

Interview with Phil Klever  
Conducted by Randy Krehbiel  
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**Krehbiel:** Good morning, this is Randy Krehbiel. The date is 7-7-13, and I'm here with Phil Klever. And Phil, why don't you start by saying a bit about who you are, and how you got to know Dr. Bowen.

**Klever:** Ok. I'm a licensed clinical social worker and licensed marriage and family therapist in private practice in Kansas City, Missouri. I've been in private practice since 1978. I am also conducting a twenty-year family research project that is currently in its nineteenth year.

**Krehbiel:** How did you come to know Dr. Bowen?

**Klever:** I came to know his work in graduate school in 1974. Art Mandelbaum from the Menninger Foundation taught a class on family therapy.

**Krehbiel:** Where did you get your graduate degree?

**Klever:** At the University of Kansas.

**Krehbiel:** Okay.

**Klever:** I got my Masters in Social Work there. One part of the class was on Bowen theory. I really liked that part the most. I found it really interesting and wanted to keep reading more about Bowen theory. So I did.

**Krehbiel:** What piqued your interest?

**Klever:** Well I actually think it was the multigenerational aspect of the theory that initially drew me in because my mother was very interested and involved in her multigenerational family. As a family we'd make a trip from our home in Iowa to visit a cousin or one of her aunts in Minnesota. I remember when we were on a family trip to the West and were driving through Washington state, my mother saying, "You know, I think I have a cousin that's in the state prison. Why don't we see if we can see her?"

And, so, it's just little things like that that were just an integral part of my growing up, as well as her daily involvement with her family, her sisters, nieces, nephews, and aunts and uncles. And part of it, probably, was my identification with my mother, and my respect for her, even though at times, I thought, "Oh, do we have to do this? Do we have to make this visit? Why are we doing this." In spite of my resistance it did rub off on me a little bit. So, when Art Mandelbaum presented the material on the larger family, it made some sense and put a framework for understanding the influence of the multigenerational family that was really intriguing.

So that was a start. And from then on I kept looking for things to read on Bowen theory. The only time I had direct contact with Dr. Bowen was at the symposium in 1989. We greeted each other and talked for a minute. During the symposium in a question and answer period I asked him a question about how he would describe the similarities and differences between dominance and differentiation of self. My additional exposure was watching his tapes and reading his book.

**Krehbiel:** Would you have insights, as to where Bowen picked up his ideas that fueled his research?

**Klever:** What I've been told is that he had a natural interest and curiosity about the human condition. I've heard that when he was in the service and saw bad things happen, that he noticed the different ways people reacted or responded to the horrible things in war. He noticed the variation in response.

And, and then of course I heard about his time at Menninger's, where he was reading about various fields of science to try to understand human behavior. He wasn't satisfied with psychoanalytic theory as an explanation for human behavior. He was wanting to know more about what might be contributing to the human condition.

It's an interesting question in general about what intrigues or motivates people to move toward a certain area of study.

**Krehbiel:** How would you describe the main characteristics of his approach to research?

**Klever:** Well, one of the key things is looking at facts. Facts of functioning. And less of what people say about their functioning. Another thing that is unique about his perspective is seeing the family unit as the unit of study, not just the individual. To broaden from the individual to the network of important relationships. I think that's a critical shift when one moves from looking at what's going on inside the individual or how 'x' affects the individual to the interplay between the individual and his environment.

**Krehbiel:** Mmhmm.

**Klever:** This is a key difference. Most research on human behavior looks at the individual. Much has been learned from looking at the individual, but important variables have been missed too. While there are studies looking at the how individuals influence relationships and relationships influence individuals, there is still something missing.

**Krehbiel:** Mmhmm.

**Klever:** Another thing is the importance of observation. Just observing. That's part of the therapeutic process, too, of course, observing myself as well as the person I'm coaching being able to see things in a new way.

**Krehbiel:** (That feels) somewhat objective?

**Klever:** Yes. To see things just as they are. Not what we think is going on, but what is right in front of our eyes. I think that's part of it.

**Krehbiel:** This theory has made so much sense to me. I sometimes puzzle why there isn't a broader and wider acceptance of it, in the psychiatric community.

**Klever:** Mmhmm.

**Krehbiel:** Any thoughts about that?

**Klever:** I think part of it is it's easier to look at an individual.

**Krehbiel:** Fewer variables?

**Klever:** There are fewer variables. And so, I think that's one part. It's just easier, to think of an individual. I also think that the anxious mind sees individuals and doesn't see systems. It sees cause and effect. It sees blame and victim, and that's just an automatic, anxious way to look at things. And I think the human is pretty anxious.

I also think it's hard for people to change, hard for all of us to look at things in a new way. One of the things that makes me think about just what I said is a study done by Beavers probably three or four decades ago. He was a family systems researcher, not a Bowen person, out of Texas, who studied families and family functioning. And he had divided families from low to high functioning. One of the characteristics of the high functioning families was that they could think systems.

**Krehbiel:** Hmm.

**Klever:** They saw things in a broader perspective naturally. And again I would relate that to higher functioning families having less chronic anxiety. They're able to see more of what is. And they would have less anxious cause-effect thinking. So that'd be my two cents worth about that.

**Krehbiel:** What do you think he meant by the word, research? Or the idea of research?

**Klever:** That's a good question. My first thought is just knowing something. Seeing something. Seeing what is.

**Krehbiel:** Sounds so simple, doesn't it? [laughter]

**Klever:** Yes, it's a whole other thing to be able to do it, but that'd be my guess.

**Krehbiel:** So the next question is, what was the main contribution that Bowen made to the Western scientific worldview?

**Klever:** Yes. I would think, simply put, it would be seeing the human as a part of the system. That's really the key part.

**Krehbiel:** And- part of nature. I mean, you are not so unique from other forms of life.

**Klever:** Yes. Adding the word 'natural,' seeing the human as part of a natural system or systems. That would be really key.

**Krehbiel:** Mmhmm.

**Klever:** One of the things I forgot to mention related to research was his own research that he did at NIMH. That was a key part, in which he demonstrated his ideas about research, not just by what he said, but by what he did there.

**Krehbiel:** Mmm.

**Klever:** There was a lot of observing, which leads to a fourth variable about research, that is the importance of the researcher monitoring his/her own subjectivity.

**Krehbiel:** Another easy thing to do.

**Klever:** Yeah, right! [laughter] Exactly! But I think that was quite a project. I can't imagine the intensity of living with and researching families living on a unit.

**Krehbiel:** And not get sucked in.

**Klever:** Yes, or get into my automatic ways of feeling and thinking in response to it. To not let my subjectivity contaminate seeing what's in front of my eyes.

**Krehbiel:** Mmhmm.

**Klever:** So I think that was a remarkable study in many ways. An observational study.

**Krehbiel:** Mmhmm.

**Klever:** I diverted from the question you just asked. What was that question again?

**Krehbiel:** What was the contribution to Western scientific

**Klever:** Yes. I think you added a key part. I don't think that's as foreign today, seeing the human as a part of nature, part of the natural world. But when you and I were being introduced as young clinicians that was a pretty foreign idea. The field of ecology has helped that shift. I think E.O. Wilson has helped. Sociobiology and different fields of study have helped to connect humans to nature more. Not in the same way Bowen did, but moving in a similar direction.

**Krehbiel:** Mmhmm. Yeah. I think of the reptilian brain, you know, all I need is an ounce of anxiety, and I turn into a lizard.

**Klever:** [laughter] Yes.

**Krehbiel:** Yeah, I'll read both of the last two questions because I think this is really one of the reasons I was really curious and looking forward to the opportunity of sitting down with you. Have you developed ideas that extend or refine the theory? And have you evidence that would further prove the theory? And this is where, I think, your research, the twenty year study, is remarkable. And I would like you to describe that, first of all, and then, if you can relate it to other questions.

**Klever:** Yes. I don't know if what I'm doing is extending the theory very much. I don't think I'm adding on to a new way to think. I'm just working with what Bowen put together and what's been described and looking at understanding the concepts, and how they work together. That would seem like a pretty bold statement to say that I've added something. But,

**Krehbiel:** [laughter]

**Klever:** I think my research generally supports the hypotheses that are implied in Bowen theory. And I can talk about that and what I did. When I began the study, I did several things. First, the unit of study was the family.

**Krehbiel:** Okay.

**Klever:** Where I started was wanting to research marital functioning.

**Krehbiel:** Mmhmm.

**Klever:** But I couldn't think of a way to research marital functioning without the triangle, which is so important. So I had to include the family unit. And that in itself is arbitrary. When I say family unit, I'm talking about the developing nuclear family, the couple and their kids, and that's an arbitrary boundary itself.

**Krehbiel:** Mmhmm.

**Klever:** Because sometimes grandma or the sister or whoever else is living in the home are a part of the family unit day-to-day. So, it's hard to define across the board, what is the unit. But for my purposes, I defined it as the couple and their kids. First, what I did was to try to measure variation in overall functioning of these units, so that I could compare one unit to another.

So that if one unit had diabetes and another one marital fighting or alcoholism, I could compare one unit to another by the intensity of the symptomology. So that's what I did. It has its shortcomings and strengths. The strength is that I have a composite of the symptomology of the family, which is a way to look at how this unit functions. And so some of the units had more kid problems, some had more adult problems, et cetera. Overall I'm looking at how much is one

unit twitching compared to another. So, then, I was thinking about what are the variables that would affect this variation and symptomology within the family. So I came up with a set of variables to look at from Bowen theory. One would be how much challenge these families have. So I've been looking at the stress that's in the family. Not just the nuclear family but the multigenerational family as well. A second variable that I looked at was the degree of cut-off and openness in the relationships in the multigenerational family. One could say it's the quality of relationships. Another variable was the level of symptomology or dysfunction in the multigenerational family. And then a fourth was the degree of individuality in the couple. Those couples who had more of a sense of direction, less wrapped up in all the relationship process, had a life of their own and goal direction. I was looking at the husband and wife's ability to be directed in their lives and effective in their direction. I did a qualitative analysis as well as a quantitative analysis. I was looking at what might be more mature or more immature directions that they pursued.

And so, I looked at all of those variables, and how they influenced variation in the family. With a systems model I would predict that no one variable would stand out significantly or predict 90% of the variance. I would predict that there would be an interplay between the variables. The quantitative analysis found that these variables had moderate, significant associations. For example, I found that stress in the larger family influenced variation. Those families that had more stress generally had more symptomology.

Taking goal direction. For couples who were more effective in their goal direction, they tended to have less symptomatic families. There's a relationship then, that I found between having goal direction and management of stress. In other words, goal effectiveness was a buffer, or it helped to slow down the impact of stress. So those couples who had some direction and effectiveness in moving toward their direction, they could have a fair degree of stress, and it was less likely to turn into symptoms. Or less severe symptoms. Which I think fits theory.

**Krehbiel:** Absolutely.

**Klever:** I also found that the hypothesis related to cutoff and the quality of relationships was supported as well. That those who had more open relationships with their family and were less cut-off, tended to have less symptomatic developing family. Their marriages tended to be better. They tended to have fewer physical, emotional, and psychiatric symptoms, and their kids tended to have fewer symptoms.

People have asked, "Were there any surprises?" And I would say about the only surprise was that the cut-off variable was a bit confounding sometimes. It appears that in some families cut-off was associated with higher functioning, which in a way actually fits theory too. Cutoff is a way to reduce the anxiety in the short run. This is from a sample of 51 couples in the first year of the study, and by the 15th year there were about 40 family units still in the study. So it'd be interesting to do a larger sample, and to examine that further.

There were various ways that I looked at relationships and the extended family. One that I was most excited by was the nature of the primary triangle, which showed one of the strongest correlations with family functioning. The primary triangle was the husband's and wife's

relationships with each of their parents and their parents' relationship with each other. That threesome. More open and less distant primary triangle relationships were associated with higher functioning in the couple's family of procreation.

Another variable that I looked at was the degree of an outside and inside position in the primary triangle. So if the participant had little contact or openness with the father and more contact and openness with the mother, the father was in an outside position and the mother and participant in an inside position, along with a distant parental marriage. This is in contrast to the participant who had the same amount of contact and openness with both parents. The more pronounced the inside-outside positions in the primary triangle, the lower functioning or increased symptomology in the participants' family of procreation.

Another research question I explored was about the projection process. I asked each of the participants, "who was the child that your parent or parents worried about most?" And when it was one of the participants, there was an association with more symptomology in that developing nuclear family. So I saw that as a common form of projection. Of course, what I didn't get to is the form of projection in which the kid is idolized or idealized. And so there are critiques and limitations in what I'm looking at. But nevertheless I think I'm picking up some pieces that would support theory.

And then, I did a qualitative analysis of the primary triangle, and that supported some of the findings in the quantitative analysis. In other words, the qualitative analysis was looking at what people said. I asked them to describe these relationships, and I had them do that at different points over the twenty years. There were participants that said, "I have a great relationship with my father and my mother. They're like friends to me. I can talk about almost anything with them, we treat each other like adults." What they were saying was quite positive. And so, in contrast to those who had more open, positive relationships were those who said, "We hardly talk, I can't talk to my dad, my mother criticizes me all the time." Those kinds of descriptions were associated with more difficulty in the couple's developing nuclear family.

Another piece that was picked up, that was not in the quantitative study as much, was conflict in the primary triangle relationships. Distance versus openness was the most common descriptor of the relationships. But a third piece was conflict. More conflict with the parents was associated with more difficulty in their own nuclear families.

**Krehbiel:** Phil, have you followed these families, for 19 years?

**Klever:** Yes.

**Krehbiel:** Really?

**Klever:** I do an annual interview, and they fill out a set of questionnaires. It's been 19 years.

**Krehbiel:** Wow. Is there a book, in the offing?

**Klever:** [laughter] There are probably several books, if I wanted to take the time. I have three articles in my computer right now. They are not written but are presentations. I've done the literature review. So it's hard to live one life when I have about two lives I could be living, maybe three! [laughter] So, I'm dealing with my own limitations of time and energy.

But maybe when I'm retired or partly-retired, I'll do more writing. I don't know for sure, what I'm going to do. I've written seven or eight articles that have been published in professional journals that have reported these findings.

**Krehbiel:** Okay. So, while it isn't in a book form, it is in professional journals. How would one find access to these articles?

**Klever:** Well, you could go to the journals, that'd be one way. You could Google my name and a few of them will pop up. And you can then go to the journal.

**Krehbiel:** Mmhmm. What are some of the journals?

**Klever:** One is the *Journal of Marriage and Family Therapy*. They published my goal article. *Contemporary Family Therapy* published two of my articles. The AFTA journal, which is *American Journal of Family Therapy*, and then the journal, *Families, Systems and Health*, is another one. And then some of my early thinking about the literature on marriage research is in the *Family Systems* journal. I think that was back in '96. So that's where they're published at this point.

**Krehbiel:** Are you aware of other research projects that, are underway, that are looking at Bowen theory?

**Klever:** Yes. Laura Brooks, is doing one on adoption, which is a qualitative study following a small group of families over time. She's looking at functional interdependence within the family. She is doing a qualitative analysis of what people say about their relationships with their kids and then looking at outcomes. Of course, there was Katharine Baker's study on cutoff in Russia after the purge. I'm sure there are others, and why am I going blank? Oh! Victoria does ongoing research, with her neurofeedback, and looking at the triangle, and physiology, which I think is an important component.

If I had all the money and all the time, that would have been something I would have liked to have done, to have taken more physiological measures of the couple and to have videotaped them while they were interacting. Something more like what Gottman did. But to add or bring in the triangle, bring in the kids and/or the parents. Watching how all these relationships fit together gets very complicated.

**Krehbiel:** Yeah.

**Klever:** Just even adding a third member, let alone two, it gets very complicated.

**Krehbiel:** Mmhm.



**Klever:** Yeah.

**Krehbiel:** Who are some of the other people that have written about Bowen theory that you've found helpful? Reading or studying?

**Klever:** Besides Dr. Bowen? I really think Mike Kerr's book was excellent. *Family Evaluation*.

**Krehbiel:** *Family Evaluation*?

**Klever:** Yeah. The book he did with Bowen. I really think he's a clear thinker and presents in a really easy to understand way, for me at least. Of course, there's Dan Papero's book. I forget the title of it, *Bowen Family Systems Theory*, I think?

**Krehbiel:** Mmhmm. Have you read any of Ed Friedman's work?

**Klever:** I have read Ed Friedman. And I think his work is pretty good.

**Krehbiel:** Mmhmm. Ron Richardson?

**Klever:** I haven't read Ron's.

**Krehbiel:** Do you know about him?

**Klever:** I know about Ron, through Randy Frost. Randy's talked about how Ron helped bring him there.

**Krehbiel:** Mmm.

**Klever:** Trying to think of anyone else, who I've read on Bowen Theory.

**Krehbiel:** And then the psychiatrist, I saw the book [out].

**Klever:** Oh, Roberta Gilbert.

**Krehbiel:** Yeah.

**Klever:** Yeah. What I like about her, the reason I have her book in my waiting area is, I think it translates it to the beginner really well.

**Krehbiel:** Mmhmm.

**Klever:** Someone who has never heard of it and wants to get an idea of what this is all about.

**Krehbiel:** I [wonder] Ron Richardson's book is entitled... Having a senior moment. Anyway, it's little- *Family Ties That Bind*. Maybe, two hundred pages. Small little paperback. I used that kind of as a text at [Peterson]?

**Klever:** Oh.

**Krehbiel:** It introduces the theory, you know, in a readable fashion.

**Klever:** You know, another very good thinker is Bob Noone. I've learned a lot from listening to him. I've also had discussions with Randy Frost, who's been useful in helping me to think about my research and seeing what's missing.

**Krehbiel:** Mmhmm. You've been exposed to Walter Smith?

**Klever:** I've been exposed to him, yeah.

**Krehbiel:** I think he's another good thinker. So, what's going to happen to Bowen theory, when Mike Kerr, and Phil Klever, and Kathy Kerr, and Dan Papero, are no longer on our planet?

**Klever:** Yes. That's a good question. I don't know. What does happen to ideas when the people die. I mean, look at Darwin. His ideas didn't die with him. Freud's ideas didn't die with him. So, I think it's possible that a truth doesn't die. I mean, it may go dormant, but a truth is a truth. If it falls, it'll be rediscovered again, because that's how it really is. If Bowen theory's wrong, or if it really isn't accurate, then it deserves to die. I think different parts of Bowen Theory are being supported in science.

**Krehbiel:** Yeah.

**Klever:** The interdependence of people physiologically, and how we're affected by relationships. I think there's more and more research on that part. I do think one of the limitations is just the technology of how do you study it all? Once a statistician was talking to me about how I can look at how this person affects that person, or this one affects that one. I asked, "Can I look at how they affect each other at the same time?" She said, "There's no way you can do that." There's no program to do that. There are statistical programs that can look at the overall family, but it doesn't really break it down. Maybe there's a statistician out there that would say, "No, that's not true. You can do that." But I think it's a good question, what's going to happen to the theory.

**Krehbiel:** I remember too, I think I may have heard this from Dr. Bowen, that when there's a major paradigm shift in the field of [knowledge], it can take up to two hundred years for it to be fully accepted as accurate.

**Klever:** Mmhmm. Yeah.

**Krehbiel:** So, maybe, taking the long view is a hopeful way to think about Bowen theory.

**Klever:** Yeah. And it may not be done in the field of psychiatry. It may be done in other fields. What will be the institutions that will carry it on?

**Krehbiel:** Neurologists. In this study of the brain and brain function. Real interesting [growing area]. Interesting research. Well, I feel I have one last question that wasn't on my list. Could you speak to how Bowen Theory has impacted your life, sort of generally?

**Klever:** Sure.

**Krehbiel:** Your personal life, obviously it has your professional life, but

**Klever:** Yeah, I think it's affected my life pretty profoundly, actually. There are a couple ways that I can think that it's affected it. Probably three or four, but the first is, I think it was very helpful in how to integrate thinking with feeling. Because I was growing up and being trained in a time of feelings being so important,

**Krehbiel:** Yeah.

**Klever:** The expression of feeling,

**Krehbiel:** "How's that make you feel?" [laughter]

**Klever:** Right. Ah, helping people to express it more, which of course I put emphasis on in my own life as a really young man. And so, now to really see the value of good thinking. That's something I'm still working on, understanding from a scientific perspective what is the relationship between thinking and emotional process or automatic process. Automatic learning. I just did a presentation on intuition a month ago, to try to understand it further. And I think that's an ongoing life project because I think I am, and the human is, so guided by emotion and automatic process. So that it takes a fair degree of thoughtfulness and awareness too.

**Krehbiel:** I think anxiety is such a big deal [now].

**Klever:** Yes it is. So that's one thing. I think a second thing that has been profound, is defining myself. Because I grew up as a pleaser, focused on how to fit in or how to be liked. So saying what I thought was not a strong part of who I was. Not that it was totally absent, but it was not a strong part of what I took from my family experience and life experience. And so that has probably helped to save me in my life. It's gotten me in trouble sometimes too, but more often than not, it's helped to save me to put a little bit of effort into that.

I am somewhat naturally introverted. Under anxiety I can become too isolated. The theory gives me a way to see intellectually how that's not productive. I don't have to become an extrovert, but the third impact that Bowen theory has had on me is to stress the importance of staying in contact with people that are around me. It is really critical to stay involved with my family and resist the urge in myself at times that says, "Oh, I don't want to do this," or "Why am I making this trip?" Or whatever.

And then I think the last way is Bowen theory has shaped my work life. I mean, it is the structure, the foundation of my work life. And, I think I shifted my career goal. My early career goal was to help people and serve people. Picking up from my mother's extreme emphasis on service to others. And I think that goal morphed into being interested in human behavior, and less into helping others. Of course, the para-

**Krehbiel:** [It's] probably more helpful.

**Klever:** I was just going to say, that's the paradox. That I probably am more helpful by not trying to help.

**Krehbiel:** Exactly.

**Klever:** [laughter] So, those are the things that I would say.

**Krehbiel:** M'kay, yeah. I certainly resonate with much of what you've said. Well, are there other comments that you would like to make, before we stop?

**Klever:** No, other than I wish I could live another hundred years to just watch what happens with the theory. Maybe more than a hundred. Another thousand years. [laughter] But that's not to be had, so.

**Krehbiel:** I really appreciate this opportunity to talk with you, Phil.

**Klever:** Oh, yes, it's great to have an opportunity to say it all.