

“ANOTHER WAY OF THINKING” - THE NATURE OF THE LENS

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Dr. Anne Harrington was the distinguished guest presenter at the 36th Georgetown Symposium in 1999. She raised a number of questions during the discussion periods, which followed the presentations. One question was, “Why do you focus on the ‘family’ as opposed to other units of observation?” Needless to say, the Georgetown audience thought her question a little odd. There were some attempts to respond to her question, but none spoke clearly to the logic and assumptions of the “family” conceptualization.

There are indeed choices for the selection of the observational unit. There are many levels of “systems,” each of which has validity and reality. Some researchers study communication patterns at the cellular and genetic level and how these interactions play a role in certain diseases (e.g., cancer, diabetes, autoimmune disorders). The prevailing and dominant paradigm today remains the focus on the individual, and interactional patterns within the organism (e.g., DSM-IV). The child guidance model acknowledged the importance of the parents, but thought it important to operationalize the therapy process of the child and the parents as separate, though in interaction. Early psychodynamic models focused on patient/mother relationships — such as symbiotic relationships, or “schizophrenogenic mother.” It was hard to keep “blame” out of this model, with one backlash result being the NAMI organization of parents insisting that mental illness is a brain disorder within the individual, like diabetes is a disease. Transactional analysis and Gestalt theories recognize the interactional (and internalization) relationship patterns, but limit the focus to the individual and his/her parents. There is no focus on or conceptualization of multigenerational relationships or interactional patterns. Another lens and conceptualization focused on the tribe or community as the healing medium (Ross Speck and Carolyn Attneave). James Lovelock’s Gaia conceptualizes the entire earth, and its environment as a single, interacting, self-regulating system. Some astronomers speak of “the life cycle of galaxies,” and articulate interactional variables. There is no shortage of lens!

In December of 1978, a family practice faculty member at a Midwestern medical school sent a paper to Dr. Bowen on “differentiation of self in one’s culture of origin.” Dr. Bowen’s response touches on these various “lens” and some of the pitfalls. He also offers his thinking about “why family?” and similarities with other emotional systems.

December 27, 1978

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Dear Dr.

Thank you for sending the copy of your paper on differentiation of self in one's culture of origin. It is a fascinating subject and I am pleased to hear your ideas and comparisons.

You present a dozen or two interesting ideas about which we could debate for hours. There is no time for all the detail. In general I agree with the notion that emotional process in the family has some striking similarities with emotional process in society.

The notion of the "differentiation of self in one's culture of origin" contains some knotty problems. I will pass along some of my experiences. In the 1972-73 period when I began presentations about "societal regression" people automatically began to think "societal therapy." The most striking example was a two day meeting at a large university. The evening of the first day someone had printed signs inviting conference participants to special meetings the next day to plan "societal therapy." On a practical level the only place the "differentiation of self" can take place is in one's family of origin. That is the only place the relationship system is strong enough to sustain the emotional turmoil of a serious "differentiating" step. It is not possible in families in which the family member is emotionally cut-off and the emotional bondedness is too weak to sustain it. The family further extrudes this family member. It is common for people to make such efforts in their work systems. Anyone who gets serious about this will end up getting fired. I have had personal experience with a dozen or more of these. I know of one minister who began a long term effort to start differentiating moves around the discrepancy in religious beliefs. His footing seemed sound enough for a beginning effort but I doubt if he can make it work on more than a token level. I have not heard from him in about two or three years. The belief system in a culture is on a fairly deep level but it would take some agile footwork to maintain a viable relationship with a previous culture after a person has shifted his beliefs toward another culture. The people who are successful in the cross cultural arena are those who have first made progress in their own families. Then it becomes automatic for them to be different, accepting and understanding in all other relationship systems. To start with another system and work back toward the family is usually an exercise in chaos, frustration, and total futility.

Considering everything, I think it is accurate and "on the mark" to point out similarities between the family emotional system and all other emotional systems but it goes beyond the boundaries of reality to imply that one can differentiate a self in these other emotional systems. Overall, I think the effort in your paper is a commendable one. However I do think your paper would be more effective if you would present it more as another way of thinking than as an explanation for this in the way things are.

If I know you, you will be thinking and working on this problem far into the future. I appreciated the copy of the paper and I will be looking forward to hearing the evolution of your thinking in the future.

Sincerely,

Murray Bowen, M.D.
Clinical Professor
and Director of the Family Center

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Enclosure