diagnosed with any mental disorders before. She has never married and she has only one child, who is 17 years old boy. She and her boyfriend live in different houses and they have been in a relationship for over two years.

According to Amy, she did whatever her partner asked for, however one day her partner wanted some space from Amy. Even though Amy and her partner did not break up, when Amy came to therapy she was consistently crying. She was overly concerned with what she should do to get her boyfriend back and what her boyfriend thinks about her. Also, she was frequently seeking approval.

She was raised in a family that consisted of a mother, father, sister, and two brothers. She was the youngest child of the family. Amy stated that at the beginning of her parents' marriage, her father had an affair with another woman and her mother never forgave him. Even though her mother did not forgive her father, they stayed in the marriage until her father died. She reported that her mother and father spent all their lives silent towards each other. Because she was the youngest kid and her older siblings left the home before Amy, Amy said she was involved in her parents' relationship too much. She reported that her mother always talked about her father in a negative way and this caused Amy to hate her dad for all of her adolescent years.

According to her description, Amy's maternal grandmother came to this country after she got married to her grandfather. Amy never met her grandfather because he died before she was born. Amy also said she has seen her maternal grandmother only a couple of times in her life. She said because of her grandmother's marriages (she got married four times), her mother was very distant to her mom. Her mother was not in contact with her siblings either, and this caused Amy to have a distant relationship with her cousins.

Amy said she now lives in a different city than her mother. She talks to her mother every day and visits her frequently. She described their relationship as very close. When Amy had a problem with her boyfriend, she could talk to her mother about it. However, Amy reported that this time she did not tell her anything about her boyfriend's attitude because she did not want to make her mother upset. She said that if her mother learns of this, she will call him and yell at him, and this can cause more tension in Amy's relationship.

Exploring her relationship with her boyfriend showed that her boyfriend was arrested because he exposed himself to a random girl in the street. Amy also mentioned her boyfriend has many sexy women friends in his social media profile and those women frequently sent posts to him. She also said that her boyfriend sometimes asks her to send nude pictures of her and she does. However, recently he asked Amy to send him a nude picture of her and another person together and this made Amy uncomfortable.

Taking a close look at Amy's life and her family of origin, it is easy to note that this case study illustrates some similar characteristics of Bowen's description of low level differentiated self. Although there might be other explanations and aspects, in this case, the paper will only focus on Bowen's theory. In light of Bowen's definition of interlocking terms of family system theory, it can be assumed that Amy struggles with the differentiation of self. Being a part of triangulation, her emotional cutoffs,

emotional reactivity, her enmeshed relationship with her mother, and her fusion with her partner bolster the idea of the low level of differentiation.

Amy's history of taking her mother's side over her fathers can be defined as a triangulation, which represents Amy and her mother's dyad over her father. According to Bowen's (1976) definition, the youngest child is at risk to be triangulated during marital conflict, which supports the possibility of her engagement in a triangle. Even though Amy's dad died, it can be easily interpreted that Amy still has an enmeshed relationship with her mother.

Emotional cutoff is another crucial factor in Amy's life that reinforces a low level of differentiation. This characteristic was also transferred from her mother's family to Amy's cut-offs with her mother's siblings and cousins, and it supports the idea of low level of differentiation. Bowen (1976) also emphasizes that running away from a family of origin is another sign of emotional dependence and necessity of closeness.

The other significant factor that addresses a low level of differentiation is Amy's tendency to make emotional decisions. For example, when Amy planned her vacation to Peru for four days, she invited her mother, too. However, her mother changed the destination and length of the trip and Amy had to go somewhere she did not want for her vacation. When I asked the reason why, she said that if she did not go and then her mother passes away, she would feel so bad. This demonstrates that her mother can affect Amy's decisions and Amy feels guilty when she disregards her feelings.

The fusion also showed itself in Amy's relationship with her partner. She adopted her partner's opinions and expressed them like her own opinions. When she learned that her partner was cheating on her, even though she was sad, she said that "every woman is cheated on by her partner; it's not the end of the world." When the therapist challenged this idea, Amy said, "My boyfriend told this to me and because he cheated on me, this does not mean he does not love me, right?" This can be considered as a sign of adopting someone else's opinion like your opinion and struggling to maintain independent thinking. In the relationship, such people seek to gain acceptance, approval, and emotional closeness, which results in fusion or enmeshed relationships (Bowen, 1976).

When Amy's boyfriend wanted space from her, Amy showed emotional reactivity by crying. She also mentioned that instead of giving him space, she called her boyfriend many times crying. While she shows more emotional dependence on her partner, she continued reacting emotionally, which illustrates the major characteristic of a poorly differentiated person.

Considering the transfer of past relationship patterns to the next generation was another striking fact in Amy's family. The cheating theme started in her parents' relationship and this projected itself onto all the children's future relationships, except one. Repetition of a cheating theme in the family supports the idea of multigenerational transmission process.

### **Intervention**

Bowen (1976) stated that the emotional health of an individual cannot be separated from the family. Using this knowledge about family system theory, Amy and her family could potentially benefit from family therapy focused on systemic approach. From this perspective, even though it is important to involve as many family members as possible to increase the level of self-differentiation, Amy is only able to attend individual therapy.

McGoldrick and Carter (2001) emphasized the techniques for family therapy with one person by explaining that system interactions, fusion, differentiation, triangles, distancing and cut-off are the areas which need to be intervened. They said that detriangulation, opening up a close system, and taking an I positions are the most effective techniques to use in therapy.

Family systems theory encourages using a multigenerational genogram to gather information about the family's history (McGoldrick and Carter, 2001). Identifying the relationship patterns in previous generations was helpful for Amy to gain insight.

Since she was not aware of the transfer of patterns (such as cutoffs and the cheating theme) from past generations to future generations, it was valuable for her to see the relationship patterns in the family.

In terms of de-triangulation, Amy said she had a chance to develop an individual relationship with her father after she gave birth. After she saw her dad's relationship with her son, she said she started to see her dad in a different light than before. She also said she realized that all that time, her mother brainwashed her about her dad and she hated from her dad for no reason. Before Amy's father passed away, she said they developed a better relationship and made up for those years. Here, there was no work possible about de-triangulation. Since Amy's dad passed away last year, she still shows emotional sensitivity about this topic. However, in therapy, talking about that triangulation's effects and how she realized she was in triangulation was beneficial.

Bowen (1976) stated that having family cutoff with the previous generation leads to dysfunction in the family. For this reason, reopening the emotional cutoff and reconnecting with family members is crucial for Amy to resolve the emotional conflict. Since Amy has never experienced conflict between her mother's siblings, contacting her cousins and re-opening that cutoffs can also benefit her self-differentiation. Even though Amy has not taken any step to make a connection with her maternal relatives, she is comfortable with this idea.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

Finally, by reinforcing, taking I positions, and maintaining independent thinking, the fusion in Amy's relationships can be prevented. During therapy, work focused on differentiating Amy's feelings from her partner's opinions. In the beginning, she tended to talk about her partner too much. When she was making comments about her partner's opinions about herself, she was asked, "This is what he thinks, what do you think?" This helped Amy to start independently thinking. Now, Amy has started to spend time on her own opinions and started to talk about herself in therapy.

As a result, these methods and therapy might help Amy's self-differentiation, her empowerment, and also prevent transference of the same patterns to the next generation. This paper only focused on Bowen's theory, however, benefiting from other aspects and techniques certainly can contribute therapy.

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