

Interview with Kathleen Kerr

Conducted by Jennifer Long

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Jennifer Long:

My name is Jennifer Long, and I'm here to interview Kathleen Kerr for the Murray Bowen Archives Oral History Project. And it's my privilege to do that today. If it's okay with you, I'd love to start with a simple question, what I imagine might be a simple question. Who are you and what was your professional background?

Kathleen Kerr:

Sure. So I'm Kathleen Bower Kerr, AKA Kathy Kerr. I am a nurse clinical specialist, which is a parallel to a psychiatric social worker, which means that I'm accredited to practice independently as a psychotherapist, without supervision. I worked two years inpatient psychiatry and then had some timeout around the birth of my first child. And then I went to graduate school. Then I worked in outpatient community mental health, and then I went into private practice, since 1975. I was on the faculty of the Bowen Center for the Study of the Family from 1978 to 2012. I think it's an important piece of information that I'm the wife of Michael Kerr, who was a senior faculty member also, and became the director of the Bowen Center. And I'm the mother of Melissa, Rachel, and Brendan Kerr.

Jennifer Long:

Thank you very much. When did you meet Dr. Bowen?

Kathleen Kerr:

Well, that's a pretty funny story. I was first introduced to him at a Psychiatry Department Christmas party at Georgetown, where he was on the faculty at that point. And my husband was a resident and had gotten intrigued with Family Systems theory and introduced me to Murray Bowen. And the response was very funny. He like said, "Hello, come on, Leroy, let's go home." [laughs] I didn't quite ... it was pretty rude, and I didn't quite have my head wrapped around it at the time. In retrospect, he was leery of me and it makes complete sense. So, here I am, a wife of a resident who's studying Bowen theory, is getting coaching from him, is making efforts in his extended family and in our nuclear family. And I could be reactive to that. I could be either me-tooing it and trying to join in, or I could be trying to neutralize Mike's efforts.

So, I get that. My second interaction with him was more propitious, but it was also interesting. I contacted him and asked him if I could have coaching. And we met in January of '69 and had an initial session and I described what I was interested in trying to work on. And he took the history of my family, and he went to the chalkboard and he drew some diagrams of the important triangles that would be worth working on. And then he just sort of quit, and it was the end of the hour. And I was like, "Well, I'd really like to keep going and do this again. Is that okay with you?" He left it to me to take up the wand, which was interesting. So, I had to ask him if I could see him again. And then of course, he was very generous and he was generous with his time.

So, yeah, those were the first two interactions with him. And then I guess when we came back from being away in the Navy in 1973, I had taken the Postgraduate Training Program at, what was then Georgetown University Family Center, and I was very fortunate that I took it when I did, because the first year I took it, was the last year that he supervised in the program. So, I had him both as a coach and as a supervisor. And that was very fortunate. Not that there weren't other good supervisors, but he was unusually adept. And then when we came back from Illinois in '73, he invited me to be part of the think tank group that was a brainstorming research ideas development group. So, that was the first that I really had more of a collegial relationship with him.

Jennifer Long:

Can you talk more about how he interacted with you over the course of the time you knew him?

Kathleen Kerr:

Sure. I thought about that question. I think there are two important threads in it. So, I think that Dr. Bowen was very respectful of other people, and I think that comes with the theory of respecting people and accepting them where they are. He was very supportive of my academic efforts. Several times when I made presentations, I would get little typed notes the next day about, "That was a half-assed good job," or something like that.

He was challenging of people and me in a good way, challenging you to think your best. He was affectionate. We had a fun, joking relationship, particularly in social situations. And that was all the strong part. But he did continue to be leery of having this marriage of two faculty members in the middle of his organization. And I get that. I get that. I mean, I wasn't always the most mature person in relation to being Mike's wife, within the organization. And as he got older and had more infirmities and the succession was more looming on the horizon, he got more nervous about it, as I would think of it. And he was at risk for talking negatively about me in the triangles, at the Center and around the country as he traveled. And that was immaturity on his part, to be bad mouthing a faculty member around the country and up and down the halls of the Bowen Center. So, that was something I just had to live with. Yeah.

Jennifer Long:

I just think it's really interesting to hear the pairing of characterizations.

Kathleen Kerr:

In what way?

Jennifer Long:

In that I think it is easy for students of Dr. Bowen, who have never met him, of which I am one, to think that he always carried this idea of maturity around with him, and it was always present and always available. And that he was just as susceptible to the humanness of falling into the challenges that occur in triangles, and in all the pieces of his theory, as any other human being was.

Kathleen Kerr:

Well, that sort of bleeds into your next question. If you don't mind.

Jennifer Long:

Please.

Kathleen Kerr:

You asked, "What did you learn from the way he managed himself with you?" And again, I learned two things: that he was a brilliant developer of this theory and that he was always continuing to expand his learning and try to verify the theory and make sure that it was right and test it, and keep an open mind, which I think is why he was such a good theory developer because he had that mindset. And also that he was dedicated to living differentiation of self, professionally and personally, and I watched him in a number of professional arenas, embody that with other leaders of the family field. Yeah, and yes. And those were the strong areas, but he also had his own immaturity that bled out at times. And particularly as he got more physically compromised and more concerned about how succession would happen and how his work would continue into the future when he was gone.

Jennifer Long:

What prompted you to study Bowen theory?

Kathleen Kerr:

Well, it was to two pronged... my husband was studying it, and he was beginning to move differently with me in ways that were both annoying and exciting at the same time. And he was also moving differently with his own family. And I could see the gain there and I could see things, and that intrigued me. And at the same time, I was in graduate school and I was in a psychiatric mental health nursing master's program. And I was being exposed to different theories and Family Systems theory. And in particular, Bowen theory made the most sense of anything that I was exposed to. So it was a two, two pronged exposure.

Jennifer Long:

Was there a reason for studying Bowen theory in your own family?

Kathleen Kerr:

Isn't there always? [laughs] Yeah, when I had that first session with Dr. Bowen, what I described to him was that I don't want to be responsible for my mother's life anymore. And what I meant was, and put flesh on in that session, was that my father had died young. My mother was widowed. She had a history of making suicide attempts in the past. And that, to some extent, definitely my father and also myself and my sister were sort of captive of that threat and feeling responsible and feeling that weight. Me, especially as a first born daughter, and I didn't want to be in that position anymore. And I didn't realize how much cutoff there was in my family until I really started to study it well. And that became another reason for working on my own family.

Jennifer Long:

How has your family and your life been changed?

Kathleen Kerr:

Gosh, that is such an important question. I would say my relationship with my mother was transformed over the many years of my effort. I was lucky to start young. What was I... 27 when I first started into coaching? My mother lived to be 95 and didn't die until 2008. And even during the last years of her life,

which involved physical symptoms and disability and stuff, there were opportunities to continue to work on that relationship and to separate more of a self from her in a way that was useful for both of us. So, that was very important. My view of my extended family, completely changed from my research, my historical research, and I learned far more about what I came from and my position in my family was broadened and deepened, gave me much more perspective on how I came to be the way I was.

And then there's the bite you in the butt part of it, it didn't prevent me from behaving immaturely in my own family of procreation. But when I suffered the natural consequences of being a less than mature person, it provided a roadmap out of the weeds. And so that I could play some catch up ball and address some moderate symptoms that came up in the family, in a way that was productive for all of us in the final analysis. I think it's worth noting that I'm fortunate in having Mike as my partner and I don't know many couples who have this fortunate situation where both are as dedicated to learning theory and to living theory in their relationships. And that's a real boon. It's possible to work on yourself without that, but it's been a boon.

Jennifer Long:

How do you think Bowen theory will impact psychiatry or society?

Kathleen Kerr:

Well, ultimately, I believe that Bowen Theory is an accurate description of human behavior. I have satisfied myself over the, what is it now? 50 plus years that I've been studying it, that it's an accurate description. And through continual experiments in my own family and in working with clinical families, it proves out to me. So, I think ultimately, that it's factual. The problem with it is that it's slippery, systems thinking is very hard to prove because it's complex and interactive. And you can't take traditional scientific methods and pin it down, in my opinion. You have to do careful observational study, like Dr. Bowen did to develop the theory in the first place. And so, I think it'll prevail because I think it's solid, but [laughs] if human society survives, I think it'll prevail. But I also have thought for a long time that it's very possible that it'll go underground for some time in the midst of this societal regression that we're experiencing, and the prevalence of quick fix, simplistic cause and effect models that are prevailing out there, like the biological model in psychiatry.

You know, I've just been re-watching *Cosmos*, and I remember when I watched the first *Cosmos* series and when I watched it the first time, I was really impressed with in Ionia, in the Greek islands, in the sixth century BC, they had nubbins, they had the sun in the center of our solar system instead of the earth. They had atoms, they had evolution, they had all kinds of scientific ideas and hypotheses. And then it was pushed underground by societal regression and the Pythagoreans, who were committed to an earth-centered solar system. And it went underground for like 2000 years and was re-emerging in the Enlightenment and later on. So, I could see that happening with Bowen theory myself, and I don't think that's particularly pessimistic myself. I think it could go underground, but science is getting ... biological science is getting closer and closer to systems thinking. They aren't there in terms of human behavior, but they're certainly getting there in terms of basic science. More and more, basic science points to a systems understanding, and I think that it'll get there eventually, but I don't think it's going to happen in my lifetime.

Jennifer Long:

What about, can I ask about psychiatry specifically? Do you see it will impact psychiatry, or in the same way as society going underground?

Kathleen Kerr:

I think psychiatry, right now, is pretty dedicated to stamping out things like this. I very much remember, as the world turned, back in the late '70s and early '80s, because there was a real flowering of systems thinking in psychiatry when I was first working in it, and the American Psychiatric Association, the Orthopsychiatry Association, Psychological Association were all having panels and speakers, and Dr. Bowen and other leaders in the field were frequently headliners at conferences. And I mean, you could go to these conferences, in the rooms for the family, presentations would be packed. I mean, might be 1200 people in a room for a presentation. I mean, it was an excitement.

And then the next thing you know, you turned around and the biological model was in ascendancy and only psychiatrists were proper to see people and other therapists were not, and you had to prescribe drugs and medicate and hospitalize. And I remember the first presentation where I heard Murray Bowen describe how he thought that this was connected, that the profession was reacting to the de-medicalization of the thinking that was involved in systems thinking. And the way that it eroded the purview of the psychiatrist and that there was a connection between the turning to the biological paradigm and the biochemical paradigm and the threat that systems thinking, and not just Bowen Theory, but there were a lot of family systems. It was a very exciting time. Sal Minuchin, the whole Palo Alto group, Nate Ackerman, Carl Whitaker. It was just a very exciting time. And you could go and meet these people. I met all those people and interacted with them. And it seemed as if we had the world by the tail. And then all of a sudden, woopsie doopsie, it was the other way around. And I think the same thing can happen, is happening societally, that happened in psychiatry.

Jennifer Long:

Have you developed ideas that could amend or refine the theory and/or do you have evidence that could further prove the theory?

Kathleen Kerr:

I don't think I've really expanded the basic theory, but I think that my study in a number of areas has deepened things that Dr. Bowen had done and studied, and made key decisions about, as he developed his theory. I'll give you a couple of examples. He studied all the different types of systems theories, including general systems and cybernetics, when he was deciding that he wanted a systems theory for his theory. And he did not choose either one of those. And I got very interested years ago. So, how come? What are the similarities? What are the differences?

And so, going for a natural systems theory rather than a mathematical or mechanical systems theory was an important distinction. And I don't think that's quite understood as well as it could be because it leads to consequences. And another area is, I got interested in how he chose not to go towards the attachment theory route, which I think a lot of people confuse with Bowen Theory because there are some similarities, but then there are a number of very important differences. And so, I really dug into that. Right now, I just had an article published about some of my clinical work and research, which I've been working on the last couple years, but now I'm going to dive in and try to write up the comparison between Attachment theory and Bowen theory, because I think it's important.

I think my work on looking at primate species and seeing whether you could see a differentiation of self in primate species and variation in levels of differentiation of self, was important. Dr. Bowen was very supportive of that effort and intrigued with that effort, I know. And again, as I just said a little bit ago, I think that, in terms of proving the theory, I think that each person proves it to themselves through what I think of as clinical experiments, either in their own family or if they do

clinical work or even pastoral work, by making ... first of all, reaching an understanding of a situation, then making predictions based on that, and then seeing whether those predictions come true.

And I describe ... the way I describe it is: the better understanding I've gotten of the theory, the spookier I get. And what I mean by that is that I can see things and see connections between things. And I can explicate a theoretical mechanism as to how that might work, even though these things are not visible. And that's why the connections between us and the way we influence each other are not super visible. Sometimes they're so huge that they can be seen, but a lot of it is happening underground. And so, understanding how the mechanisms of togetherness and differentiation would work and influence behavior, and making predictions ... yeah. I mean ... and changing your behavior in your own family is a process of developing a hypothesis, making a prediction, putting it to work, and seeing whether it proves true.

So, that's what I think of as ... and that's very different from the way that people think of proving a theory, but I believe that those of us who have studied it for yeah, these many years, have a real big body of work, which demonstrates that the theory is accurate, but it's not the usual scientific proof.

Jennifer Long:

I hear that. Thank you. Which parts of our society and which professions do you think might benefit from Bowen's ideas today, yet may effectively have no access to them?

Kathleen Kerr:

Pretty much everything. What came to mind what I wrote down, when I was jotting down some ideas yesterday, getting ready, was: government, biology, and medical sciences. And then I thought, "Wait a minute, there's no laundry list here. I can't think of a profession that wouldn't benefit from systems thinking and understanding one's own functioning, better." In whatever you're trying to do, whether it's work with a team to build a bridge, or whether it's being a scientist, trying to understand human behavior. I can't think of a profession that couldn't benefit. Can you?

Jennifer Long:

I cannot. And I continue to be amazed at the way I see churches and clergy shift from having access to it. So ...

Kathleen Kerr:

Shift away from it?

Jennifer Long:

No, shifts in functioning when you've got somebody involved in that system, who's actively working on it.

Kathleen Kerr:

Gotcha.

Jennifer Long:

Is there anything you would want to add? The goal obviously, of the Archives is to ... the goal of the Oral History Project is for us to interview as many people as possible, as knew Murray Bowen in person. And just to make sure that what can be preserved of his legacy is preserved.

Kathleen Kerr:

Right. And what are you asking?

Jennifer Long:

Oh, I'm asking if there's anything you'd want to add. So, we went, we went through the questions that I had prepared in advance. So, that maybe there were things you thought of, that the questions didn't address?

Kathleen Kerr:

I think I was fortunate to know Murray Bowen, professionally and personally. We were neighbors. When we were moving back to Washington from my husband's Navy duty, we talked to Murray and Leroy about neighborhoods. They strongly recommended the neighborhood they lived in because of the strength of the school. We had kids. And so, for many years, we lived within blocks of them. And, excuse me, that oftentimes meant sharing a ride back and forth to things, carpooling to go to a social function, long drives to Medical College of Virginia for the monthly clinical presentations there, the video presentations.

And so, those were opportunities to expand the view from the professional to the personal, and to get to know Murray and Leroy and their kids, and to appreciate all of them as individuals. And then just to get into it young, at 27 and to grow up professionally, after my graduate education, steeped in Bowen theory and not having to, as many people do, have to fight their way out of the bag of being trained in a different paradigm and to unlearn things that have seemed to make sense to them before. I mean, we all have to unlearn what we learned at our parents' knees, but that's a ubiquitous process.

I think I was fortunate. I think I was fortunate to be involved in the early days of the development of the training program and then the Georgetown University Family Center, and then the Georgetown Family Center, and then the Bowen Center for the Study of the Family. I feel like I was fortunate to have had that exposure and to have had the opportunity to sit at his knee, as a mentor, for all those years, and to interact with the originator of the theory and to learn constantly, from him. So, I think that that was the lucky consequence and I think also being exposed to Bowen theory made a huge difference in ... well, huge... made a very significant difference in how my life turned out, based on the ability to play around with your level of differentiation a little bit, and maybe nudge it towards the more robust self, more mature side. And that has had lots of benefits.

Jennifer Long:

I want to thank you very much for your time. And for being willing to be interviewed.

Kathleen Kerr:

It was a pleasure to think over the good old days.