

Murray Bowen's presentation of his paper, *Toward The Differentiation of a Self In One's Own Family* (1972), at a national meeting of family therapists in March 1967 had an impact that still reverberates throughout the family movement. In the paper Bowen described his effort toward being more of a self in a relationship to his family of origin. The presentation actually had two effects. It not only communicated what he had done in his family, but it also established a position for him in the then rapidly developing family movement. This position was established by two clear implications in his paper; namely, that theory was an essential base for the conduct of psychotherapy and that effective therapy was contingent on the therapist's ability to look at his or her emotional functioning. Many accolades were showered on Bowen for his pioneering work, but in the years since 1967, many misconceptions have arisen about his theory and its application to family of origin. This paper will attempt to eliminate some of these misconceptions.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Numerous clinical experiences and research developments contributed to the eventual theoretical understanding of the family of origin. Focus on the family of origin in therapy became possible only through acquiring this theoretical knowledge. Bowen's experience at the Menninger Clinic, a multigenerational research project conducted at Georgetown, and the refinement of the concept of a triangle all were particularly important to the understanding of extended family.

Bowen trained and worked at the Menninger Clinic between 1946 and 1954. It was the occasions that necessitated his being away from Menninger's for brief periods that provided some of his first insights into the nature of emotional systems. A particularly difficult concept to grasp in systems theory is what it means to be in good emotional contact with a relationship system and, at the same time, not be an emotional participant in that system. This is frequently referred to as staying "outside" the system or as not getting "caught" in the system. Staying outside the system is frequently misinterpreted to mean being emotionally distant. Bowen's first inkling as to what it was like to be outside a system resulted from the realization that he could think more clearly and objectively about the people at Menninger's when he was away. The physical distance and absence of stories about who did what to whom and what was wrong with so-and-so seemed to be what permitted more objectivity. Despite considerable determination, Bowen found it difficult to retain this objectivity after he was back at Menninger's more than a few days. It usually took another trip away for him to even realize objectivity had been lost. Getting caught in the system could start with a derogatory or idealized remark made to him by one staff member about another who was not present. When Bowen later encountered the person about whom he had heard the remark, his thinking, feelings, and behavior toward that person were somewhat altered by the story he had heard. It was such an automatic process, it was difficult to escape. This is, obviously, not a phenomenon peculiar to Bowen or the Menninger system. It occurs everywhere. The awareness of the importance of this kind of phenomenon led Bowen to think of groups of people as comprising an emotional field. The emotional field regulates, to varying degrees, the attitudes and behavior of the group members toward one another. This concept of the group as an emotional field later proved applicable to the relationship system in the extended family.

Bowen left the Menninger Clinic to begin a research project at N.I.M.H. in 1954. The family research conducted there between 1954 and 1959 made a major contribution to the development of the basic concepts in family systems theory. The observations of the nuclear families that lived on the wards, for example, formed the basic elements in the concept of *nuclear family emotional process*. Bowen transferred his family research to Georgetown in 1959 and soon thereafter began a new project of assembling extensive multigenerational histories on a number of families. He believed that the emotional patterns that had been defined in the nuclear families of the N.I.M.H. project were identical to patterns that existed in nuclear families back through the generations. The multigenerational research was undertaken to confirm this hypothesis.

As the multigenerational research progressed, Bowen became intrigued with the new perspective it provided. The present emotional functioning of a family was more understandable when viewed in the context of its multigenerational past. Bowen found himself in the peculiar position of being a family researcher who knew a lot more about other people's families than about his own family. This realization was a stimulus for him to undertake similar research on his own family. It is important to emphasize that the goal of this early research was to learn about families and not to treat them. As others became interested in the family of origin, the importance of this increased understanding was frequently lost in the zeal to do therapy.

The first appreciation that patterns of interaction in a family could be conceptualized as triangles occurred during the N.I.M.H. research. It was not until about 1964, however, that Bowen saw the operation of triangles in the kind of microscopic detail necessary to allow application of the concept to his own family.

The activity of triangles is governed by an emotional process. Until this process can be accurately observed in oneself and others, triangles have little more than geometric meaning. Because of the necessity of being able to observe the emotional reactions that drive triangles, reading and lectures have limited value for learning about them. Understanding triangles, however, is critical to the approach to family of origin. Triangles are the molecules of emotional systems. They permit one to see order in the midst of seemingly chaotic interactions.

The Menninger experience, the multigenerational research at Georgetown, and the development of the concept of triangles were critical factors in the eventual defining of a method to work on oneself in the context of existing relationships with family of origin. In addition to this new learning about human behavior, focus on family of origin also depended on unlearning some old concepts about behavior. Bowen was trained in psychoanalytic theory. Learning to think systems in reference to human behavior meant giving up the explanations psychoanalytic concepts had provided. Psychoanalytic theory had to be viewed as a set of assumptions rather than a body of facts. It also had to be seen as *descriptive*, rather than as a theory that could *account* for human behavior. Everyone attempting to move toward a systems way of thinking faces the same task of unlearning individual concepts that Bowen faced. While mental health professionals usually receive less formal training in psychoanalytic concepts than in the past, these concepts continue to be a major influence on thinking about human behavior. Psychoanalytic theory and other concepts of behavior based on the study of the individual still permeate scientific journals, literature, the arts and the media. The human tendency in emotionally charged atmospheres is to focus primarily on factors perceived to exist within the individual to explain behavior. The tensions of a group are blamed on the behavior of certain individual in the group. Human beings do this in families, social groups, and on the national and international level. Our own part in whatever occurs around us is usually overlooked. The higher the tension level, the greater the tendency to diagnose others. Tunnel vision seems built into us and is only reinforced by professional training.

Bowen puzzled over how little use psychoanalytic training had for helping him deal with the people who were closest and most important to him. It was a dictum of the psychoanalytic orientation that one's relatives and close friends be referred to another therapist for their problems. Psychoanalytic theory does not provide the theoretical base for working on oneself in relationship to one's own family. Bowen could easily apply labels such as hysteric, obsessive, alcoholic, etc. To various family members, but such a skill contributes little to understanding and improving family relationships. As his clinical family research progressed, however, Bowen became intrigued with the possibility of applying the new theoretical understanding of families to his own family. He wondered if it would be possible to be in the midst of his family of origin and remain outside the emotional field.

After many unsuccessful attempts at this over a period of about ten years, a trip home in August 1966 was unusually productive. A clearer understanding of triangles and more freedom from the tendency to diagnose others made the difference. The August 1966 trip was at a time of fairly intense emotional turmoil in his family so much planning preceded the visit. During the week at home, he was able to make good emotional contact with each family member, listen to all the stories, and still not get caught in the emotional system. He had as much emotional neutrality when he left the system as when he entered it. Emotional neutrality is another way of describing being outside the system. It is the ability to see both sides of relationship issues and to be neutral about the fact that

things are the way they are in one's family. Bowen considered the most important success of the trip the validation that theoretical concepts such as the triangle and differentiation of self were applicable to the family of origin. The theory was demonstrated to be an adequate guide through the maze of relationships and potential emotional obstacles in the extended family.

Six months later Bowen presented the theoretical basis for what he had done in his family to a national meeting of family therapists. Working on self in relationship to family of origin quickly became the central focus of training family therapists at Georgetown. Sufficient experience with trainees attempting this in their own families had accumulated by 1971 to suggest that it was an unusually affective form of therapy. During the 1970s, other therapists around the country became interested in family of origin, but they approached it from a different theoretical orientation. Many had understood Bowen to be applying some kind of new technical maneuvers with family of origin and did not grasp the theoretical underpinnings on which his approach was based.

During the 1950s, Bowen, like most others, had recommended personal psychoanalysis to young therapists as the best available method for working on their own problems and enhance their clinical effectiveness. Around 1960, based on the growing understanding of differentiation of self, he started to recommend therapists choose family therapy with their spouse instead of psychoanalysis. The goal was to work on differentiation of self in relationship with an analyst. After 1967, Bowen considered working on differentiation of self in relationship to one's parents as the approach with the most potential. One fascinating thing that emerged was that people who focused on their parental families and never had a therapy session involving their spouse reported significant changes in their nuclear family relationships. The perspective gained through working on self in family of origin carried over into the nuclear family. In fact, change seemed to occur faster in the nuclear family when the nuclear family was not the primary focus of one's efforts.

Bowen now considers establishing the fact that people can work on emotional maturity through efforts at directly resolving attachments to their original family to be one of Georgetown's most important contributions. Therapy sessions four times a week to build a transference were no longer necessary. The therapist became a kind of "coach" to a person's working on the ultimate transference with their parents. Some have challenged the claim of Bowen and his associates that people can achieve the level of objectivity necessary to change in relationship to their own families. People *can* achieve this level of objectivity, and systems theory has provided the necessary lens.

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