Bowen Theory: Families with Addiction

Anne S. McKnight Ed.D.
Director, Bowen Center for the Study of the Family
La Bouverie Centre, Melbourne
June 16, 2015
Goals

- Present a family systems view of addiction.
- Describe concepts of Bowen theory, including differentiation of self, the family as an emotional system, anxiety, and family emotional patterns.
- Present a videotaped clinical session discussing addiction in a family.
What is addiction?

- compulsive physiological need for and use of a habit-forming substance (as heroin, nicotine, or alcohol) characterized by tolerance and by well-defined physiological symptoms upon withdrawal; *broadly: persistent compulsive use of a substance known by the user to be physically, psychologically, or socially harmful.*

*Webster’s Dictionary*
Opioid receptors are built into the human brain.
Neurological basis for addiction

Mu Opioid Receptor:
Located on the membrane of neuronal cells

Morphine

Affect the brain reward/pain system
Individual model of addiction

Addiction is a disease.
Individual model of addiction

Addiction is a disease.

It is biologically based and genetically transmitted.
Addiction is a disease.

It is biologically based and genetically transmitted.

The problem is in the pathology of the individual.
Individual model of addiction

Addiction is a disease.

It is biologically based and genetically transmitted.

The problem is in the pathology of the individual.

It should be diagnosed and treated.
Broader viewpoint: Opiate receptors are essential to regulate the physiology, emotions, and relationships of the human.
Opiate receptors regulate:
\begin{itemize}
    \item pain and analgesia,
    \item stress and social status,
    \item tolerance and dependence,
    \item learning and memory,
    \item eating and drinking,
    \item alcohol and drugs of abuse,
    \item CNS development and endocrinology,
    \item mental illness and mood,
    \item seizures and neurological disorders,
    \item electrical activity and neurophysiology,
\end{itemize}
general activity and locomotion, gastrointestinal, renal and hepatic functions, cardiovascular responses, respiration and thermoregulation and immunological responses.

[for reviews, see: van Ree et al. (1999); Law et al. (2000); Williams et al. (2001)].
Jaak Panksepp wrote *Affective Neuroscience*

- The neurobiology of addiction is related to social dependency.
“....One reason certain people become addicted to external opiates is because they are able to artificially induce feelings of gratification similar to that normally achieved by the socially induced release of endogenous opioids such as endorphins and enkephalins. In doing this, individuals are able to pharmacologically induce the positive feeling of connectedness that others derive from social interactions.”
SIMILARITIES BETWEEN

OPIATE ADDICTION

1) Drug Dependence
2) Drug Tolerance
3) Drug Withdrawal
   a) Psychic pain
   b) Lacrimation
   c) Anorexia
   d) Despondency
   e) Insomnia
   f) Aggressiveness

SOCIAL DEPENDENCE

1) Social Bonding
2) Estrangement
3) Separation Distress
   a) Loneliness
   b) Crying
   c) Loss of Appetite
   d) Depression
   e) Sleeplessness
   f) Irritability

created a family systems theory based on his observations of human families and his studies of the natural world.
Concepts of Bowen Theory

- Family as an emotional system.
- Differentiation of self/scale of differentiation.
- Symptom development as family adaptation.
- Triangles and the projection process.
- Emotional patterns that manage anxiety.
Bowen: The family is an emotional unit based on those individuals who are appended to the emotional nucleus.
Each member of a family system interacts with other members in reciprocal patterns that involve emotions, behavior, and physiology.
“Systems theory assumes that all important people in the family unit play a part in the way family members function in relation to each other and in the way the symptom finally erupts. The symptom of excessive drinking occurs when family anxiety is high…The process of drinking to relieve anxiety, and increased family anxiety in response to the drinking, can spiral into a functional collapse or the process can become a chronic pattern.”

Family Therapy in Clinical Practice (FTCP), 261
The human has a balance in the forces for individuality and togetherness:

Interdependence and the need for social connection. The individual’s need to develop his own life.
Two emotional forces that balance each other

“A relationship system is kept in equilibrium by two powerful emotional forces that balance each other."
“A relationship system is kept in equilibrium by two powerful emotional forces that balance each other. One is the force for togetherness powered by the universal need for emotional closeness, love, and approval.
“A relationship system is kept in equilibrium by two powerful emotional forces that balance each other. One is the force for togetherness powered by the universal need for emotional closeness, love, and approval. The other is the force for individuality, powered by the drive to be a productive, autonomous individual, as determined by self rather than the dictates of the group.” FTCP, 311
The balance in the forces for:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INDIVIDUALITY</th>
<th>TOGETHERNESS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Individual needs to fulfill tasks of life:</td>
<td>Individual has a need for connection, group cohesion, interdependence, and acceptance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>to become an adult,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>function in the world,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>choose a partner,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and reproduce.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A basic human emotion is anxiety.

Anxiety is a patterned responsiveness at emotional, physiological, and behavioral levels over time and across generations.
Anxiety

- is transmitted through family relationships,
- over generations,
- is triggered by life events, and
- can become generalized.
Anxiety

- is transmitted through family relationships,
- over generations,
- is triggered by life events, and
- can become generalized.

*When anxiety is high, the ability to think, plan, evaluate, and decide is compromised.*
The more a person’s life is run by sensitivity to expectations of others, the need for approval, or dependence on others, the less able he is to think about how to manage his life based on thoughtful principles.
Families vary in ability to manage anxiety.

Connected, but flexible for individual life goals, calm interdependence.

Dependent, sensitive, emotionally reactive, difficulty with boundaries.
Families vary in ability to manage anxiety.

Connected, but flexible for individual life goals, calm interdependence.

Dependent, sensitive, emotionally reactive, difficulty with boundaries.

When a person is sensitive to the reactions of others, he/she has less self and is more vulnerable to developing a symptom.
Differentiation of Self

- Differentiation is based on the interplay of individuality, the ability of family members to be thoughtfully goal directed in their lives, and togetherness, which is an individual’s sensitivity to the thoughts, feelings, and opinions of others.
What is differentiation of self?

- Flexibility and objectivity.
- Separation of emotional and intellectual systems.
- Clear set of principles by which to live.
- Capacity to define self.
- Determined by family functioning.
- Influenced by level of anxiety in family.
The Scale of differentiation describes variation in human functioning. It ranges from:

- **More thoughtful, purposeful life**: Manages emotions, cooperative.
- **Reactive, anxiety driven**: Symptomatic, chaotic.

This scale highlights the spectrum of human emotional and behavioral responses.
Some live their lives calmly.

- Are informed by their emotions, without acting on their initial reactions.
- Reflect and make thoughtful choices in spite of social or family pressures.
- Have a life plan that takes into consideration the responsibilities to others.
- Are thoughtful, collaborative, and calm.
Some lives are more directed by anxiety:

- React to others without weighing the facts.
- Depend on the approval of others.
- React to pressures from family or group by conforming or rebelling.
- Become angry, violent, or overwhelmed and unable to solve problems.
- Have social, emotional, or physical problems.
Scale of differentiation describes variation in human functioning

More thoughtful, purposeful life
Manages emotions, cooperative

Addiction

Reactive, anxiety driven
Symptomatic, chaotic
Symptoms are an expression of family anxiety.

- Symptoms develop in a family when a family’s ability to adapt in the face of stressors is exhausted.
- Symptoms can include physiological, emotional, or social problems.
A symptom is an expression of a family’s anxiety and reactivity in an individual, not a pathology in an individual.
Substance abuse as a symptom in a family:

- Is a mechanism to cope with anxiety,
- Which creates more anxiety in the family, and
- Which fuels the reactivity and the substance abuse in a spiraling manner.
Spiral of reactivity and addiction

Reactivity

Problems

Reactivity
The role of alcohol and drugs

Addiction/Compulsion
Automatic Patterns of Reactivity, Depression, Anger, Guilt

Thinking
Reflection
Choices

Stress

Anxiety
Family mechanisms (patterns) to manage anxiety

1. Distance/Cutoff
2. Conflict
3. Over/underfunctioning reciprocity
4. Projection on a child
Family mechanisms (patterns) to manage anxiety

1. Distance/Cutoff
2. Conflict
3. Over/underfunctioning reciprocity
4. Projection on a child

The higher the anxiety in the family and the lower level of differentiation, the more intensely the family uses these mechanisms.
Video
Family is an Emotional Unit

The change in one person’s part of the interactions will change the way others function in the system.
Coaching the motivated family member

- Anyone who is motivated to change his/her part in the interactions will change the system.
Coaching the motivated family member

- Anyone who is motivated to change his/her part in the interactions will change the system.
- The motivated person does not have to be the symptomatic one.
Coaching the motivated family member

- Anyone who is motivated to change his/her part in the interactions will change the system.

- The motivated person does not have to be the symptomatic one.

- If the any member of the family can become calmer, he/she will be more capable to lead the family out of the reactivity and toward solutions.
Level of differentiation, rather than intensity of symptom

“The basic strength or level of differentiation of self, rather than the intensity of the alcoholism, is a rather good predictor of the outcome of any effort at therapy.”

FTCP, p. 271
Coaching an individual toward differentiation

“The concept of differentiation has to do with self and not with others. Differentiation deals with working on one’s own self, with controlling self, with becoming a more responsible person, and permitting others to be themselves.”

FTCP, . 409
Family is an Emotional Unit

The change in one person’s part of the interactions will change the way others function in the system.
Defining self and the push to change back

“One principle about differentiating change is probably more important than all the others. Differentiation begins when one family member begins to more clearly define and openly state his own inner life principles and convictions, and he begins to take responsible action based on convictions….The remainder of the family opposes this differentiating effort with a powerful emotional counterforce, which goes in successful steps: 1) “You are wrong” with volumes of reasons to support this; 2) “Change back and we will accept you again”; and 3) “If you don’t, these are the consequences”.

FTCP, .437
Managing reactivity to the push back

….If the differentiating one can maintain a calm stand through this, the family anxiety suddenly subsides into a new and different kind of closeness…”

FTCP,. 216-18
When a family member becomes sober

- The family system changes.
- Known patterns of interaction are disrupted.
- Tension can escalate.
- Focus can shift to other family members.
Similarities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Bowen theory</th>
<th>Alanon</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nonreacting</td>
<td>Serenity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overfunctioning</td>
<td>Ennabling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defining self/ responsibility for self</td>
<td>Working one’s program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not blaming</td>
<td>Not provoking</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A person motivated to examine and work to change their position in the reciprocal interactions in a family can help to change the family system.

A coach relates to motivated family members to allow them to think more clearly about their position in the family and a course of action to follow.
Important to the coaching process:
- Conceptualizing the family as an emotional unit.
- Staying neutral and non-blaming.
- Using theory as a way to ask good questions which promote the family’s thinking.
- Coaching the motivated individual in the process of differentiation.