



The Family Structure of borderline personality disorder in the middle class of Taiwan society: three case studies from Bowen Family Systems Theory perspective

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Background/ Problems/ Objective

Many psychiatric specialists believe we are living in a Borderline Personality Disorder era. Since World War II, the family structure has shifted from stability to disintegration because of domestic violence, child abuse, intra-familial sexual abuse, drug addiction, and alcoholism issues. In our practice, cases have suggested that some borderline personality disorder cases in Taiwan didn't arise from lower-class, but rather in middle-class and wealthy families. Moreover, there are very few research findings regarding the family structures of borderline personality disorder cases in ethnic Chinese society; thus inspiring the thinking behind this research.

One Chinese proverb states "There are three things which are unfilial, and to have no descendants is the worst of them," thus, raising children is central to ethnic Chinese family life. Excessive protection is regarded as a performance of parental responsibility. To ethnic Chinese, filial piety includes obedience to one's elders, non-rebelliousness toward one's parents, and not causing one's parents sadness. Fusion between the individual and the family is necessary, therefore the individual should not have one's own needs or opinions.

The patients of these cases grew up in "invalidating environments", especially when parents or primary caregivers denied or ignored the internal emotions of the patients for long periods of time. These long-term oppressive circumstances cause patients to easily develop internal conflicts, wherein patients would present a common pattern of ups and downs in their self-image, interpersonal relationships, and emotional expressions.

The researcher contacted nine families with Borderline Personality Disorder this year, and selected three middle-class families from them. This research utilizes Bowen Family Systems Theory to explore the effects of family Structures on Borderline Personality Disorder in three middle-class, ethnic Chinese families.

Method/ Intervention

Since World War II, Bowen Family Systems Theory has been the essential and integrated family therapy strategy. There are eight concepts of Bowen Family Systems Theory. This research uses the concepts 'differentiation of self' and 'relationship triangles' from Bowen Theory to explore the cases of three ethnic Chinese families.

Results

This research found similarities in the family dynamics of these three cases. 1. The relationships between the respective parents in each of these three cases are distanced and even hostile. 2. The patients of these three cases act as the emotional support roles for their mothers. The mothers have been acting as both father and mother because of the respective fathers' shortcomings. 3. These three primary caregivers are overprotective and do not allow the patient to have autonomy.

Conclusions/Lessons Learned

1. The parental relationships in these three cases are dissonant. The fathers are absent from their parental roles, so the relationship between the mothers and the respective children is one of symbiosis. The fusion between mother and child creates unhealthy relationship triangles.
2. The patients of these three cases didn't have a sense of self-identity and have fused with their mothers for a long time. They are not able to successfully achieve differentiation of self and are not able to have healthy interpersonal interactions. It is for these reasons that they have been diagnosed with Borderline Personality Disorder.

Relevance to HPH

It is difficult to treat personality disorders just with medication in psychiatric clinical work, this is due to the development of personality and family structures having an enormous influence on personality disorders. Additionally, there are few references related to the effects of family structures on Borderline Personality Disorders in ethnic Chinese society and culture. We hope the clinical experiences discussed in this article can be used as references for future clinical treatment.

Keywords

Borderline Personality Disorder, Bowen Family Systems Theory, Taiwan Society, Fusion, Differentiation of Self

