

Measuring a Marriage's Emotional Fusion

by Randy Frost, M.Div, RCC

Several years ago, John Gottman was a main presenter at a Living Systems conference entitled *The Importance of Research for Family Theory and Therapy*. Dr. Gottman was invited to speak, in part, because his research seems to document what Bowen theory predicts.

For example, Dr. Gottman conducted one piece of research in which he hooked up couples to biofeedback equipment that simultaneously measured physiological indicators of tension as the couples discussed sensitive topics about which they disagreed. When some couples had such a discussion, one spouse's level of tension rose while their partner's level of tension didn't change much. Couples with such low levels of what Gottman called "physiological linkage" reported high levels of marital satisfaction and were unlikely to divorce.

For other couples, the visceral indicators of anxiety for each partner rose and fell together. Couples who had such a high level of physiological linkage reported low levels of marital satisfaction and experienced high rates of divorce.

From the perspective of Bowen theory, Dr. Gottman has found a way to measure "emotional fusion" in a marriage. The ability of one person to remain relatively calm while actively relating to their spouse, even when the partner is upset, represents a good level of differentiation. The less the physiologies of a couple "fuse," the more "differentiated" each one can be from the other. Satisfying, stable marriages are one indication of better levels of differentiation, just as theory predicts!

Dr. Papero will conduct the upcoming Living Systems conference on marriage. He has an unusual ability to draw out the practical implication of theory and research for couples and the therapists who try to lend them a hand. The title contains an intriguing question, "Should the Two Become One?" Join us on October 26 – 27, 2007 for what promises to be another stimulating conference.

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