

# Triangles

Bowen Family Systems Theory Perspectives

*Edited by*  
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### ***The Triangle and Interlocking Triangles in Bowen Theory***

In Bowen theory, triangles are the smallest stable building block of any emotional system. According to Bowen (1978), a two-person system is stable as long as anxiety is low, but when it rises it automatically draws in the most vulnerable third person and becomes a triangle. Although the triangular process in families is always shifting, it also involves patterns that repeat over time, in which people often come to have fixed positions in relation to each other. Predictably, triangles have two close individuals in the inside positions, and one that is in the outside position. In an anxious system the preferred position is on the outside. In Bowen's (1978) words:

In periods of calm, the triangle is made up of a comfortably close twosome and a less comfortable outsider. The twosome works to preserve the togetherness, lest one become uncomfortable and form a better togetherness elsewhere. The outsider seeks to form a togetherness with one of the twosome, and there are numerous moves to accomplish this. (p. 373)

Figure 1.1 illustrates the development of a triangle. In this figure the diagram on the left indicates a calm relationship, in which neither individual seeks to triangle in a third person. The diagram in the center illustrates tension or conflict in the relationship, with the more uncomfortable individual, A, triangling in a third person, C. The diagram on the right shows the result of the triangling: the conflict has been covered over between A and B, and it has been shifted out of that original twosome, into the relationship between B and C. In this process the tension between A and B has been decreased, or covered over, at least for the time being.

Triangling is an ever-present process in the presence of microscopic changes in the comfort levels

of dyadic relationships within the larger emotional unit (nuclear, extended, or a combination of both). It goes on all the time, below awareness and in awareness, in everyday life. Frequently triangles emerge, or crystallize, when the calm stability of a two-person system is unbalanced by anxiety in the wake of a nodal event such as marriage, the birth of a child, children leaving home, divorce, disease, death, or other transitions in the course of the family life cycle. The additions or losses of family members are the most significant factors in altering the stability of an emotional system, either negatively or positively. The emergence of a triangle can either stabilize or destabilize a two-person system, or even a larger system, for example, a nuclear or extended family.

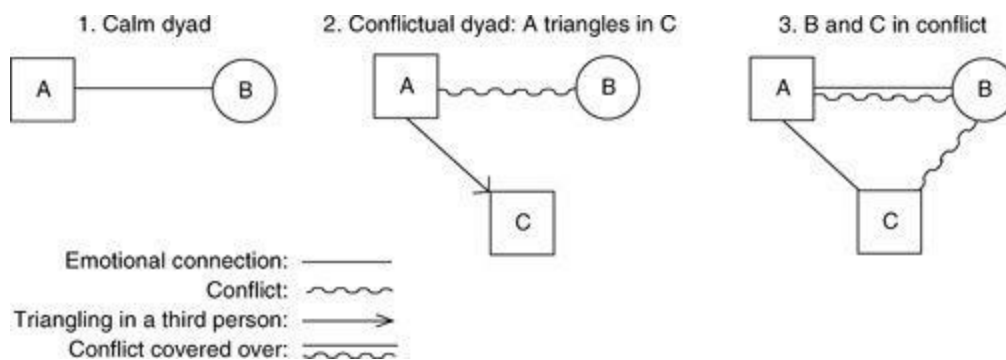


Figure 1.1. Development of a Triangle (Source: Figure modified from Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 137.)

From the perspective of Bowen theory, the family is an emotional unit and the emotional processes are the expressions of the hypothesized instinctual forces of togetherness and individuality. The introduction of acute or chronic anxiety<sup>3</sup> into a relationship system unbalances these forces. The calm stability of the two-person system is disrupted, decreasing, for example, a couple's ability to deal directly with each other. Anxiety in conjunction with the twosome's functional levels of differentiation can lead to the engagement of a vulnerable family or nonfamily member in a triangle. The *inside*, or *togetherness* positions are preferred when anxiety is low, and when anxiety is high the *outside* position is preferred. When the emotional process cannot be contained within a triangle, *interlocking triangles* are formed within and across the multiple nuclear families in the larger multigenerational family emotional system. Triangles and interlocking triangles express the predictable movement of emotional process in internal and physical, or geographic space. The focus in Bowen theory is on the emotional space— whether it be expressed internally or externally. The phrase, “old triangles, new players” (Moynihan-Bradt, 1984) describes certain functioning positions, patterns, and issues in triangles that are passed down in a family through the emotional process of interlocking triangles. Old triangles, new players also refers to the way new individuals enter new relationships that very frequently replicate the old relationship patterns they have tried to shed, and in turn they often become a part of interlocking triangles.

Bowen (1978) describes the process of interlocking triangles as follows:

In a state of tension, when it is not possible for the triangle to conveniently shift the forces within the triangle, two members of the original twosome will find another convenient third person (triangle in another person) and now the emotional forces will run the circuits in this new triangle. The circuits in the former triangle are then quiet but available for reuse at any time. In periods of very high tension, a system will triangle in more and more outsiders. A common

example is a family in great stress that uses the triangle system to involve neighbors, schools, police, clinics, and a spectrum of outside people as participants in the family problem. The family thus reduces the tension within the inner family, and it can actually create the situation in which the family tension is being fought out by outside people. (p. 479)

Figure 1.2 is an illustration of how interlocking triangles emerge in a nuclear family. There are of course multigenerational interlocking triangles and interlocking triangles that involve members of the family in combination with individuals who are nonfamily members.

Interlocking triangles can shift anxiety far away from an original anxious dyad to the most vulnerable individual in an emotional system. However, the discomfort will not disappear in the system because anxiety in the original dyad, although covered over, has not been alleviated.

Bowen (1978) describes a three-person system as one triangle, a four-person system as four primary triangles, and a five-person system as nine primary triangles. The progression multiplies significantly as systems get larger (p. 479). Interlocking triangles always exist when there are more than three members in the emotional system, the most important example for our consideration being the family, which is a complex multigenerational emotional system.

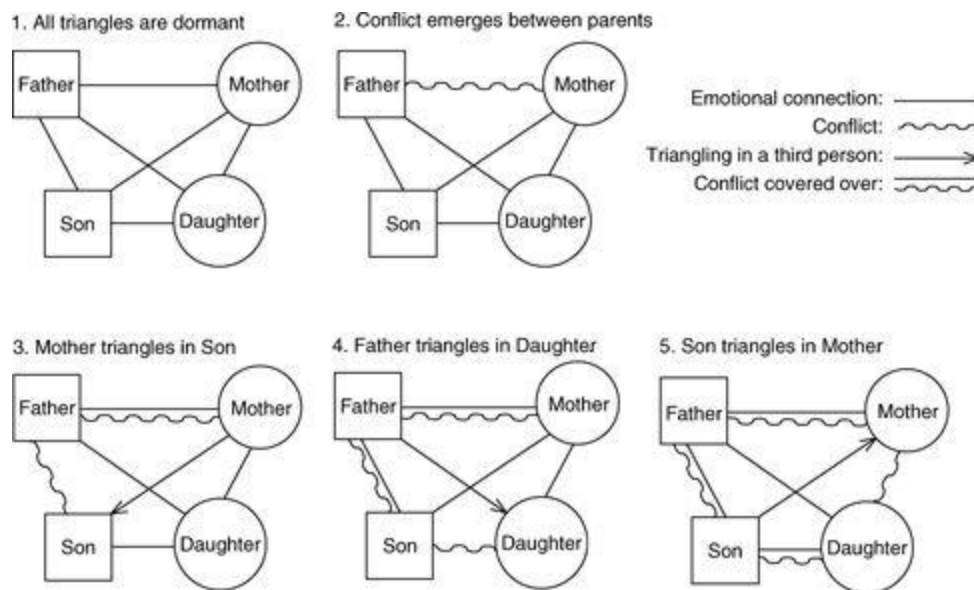


Figure 1.2. Development of Interlocking Triangles (Source: Figure Modified from Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 140.)

### ***Primary and Secondary Triangles***

This author (Titelman, 2003) has found it useful to employ the terms *primary* and *secondary* triangles in a way that seems consonant with the intent of Bowen theory. The terms primary and secondary triangle do not describe a new phenomenon, but they can be a useful way of observing and working with the different parts of the larger whole, interlocking triangles. A primary triangle refers to a triangle between parents and an offspring, and a secondary triangle involves any triangle in which at least one position, or more, is occupied by one person who is not part of the primary triangle.

A secondary triangle can involve siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles, or cousins. Secondary

triangles involve many configurations within and outside the family. Examples include in-law triangles; same generation, intergenerational, and multigenerational triangles; combination family and nonfamily triangles; triangles in family business and nonfamily business; and, a variety of triangles involving individuals or families with individuals or groups of people within nonfamily organizations, including small and large social or governmental groups.

The terms primary and secondary refer to the temporal origin of triangles. They do not necessarily indicate their level of significance in regard to a particular issue or clinical focus at any given time. For example, in a particular clinical case a triangle involving two siblings and a parent, or three siblings, is a secondary triangle, but it may be most significant at a given time, in a particular clinical situation. However, the primary triangle, that is the father-mother-child (or two parent figures and child), is the basic triangle, and all secondary triangles spin off from it, or interlock with it, both in the nuclear family and the extended family.

### *Characteristics of the Triangle*

This section is divided into four parts: (1) what constitutes an emotional triangle; (2) process and structure in the triangle; (3) the triangle as an involuntary and voluntary process; and (4) the function of triangles.

#### *What Constitutes an Emotional Triangle*

Must an emotional triangle be made up of three persons? Must all three persons be alive? Can more than one person occupy one corner or position in the triangle? Can an organization or social institution or structure be part of a triangle? These questions are frequently raised by students of Bowen theory and are not simple to answer.

Bowen's (1978) own writing always refers to the triangle as involving three people (see pp. 174, 198, 306, 373, 398). This follows logically from the notion that the triangle is a living, biological system in which there is either reciprocal movement or potential reciprocal movement between the three. Bowen (1978) does acknowledge that many people can be part of one or more positions within the triangle. He spells this out in the following statement: "In a multiple person system, the emotional issues may be acted out between three people, with others relatively uninvolved, or multiple people clump themselves together on the poles of the emotional triangle" (p. 307). According to Bowen (1978), two or more people "may bond together for one corner of a triangle for one emotional issue, while the configuration shifts on another issue" (p. 479).

Some practitioners of Bowen theory, notably Fogarty (1975; see pp. 4647) and Guerin, Fogarty, Fay, and Kauto (1997) theorize that a dead family member, or a long absent person, an idea, a fantasy, a process, or an institution, can occupy the third point of a triangle. Kerr (Kerr and Bowen, 1988), the current director of the Bowen Center for the Study of the Family, wrote: "A live third person is not required for a triangle. A fantasized relationship, objects, activities, and pets can all function as a corner of the triangle. For all the facets of a triangle to be played out, however, three live people are *usually* [emphasis added] required" (p. 136). In a personal communication, Kerr (2005) indicated a change in the way he would address this issue: "Someone suggested that alcohol could be the third point on a triangle involving a husband and wife. I asked when the last time was that Jack Daniel's said: 'We have got to stop doing this!'"

Kerr (2005) said further:

I would write differently now. I think it is cleaner to restrict triangles to three active people. Alcohol would be a distancing mechanism. Dr. Bowen was often loose about this, such as when he talked about a triangle with the deity. Anyway, that is where I come out, but I realize others may be in a different place.

According to Kerr (2005, personal communication), the view most congruent with Bowen theory, and supported by the Bowen Center for the Study of the Family as of 2006, is as follows:

1. An emotional triangle is made up of three living people. It is a living, biological system (a pet, being a living being, may qualify as a potential third member of an emotional triangle). All three are emotional participants and are able to act and react to the other two members of the triangle.
2. A deceased person, idea, fantasy, institution, religion, or other nonliving concept or object is *not* considered part of an emotional triangle.

Smith (2003) makes a distinction between the multigenerational family system, which includes all living and dead members of a family, and the multigenerational family emotional system, consisting only of living members of the family. Part of the confusion about what constitutes a triangle stems from the difference between the theory of the triangle and the clinical use of the concept. Clinically, many Bowen trained professionals have utilized the idea that a dead family member is a part of the multigenerational family system. In that sense he or she is often experienced as being emotionally alive, and appears to function as if he or she is a part of triangles. Another way of thinking about the place a dead family member continues to hold in triangles is expressed in the idea of “new players, old triangles.” In other words, the functioning position, for example, of a dead mother in relation to her son may be inhabited by a new player, the son’s wife.

A dead person, a religious issue, ideology, or institution, among other issues, beliefs, and objects may be part of an individual’s effort to detriangle in a family or nonfamily situation. This will be discussed further in a later section on clinical applications of triangles and detriangling.

Drawing in part upon Smith’s (2003) distinction between the multigenerational family system and the multigenerational family emotional system, this author proposes making a distinction between two kinds of triangles: emotional triangles and two forms of *mental construct triangles*. Bowen’s emotional triangle has been defined and described in previous text. It consists of living family members and/or nonfamily persons, as illustrated in Figure 1.3.

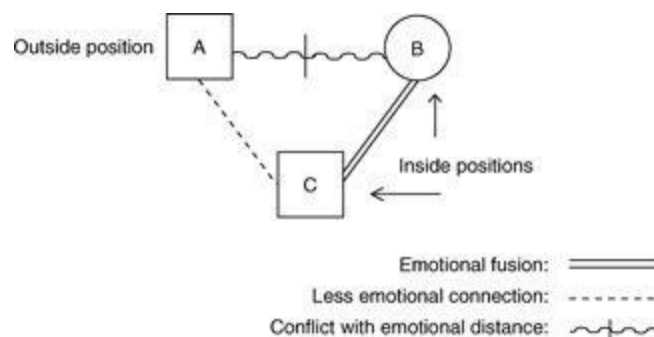


Figure 1.3. Emotional Triangle

A partial mental construct triangle includes a mix of living and nonliving entities. The use of the term mental construct is meant to connote the fact that one point of the triangle is occupied by an entity that comes out of man's brain, rather than being a living, biological entity. This form of triangle consists of two or more living individuals, occupying two positions, with the third position occupied by a deceased person, idea, religion/philosophy, or fantasy, among other nonliving entities. These triangles might also be described as quasi-triangles. They are not emotional triangles. Partial mental construct triangles have an anxiety binding function, but the nonliving entity located at one point of the triangle is a mental construct. The presence of a partial mental construct triangle may also allow two individuals to avoid identifying and dealing with a living but absent, or unseen, third member of an emotional triangle. Figure 1.4 illustrates two examples of this type of triangle.

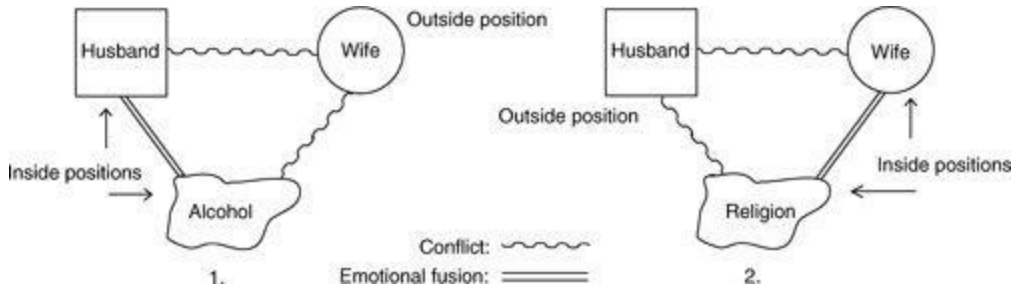


Figure 1.4. Partial Mental Construct Triangle

A mental construct triangle is based entirely on mental construction. It does not include any biological entities. Therefore it is not an emotional triangle. It is an organizational model. An example of this would be the tripartite structure of the U.S. government: the executive branch (the president and his appointees), the legislative branch (Congress), and the judiciary branch (the Supreme Court and other branches of the judicial system). Figure 1.5 illustrates this type of triangle.

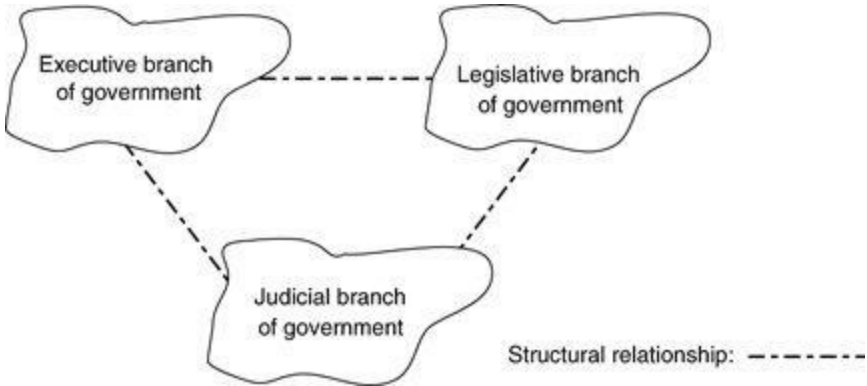


Figure 1.5. Mental Construct Triangle

Of course, there are other organizations or institutions that may be comprised of tripartite structures. There are, for example, at the societal level, triangular relationships between nation states that are codified in treaties as well as triangles that are less formal. These organizational triangles are

not emotional systems in themselves, but they may modulate or control the emotional process that exists between the people who occupy positions within the tripartite structural divisions that make up the organizations or institutions. These nonbiological, societally created triangular entities are not emotionally driven relationship systems in and of themselves.

Kerr (2005, personal communication) reinforces this distinction when he wrote, in a personal communication, that the concept of the triangle can be

cautiously extended to societal process. I do not consider the three branches of our government to be a triangle in the Bowen theory definition of the term. I consider the three branches a structure that is designed to minimize the impact of emotional process on decision-making. In other words, the three branches might be considered an administrative structure designed to prevent triangling. I do not know of course, if our founding fathers would agree.

The three branches of the U.S. government are triangular arenas in which emotionally driven relationship triangles, made up of humans and often inhabited by many individuals at one or more of the three points, unfold. They function on a continuum of differentiation from highly emotionally driven to more thoughtfully based, goal-directed functioning, in the context of the degree of acute and chronic anxiety that exists within and between the people who inhabit them. When, for example, the tripartite government is examined in terms of individuals, or the small and large groups of people who occupy the three positions of the triangle, then it is accurate to describe this phenomenon as an emotional triangle, or interlocking emotional triangles, consonant with the understanding of the emotional triangle offered by Bowen theory.

### *Process and Structure in the Triangle*

Bowen (1978) described the triangle as a phenomenon characterized by an ever-moving emotional process consisting of instinctual emotional forces and counter forces:

The emotional forces within the triangle are constantly in motion from moment to moment, even in periods of calm. Moderate tension states in the twosome are characteristically felt by one, while the other is oblivious. It is the uncomfortable one who initiates a new equilibrium toward more comfortable togetherness for self. (p. 373)

The emotional forces within a triangle are in constant motion, from minute to minute and hour to hour, in a series of chain reaction moves as automatic as emotional reflexes. (p. 470)

In Bowen theory, the focus has been much more on the notion of the emotional process, and less on the part that structure plays in understanding a particular concept or the interlock of concepts. Nevertheless, emotional process takes place in the context of structure and structure always contains emotional process. The process focus asks the *How* question. It addresses how each part of the system, or each person, affects and is affected by the others in the family, or nonfamily, system. The focus on structure asks the *Who*, *What*, *When*, and *Where* questions. The *Who* question asks who the people are who make up the triangle. The *What* question addresses the issues around which the triangles typically form; and the *When* and *Where* questions address the time(s) and space(s) in which the triangle unfolds.

Bowen (1978) never refers directly to the place of structure in writing about triangles. Perhaps the



reason is because he believed it led to seeing patterns and process in too static a way. He did allude to the idea of structure when he wrote: “Each of *the structured* [author’s italics] patterns in triangles is available for predictable outcomes in families and social systems” (p. 374). It seems to this author that Bowen’s description of two individuals occupying inside positions and one occupying an outside position is a description of the basic structural pattern that makes up a triangle. The constant oscillating movement of distancing or pursuing is the emotional process. When Bowen describes the fixed patterns and postures that each person maintains in triangles he is in effect describing the structured or structural dimension of the triangle:

Over long periods of time, a triangle will come to have long-term postures and functioning positions to each other. A common pattern is one in which the mother and child form the close twosome and the father is the outsider. In this triangle, the minute to minute process of emotional forces shifts around the triangle, but when the forces come to rest, it is always with each in the same position. (p. 479)

Kerr (Kerr and Bowen, 1988) has described the functioning positions within a triangle as consisting of *an anxiety “generator,” an anxiety “amplifier,”* and *an anxiety “dampener”* (p. 142). Kerr also refers to three functioning positions that make up a triangle: *the distancer, the projector,* and *the absorber*. The functioning positions represent the structured patterns of behavior that the three individuals in a triangle embody and around which the emotional process flows.

### *The Triangle As an Involuntary and Voluntary Process*

The emergence of triangles is an automatic or involuntary process that is part of the nature of emotional systems. However, at times, the human, and other nonhuman primates (deWaal and Embree, 1997), intentionally and actively enter into, evoke, and promote the triangle process. In contrast, for the most part, detriangling is an intentional process that involves cognitive awareness and a thoughtful, goal-directed strategy. However, in the course of everyday life in the family, detriangling can occur automatically or unintentionally. For example, the conflict between a parent and a child can be automatically modified by the nonanxious contact with a second parent who is, at least for the time being, residing in the calmer, outside position of the triangle.

### *The Function of Triangles*

Triangles can function to reduce the anxiety of one or more members of a family, or any other emotional system, when the stability of a comfortable closeness/distance between two individuals is thrown out of balance. The unbalanced emotional system can be stabilized through the transfer of anxiety by involving a third individual. Another function of the triangle—implicit in Bowen theory—is the binding of anxiety through control or regulation of one or more individuals in the original dyad, the nuclear family as a whole, and in the larger system, the multigenerational family emotional system. These functions of the triangle bind anxiety for one or more members of a family, the nuclear family, and the extended family as an emotional unit, at the expense of a third member.

The triangle can function to transfer anxiety in the emotional system by involving a third individual. The triangle transfers anxiety from within a two-person unit (A and B, for example) when A, the more uncomfortable of the two, engages a vulnerable and willing third person, C, who previously was in an uncomfortable outside position. In this new triangle A now has a sympathetically comfortable

position in C, who now occupies the other inside position. B now moves into the uncomfortable outside position. A second variation of this triangle would involve A criticizing B to C with C and B becoming conflictual and occupying the uncomfortable inside positions, with A moving to the more comfortable outside position.

Triangles and interlocking triangles can function to regulate the equilibrium in the emotional system. The triangle exerts emotional control over the individual in order to maintain togetherness in the family. One of the ways the triangle functions for this to occur is when a child goes along with the parental view (often the mother's view). He or she does this in order to calm his or her mother, in the context of some emotional distance in the marital dyad. Having a calmer mother is calming to the child, even though he or she is giving up *self* in this reciprocal process. The process of regulation through triangles also occurs when two or more individuals explicitly, or implicitly, threaten the third person with punishment or expulsion from the family for not following "the party line." Bowen (1978) describes the three-stage verbal and nonverbal message that the family emotional system communicates to an individual making a differentiation of self step. It also applies when any individual's behavior or posture is such that it threatens the balance of togetherness or the emotional equilibrium of the family. The three-stage message is: "(1) You are wrong; (2) Change back; (3) If you do not, these are the consequences" (Bowen, 1978, p. 216). This message is imparted through a triangling process whereby, for example, the parents, in the inside positions of the triangle, try to exert pressure on their son or daughter, who resides in the outside position, not to marry a particular individual. The parents may invoke family values, rules, or family loyalty, among other pressures, to criticize their offspring's choice, in order to bring him or her back into the fold of family togetherness. Finally the family may threaten, or carry out, the expulsion of their offspring if he or she does not comply with the wishes of the parents. Their threats are expressed on behalf of the anxiety of the family emotional system as a whole.

The regulatory function of the triangle is not control for the sake of power. Rather the control of individuals in the system serves the purpose of maintaining the stability of the family unit. Ultimately, the triangling process lowers anxiety in the family system as a whole—the multigenerational family emotional system—through interlocking triangles, at the expense of one, or more, individuals. In so far as the family emotional system's anxiety is managed by triangles and interlocking triangles, one can say that the triangle can function as a mechanism of regulation or control. It lowers acute anxiety in the service of the family's current functioning, with mixed results in terms of the family's long-term survival. A regulatory function of the triangle is implicit in Bowen theory. Evolutionary biology distinguishes between proximate and ultimate explanations of behavior. According to Fairbanks (2007): "A proximate explanation describes the mechanisms that control how a system works, while an ultimate explanation is concerned with how such a system could have evolved" (p. 7). A proximate explanation for the triangle process is that it manages anxiety in the family unit. An ultimate explanation for the existence of the triangle process is that it maintains the coherence and survival of the multigenerational family. These functions of the triangle are also found in nonfamily emotional systems.

In regard to the function of triangles, Kerr (2005) wrote:

triangles can function to do x, y, or z. A triangle can function to stabilize a two-person system. Interlocking triangles can function to shift anxiety around a system. A triangle can function such that two people can keep a third person (with the third person's complicity) in his or her place. Triangles can function this way in families and non-family groups. Triangles may function in

other ways that we do not yet recognize. We can know how triangles function by sticking with how, what, when, and where questions, which are all provable.

The triangles can stabilize or destabilize a dyad by the addition or subtraction of a third person. Kerr (Bowen and Kerr, 1988; see pp. 138–139) describes these processes. The following is an example of the destabilization of a stable dyad by the addition of a third person: the addition of a child to a marriage can have the impact of modifying a nonconflictual marriage into one that is conflictual because the investment of time and energy in the child has a negative effect on the balance of togetherness of the couple. The following is an example of the destabilization of a stable dyad by the removal of a third person: conflict between the couple may increase following a child leaving home when the child is no longer available to be triangled into the parents' conflicts.

Here is an example of how an unstable dyad can be stabilized by the addition of a third: a marriage with conflict may become calmer with the birth of a child. The latter may allow the couple to shift its focus of anxiety away from each other and onto the child. The following is an example of how an unstable dyad can be stabilized by the removal of a third person: a problem child, adept at playing one parent off against the other, leaving home is no longer evolving conflict between the parental dyad.

Berenson (Bowen, 1978), in an interview with Bowen, raised a frequently asked question: Is the triangle a “natural way of being” or is it a failure of dyadic interaction? (p. 400). Bowen (1978) answered the question by describing the paradox of the triangle as both stabilizing and disruptive for the emotional system:

A triangle is a “natural way of being” for people. It is not inaccurate to think of the triangle as a failure in a two-person relationship, but that is a narrow view of the larger relationship system. When anxiety is low and external conditions are ideal, the back and forth flow of emotion in a twosome can be calm and comfortable. The two-person relationship is unstable in that it has a low tolerance for anxiety and it is easily disturbed by emotional forces within the twosome and by relationship forces from outside the twosome. (p. 400)

A two person relationship is emotionally unstable, with limited adaptability for dealing with anxiety and life stresses. It automatically becomes a triangular emotional system with a much higher level of flexibility and adaptability with which to tolerate anxiety. (p. 401)

An open family or nonfamily emotional system characteristically involves triangles that are not fixed, compared to a closed system that is characterized by rigid triangles. An open system is one that is characterized by open, direct one-to-one communication between its members in a considerable number of their dealings with each other. A higher level of differentiation characterizes its members; individuality is relatively high, and while the togetherness forces are in play, there is a respect for and encouragement of individuality. A closed family or nonfamily emotional system is characterized by rigid or fixed triangles in which communication is unclear, closed, and characterized by secrets between its members. It must be pointed out that there is a continuum between closed and open emotional systems, and there are no emotional systems that are either completely open or completely closed, just as there are no individuals or families that are fully differentiated or completely undifferentiated.

The distinction between the ever-changing open triangles in an open system and the static or rigid

nature of the triangles in a closed system can be understood by viewing triangles as occurring along a continuum. Less rigid or less fixed triangles are found when differentiation is relatively high and chronic anxiety relatively low. They are relatively open and ever changing, and the functioning positions of the individuals involved are flexible and can vary. Triangles described as rigid or static occur when differentiation is relatively low, chronic anxiety is relatively high, and functioning positions among the participants are relatively fixed and rigid.

### ***Summary***

The first part of this section contrasted Bowen's family systems view of the triangle with Freud's psychoanalytic view of the Oedipal triad. The second section was the evolutionary basis of Bowen's view of the emotional system and the triangle, followed by commentary on the misunderstanding of Bowen's natural systems theoretical basis for his theory of understanding and intervening with families, and specifically in regard to the concept of the emotional triangle. The last part of this section presented a broad description of the concept of the triangle and interlocking triangles. This included an examination of the characteristics of the triangle: what constitutes a triangle, process and structure in the triangle, the triangle as an involuntary and voluntary process, and the function of triangles.

### ***The Relationship Between the Concept of the Triangle and other Concepts in Bowen Theory***

In order to fully understand each of Bowen's concepts—in this case the emotional triangle—it must be considered in the context of Bowen theory as a whole. In this section the concept of the triangle is related to each of the other seven major concepts in the theory: differentiation of self, the nuclear family emotional system, the family projection process, emotional cutoff, sibling position, and societal emotional process. Relating the triangle concept to each of the other seven concepts is a somewhat artificial process. Each concept is fluidly connected to and impacts upon the functioning of the multigenerational family emotional system or unit. The process of triangles is closely linked to all the other concepts, and it also links them to each other. The reader is referred to the seminal works on Bowen theory (Bowen, 1978; Kerr and Bowen, 1988; Papero, 1990) for further explanation of how the concepts are interconnected.

Bowen's effort was to create a theory in harmony with the natural world, specifically the natural science of evolutionary biology. The emotional system is a product of several billion years of evolution. It is the driving force of the family and other relationship systems.

Bowen postulated that the family is an emotionally driven relationship system:

Operationally I regard an emotional system as something deep that is in contact with cellular and somatic processes, and a feeling system as a bridge that is in contact with parts of the emotional system on one side and with the intellectual system on the other. (Bowen, 1978, pp. 158–159)

According to Bowen theory (Titelman, 2003):

The concept of the relationship system is a description of what happens among family members, their communications and interactions, whereas the concept of the emotional system is an

explanation of what happens. The emotional system refers to what “energizes” the family system, and includes those aspects that humans have in common with other forms of life. It includes automatic, instinctual mechanisms such as finding food, fleeing from enemies, reproducing, rearing young, and other aspects of social relationships. (p. 19)

Bowen (Kerr and Bowen, 1988) postulated that the emotional system is governed by the interplay of two hypothetical, instinctual life forces: *togetherness and individuality* (see p. 59). Both forces are rooted in biology. The individuality force propels an organism to follow its own directives, to be an independent and distinct entity. The togetherness force propels an organism to follow directives of others, to be a dependent, connected, and indistinct entity.

From a Bowen theory perspective individual behavior takes place within the relationship system in the multigenerational family, connected to a variety of other relationship systems, driven by the emotional system.

### ***Differentiation, Anxiety, and Triangles***

The family is an instinctually, emotionally driven system that responds to the ebb and flow of stress with varying degrees of anxiety. The two most important variables in Bowen family systems theory involve the interaction between the level of differentiation of self and the degree of chronic anxiety.<sup>4</sup> Each of the other seven concepts that make up Bowen theory will be expressed differently depending upon an individual’s level of differentiation and how that is integrated with his or her level of chronic anxiety. The triangle process is ubiquitous. Yet when differentiation is high and anxiety is low it is hard to observe, and it does not usually interfere with the functioning of the family.

Bowen described differentiation of self as the capacity to separate thoughtful goal-directed response from emotionally reactive response. The concept defines people according to the degree of differentiation or fusion (a synonym for undifferentiation) between intellectual and emotional functioning (see Bowen, 1978, p. 362). Bowen saw this capacity as lying along a continuum in human functioning. Pair bonding, or marital choice, takes place between couples that function at approximately the same basic level of differentiation of self.

Bowen differentiates basic self from functional self in the following ways. Basic self is made up of those principles, core beliefs, and positions that are not dependent on the relationship. Basic level of differentiation is usually fixed by the time an individual reaches adolescence or young adulthood and remains relatively fixed from then to the end of an individual’s life. Unusual life experiences or a structured effort to raise one’s level of differentiation can lead to some degree of change in level of basic differentiation.

Functional level of differentiation refers to the phenomenon in relationships whereby an individual “borrows” or “lends” self to the other, and in so doing is either overfunctioning or underfunctioning. Both sides of this relationship dance involve a compromise in functioning.

Differentiation of self is the core theoretical concept of Bowen’s theory of the family as an evolution-based multigenerational emotional system. The other seven concepts describe how undifferentiation, or fusion, is managed through symptom patterns in an individual, a couple, a single nuclear family, and multiple nuclear families. Ultimately the multigenerational transmission process of the level of differentiation of the family leads to continuity or extinction of particular family branches. Even societies display emotional process and variation in the level of differentiation at a macro level of human functioning.

Bowen describes differentiation as being similar to the process of the differentiation of cells in embryology and biology (see Kerr and Bowen, 1988, p. 362). It is the floor plan or architectural design for guiding the development and life course of the individual and the family. Triangling and detriangling manage and guide the emotional process with its varying integration of the instinctual forces of individuality and togetherness that constitute the emotional system in the family, and possibly all of life.

The triangle is the ubiquitous process—but not the only process—that manages undifferentiation in conjunction with anxiety in the face of the inevitable nodal events, both positive and negative—such as births and deaths—that are part of the life of the human family. Insofar as all humans are not fully differentiated, they live with some degree of chronic anxiety. One-to-one or open, person-to-person relationships cannot be constantly maintained. The lower the levels of differentiation and the higher the levels of chronic anxiety, the greater the presence of triangling, and the more likely that rigid triangles develop in a family. Conversely, the higher the levels of differentiation and the lower the levels of chronic anxiety, less triangling occurs, and less rigid triangles develop. However, as noted in previous text, no family or other emotional system is ever free of the ubiquitous presence of the triangling process and triangles.

Differentiation is a naturally unfolding evolution-driven, automatic, emotional process that comes out of the emotional system. At the same time the intentional effort to work on the defining or differentiation of a self through a planned course of action, based on the thinking system, comes out of the neocortex.

Triangles and interlocking triangles are natural evolution-based processes. The three-person unit, the triangle, is the basic building block of the family, both biologically and psychologically. Detriangling is a process that involves a carefully planned course of action based on a thoughtful understanding of the self of the differentiating—one in relation to his or her family and other significant relationships, usually under the guidance of a coach trained in Bowen theory.

### ***The Nuclear Family Emotional System and the Triangle***

Bowen's nuclear family emotional system concept is a description of the patterns of emotional functioning in a single generation. It consists of three basic patterns through which the family manages its fusion or undifferentiation in the face of anxiety: marital conflict or distance; dysfunction in one spouse, the over/underfunctioning reciprocity between the spouses, whereby one spouse lends self and the other borrows self, with the result that one spouse manifests emotional, physical, or social symptoms; and impairment of one or more children, in other words, the projection of the anxiety of the parent(s) to a child, so that that child expresses the family anxiety through emotional, physical, or social symptoms.

In the first pattern, distance or conflict between spouses, a third person is, inevitably, triangled into the process. For example, a couple in which one partner is distancing and the other partner is pursuing may eventually develop conflict or mutual distance and then become stabilized, at least temporarily, perhaps through an extramarital affair, a common form of triangle.

In the second pattern, the overfunctioning/underfunctioning reciprocity, characterized by emotional, physical, or social dysfunction in one spouse, a child may, for example, become allied with his or her overfunctioning parent with the underfunctioning parent residing in the outside position.

In the third pattern, impairment of one or more children, parents operate as a fused parental “we,” that is, the inside positions of the triangle, and they project their fusion or undifferentiation onto one

or more children.

### ***The Family Projection Process and the Triangle***

The concept of family projection process highlights the triangular emotional process that exists in all nuclear families. The chronic anxiety of the parents, in conjunction with their level of fusion or undifferentiation, is transmitted to one or more of their children, and is picked up and bound by that offspring(s) in the form of emotional, physical, or social symptoms. In the family projection process, a more detailed process of parental transmission of undifferentiation in the face of anxiety to one or more children may impair one or more children in the father-mother-child triangle. In other words, the family projection process is a special form of the triangle, and it is seen most profoundly in a child-focused family, but it is present to some degree in all families.

### ***The Multigenerational Transmission Process and the Triangle***

The multigenerational transmission process describes how the level of differentiation decreases in particular individuals, and increases in others, in all families over multiple generations. It accomplishes this through the mechanism of triangles and interlocking triangles. This process assumes that all members of every nuclear family, in each generation, have relatively equal levels of differentiation. However, the child(ren) who receives the greatest amount of the projection process ends up with a lower level of differentiation of self than the parents. He or she is the most triangled child in a family. Conversely, the child(ren) who receives the least amount of the projection process ends up with the same or a higher level of differentiation of self than his or her parents, and is the least triangled child in a family. The degrees of difference in differentiation of self are small but they are meaningful in terms of basic level of self. Over multiple generations this process leads to some members of the family having extremely low levels of differentiation, characterized by chronic emotional, social, and physical difficulties, and others functioning at relatively high levels of differentiation, with still others falling at points in between.

### ***Emotional Cutoff and the Triangle***

The concept of emotional cutoff deals with the way people separate themselves from the past in order to start their adult lives in the present generation. The mechanisms for this process are internal emotional distancing or a combination of internal and physical emotional distancing between the generations, and between individuals and nonparental or nonfamily significant others. A cutoff between an offspring and a parent(s) is always an expression of unresolved attachment between child and parent(s).

The editor of this book (Titelman, 2003) has previously described the relation between the triangle and emotional cutoff (see p. 33). In the context of the child growing away emotionally from the parent and the parent promoting that process, cutoff develops in response to the degree of intensity of fusion in the parental triangle. For example, cutoff as a response to fusion between the generations can involve a shift from the child being in the inside position with a parent (more often with the mother, with the father in the outside position) to the child moving into the outside position. At an intense level of emotional fusion, this occurs through a process of *tearing away*, and predictably engaging another individual to fuse with, often through marriage. In the new interlocking triangle the new couple occupies the inside positions, with one or both parents occupying the outside position.

Another possibility is that a cutoff between a parent and an offspring may not change the triangle, but rather it may change the form of the expression that emotional fusion takes. For example, mother and son may continue to occupy the inside positions of the triangle with the father in the outside position, but instead of the togetherness getting expressed by stuck-together fusion between mother and child, it is now expressed by cutoff-fusion.

The less undifferentiation, or fusion, within the nuclear family, and the less fixed the parental-child triangle, the smoother the process of emotional separation between offspring and parents. It will be more of a process of growing away, rather than tearing away. And the triangling process will be less intense and less fixed.

### ***Sibling Position and the Triangle***

The concept of sibling position (Bowen theory) based on the research of Walter Toman (Toman, 1969), as presented in his book, *Family Constellation*, provides a personality profile of each sibling position and allows one to know the typical or expected characteristics of sibling functioning positions, with Bowen's (1978) caveat, "all things being equal" (p. 385). Bowen points out that in many families all things are not equal. For example, a firstborn child, who is born with a severe physical disability, will not receive or fulfill the expectations for leadership that come with this functioning position under normal conditions. In this case the youngest born may not occupy the functioning position of follower or creative spirit, but he or she may step up to the position of leader.

Toman speaks about the complementarity of sibling position functioning much as Bowen speaks about the reciprocal functioning between family members. According to Toman (1969), in marriage the partners may have complementarity, partial complementarity, or noncomplementarity in their sibling positions. The degree of complementarity depends on the presence or absence of rank or sex conflict. An example of complementarity is an older brother with a younger sister married to a younger sister with an older brother. The husband who is the older brother with a younger sister will have neither sex nor rank conflict with a wife who is the younger sister of an older brother. The husband is used to relating to the opposite sex and to being the captain of the sibling team while the wife will also have no rank or sex conflict. She is used to relating to the opposite sex and is used to being a lower ranked member of the sibling team. An example of noncomplementarity in marriage is the reverse of the example in the previous text. A man who is an older brother with a younger brother married to a woman who is the older sister with a younger sister will have both rank and sex conflict.

How an individual functions in his or her sibling position depends on the following individual and family factors: (1) the level of differentiation and amount of chronic anxiety of the individuals who inhabit those sibling functioning positions; (2) the level of differentiation or flexibility of the family as a whole; (3) the unresolved issues of both parents in relation to their own sibling position; and (4) the unresolved issues related to sibling position interactions in the multigenerational family.

Sibling positions and triangles are interlocked insofar as in a family constellation one or more siblings is in the inside position with one or the other parent, while the other sibling(s) is invariably in the outside positions in those triangles. Typical triangles are the *good* child being in the inside position with one or both parents and the *bad* child in the outside position. Sibling triangles include triangles with other siblings, with siblings and parents, with parents and grandparents, with siblings and grandparents, and with uncles and aunts, among other combinations.

### ***Emotional Process in Society and the Triangle***



The final concept in Bowen theory, emotional process in society, is an overarching emotional arena in which the other seven concepts, in conjunction with the concept of anxiety, can be applied to larger social units found in society. Bowen (1978) believed that triangles exist in all relationships. His interest in emotional process in society included his desire to understand societal chronic anxiety. He postulated this was the product of the population explosion, diminishing supplies of food and natural resources necessary to maintain man's way of life on earth, and the pollution of the environment that is clearly threatening the balance of life upon which human survival depends (see p. 386).

Although it is acknowledged that this concept is more speculative than those grounded in the family, it was based on research in which interlocking triangles were observed involving delinquent adolescents and their parents, and the court system. In the 1960s Bowen (1978; see pp. 413–451) observed the way the nuclear family triangle interlocked with society in an emotionally regressive direction. His observations led him to believe that the postures of permissive, child-focused parents, and the overly lenient courts, social service agencies, and schools were resulting in an imbalance of adolescent rights over responsibilities. The parents were turning to the court system to manage and control their delinquent children, and societal systems in turn were triangled in by the families. For example, a delinquent child might be aligned with an overly permissive mother in the inside positions, with an overly strict, but ineffective, father residing in the outside position of the triangle. Over time, as the adolescent's behavior becomes difficult to control, the triangle often shifts to the parents joined in the inside positions, with the angry adolescent in the outside position in the triangle. Eventually, the parental-child triangle may shift to include the other siblings as appendages to the parents. As further breakdown in the parent-adolescent triangle unfolds, with more antisocial behavior occurring, the school, court, and other social service agencies are triangled in and become a part of the interlocking triangles. These social institutions are at a relatively low level of differentiation, and reflect the level of the society at large. They not only react to the family's anxiety, but they often increase it. The triangling process can and does move from the smallest microlevel, the nuclear family, all the way up to the largest and most complex societal structures—through a myriad of interlocking triangles.

### *Summary*

This section briefly related the concept of the triangle to each of the other seven primary concepts in Bowen theory, and to the supporting concept of anxiety. The triangle was related to anxiety and differentiation; the nuclear family emotional system; the family projection process; the multigenerational transmission process; emotional cutoff; sibling position; and emotional process in society. Initially, it was pointed out that a full understanding of the triangle, or any of the other concepts, calls for an understanding and appreciation of how each concept is related to all the other concepts. All concepts in Bowen theory are interrelated and reciprocally intertwined.