

Interview with Laura Havstad, PhD
Conducted by Andrea Schara

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of the National Library of Medicine

Schara: Let's see how it looks. Yeah, that looks pretty good. So today- what's today's date? Is it the 14th?

Havstad: Today's the 13th of October.

Schara: Okay. So I usually just start with a very open-ended question. Asking how you met Dr. Bowen, and how that relationship may have helped you learn about Bowen Theory, or got you interested in Bowen Theory, and whether or not your interest in Bowen Theory, you know, continued to develop in sort of divergent ways, after that first meeting with him, and whatever your particular interest was the first time you met him, then where did it go from there.

Havstad: Well, I think my interest in Bowen Theory was pretty much in place before I met him. Because, I was introduced to Bowen Theory by Dr. Larry Allman, who was a clinical psychologist on the faculty at the University of Southern California. And that was in 1970. Probably in the fall of 1975, Larry Allman was my major professor as I was getting my Masters degree and he was a follower of Carl Whittaker, who to the extent that you could be a follower of Carl Whittaker, he was certainly a fan. I learned [recently] that Dennis Jaffe, who was a clinical psychologist on the faculty at USC, was also along with Larry Allman, handing out Bowen's Anonymous Paper, where he wrote about his effort to stay outside the emotional system of his own family. So that paper was the first thing of Bowen's I had read, although as an undergraduate several years before I had studied the family researchers, who were studying the family and schizophrenia. So when I read the Anonymous Paper, I kind of had that background, the idea of the family as a system and the idea that individual's problems were a product of this interaction in the family. So when I read the Anonymous Paper, in which Bowen tried to convey with his own family examples, what he meant by being outside the family emotional system, I was really pretty thrilled by that paper. And I knew pretty clearly that's what I wanted to know how to do. And, so based on that I wrote him some letters that were about both I being interested in someone who could maybe work with me, [coaching me] in my own family, but also because he had used the term scale of differentiation and I was looking for research projects for my graduate program. I also wanted a copy of the scale of differentiation.

Schara: [laughter]

Havstad: Which is funny, because everyone knows, who got to know Bowen, that he thought people who asked for the scale of differentiation were like, pretty clueless. Exactly. Looking for the fountain of youth. The pot of gold at the end of the rainbow. But in a way, Bowen didn't really understand, or he probably did understand but there's a big difference between the way he

used the concept of the scale, and the way academic psychology used the concept of a scale. So from the perspective of psychology and my perspective as a PhD student, my question made a lot of sense. From the perspective that he had, this was a way of talking about the continuum of adaptiveness that you could see among people. That was very complex. That from his point of view, the idea that you could get a copy of the scale would be like having a blueprint to evolution or something. Which didn't exist, at least, not to anybody's knowledge.

So when I met him, it was at a meeting and it was after I had actually attempted to put detriangling in to effect. Which he had described in that paper. And I hadn't read anything else about how to do detriangling, or talked to anybody about it, and I tried to do it. [laughter]

Schara: [laughter]

Havstad: And, my mother was talking to me about my brother, and what was she being critical about? I can't remember exactly. But it was like, she was sort of telling me what was wrong with one of my younger brothers. And, I thought, "Here's a great opportunity." So, later I told him, you know, "Your mother was telling me all these things wrong about you."

Schara: [laughter] You didn't know you were triangling, instead of detriangling! [laughter]

Havstad: I thought that was detriangling, because [laughter] -and maybe that's a continuing confusion, that I have from time to time. Which is triangling, and which is detriangling? Of course he later said, that detriangling's just triangling your family. [laughter] There's a true aspect to that. So, he went and told my mother that I had told him that she'd been telling me, and who knows, I think he probably did that with a certain amount of emotional intensity. And she got furious at me, and literally cut me off.

Schara: I've been there. [laughter]

Havstad: For months, she wouldn't talk to me. [laughter] Yeah, and it was interesting. I did lose a lot of weight.

Schara: [laughter] I love-that's a good [theory]. I blew up my family, and I lost a lot of weight. You should try it too. [laughter]

Havstad: "How to lose weight by blowing up your family." [laughter] And, you know, it could have been that looking back, had I been sort of more prepared, even though he talks in the paper about the reactions you get, that had I been more prepared, I could have probably managed that in a way that there wasn't that huge cutoff. But I'm not sure, maybe not.

Schara: When you get over 65, yes.

Havstad: [laughter] I would not have provoked that cutoff.

Schara: You could've said all those things when you were over 65, and nothing horrible would've happened.

Havstad: I should have waited.

Schara: [laughter] Until your functional level moved up, then you would've been able to put it in correct terms.

Havstad: Well, these are things we just don't know, going into them.

Schara: Why the heck would you stick with it? I mean, you've already had a huge failure, and why would you at all be interested in meeting the guy who provoked this failure?

Havstad: I don't know, I mean it's hard to explain. I can't really account for it, except that I could say that the experience of blowing it up, blowing up my family and ending up in this big cutoff, I interpreted it as I hadn't understood or hadn't done it correctly, or there was something I had missed, but I was impressed with the power of the reaction I had provoked, and I wasn't altogether unaccustomed to intense explosive sort of things in my family. So maybe I wasn't that disturbed by it either. You know at another level, it's like this was the way my family behaves. And I had triggered another episode of it behaving that way. And now I was perplexed. About, what do I do, where do I go from here, did I get something wrong? Did I get something right? [laughter] Or something, you know, I just was more curious.

Schara: [laughter]

Havstad: Now, as well as being like clobbered, I was definitely, you know. It wasn't comfortable.

Schara: It was significantly different from the way your family and you've been handling these kinds of conflicts, in the past though, because you had initiated it with the idea that, "I'm going to detriangle."

Havstad: Yeah.

Schara: And so you had done something which you would have ordinarily never have done. And you ended up with an explosion, maybe, a different kind of explosion in some ways, I don't know, I'm guessing, than you had had before. Or maybe it was similar, but you had but there was some- enough different about it that you actually believed that you were kind of on the right track, but you had done some little thing wrong.

Havstad: There was something about, "OK, so I have intentionally set out to do something, that produced a result that unintentionally has happened a lot. So that maybe was sort of interesting and I think that's what I was interested in-in knowing a lot more about, which was how could you know what you were doing?"

Schara: How could you know what you were doing?

Havstad: So I set up, and I kind of knew what I was doing, in a very limited sort of way, I had an idea that I was trying out.

Schara: And your idea was, that "Mother usually tells me these complaints and I don't really tell my brother, that he's being talked about."

Havstad: [laughter] Yeah, and I think more than that, I was thinking like, "Here's an opportunity for me, to put the emotional process back between others and the family. And try and be outside of it myself." I think that's what I wanted. And so, I think that was the idea. And of course, what happened was it sort of came back and landed on me heavy. [laughter]

Schara: "I want to be outside, how can I get outside? Let's see. How can I push the two of them together, and I get outside?" But you had that as a concept, which would have never really occurred to you before.

Havstad: Right, that was a new concept. Yeah. That was brand new.

Schara: That was a new concept and the concept was right, but the- [laughter]

Havstad: The execution, was, you know....

Schara: Yeah

Havstad: I thought, probably wrong. But I wasn't even completely sure of that. You know, that maybe, it was something that I needed to learn more about, in the realm of, I would use the word flexibility now, but maybe I didn't have that as a concept then. You know, that I could have adapted to what would have happened in a way that furthered what my original intention was. I didn't let go of wanting to get into the out- to get outside the family system. That's what I wanted to do. [laughter] So, in trying to do that I triggered a big reaction.

Schara: M'kay.

Havstad: And, it fit well enough with the ideas; it gave more credibility to that. Rather than less.

Schara: Okay. And then you actually had to meet Dr. Bowen. How long after that?

Havstad: It was probably several months. Later. Or maybe it was longer.

Schara: So you didn't rush off to Washington to schedule an appointment with him, and say, "Wait a minute..." [laughter]

Havstad: No, and I mean it'd be interesting to look back at the dates. Cause I have, probably, several letters, that went back and forth between us during that period of time. And, around the scale of differentiation, and he didn't really know anybody in LA that I could work with, and so no, I didn't rush but when the opportunity came to attend a two-day meeting with him, in the LA

area, I went. And somehow I convinced my husband to go. He never went with me to any of this stuff! He didn't even -yeah! [laughter]

Schara: So it's 1975 or...?

Havstad: So he came- I saw him in 1976, it was February of 1976, in some place, it's some institute of family therapy, in the San Fernando Valley. Brian Kelly was at that same meeting, he was on the faculty of that school, at that time.

Schara: I think he organized that meeting, he told me, I'm not 100% sure. Yeah, think so.

Havstad: Did he? And there was one other guy, who was also in our group in June of '76, when we started the postgraduate program. Some other guy, that was part of that school, also. I can't remember his name.

Schara: So, '76. Bowen was 63, then, at that time. Just turned 63.

Havstad: Right. Exactly.

Schara: And out of that meeting, you and Brian Kelly and Tom got interested in Bowen Theory. So who meets Dr. Bowen first, you or Tom?

Havstad: Yeah, right. So, Tom goes up to Dr. Bowen, and he's funny telling this story, he says, he's going up to Dr. Bowen to talk about me and my family. [laughter] So he says to Dr. Bowen something about his wife and her family, and Dr. Bowen says to him, "Where is this wife of yours?" [laughter] And he comes and gets me, Tom comes and gets me, and says, "Dr. Bowen wants to see you," or something. [laughter]

Schara: "I'm going to get on the outside of you and Dr. Bowen." [laughter] That's a beautiful triangle there.

Havstad: And I go up, and so Dr Bowen says to me, "You look bad. You don't look so good," or "You look pretty bad," or some version of that. And I didn't. I mean, I was a stressed out graduate student, who had blown up my family. [laughter] And I said, "Well, I tried to detriangle my family. And I blew it up. And I think I could use some help." And Dr. Bowen said, you know it was interesting, because his whole bearing shifted from that challenge, of "You look pretty bad," to "I admire your courage."

Schara: That was good.

Havstad: Yeah. And so, and he ended up telling me about the postgraduate program. And I think I was the only person that had been, of course it wasn't that old a program then, but they had a policy against people attending the postgraduate program while they were still being supervised in a graduate program. And Bowen told the admissions committee, whoever it was at the time, to let me in any way I think. And I started in June of 1976. In the four times a year program.

So meeting Bowen at that point, you know, when I actually talked with him I had sat through a day of a meeting, or part of a day. And, I had never heard his voice or had seen him in any way, had only read his paper and exchanged letters with him, and when he first started to talk in the meeting, I thought, "I'm not going to be able to listen to him. Because he has this Southern accent, and he talks so slowly."

Schara: That's beautiful.

Havstad: I can't stand it." [laughter] And then, you know, as it went on and I kind of got drawn in to listening to him, and just became fascinated. I don't remember exactly what he was presenting, I just know that I was hearing about what I was interested in. And, so when I went up to talk with him I had a sense of Bowen and his physical presence and his voice and his way of being. From having just watched him over a morning. Lecturing. And answering questions with an audience.

And, in that interaction, one of the things I remember clearly was that at one point, I said to him, "So, the thing about me, is I really tried to save my father." I probably didn't put in "from my mother." [laughter] And so he says to me, "Well you succeeded, didn't you?" [laughter]

Schara: Still [alive]!

Havstad: And I said, "Huh. Hadn't thought about it that way." Why did that make sense to me? You know, I think there would be a lot of people that couldn't make sense of a remark like that. Because he was doing a reversal on how I thought, I have tried to save my father, I keep trying and I keep failing. Because he won't stand up for himself. And so I'm going to take on my mother.

Schara: For him.

Havstad: For him. And, it doesn't work. He's still not right [laughter].

Schara: Yes, now that you're doing the job all the more reason to relax and stay in your lane.

Havstad: But he was saying in fact, the reversal was, well, one comment, and I understood. I had drawn the focus and that had helped my father out.

Schara: [laughter]

Havstad: So, my first interactions were- I don't know if I could have said all that, as I did not quite have the concepts as clear as I have them now. But, those responses from him in that first meeting, they just all influenced me to have great confidence in what he knew.

Schara: So now would you say what he knew and what he talked about was emotional process? Would you go that far?

Havstad: Yeah.

Schara: To say that when other people talk to you about stuff, they're not talking about the flow of the function of relationships. And he was talking about the function of the flow of relationships and what actually gets accomplished. Not really about the suffering. Not really about that cost.

Havstad: Right. No, he didn't seem too impressed by my angst, or the fact that I looked pretty bad.

Schara: [laughter] This is a fact.

Havstad: It was all part of the day, you know.

Schara: But somewhere within you, you knew that he had this insight, or he talked some different language, or he had some profound knowledge that you wanted to obtain for yourself, and that it was something that could be learned. You thought. But he had the key to it somehow. He understood it.

Havstad: Yeah. He understood it. Yeah.

Schara: And that was what you were seeking - to understand it too.

Havstad: And his interactions with me after, beside his writing, beside that paper and just watching him that morning. His interactions with me confirmed the conclusion I had come to reading that paper, and what had been confirmed to me listening to him lecture. That he really knew something, because I remember saying to him-

Schara: Well, that's interesting.

Havstad: [It] makes me emotional. I said, "this is important." And I was probably emotional saying it to him.

Schara: On reflection then, the importance of someone who sees emotional processes as not like "I see Freudian instincts, I see dreams, I see loose association," this is like the emotional process is something that no one has really seen. No one has seen this. You kind of grasp it a teeny, tiny bit, when you tried to detriangle that there was something big there. Some big emotional thing there, that was holding everybody, and holding everybody hostage.

Havstad: I don't know that I would have thought about it, using those words. It was, I think, kind of instinctual on my part. I mean, Bowen had the words, and it fit my experience of my family, you know. I think I'd been working on my family from the time I was quite little and trying to figure it out and puzzle it out and do something about it, you know? And, so, that idea that you're talking about, about there being a system in which everybody was participating, that held everybody in their functional role, was a very appealing idea. And maybe because, there was in my family, what Bowen called the projection process directed at me, where my mother would have wanted to diagnose me. As not so much psychiatrically, but as being against her, of

being wrong or bad or lacking. Inadequate. Not doing what I was supposed to. And that kind of invalidation that could have gone in the direction of me being the problem. And that this point of view did not buy into that process of, identifying a patient or blame, really. He didn't go along with the blame.

Schara: Or the cause, that kind of thing. Instead, it lifted you up, to say that this is important. Maybe you had a glimpse of emotional process, you had some idea about what it was, but the importance of it was emotional; it was deeply emotional. The importance of being able to see emotional process is because if you could really see it, in a way, it was completely impersonal.

Havstad: Yeah.

Schara: And you were not caught in the system. And so the emotionality may have had to do with that.

Havstad: Right. Right.

Schara: I don't know what the emotionality had to do with, but maybe it's kind of a release, or seeing that process of caught-ness and then the release from it, [where] your father's alright? [laughter] You already helped him!

Havstad: "You already helped him. Mission accomplished." [laughter] "Relax.!"

Schara: Exactly! And you're like, "Wow, that is so important! Why doesn't everybody in the world know about this?"

Havstad: Yeah. [laughter]

Schara: You know, it's amazing.

Havstad: That's what I felt like, you know. So there was something about that. There was a great relief. And there is a great relief in getting outside the emotional system. You know, which I've learned since is still not easy to accomplish. After really studying it for decades. It's still labor. To get there. Over and over.

Schara: It's 35 years as I count from '76, to now.

Havstad: 1976, 35 years, yeah. That can be discouraging, you know. [laughter]

Schara: You've had probably a far different life than you would have had, if you had remained as the, I don't know what, caught in the position you were in, before you met Dr. Bowen. That this bad child, that this disobedient one, that doesn't do it right, I mean how much of that could you take for 35 years?!

Havstad: Well, I can't say, I can't claim that I've got completely out of it, because with the problems that occurred, over my adult life, I have been back in that position from time to time.

And, there's been a cost to sort of pursuing this rather than.... By the time I got into this, I had married Tom. And that created a certain set of tensions for me in my family. Not about him, he's liked. But he's not the sort of spouse that my family would have picked for me either.

Schara: He's not Jewish, he's-

Havstad: And he's not a professional. I met him in college, and you know, he never finished. And he's always been a bit of a kind of an iconoclastic, unconventional guy. And he didn't come from a business family or a professional family. You know, all his siblings have done very well, but they've all been corporate or government employees. And, so we've had a very different life. So that set of tensions were in place. And that set in motion certain ways in which we got in trouble, and we got blamed. I got blamed. So I found myself back in that position, you know, around our financial difficulties that came out of the problems with his business, and the lawsuits. And those are still kind of underground, grumblings that occur where I could say, "Did I get out of that focused-on position in my family?" Not entirely. Not entirely.

Schara: What does knowledge of emotional process do for you? What I referred to in the beginning was Bowen Theory is a completely different way of looking at emotional problems. Is that the main thing that you get out of it, or what is the main thing that in these years of trying to understand becoming a person who's capable of getting outside the system that something different happens in your family that makes it worth the effort? Even though they can drag you back in, it's still in the long run, you look at it and you say, "Wow, I got out here, I got out there." I mean, I can look back and say, "I do not like to differentiate a self, but there are times when family is going in such a completely wrong direction that I can not go along with it." And I don't want to take things up with people, but I have to get outside the system somehow.

Havstad: Yeah, and I'm not done with it yet. Either. I mean I continue to be persuaded it's worth continuing to work at. Yeah, so I would say realistically, maybe there's a time ahead when one can really get out and stay out. Get out as a young person and stay out of an emotional system throughout their life course.

Schara: Yeah, I can't imagine it myself.

Havstad: I mean I can imagine it more than I used to be able to, because I can now look back and see things, I can look back at the lacunae in my effort, where I lost track, and could see where, with a little more clarity. Maybe. You know someday, maybe we'll be able to be the kind of coaches to people that really make more of a difference in people's ability to not lose the effort as much. To be clearer about the difference of being in and out of it and to know when you're getting into it again.

Schara: Yeah, I hear that and I can visualize it in my head. Although I kind of think there are two things that happen. One thing is that you're cruising along with your family, and then things happened that pull you back in. It could be a death. But something happens that pulls you back into it before you know it. You've kind of gotten reactive and caught in the system. Because of knowledge of the theory, then you're able to say, "here we go again. I'm in it, but I know how to get out. And I've gotten out several times and I'm going to do it again. It's not going to be an easy

thing or a pleasant thing, but because I've had this experience and this knowledge when I run into....”

Havstad: It's bad every time.

Schara: [laughter] It's bad every time! That's so true! I see we've gotten to-

Havstad: [laughter] What time is it?

Schara: It's 2:30 now so maybe we'll stop for now and come back.

Havstad: So we'll stop for now. And I don't know if I'm answering your questions or not.

Schara: I think you're making a difference.