

Interview with Margaret Otto
Conducted by Pamela Allen

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For the Murray Bowen Archives Project of Leaders for Tomorrow at History of Science
Division of the National Library of Medicine

Allen: Yeah, I think it's working. It appears to be recording. I'm going to scoot up. And actually put it over there, so you can get your voice recorded.

Otto: [laughter]

Allen: So I'll just start with the questions, and you have a list and I'll kinda, go by that list, and [silence]...Just start by asking you, to give some brief, biographical information about yourself, and how you came to know Dr. Bowen.

Otto: Well, I have a Masters in Social Work, from Washington University, went into healthcare, then switched to mental health, and was aware of Dr. Bowen's work. He came to Leavenworth, and I had heard him but really my first contact with him was in 1989, when I went to the training program.

Allen: So you got to know him through the training program?

Otto: Mmhmm. I knew him as one of the, you know, in the post-graduate education seminar, at the Bowen Center. And then also was a client of his.

Allen: Well how would you describe your relationship with him?

Otto: I don't think I really had a relationship with him. [laughter]

Allen: [laughter]

Otto: I mean, he was a, he was a professional, I was a trainee, and a client,

Allen: Yeah.

Otto: but I mean, I didn't have a personal relationship with him. Remember, you know, we were in his home, in the end, when he was ill, and had the training program there.

Think that was in '90, before he died. But I didn't really you know, I had a professional relationship with him.

Allen: Sure, sure. And a coaching relationship?

Otto: Yeah, brief. Mmhm, but brief, yeah.

Allen: Mmhmm. [silence] Well, would you have any thoughts or insights into where Bowen picked up some of the information that fueled the earliest phases of his research?

Otto: Well, I mean really what he just described, his own family upbringing, and then his training, his medical training and psychoanalytic training, and then his own ability to think for himself. And how he tried to merge psychoanalysis and his own thinking, and gave up on that. And then continued with his own thinking through, you know, what he described as, you know, exploring different areas, and trying to learn about other fields, and have a very broad perspective of human behavior.

Allen: Mmhmm.

Otto: So, you know, his mind was...never met another one like him.

Allen: Curious.

Otto: Mmm, well I mean there was curiosity, but it was much more than that. Much more than that.

Allen: Mmhmm. Able to see what was in front of him.

Otto: [silence] I don't know. You can sorta- watched a tape of his the other day, and I would say maybe Mike Kerr's second closest to it, but just his own way, to thinking about it, and the effort to think through the ideas, and challenge himself to apply them, and you know, always looking up the scale, never, I don't think he looked down the scale. So, it's hard to describe it, it's

Allen: Yeah, it is. I watched a tape of his the other day, and was just kinda struck with -it was on emotional detachment and family therapy, he was talking about being able to work with those people that were close to him.

Otto: Mmhmm.

Allen: And um, just his ability, to forge a new, a new way and not be afraid to do it, was pretty remarkable, I thought.

Otto: Mmhm. And some of the prices he paid for it, both. [silence]

Allen: What, would you say, were the main characteristics of his approach to research?

Otto: I don't really know. Um...[silence] I don't even know if I would say it was research. [silence] I mean, at that point, I would think of it as theoretical development. And him thinking through the ideas of his theory and seeing if they held up or not. So I guess that would be called research, but I think of it more as theoretical development. Um, which I think is pretty well established now. Ah, the ideas, and the continued expansion. But I don't know that I'd really call it research. I don't know. I have to think about that. At that point, I think it was exploratory thinking through the ideas, conceptual, theoretical formulations. You know, triangles, birth order, you know, some of the core concepts.

Allen: Mmhmm.

Otto: Differentiation, which is, you know, I don't think he was- you know, sometimes I think he wished he'd never ran into that one. Um, anxiety- well, you know, and thinking through the devel-... and developing the concepts...

Allen: [laughter]

Otto: ...more than actually doing, research. Per se.

Allen: Mmhmm. Yeah, the next question's kinda along those same lines. Um, it asks, "Do you have any thoughts about what he meant by research?"

Otto: You know, I really don't. That would be a great question to ask him. Or go back and, you know, take his books and his writings, and look at that word. The way I think about it, is he obviously developed the theory, and then I think Mike expanded it, and then the theoretical concepts are often misunderstood, but I think they're pretty well developed.

And now, I think the challenge is moving it into more and more application, and more and more, if you want to use the word, research. You know. The testing of ideas, Um. But that's just sort of my own way of thinking about it.

Allen: Mmhmm. Okay. Um, you know Dr. Bowen, he did a lot of traveling, trying to present his ideas, and, in an effort to further the Family cause. And it was sometimes well-received and sometimes wasn't, do you have any thoughts about what the main contribution that Dr. Bowen made to the Western scientific worldview?

Otto: Well, I don't know that he [silence] I don't know how much he impacted the scientific worldview. Um, he certainly presented to scientists. Um, how much he impacted the scientific worldview, I don't know. I think time will tell, whether it takes hold or not. In, in that community. But certainly, I mean to see the family, see the family as the emotional unit, and to see the family as an organism in and of itself, which regulates the individual, is I think a tremendous offering. And at some point, I think

Allen: Mmhmm.

Otto: science will- it can't, I don't think it's possible to go forever, from cells, to individual biology, skip over the family, to societal functioning. At some point, and it seems to be edging closer to that, the family will be "discovered," quote unquote, in the scientific community even though Dr. Bowen was aware of it a long time ago. I think that's his main contribution, that the family regulates, is the organism that regulates, the individual. Of course, the individual impacts the family, but [silence] that's, um, that's quite a contribution. Quite a contribution.

Allen: And his efforts towards a science of human behavior.

Otto: Right, that it's not what mind can create, but the way it is, and um, and then what, what, what are the functional facts, or evidence, if you want to say that, to support that. Yes, sort of tied to the biology of the brain, versus what the brain can, or the physiology of the brain, versus what the brain can produce.

Allen: Mmhmm.

Otto: [silence] Just, what he talks about.

Allen: Yeah. This next kinda of group of questions, is kind of about a little bit, your professional life course and your family. Um, what got you to select your profession, and what is your favorite way to describe it?

Otto: Well, I think, you know I was- I was going to say a little more about Dr. Bowen too, I was thinking about when I went out there, you know, I was very smart. [laughter]

Allen: [laughter]

Otto: I graduated from Wash U, you know, bunch of smart people, and, paid all this money, to go out there, and I was very reactive, very immature and very reactive. And of course, he was a reactive individual too, certainly not a saint. But I had a very brilliant mind, and uh, and then the idea that I co...that I could learn from him, and then apply the theory, myself, um, and I knew, when I went out there, that he knew something I didn't know. And knew a lot I didn't know.

And that sort of drives me crazy. I'm just one of those people that I have to understand it. And even as a kid I was that way, I'd work on things till I thought I had a machine that could fly, or whatever, you know. Of course, it never flew, but - and so, I think that was part of it. One, the ideas made sense to me, you know, my own, my own history, there was always a tie between, well basically: human, science, and religion. Those three were always compatible. And went hand in hand. You know, my father was a chemist, my mother was an art teacher. Both did well in their fields. So, it just made sense to me, that it was a natural systems theory. And I was sorta invested, in understanding what he understood. So, I mean I- and then I kept going. I mean, that's '89, and what is it? 2013, you know?

Allen: [laughter]

Otto: And I wasn't the strongest student he had. I-I well, got yelled at, and cried often in front of him, and he blew up, and you know. But I learned a lot.

Allen: Uh huh.

Otto: Learned a lot.

Allen: Well, what was there about your background that got you to select your profession, would you say? Was there-

Otto: You mean social work? Well, I dunno, I think typical.

Allen: -and mental health, and-

Otto: I mean, I was a medical social worker, first. And not into mental health. And then switched over to mental health. But I think that's typical stuff, helping position in the family, all that kind of stuff. You know, crazy stuff. Crazy stuff. Pretty typical.

Allen: [laughter]

Otto: Helper, helper history, whatever you want to say. But thankful I ran into the theory, it's made a- I think it's made a big difference clinically, as well as individually. Well, it's been a good run, I'm thankful for it.

Allen: Mmhmm. Well, is there anything about your own family, in which your father a chemist, your mother an art teacher, they did well in their professions, that spawned your interest in Bowen theory, do you think?

Otto: Well, sort of what I was inferring that the, it didn't spawn my interest in it, cause I didn't know anything about it, but it made the next step, I mean, things like the man at the top knows something nobody else knows, so go talk to him, so I went out there, got him as a coach. Um, that was the Natural, the Natural Systems perspective, was in my own family. Um, so that made sense to me. I mean, the- it was sort of continuous, to go ahead and explore it, versus finding- I didn't find it allergic in any way, to it, it just made sense to (me).

So there was all that upbringing, course it wasn't about -but, to go from science- human behavior, to science, you know, rel- those three topics, just went back-to-back, very smoothly. So, I think that just made it a-a natural fit for me. While other theories I studied, Gestalt, and Psychoanalytic, and Behavior, and Skinner, and - It just didn't really- it just,

Allen: Mmhmm.

Otto: it wasn't comprehensive enough. For me. [silence]

Allen: Didn't stick. Yeah. You said there was natural- that natural systems was a part of your family, or it fit with your family, in the sense of, just-

Otto: Well, my father was a bird-watcher, he was an amateur ornithologist, so he'd take me out in the woods, and we'd count birds, and my mother, you know, collected wildflowers, all the wildflowers she could find, and then she'd draw them, and

Allen: Mmhmm.

Otto: you know, it's just in- he was a chemist, and you know, it was just part, part of it.

Allen: Mmhmm.

Otto: It wasn't, um, you know, I was a city kid, but it was it was part of the-

Allen: Appreciated.

Otto: Well, and studied,

Allen: Yeah.

Otto: and counted, and

Allen: Mmhmm. Observed.

Otto: Observed, and collected, and pressed, and you know, it was just part of the [laughter] Uh huh. Wasn't a huge part, I mean, he went to the office, she went to school, and taught and all that, he was a corporate- he was in corporate. Um, but it was just part of the fabric in the way things were described and understood.

Allen: Well, have you developed any ideas that would extend or refine the theory, do you think? At this point?

Otto: No, I don't- I mean, I've had... I've tried to present my ideas, I think, um certainly Bowen contributed, and I think Mike's expanded it, with the Unidisease Concept, I think my efforts were, you know, certainly to talk about reciprocity on a triangle, I did that for a little while. And sort of isn't a new concept but talking about it maybe in a little different way. And, um, so, you know, presented on that, and then I think the presentation I did on multiple cases going in remission, and common denominators among all the clinical cases that went into remission, um, you know, it's just sort of a- it's not new, but just a different way at it.

Allen: Mmhmm.

Otto: Um, so that, and then of course I tried to teach as effectively as I can, in the training program here, as well as continue to, you know, it's- apply it to myself most- you know, most importantly. You know, cause you can't stay ahead of the student, unless you just, you know, stay ahead, try to get ahead of yourself.

Allen: Right, right.

Otto: So, um, I mean I've taken- I haven't written, and I haven't published, there's a lot I haven't done, I'm a pretty good teacher. I think I would be better, um- I think I'm best at presenting. But, I need to do the other but I don't know if I'll get to it or not. [silence]

Allen: When you present your- when you teach, how are the ideas accepted, by the students, in the training program?

Otto: I think pretty well. I think I'm, probably the one of the things I do the best, is I don't even know, really, how to describe it, I almost want to use the word 'translate' it, but I don't wanna mean distort it. But translate it into metaphors, or examples, that anybody can get it. I mean, it was designed for anybody to get it, and, on purpose, you know, by Dr. Bowen, like the use of language and all that. So, whether it's in a clinical hour, or in front of a classroom, or teaching family residents, or whatever, I think I'm- I think I'm pretty... I think I'm pretty good at that. [silence] Not making it gro- overly simple, that's a danger I think, but making it succinct or something enough, that it can be understood, in an applicable fashion. I mean, the work is really defining itself, that's [silence] it's not that hard. People can do that.

Allen: Mmhmm.

Otto: It's not easy.

Allen: Mmhmm, sure.

Otto: But, they can do it. People can do really hard things.

Allen: Mmhmm. [silence] Would you say that you have evidence that would further prove the theory?

Otto: [laughter] I don't know how much I care about evidence sometimes. I know for me, clinically, I mean I haven't probably had a hospitalization in fifteen years. I probably haven't had a crisis in fifteen years.

Allen: Mmhmm.

Otto: It's been very, ah, I've been very pleased with the- I'll probably have one tomorrow, you know,

Allen: [laughter] Yeah.

Otto: I mean it's the nature of the beast, but it's been very, um, haven't had a suicide, I've been very pleased with it. And so for me, I'm pleased with it, pleased with the caseload, pleased with the clinical outcome. Used to keep track of it more, how many sessions I would see somebody, you know, before progress was made, that kind of thing. It'd be like, six or seven, eight. But, I don't do that anymore, I don't keep track of that- my clinical work like I used to. So is that evidence? I don't know. That's not research. It's not a control group, and you know, I haven't compared it to a group of those not receiving a family systems orientation,

Allen: Right.

Otto: Bowen family systems, so I don't know. I'm not sure that evidence is going to prove it. Um, I mean, I could just keep thinking at some point this emphasis on biological psychiatry is just going to hit a dead end. And may be closer, with the current state of things, I don't know. And there seems to be a flavor that it's gonna, it's a little less hostile, towards family systems.

And um, that it will turn, because there's a dead end. Somewhere. But I don't know.

Allen: How many of your clients actively try to learn the theory, or is it mainly just that they get it from you, or do you have a, even, a sense of that?

Otto: There's some variation in that, I think. I mean, some clients have gone on into postgraduate training program, um, I mean most people come in, they don't want to learn the theory. Why would they? I mean,

Allen: Mmhmm.

Otto: wouldn't make any sense to. So, I just try to represent how I think about it, and the concepts that I think are pertinent, to whatever, sorting the strong triangles out, on how I thought what was happening, family that had spilled over, into societal stuff. But, and see what they think about it. But I don't-

Allen: So, you talk about the theory with the clients, and...?

Otto: They don't really know that it's a th-

Allen: Uh huh.

Otto: I mean, I'll talk about the emotional process, and what's got them around the ankle, or whatever you want to say. And so I-I represent how I think about it.

Allen: Sure.

Otto: Triangle, or fusion, or giving up self. Whatever. And then, they say what they think.

Allen: Yeah.

Otto: And, some a lot of people are very appreciative of it. Some of it-some of them think it's a bunch of - I had a gal the other day, she told me it was a bunch of BS.

Allen: [laughter]

Otto: That her husband was the problem, and it wasn't a co-created problem, and

Allen: Mmhmm.

Otto: think a lot of people would agree with her. [silence] I didn't see it that way, but a lot of people would agree with her. [silence]

Allen: Mmhmm. Well, it looks like we have time for a final question. [silence] Which parts of our society and which professions, do you think would benefit from Bowen's ideas, today, that really haven't had access to them yet?

Otto: I don't know. I really don't know. I [silence] I don't really know where the theory should go. I mean, it's in one way, it's expanded a lot, it's gone into business, and clergy, and mental health, some. And a lot of people say they know it, come in, and they say, "Oh, yeah, I know that. Here's my genogram," and I can tell, probably in the first five minutes, that they don't know, but they know a little bit. You know, they've had some exposure to it. But, um, I don't know what will- what the future will hold. I think- could see that it might die, it might you know, if it doesn't take ahold, in the third generation, so to speak, it might go dormant, it might go in the books, in back shelf of the library, and get pulled out later. Or, um, [silence] you know, it might, it might get more bigger. And more interest, in the scientific community. There's been some-some good contact, think, over the years. So, I don't- I don't really know where it should go. Um, I guess I try to get good with whatever way it goes.

Allen: I-I guess while you were talking a final question kinda came to my mind, you mentioned you had a brief coaching relationship with Dr. Bowen.

Otto: Yeah, yeah, I was one of his flunky students, yeah! [laughter]

Allen: [laughter] I was just wondering if there was anything about that relationship, or that experience, that you wanted to mention, or describe, or?

Otto: Well I, like I said, I was pretty immature, and didn't really get it. But by God, I was going to understand it. And I think, I might have had the last in-person clinical hour with him, he was quite sick, and he was grey, and his eyes were rolling to the back of his head, but it's amazing, cause he managed, the way he could manage his physiology. I can remember at the time thinking, "In the building, where's the physician, if I need one?" And I sort of located Mike Kerr, where he would be in the building, if I knew him.

Allen: (This was the- fairly sick)

Otto: Mmhmm. And, that was it. That was the only thought I had about it.

Allen: Mmhmm.

Otto: And had a good, productive session, and he'd roll those eyes down and make pertinent- pertinent comments, and so

Allen: Sure.

Otto: So that, I mean, I was just impressed, that he could keep his thinking on top of this physiology. And manage his physiology. Um, so that. And then, I mean, things he told me I had, I couldn't understand, you know? um, he- I didn't pay him once, and he blew up, I forgot to pay him.

Allen: [laughter]

Otto: Didn't get a bill, didn't pay him, just thought I was all flustered from talking to the guy at the top, and sorta wobbly-kneed with that, but sure was gonna do it. And uh- didn't pay him, and boy he let me know I didn't pay him. So, you know, the humanness, of it all. But the thinking was, um, you know, I still think about some of his comments. You know? [silence] Under- you know, knew he could see something I couldn't see.

Allen: Mmhmm.

Otto: And it's right there. Now I can see it. But I couldn't then. [silence]

Allen: Well, do you have anything that you, want to put in, here? That- At the end, project, anything? Thoughts or comments?

Otto: Well, I was thinking- I just think it's much bigger than the man.

Allen: Mmhmm.

Otto: I mean, the theory itself, I remember, he used to get so upset, "Bowen-enenenenenenen!" and he'd be yelling, and

Allen: [laughter]

Otto: You know, slamming down that hand, and all that, and everybody's got a story to tell, but that's more than him. In that it's, in nature, not in, um. So, to me, the theory, is sort of the- what my, you know, I could be 95, and still interested in the theory, and the expansion of the ideas, and the application of the ideas, and their use- their usefulness, to man, if he gets it together to use them. But I think it's quite the, quite the concepts, and you know, how he came up with all of that, I'm not sure,

Allen: Mmhmm.

Otto: but he certainly established it. And it's progressed since then.

Allen: Mmhmm.

Otto: So much- to me, much bigger than the man.

Allen: Mmhmm.

Otto: I mean I knew the man, and he knew me, in a little, tiny way.

Allen: Yeah.

Otto: Just as human as all of us, but the thinking was pretty, pretty, the concepts are pretty, pretty bigger.

Allen: Mmhmm. Well, I've asked everything that I had and I appreciate you doing this, and

Otto: Sure, hope it got recorded. [laughter] after all of our on and off, and hold, and!

Allen: [laughter] Thank you...it's still-

Otto: There you go, I don't know what it's doing.