

CHAPTER V

Discussion

This chapter contains (1) a summary of the results of the correlation matrix as applied to the research questions, (2) a discussion of the results, (3) a discussion of the implications of the results, including factors which may have affected the results, and (4) recommendations of the study, which serve to aid the clarity of future research on cutoff.

In the study of 60 families with teenagers being assessed for substance abuse, significant correlations were found between the self-functioning of the mothers as measured through the Global Assessment of Functioning (GAF) by the researcher with their level of cutoff with her mother and father measured on the Emotional Cutoff Scale (ECS). For the six research questions that included fathers, the sample was not large enough for the correlations to have significance. No correlations of significance were found with the other research questions relating to the mothers.

Discussion and Implications of Results

These results generated numerous questions and ideas about further research with families. The following considerations in evaluating the results of this research study are important in future investigations of cutoff.

Complexity of Bowen Theory

Before concluding more about the data in detail, some caveats about Bowen Theory should be discussed. Bowen Theory is described in some detail in Chapter I, with the goal of elaborating on his eight concepts of family functioning. One of the central organizing principles of most family theories is that the family is a system, with complex regulating mechanisms. Cause-and-effect thinking, which is the basis for developing hypothetical constructs, has little relevance in evaluating family systems. An analogy in the scientific work is studying an ecological niche. An animal exists in a web of the natural environment, weather, seasons, predator, and prey that are in balance. Studying one factor in no way gives a real view on the complexity of the ecology.

One of the difficulties for this researcher was to attempt to measure emotional functioning over several generations without increasing the number of variables to an unmanageable size for the scope of the research. The researcher recognized that there are important variables that were not considered in the outcome. These include the relationship between the two parents, the style of parenting, the level and nature of stressors on the family, and the functioning of other siblings in the family. The inability to control for other significant variables in family life may have played a role in the results.

The Difficulty in Defining and Measuring Cutoff

What is cutoff? Bowen developed this concept in observing families in which one generation backed away from the previous generation to moderate the tension in the relationship. The complexity of the concept is the difficulty in defining the nature of the backing away. Does the researcher measure the amount of contact of individuals with

their parents, the perception of the relationship of the parents by the individuals, or as Bowen suggested, the amount of knowledge about the extended family by the individuals.

Another difficulty is that cutoff can be expressed as physical distance. Some families are only comfortable living 500 miles from parents, some 3,000 miles from parents. Yet, some families live a great distance from one another and keep in close emotional contact. Cutoff can also be expressed through emotional distance. A family can live in the same house and yet not communicate on a personal or connected way with one another. Cutoff is subtle and complicated, but can be of extraordinary significance in a family's life. Often a person only understands cutoff after thinking about relationships in depth. Many times parents of substance-abusing teens do not want to communicate the facts of the child's problems to their parents, ostensibly not to 'worry' the parents, but often out of fear of being judged by their parents. Their ability to evaluate the quality of the relationship with their parents only materializes after a period of reflection and examination, which is not present in the initial interview.

McCollum (1991) chose to base his scale on Kerr's definition of cutoff: "Emotional cutoff describes the way one generation cuts off emotional contact with the previous generation in order to avoid potential relationship problems" (Kerr, 1981, p. 273). McCollum developed questions on the expression of love, the discussion of personal issues, and feeling obligated to see the parents as measures of cutoff. The subjective way in which people apply these ideas becomes one of the difficult questions in understanding the outcome of the research. For example, Ms. S. scored 23 out of 25 in positive connection with her family. However, in the telephone screening, she made it clear that her mother, with whom she lives, was not to be informed of her son's interview for possible counseling. Upon further discussion, Ms. S. describes how she and her son have lived with her mother who has supported them since his birth. She and her mother are in constant conflict over the son. There is no physical distance, yet Ms. S describes an emotional shutdown with her mother that is consistent with Kerr's definition of cutoff. This complexity makes cut-off exceedingly difficult to define and measure.

The Preservative Quality of Cutoff

A premise of this research study is that cutoff is deleterious to families. Bowen's thinking (1978) was that individuals who sever relationships with their parents and extended families as a way to resolve the difficulties replay those emotional patterns in adult life and in their nuclear families. This system idea that relationships are reciprocal and that people carry with them the imprint of their original relationships are central to his theory. This researcher has observed this empirically with many families.

However, another side of cutoff is that in the short run it can be a relief for families. For example, a parent wants little to do with a substance-abusing parent and does not want a child exposed to the difficulties of the grandparent generation, or a father is incarcerated or has disappeared, or a mother is experienced as critical. The parent feel better when he or she does not experience the tension with the previous generation. Such contact can make the parent feel judged, abused, or unloved. Yet in the long run the cutoff does not solve the emotional patterns that reoccur in families across generations; Therefore these patterns can be replayed with the next generation.

Small Sample of Fathers

One problem that was not anticipated fully was the small sample of fathers. Of the 12 hypotheses, six were basically not measured adequately due to the small sample. In some cases, the father was not present in the family or had disappeared. In other cases, the father did not accompany the teenager to the interview because of work obligations. A somewhat paradoxical problem developed in the study in that some of the fathers who were most cutoff were not present to complete the instrument that would document their cutoff.

Anxiety and Defensiveness in Initial Interview

The measurement instruments were administered at an assessment session with teenagers and families. The members of the family present were told a study was being made of families who came for assessments and their participation was totally voluntary. Most families appeared very comfortable with participating. One mother and five adolescents declined to participate.

In spite of this, the families experienced a level of anxiety and confusion in their first meeting at the mental health center. Many are referred by the juvenile court or the school counselor, often with consequences to the adolescent if he or she is not cooperative. The court-referred families had experienced family background evaluations as a matter of course in the adjudication of their child. The focus of the evaluation is on the child, so that when parents are asked about their relationships with their parents, they may be surprised or threatened. Some families want to present themselves in the best light until they are comfortable in disclosing personal information to an interviewer.

In two previous dissertation studies (Day, 1987, McCollum, 1986), the ECS was administered to students who may have felt less threatened and anxious than these families in the initial interview about their adolescent.

Other Research Outcomes from the Data

What else can be learned from this data that was not posed in the initial research questions? Some of the additional data is captured on the bar charts included with this chapter.

One of the areas of significance in the research is the relationship of the cutoff of the teenager from the father to the functioning of the teenager. The degree of cutoff of the teenager from the father was correlated .27 with his or her level of total impairment on the CAFAS, .37 with problems at home, .38 with depression, and .27 with cutoff of the mother with her father. Does this last correlation suggest that cutoff from the father is a multigenerational phenomenon, with the cutoff of a child with a father reflective of a mother's cutoff with her own father?

The teenager's cutoff with the mother is most reflective in problems in school with a correlation of .21, in behavior toward others with .31, and in depression with .26.

Keeping in mind that the father's outcome has little significance, the correlation between the cutoff of the father with his father and with his mother is consistent with the correlation of .60, while the cutoff of the mother with her mother and with her father is only .28.

Recommendations for Practice and Research

Although the outcome of the correlations of the variables did not support the theory of the cutoff of the parents relating to the level of impairment of the adolescents, much was learned by this researcher through the research effort. After evaluating many research designs, a quantitative correlational design was selected. With a theory this complex, perhaps a qualitative design is more appropriate. In future studies, a way of measuring a complex process such as cutoff through factual data—how many times have a person had contact with parents—as well as perceptual data may be essential. An effort, which has already begun, should be made to collaborate with other researchers about the difficulties in design and methodology with cutoff as well as the successes in understanding and measuring the emotional processes that operate in families.

Summary

The outcome of a three generational study of 60 families produced two correlations of significance with the mothers of the families. The mothers' level of cutoff with their mothers and their fathers as measured by the ECS was significantly correlated with their level of self-functioning. The other research questions for the mothers were not found to have significance on the correlation matrix.

The researcher discussed several factors that may have affected the results of the research. These include not measuring other variables such as the relationship of the parents to one another, the functioning of other siblings, the stressors on the family, and the style of parenting. The study may have been affected by anxiety and defensiveness of the parents who were negotiating a first interview in a new agency about personal and problematic events in their family. The measurement of cutoff may be best established through an instrument that measures facts, as well as perception of cutoff that is recorded in the ECS. In addition, the small sample of fathers invalidated six of the research questions.

This study adds information to the research on cutoff as initiated by McCollum (1986) and further studied by Weiner (1990), and Day (1987). Through the results of this study, further research can refine how to measure this emotional process, which may include data on the perception of the relationships of the participants, as well as more factual data about contact with family.