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Bowen Theory: A View from the 21st Century



Murray Bowen began his Family Study Project employing cause-and-effect thinking. He realized within the first year that systems thinking was necessary to describe relationship interactions. The application of systems thinking ultimately led to discerning basic patterns of emotional functioning. The description of the patterns, such as the triangle, became the basis of the first six concepts in his radically new theory. During the more than five decades since the first publication of Bowen theory, it has been extremely difficult to demonstrate a link to individual emotional functioning, except in terms of behavioral interactions. This link has largely been ignored by the scientific community.

However, exciting new developments are occurring in medicine and systems biology. One example is the development of Tissue Organization Field Theory (TOFT) based on cancer research. The basic idea is that, like individual family members being regulated by the family relationship system, cells are regulated by the cellular relationship system. The appearance of cancers is inadequately explained by looking for “causes” within the cancer cell such as gene mutations; the appearance of cancer results from a disturbance in the cellular relationship system in which it is embedded. This presentation will explain why TOFT is so important to Bowen theory. In essence, TOFT is an important step towards a systems theory of the individual, which will make possible a link between what is playing out within the individual and what is playing out in the family. It moves Bowen Theory closer to science. Science will be the ultimate judge of the theory’s accuracy and acceptance.

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