INTEGRATING MINUCHIN'S BOUNDARY CONTINUUM AND BOWEN'S DIFFERENTIATION SCALE: A CURVILINEAR REPRESENTATION*

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ABSTRACT: The purpose of this article is to discuss an integration of Minuchin's boundary continuum and Bowen's differentiation scale. Minuchin's boundary continuum provides a framework for understanding proximity and distance within relationships. It graphically depicts health in relationships as being a dynamic middle ground between the extremes of enmeshment and disengagement. Bowen's differentiation scale illustrates differences in emotional health, such as the ability to distinguish between thoughts and feelings, associated with varying levels of differentiation. A curvilinear integration of Minuchin's continuum and Bowen's scale retains the advantages of each and also expands their understanding.

KEY WORDS: Bowen; Minuchin; boundary continuum; differentiation scale.

Minuchin (1974) and Bowen (1978) have both utilized continua and scales to illustrate theoretical concepts related to individ-
ual and family health. Minuchin described a boundary continuum and Bowen conceptualized a differentiation scale. Minuchin's continuum depicts proximity and distance in the current structure of relationships. Bowen's scale describes the underlying emotional qualities of individuals (i.e., differentiation levels) which motivate the development of characteristic relationship structures. The continuum and scale are assessing different variables, however, they are complementary. Using both simultaneously provides a rich picture of affiliation and differentiation in relationships, and broadens the understanding of each. This paper will describe Minuchin's boundary continuum and Bowen's differentiation scale, and then show how they can be integrated to create an affiliation/differentiation curve.

MINUCHIN: STRUCTURAL FAMILY THERAPY

One of the primary ideas espoused by Minuchin is that individuals and systems vary in their degree of emotional and physical proximity or distance (Minuchin, 1974; Minuchin & Fishman, 1981). He described the level of affiliation between members of a system as being regulated by boundaries in the system (see Figure 1). When boundaries within a system are too rigid, members are disengaged, that is, they lack feelings of intimacy and connectedness with their family or subsystem. Only very high levels of stress cross rigid boundaries and activate members into a supportive role. At the extreme other end of the continuum, members lack a sense of autonomy and are enmeshed with other members of their system. In this case, boundaries are diffuse and even small amounts of stress will immediately affect other members.

Individuals may be in both disengaged and enmeshed relationships, depending on the complementarity of roles and pressures of the system. Different levels of affiliation may also characterize various subsystems within a system. A mother-child subsystem may be enmeshed, for example, whereas the spousal subsystem may be disengaged. Furthermore, systems and subsystems can quickly shift back-and-forth between the two extremes. As an example, a disengaged system will likely be slow to respond to stress. However, a crisis, such as a suicide attempt of a member, may excessively activate the system into an enmeshed style. This shift is usually short-lived as the system deals with the “closeness” by returning to a disengaged position (i.e., homeostasis).