Bowenian, Structural, and Experiential Theories

Applied to Case Study

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In this paper, Bowenian or Intergenerational, Structural and Experiential theories will be applied to the family of Pearl, Duke, and their children to determine the level of system focus, assess current functioning and determine treatment goals with effective therapeutic techniques. Multicultural issues will also be considered for each approach. Each approach will also be compared and contrasted with the others. All information on specific theories was taken from Michael Nichols Family Therapy: Concepts and Methods.

**Level of System Focus**

A Bowenian therapist would be interested in working with the family on a family level. They would see insight into levels of differentiation between generations as the main catalysis for change. A Structural family therapist would focus on the family system as well when working with Pearl and Duke. They would do so because of the apparent lack of control in the parental subsystem due to Duke’s enmeshed relationship with Amy and Pearl’s rigid boundaries. An Experiential family therapist would focus the majority of their work on individuals within the system to increase the range of their emotional expression. Although both Bowenian and Structural therapy focus on the quality of relationships between various members, Structural therapy focuses more on how the quality of relationship, whether disengaged or enmeshed, affects power structures. Bowenian therapy focuses more on how the relationship quality in the family of origin is transmitted through the multigenerational transmission process to children. Experiential therapy, with its focus on cathartic expression, would work towards Duke expressing his pain since Pearl’s affair, the detachment that Pearl seems to feel and the silence of Lil’ Duke.

**Assessment**
One of the first steps a Bowenian therapy would be drawing a three generational map of the family called a genogram. A number of patterns emerged in the genogram. Both Duke and Pearl came from families with patterns of cut-off and overinvolvement. Pearl’s mother was overinvolved with her father, “compromising herself sexually and emotionally... to keep [him] interested in her.” Although Pearl reported “blaming her father... and never forgiving him,” she seemed to mimic her father’s behaviors in the extramarital affair that ended eight months ago. Additionally, she is cut-off from her father, which seemed to speak to the possibility of enmeshment. Pearl is cut-off from her father and Larry, Amy and Billy’s biological father. She is involved in a conflictual relationship with Amy and Duke. Her relationship with Duke has also been distant since the affair. Lil’ Duke’s behaviors in session, including leaning on his mother during times of conflict between the parents, seemed to indicate triangulation between Lil’ Duke, Pearl and Duke.

Duke’s family of origin also seemed to indicate patterns of cut-off, enmeshment, and triangulation. Duke is cut-off from his father and close with both of his brothers. His father was verbally and physically abusive to his mother and he swore that he would “never let himself get into a relationship like the one his parents have.” As previously mentioned, his relationship with Pearl is currently both distant and conflictual.

Amy appears to be especially triangulated into her parent’s conflict, evident by her report of “respecting her dad (Duke)” and then immediately afterwards sticking out her tongue at her mother. When that occurred, the Bowenian therapist may have observed Pearl’s reaction to Duke. Billy also seems to be triangulated into Duke and Pearl's conflict evident by standing and leaning against Duke while Pearl and Duke argued in session. The
Bowenian therapist would also examine family members responses to various process questions. They may also ask each family member who they feel closest and most distant from in their immediate and extended family. The goal of these process questions would be to find out more about current family function and current patterns.

The main concepts of Structural family therapy focus on the behavior patterns that become habit over time and the roles individuals play within behavioral sequences. The focus in Structural family therapy is on current function, boundaries and the hierarchy within the current function. The first assessment task of the Structural family therapist would be to join the family, while maintaining leadership. Through accommodating to the existing system, it would appear that Amy holds more power over the family subsystem than she should due to her disrespectful behaviors toward her mother and overinvolvement with Duke. Amy sticking out her tongue at Pearl and making plans to go and see a movie during the session with Duke is also evidence. Duke and Amy appear to have diffuse boundaries with each other. In contrast, since the affair, Duke and Pearl appear to have rigid boundaries with each other. Amy and Pearl appear to have diffuse boundaries with each other due to the high degree of emotional reactivity they regularly demonstrate. Duke and Amy appear to have formed a coalition against Pearl since the affair. Although Structural therapy has little to say about the presence or absence of an unconscious, their coalition appears to have formed unconsciously because there is no evidence that Amy knows about her mother’s affair.

The therapist would encourage more enactments like the ones the family already demonstrated in order to gain additional insight into and continue to modify the
hypothesis about the existing structure. The therapist may not only encourage existing enactments, but also instigate enactments. For instance, the therapist may ask Duke to describe a recent argument between Amy and Pearl. By watching Amy and Pearl’s reaction to Duke’s interpretation, the therapist would have an additional insight into the existing and evolving family structure.

The main concepts of Experiential family therapy focus on the relationships between people and their emotions. Experiential therapists believe that stifling emotions signal a tension between autonomy and connection. Stimulating emotional expression is the route to self-actualization. Looking at the behaviors of the family in session, they would see the high emotional reactivity Pearl seems to demonstrate when Duke does not appear to support her in disciplining the children. They would also notice Duke, Lil’ Duke, and Billy’s lack of emotional response and Amy and Pearl’s high reactivity toward each other. Assessment for an Experiential Therapist would include using enactments in session to see how the family tolerates emotional expression. Although most of the males in the family would seem initially to have a lower tolerance for emotion due to their lack of expression, the females in the family also seem to struggle tolerate it, evidenced by its spiraling into argument when one or the other demonstrates emotion. Pearl also seems to use emotion as weapon when she speaks about how the kids know that she will “yell loud” when they misbehave. Emotions are either landmines to be avoided or grenades to throw in the family.

While assessing Duke and Pearl’s family similarities and differences arise in Bowenian, Structural and Experiential therapy. Although Bowenian and Structural therapy
both focus on relationships between individuals, Bowenian therapy looks into the past for insight, while Structural therapy looks into the current interactions between clients sitting in the room. Experiential stands out due to the lack of overt focus on interpersonal relationship. In contrast, Experiential therapy focuses on the intrapersonal relationship between the individual and their emotions.

**Treatment Goal**

The overall therapeutic goals for a Bowenian therapist would be to increase the levels of differentiation for all family members. If Billy and Amy are no longer triangulated into their parents' conflict, their disruptive behaviors at school will decrease. Duke will be able to advocate appropriately for himself and express his feelings about the affair to Pearl openly without being afraid of demonstrating the violence the way his father did towards his mother. Pearl will move out of her pattern of overinvolvement and cut-off towards maintaining herself in the midst of conflict.

At the end of successful Structural therapy in Pearl and Duke’s family, Pearl and Duke will have normal boundaries with each other. The parent subsystem will hold the most power in the family hierarchy. The children’s boundaries with each other will be clear, and their subsystem will be placed hierarchally lower than that of their parents.

The goal of an Experiential family therapist would be to increase the range of emotional expression in Duke, Lil’ Duke, and Billy. It would also be to address the spiraling reactivity Amy and Pearl seem to demonstrate toward one another. In short, the goal for all members would be to reframe emotions so that they are no longer weapons but tools to use toward actualization.
Structural and Experiential therapy focus on both symptom resolution and systemic change, whereas Bowenian therapy focuses the most on pure system change. Because of Bowen's focus on the multigenerational transmission process, simply accomplishing a cessation of symptomatology would be a disservice to the client. Structural therapists would focus on system change only as much as any aspect of the system did not adapt to family life cycle changes. Experiential therapists would not focus as much on system change because of their belief that it is the underlying mechanism of emotional repression that creates symptoms.

**Techniques for Achieving Stated Goals**

The Bowenian therapist would utilize relationship experiments, the “I-position,” coaching and their non-anxious self to de-triangulate the family. A relationship experiment may be one in which Duke and Pearl are asked to role play each other in session. An example of taking the “I Position” would be if Duke was asked to express his feelings to Pearl regarding the affair straightforward and in such a way that took ownership for his feelings. The therapist may also encourage Pearl and Duke to contact the parents they are currently cut-off from. One of the central beliefs of Bowenian family therapy is that a family can only progress to the point of differentiation that the therapist has achieved. Therefore, it is important that the therapist have done their own therapeutic work to differentiate from their own family of origin. From his or her differentiated stance, the therapist would also offer coaching in session to help Duke, Pearl and their family move toward differentiation.
Structural family therapy work to unbalance the current structure by blocking enmeshed behaviors between Amy and Duke. It would also challenge Duke’s and Pearl’s disengagement with each other. One of the beliefs of Salvador Minuchin, the founder of Structural therapy, is that clients cannot expect their family members to change out of internal desire. Instead, individual members must take on the onus of changing their partners themselves.

As a theory, Experiential therapy focuses more on therapeutic techniques than overarching theory and the main tool of the therapist would be the tool of the self. The primary technique of Experiential family therapy is to use the self-of-the-therapist to promote self-exploration among family members. A newer therapist would be expected work in tandem with a co-therapist so they could as a set of checks and balances against each other. The technique of the Experiential Therapist is spontaneous, provocative, warm, and personal. Therapists would tolerate emotionality in the therapy room and encourage enactments to practice new ways of function in the therapy room. An Experiential therapist would make note of the children’s behaviors in the therapy room and consciously align himself or herself with the family member who will instigate the greatest emotional response. They would also not only tolerate, but also encourage anxiety in order to compel the family to change.

Technique is where Bowenian, Structural and Experiential therapies split strongly from each other. The Bowenian therapist would work to impart three important lessons to their clients: self-determination, self-advocacy, and re-engaging with the self in relationship. Through insight, the successful client speaks for himself or herself in
relationship. The Structural therapist is not as concerned with the self of their clients, but with the boundary between the self and the other. They work to create change in their clients through creating permeable boundaries. The successful client recognizes not only where they begin and end, but also what is helpful to take in and what should be rejected. The Experiential therapist confronts the client so that they can confront themselves. The successful client is bold in their appraisal of personal strengths and weaknesses, while allowing themselves the pain and joy of both. Bowenian therapy focuses on relationship quality to improve relationship. Structural therapy focuses on boundaries between individuals to adjust power. Experiential therapy focuses on the individual’s intrapsychic experience to improve relationships.

**Multicultural Issues**

Working from in Bowenian therapy, it would be important that the therapist be aware of multicultural factors. Looking at Pearl and Duke’s relationship and occupational roles it would seem like they have reversed some stereotypical gender roles. Pearl works outside of the home and is the disciplinarian. Duke is the primary caregiver and seems more passive when it comes to disciplining the children. Taking note of this reversal of gender roles and exploring the contribution or lack thereof it plays in levels of differentiation would be an important consideration of the Bowenian therapist. Intergenerational therapy often gets accused of overemphasizing differentiation to the devaluation of traditional feminine or matriarchal values like nurturing and interdependence. The therapist would need to strike a balance between encouraging both differentiation and nurturance. It would also be important to note that differentiation does
not mean either emotional stuffing or purging. Differentiation is maintaining the “I” in relationship that maintains “both connection and autonomy” (Schnarch, 57, 1997).

Structural therapy lends itself well toward multicultural issues. Because of Minuchen’s interest in the functionality of existing structures instead of the specifics of those structures it would appear at least superficially that it seems to be one that would value the diversity inherent in each family. However, it is important that a structural therapist not ignore power differentials between genders or roles. Although Duke and Pearl appear to have successfully reversed some traditional gender roles, in which Duke is the caregiver and Pearl is the out of home breadwinner, the structural therapist should be aware of a potential power differential between the two partners and note whether or not that seems to be an mutually agreeable arrangement. A technique that the founder, Salvador Minuchen himself employed to address this was to assume that the existing structures are functional and express that to the family. The family is then forced to elaborate on the specific areas they experience as dysfunctional.

An Experiential therapist would need to be aware of a variety of multicultural issues, specifically around issues of ethnicity. Emotions may be expressed in a range from extremely demonstrative to highly stoeic in different ethnic groups. Recognizing this reality and taking note of Pearl and Duke’s racial and ethnic history may provide important insight into the likely range of emotional affect they were likely to demonstrate. Additionally, the one-down, or subordinate, position a therapist is likely to take in Experiential family therapy may challenge client’s perspective of the therapist as the expert change agent.
Recognizing this discrepancy and being explicit with the role of the therapist and the role of the family in Experiential family therapy would be paramount.

**Conclusion**

Structural and Bowen Intergenerational Family therapy share an interest in the family generational processes. Their interest is in the interplay between the behaviors of the parent's generation and the behaviors of the children's generation. Bowenian therapists want to decrease the level of family anxiety by increasing the level of differentiation between the individual and their family of origin and the people around them. Structural therapists are interested in that relationship because they want to build clear boundaries between individuals and systems so that the parent’s generation can maintain power. Although the organization of the Structural formulation of family function may look similar to Bowenian genogram construct of a triangle, each theory maintains the disparate nature of their construct. Bowenian therapy also focuses more on the historical perspective and uses process questions to explore the relationships of individuals to their family of origin. Structural therapy uses more of a present stance looking at enactments to change current family function.

Experiential family therapy also uses a present stance to change current family function. This theory differs strongly from both Intergenerational and Structural therapy however, in that it is not highly interested in cross generational interactions, only in as far as the effect current family emotional expression. The Experiential family therapist would be the most confrontational of the three theories explored. It is similar to Bowenian family
therapy in their focus on growth of the self, through either differentiation or self-actualization as a central goal of treatment.

References

