

HISTORY AND PROCESS

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It is interesting to hear what people “hear” about Dr. Bowen and how they use what they “hear.” Even a relatively benign question like “What does the theory say?” travels through a few layers of subjectivity when the answer comes out. There is confusion between what is a fact and what is a process; what is an observation of a process and that which is observed; what is a noun and what is a verb. To paraphrase Gregory Bateson: “The map is not the territory.” There is also a fair amount of interpretation in reading of what Dr. Bowen meant, e.g., “causes” of schizophrenia. Numerous chapters have been written by authors describing his theory/therapy development. What determines what the authors focus on and what they leave out? When Dr. Bowen uses the phrase “a science of human behavior,” what does he mean by “science”? Some observers attempt to compare Bowen theory to other theories (“he’s really talking about transference”) which usually adds more confusion and distortion. Some say he’s really using psychoanalytic theory when he inquires about a person’s relationship with a parent.

In Dr. Bowen’s letter of August 1989, he offers a brief historical review of the what and how of the theory development. Of particular interest is his articulation of how his theory includes *both* a scientific and a non-scientific side.

Chevy Chase, MD 8-6-89

Dear

Many thoughts about the session on Friday, especially about writing up the story about the "skunk woman", that might become libel. It was only one personal story, among many in that period. Professional people did not believe a new theory was possible. They believed it was all based on personality characteristics in me, rather than facts about the universe, that anyone could "see", if they tried hard. The world has changed a bit in 40 yrs, but most bypass theory, and focus on personality.

The main things I tried to communicate, were:

1. Lifelong motivation to help Freud move psychiatry toward science-art, generally associated with medicine. Mission impossible.

2. Unexpected success in a decade. Direct focus on "what was wrong" with Freud, was not successful. Success came only with a focus on the accepted sciences. A few FACTS from Freud; plus evolution, could start with the beginning of animate life on the planet, millions of years ago; if the two could be connected with a "systems theory" that connected the ANIMATE with the INANIMATE. Much time went into the development of Natural Systems Theory to fulfill this need.

3. The new theory was developed in Kansas, several years before the move to NIMH. Full time research was necessary to move beyond simple technique.

4. Theory operationalized at NIMH, 1954-1959. Special kind of family chosen to illustrate the concepts. Immediate development of family therapy, and description of numerous concepts that fitted precisely with the new theory. Overwhelming evidence that the new concepts were present in all humans, from the most functional to the most impaired, irregardless of social status, or race, color, or creed.

5. Reaction of the environment, 1954 to present. This has been so consistent, and so divergent, that special categories are listed.

a. Immediate reaction. I was the only one who could "see" the family clinical phenomenon. Others could see when told what to look for. The professional world guessed the clinical concepts were merely the product of pre-existing theory, plus schizophrenic families, living on the ward together. Others tried to reproduce the research period, without changing theory. Results were largely unsuccessful. The new theory was part of the world wide explosion into family therapy. Family Systems Theory, later called the Bowen Theory, became only one of several techniques of family therapy.

b. Long term reaction. In the beginning, I thought the world would change, with family experience, as workers discovered the theoretical misfit. It has happened at a slow pace. Names such as "systems" and "systemic" have been used with little academic awareness of the meaning of the terms. Therapists use one or two concepts from Bowen Theory, liberally mix them with individual theory, and truly believe they practice a reliable version of a different theory. Some believe

the "key point" is knowledge of past generations. Books have been written to indicate one has "differentiated a self" by learning a few items about past generations. A diluted version of the theory has become popular with professional readers. Over the years, "thuh [sic] theory" has become part of the public domain. Some writers have become popular through the publication of diluted segments of the total theory. "Dilution" is equivalent to "erosion", or to "lag time" in previous papers. It is an insidious process that operates when the population opinion of the masses is greater than the theoretical sureness of a therapist. It has involved an increasing number of Family Center therapists who are not aware of the force for togetherness and the theoretical gains from specific individuality.

c. Renewed effort. The theory has been the focus. Increased number of conference for Faculty and staff, based on theory. If the central unit knows theory in detail, its influence will spread, more quickly, through trainees and other motivated people. There was no "magic" in "seeing" the new theory. Anyone could have done it, if they had the basic information that went into the creation of the theory, and if they could erase the old theory from their thinking. If the focus is on "what is wrong with the old, the debate will continue indefinitely. If more professional people know "accepted facts" about theory, the profession can move more rapidly, toward an accepted SCIENCE of human behavior.

d. The future. Family Systems Theory (later called the Bowen Theory) is one step toward a new theory of human behavior. It has gained wide acceptance in only 35 years. It is still liberally mixed with feeling items from the old theory, that are not factual. Theorists in the future century, will move more rapidly toward a more factual theory, and ultimately toward science. The human is as scientific as all other cellular life on the planet. The human is also a feeling being, which is not scientific. Past theorists have found it impossible to connect the scientific with the non-scientific. Bowen Theory has conceptualized the human as a scientific creature, that also feels. Feeling items are carefully separated from the scientific side. Feelings are a superficial part of the relation between the humans, including the therapist, and with certain imagined forces. Feelings are handled in the therapy, separated from theory, which moves toward science. When the human can carefully KNOW AND RESPECT the difference, there will be a science of human behavior separate from the non-science of feelings and imagination. Future theorists will know the difference, and help the disciplines comprehend. Sometime in the next century, a science of human behavior, will have structured a bright new future for human beings.

Washington, D.C.
August 1989.

Murray Bowen, M.D.