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Biculturalism:

Its Implications for the Family System

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Biculturalism: Its Implications for the Family System

The United States' population is composed of many different cultures: Anglo-Saxon, African American, Hispanic, Asian, Caribbean, Native American, etc. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2005-2007), the American Community Survey reported that the population consisted of 74.1% of Whites, 14.7% of Hispanics or Latinos, 12.4% of African Americans, 0.8% of American Indians and Alaska Natives, 4.3% of Asians, 0.1% of Native Hawaiians and Other Pacific Islanders, and 6.2% of some other race. However, all of these cultures do not prevent America from having a culture of her own. Unfortunately, some of these cultures may come to clash with another, which results in conflict for the family system.

Many people of different ethnic groups migrate to the U.S. in hopes of finding opportunities to prosper for themselves and their families. However, with this migration comes many issues in the family system, particularly when dealing with a family that has first generation American adults and second generation American children. This mix of cultures gives rise to another population, one of bicultural or multicultural individuals. Biculturalism or multiculturalism implies that one has two or more cultural identities, respectively (Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005). These identities can come to cause bicultural and multicultural families many issues, many relating to differing rates of acculturation (Romera, Carvajal, Valle, & Orduña, 2007). Differences in acculturation and values tend to be very problematic for the family as each culture places varying levels of value on different things. What is considered to be highly valued in one culture may not be that important in another. These differences in acculturation rates and cultural values, if not addressed appropriately, may lead to conflict within the family system.

The theoretical perspective offered by Murray Bowen seems to provide an adequate explanation of how this phenomenon might occur and how it might affect the family (Alderfer, 2004). It presents ways in which this conflict may continue from generation to generation using concepts such as differentiation of self, emotional cutoff, fusion, and multigenerational transmission process. Therefore, since Bowen's model attempts to explain problems in the family system through these concepts, his approach appears to be well suited for the purpose of gaining insight into how biculturalism, and consequently acculturation, affects the family system.

Bowen's Theory

Murray Bowen, a family origin theorist of the late 1900s developed his family systems theory which highlights a few major concepts: differentiation of self, the family emotional system, multigenerational transmission processes, and the emotional triangle (Alderfer, 2004). Other relevant terms include fusion and emotional cutoff, which will be further explained later in this paper. The most important concept in the theory, and probably the one most relevant to the matter at hand, is differentiation of self (Klever, 2009a).

Differentiation of Self

Differentiation of self refers to one's ability to effectively incorporate cognitive and emotional processes, and one's ability to maintain individuality in spite of emotional relationships (Klever, 2009a). Effectively incorporating cognitive and emotional processes refers to being able to think in emotional situations (Klever, 2009a). Basically, it means that one can keep a clear head in circumstances that would otherwise lead to emotional reactivity. Maintaining individuality consists of the ability to stay true to one's self, while also having emotional relationships with others (Klever, 2009a). This relates to how differentiated individuals can take an I-position, which signifies that they take ownership for their feelings and

thoughts; this is opposed to undifferentiated individuals whose emotional connectedness and reactivity prevents them from doing so (Skowron, 2004). Undifferentiated individuals cannot separate themselves when connected to the family system. Consequently, they are emotionally reactive.

People can have either high levels of differentiation or low levels of differentiation (Klever, 2009a). Higher levels of differentiation in the family are associated with more productive functioning than lower levels of differentiation (Klever, 2009a). Unfortunately, not all families consist of members with high differentiation levels. Some undifferentiated individuals finally achieve higher levels of differentiation through Bowenian therapy. On the other hand, some never achieve it all, which can affect future generations.

Cultural Conflict

America is very much an individualistic country, valuing independence and autonomy; conversely, collectivistic cultures place more emphasis on interdependence (Skowron, 2004). One might see how this may result in conflict among the family system. Say, for instance, a family immigrates to the U.S. from a collectivistic culture that values togetherness, interdependence, family connectedness, etc. Soon after, they have a couple of children added onto the family. These children are probably raised in one culture at home but another at school or anywhere else in outside society. They come to have two identities and lead double lives: one at home (or with their ethnic group) and another in everyday society, placing them in a double-bind (Quinones-Mayo & Dempsey, 2005). If the two cultures are very dissimilar in values, they are hard to blend together. This results in cultural conflict. Therefore, if the way they are raised at home and the way that is found in society completely clash, children may achieve lower levels of differentiation than they normally would if they were being raised by American parents who

held the same beliefs and values as the mainstream culture (such as the importance of independence and autonomy).

Acculturation

Acculturation refers to the changes that result in an individual due to his/her contact with other cultures (Farver et al., 2007). As the children get older, this begins to bring more and more problems into the family; this is because the different acculturation levels of the parents and children often lead to perspectives that are incompatible with one another. This cultural conflict may result in a negative ethnic identity rather than a positive ethnic identity (Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005; Quinones-Mayo & Dempsey, 2005). This can result in lower levels of differentiation, as higher differentiation levels are associated with a higher sense of ethnic belonging (Skowron, 2004). The children may end up with low levels of differentiation of self because they have been raised in a manner that encourages fused emotional thinking, in which thought cannot be separated from emotion. The two become linked. One might think, "I can't do what I want and please my parents." or "If I do this, it means that I don't care about my family," which is not necessarily the case.

Fusion

Highly differentiated individuals would be able to recognize that one is not automatically linked to the other. There is a level of individuality that should be maintained while also maintaining a sense of togetherness with one's family. Unfortunately, this is probably not the case for most second generation Americans with parents from a collectivistic background. Fusion is probably the most likely outcome, which is basically the opposite of differentiation. Fusion occurs when one cannot separate the self from others when connected to the family (Klever, 2003).

Emotionally fused families experience much more anxiety, while the least differentiated member experiences the most (Klever, 2003). This transmits from generation to generation which is defined by the concept, multigenerational transmission process (Alderfer, 2004). With the advent of each generation comes either a lower level of differentiation or a higher one for the subsequent family depending on the fusion or differentiation level achieved by an individual in the family of origin. This occurs because there is a transfer of reactivity that affects the nuclear family of the next generation (Klever, 2003; Klever, 2009b).

Implications for the family

One might argue that the Bowenian model may not apply to cultural groups. Therefore, lower levels of differentiation may not necessarily impact other ethnic groups in the same manner that it affects the mainstream group. However, a study conducted by Skowron (2004) suggested that Bowen's theory has cross-cultural validity as higher levels of differentiation were associated with better psychological adjustment, maturity, and social problem-solving skills of individuals across ethnic groups. As a result, differentiation of self appears to be linked with positive outcomes across cultures.

Adolescents may not achieve a high level of differentiation due to the high level of anxiety and stress experienced in their familial relationships. Studies have indicated that the conflict encountered through differing levels of acculturation can result in mental health problems for the individuals undergoing the most acculturative stress (Romera et al., 2007). As a result, families with first generation parents and second generation children may experience many issues that disrupt the family relationships and dynamics.

A focus group composed of Latino mothers conducted by Quinones-Mayo & Dempsey (2005) found that the mothers shared similar experiences when it came time for their children to

reach adolescence. From their perspective, they suddenly had rebellious, deviant kids that would no longer conform to the norms and traditions of their ethnic background. Communication was blocked. It became a dilemma of Latino mothers raising “American” kids. The values inherent in Latino culture were not considered the most important values for the adolescent children because they were assimilating into American culture. Assimilation refers to how much one rejects one’s ethnic culture and identifies with the dominant, mainstream culture (Romera et al., 2007). Needless to say, most adolescents have this acculturation style (Romera et al., 2007). This brings forth many problems in the family, particularly when the parents have the acculturation style of separation – identifying with one’s ethnic group and rejecting the values of the mainstream culture (Benet-Martínez & Haritatos, 2005).

As a result, bicultural families encounter many issues, both for the first generation parents and the second generation children. Undifferentiation or fusion is linked with higher levels of symptomology for the nuclear family (Klever, 2003). This symptomology, in turn, has negative implications for family. A study assessing the effects of symptomology on the family from a Bowenian perspective did comparisons of the five least symptomatic families and the five most symptomatic families in the sample. The families with higher levels of symptomology reported more instances of divorce/separation, significantly more health problems in the family, and more emotional issues (some requiring medication) than those with lower levels of symptomology (Klever, 2009b).

The aforementioned problems and outcomes are not surprising, particularly the ones relating to physical and emotional health. One might hypothesize that the high levels of anxiety that are typical of undifferentiated families might result in more stress, which may lead to health and emotional problems, especially for the parents. However, stress does affect the children as

well. According to Romero et al. (2007), bicultural stress results in serious mental health problems, particularly depression, for the adolescents involved. Accordingly, they purport that mental health researchers place more focus on how one's cultural context can affect one's mental health because it appears to be an area that is generally overlooked yet is very important for the mental stability of the family.

Emotional Cutoff

For the moment, adolescents have their ways of coping with these situations and stressors. One way, as explained by Bowenian theory, is through the process of emotional cutoff. Children may engage in emotional cutoff due to the emotional fusion between them and their parents. Emotional cutoff is a natural reaction to the fusion that results from an undifferentiated family. It occurs when a child, for example, chooses to distance him/herself from his/her parents in an effort to reduce the anxiety between generations (Klever, 2009b). This can happen in a literal sense (i.e., the child moves away) or in a manner that prevents personal or close contact with parents (e.g., avoiding being alone with the parents, certain conversations, etc.). Some might think they are escaping the problem, but on the contrary, they are not dealing with it. The problem of fusion subsists quietly within the individual and soon resurfaces in the presence of the person's parents or in the person's future nuclear family (Klever, 2003); hence the concept of multigenerational transmission process. This phenomenon continues from generation to generation until undifferentiation is addressed in the family system, which is usually done through Bowenian therapy.

The implication that this information has for the family system is one of utmost importance. If varying acculturation levels can lead to undifferentiation or fusion in the family members, then the family is in trouble. Family dynamics are affected by the anxiety present in

the family. Communication is negatively affected, as undifferentiated individuals are emotionally reactive. Furthermore, the level of stress experienced by the family affects them physically and emotionally, both adults and children. There are also repercussions in the family system, as the symptomology of nuclear families increase with the level of fusion in the system. Marital discord and family issues often arise and lead to divorce or separation of the couple. Moreover, the problem that was responsible for the lack of homeostatic balance is not addressed, leaving the children to react in maladaptive ways such as emotional cutoff. Sadly, this does not resolve the problem either. It remains quietly buried only to be awakened by the next generation nuclear family or by contact with the family of origin.

In short, bicultural families in America will probably experience difficulties due to the acculturation levels present in the family system, particularly when the cultures in question have much dissimilarity. The children might choose to fully assimilate into the mainstream culture, whereas parents may hold to the values of their respective ethnic groups. This interrupts the homeostatic balance of the family system. The disruption in the family system is related to the conflict that exists between the cultures involved and brings about feelings of anxiety and stress for the family as a whole. This phenomenon may be explained in terms of Bowen theory, specifically the concepts of differentiation of self and fusion of the family.

First generation parents often have different acculturation levels than their second generation children which may result in a low level of differentiation for the children of the family. This produces much anxiety in the family system and, in turn, may lead to fusion and, subsequently, emotional cutoff on the children's part, which only perpetuates the problem. To resolve this problem, one must get the undifferentiated individual to stop avoiding the problem and address this issue. Doing so may lead him or her to achieve a higher level of differentiation,

lest the problem continue on and on, from generation to generation. Out of these two outcomes, people would most likely agree that the former is preferable to the latter.

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