COMMON MISUNDERSTANDINGS
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The Process of Bowen Theory

Beginning with the listener, Bowen’s theory at its essence focuses on the distant to solve the proximate. This is a foreign concept to a western world raised to focus on the proximate to solve the proximate. We have been raised to relate everything to our individual experience and responsibility: the truth behind one’s behavior lies within oneself. This is comforting because one’s self is a small enough context to hope that the causes of our difficulties can be determined, understood, and resolved.

“Bowen’s theory focuses on the distant to solve the proximate”

Looking to a context wider than the self to solve problems in the self is a novel and less comfortable idea, especially when the context involves getting to know personally and directly, assorted relatives who may have never been that much a part of our lives and with whom, for many reasons, we may not be particularly comfortable. “How then will getting to know them now help me with my immediate problems?”

In Bowen’s framework, one comes to know and change the self by stepping back and looking at the broader context of the structures and patterns of interacting chains of interpersonal events through the generations. One can’t really change one’s own program until one sees how it fits into the broader scheme of family patterns. Now who really wants to believe that? It means believing that a good deal of what we experience, feel, and do is programmed, written in a family script. To “hear” what Bowen is saying we have to admit to the possibility that there is such a script, that we haven’t read large portions of it yet, that it influences our daily life in a major way, and that to change any of the scenes of it we must go back and rewrite them with the primary characters (i.e. parents, siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles, great aunts, great uncles and others) with whom they were originally written. Worse yet, the change effort is not contained in a therapy room, rather it takes one out, alone, to the front lines of one’s life.

Turning now to Bowen’s part in the proliferation of misunderstanding, it could be said that at least as far back as the well-known “Hillcrest Series,” produced in the 1960’s, that audiences have been perplexed with Murray Bowen. In that series, in which four therapists
separately interviewed the same family to demonstrate their methods of "family therapy." Bowen confused many people. For example, Ackerman came across as the warm grandfather to the children, involving them actively in the process while Bowen barely spoke to them. Bowen spoke mainly to the parents because his model focused on addressing those with the power for change, knowing that if they changed, the children would profit more profoundly than if he addressed the children directly. However, it did not look to many as if he were doing "family therapy."

As I read what he wrote and observed and knew him in a variety of contexts over the years that followed, I would conclude that his long suit was not public communication, written or verbal. He was more of a personal than a public communicator. He was not a very good "marketer" of his theory in ways that made it "user-friendly." He was not a pursuer by style and not very much into selling his theory or "influencing" people to buy it although I think he very much wanted it to be heard and to grow. He could be gruff, impatient, provocative and intimidating in public situations. Yet, at times he could also establish a magical rapport with his audience. I don't think that he was particularly comfortable with crowds because he became so much warmer, humorous and related in the one-to-one situation.

He was a very personal, though not an easy, teacher in my direct experience with him. He was the master of both the pithy one-liner and the "parable," either of which could make issues clear while purposefully not addressing them too directly. His blue eyes twinkled and his mouth turned up with a little crooked smile, and you knew he was with you even as he took you on. Each person to whom I spoke who had been coached by Bowen could recall one-liners driven consistently from the thinking of the theory but tailored to them as individuals as well. For example, to a surveillant, eldest caretaking daughter unexpectedly caught in her old caretaking role: "You got snookered, didn't you?" Or, in response to an actor client trying to get Bowen to tell him how to be with his family: "It's amazing how many things come up, the twists and turns in a family when you're just you with them. The best thing you can do is just be you." Or coaching an intensely serious client whose father confides in her about his affairs to respond with: "There you go bragging again." One favorite Bowenism to clients seeking a more dependent relationship with him: "Go find your own father." In response to a wife's complaints about her husband: "How'd you get him to be that way?" or "You've been a failure at shaping him up, haven't you?" or "How'd you find him with a whole world of men out there?"

There was often the initial frustration of not getting the answer one wanted from the expert. But underlying Bowen's responses was the most respectful of positions: you are the person best able to come up with your own answers. The real people in your life are the ones with whom you will best find the answers. It starts with responsible self-focus. Getting less intense and serious about it all helps, and finally was the message, I will guide but not provide. Ultimately, one knew he cared: he was interested and incredibly accessible. No matter how busy he got, he could always find a time to "tuck you in." I don't think I ever remember him answering a question directly, but in the close personal exchange possible in the coaching situation, I always knew in the end more than I would have known with a direct answer. The experience of a coaching session with Bowen was simultaneously like an audience with the Pope and just sitting around with a "good ole boy" from the South. He used both positions to make one think in new ways. He'd pause, look up, be pensive and move his hands in as many ways as there were sides to the story. I often only partially understood him at the time; most of it I only put together as I subsequently worked with my family.

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This kind of learning is not possible in a large public arena. Unfortunately, most of the world knew him only through what he wrote, which wasn't always clear, or through large conferences, where his mission
and that of the audience were often at odds with each other. By the latter I mean that professionals often come to conferences hoping to take something very concrete away that they can use in the office tomorrow, just as I and others wanted to take something concrete away from the coaching situation. Bowen’s hope, I believe, was only to be able to stimulate the interest and curiosity necessary to have participants want to learn more after the conference. Unfortunately, participants were often more alienated or mystified than intrigued. For example, he once did a live interview at a conference on schizophrenia where he asked each family member a few questions, found the calmest member and talked mostly to that member for the rest of the interview. In the end, the whole family was calmer; the schizophrenic member was talking straighter, but the audience was confused and angry. Once again, this was supposed to be a demonstration of “family therapy,” and it didn’t look that way. It was a brilliant demonstration of the method of finding and relating to the strength in a family as a way of settling down the symptom: a more distant than proximate focus, not easily understood and not readily explained by him in that kind of a format. The result: more misunderstanding.

Let me turn myself now to attempting to clarify the specific areas of misunderstanding that I mentioned earlier. There are four sections, each of them responding to a statement which embodies a common misconception.

The Misunderstandings

"Bowen theory and psychoanalysis are really talking about the same thing; they just use different words." Many family therapies have psychoanalysis at their core; but Bowen’s is not one of these. Nevertheless, it is not uncommon to see Bowen theory listed under psychoanalytically based family theories. This section will compare structural aspects of these two theories, and hopefully, provide some clarification of their relationship to each other. Some aspects of this comparison relate to family system theories in general.

The differences between psychoanalytic theory and Bowen theory are not limited to words. Bowen theory and psychoanalysis address a different order of phenomenon theoretically and therapeutically. For example, consider the experience of watching an elaborate production number at the Ice Capades. If one watches the show from a box seat, one can see the pain and pleasure on the face of an individual skater but misses the pattern one would see from the top of the bleachers. Freud sat in a box seat, and Bowen went to the bleachers. Both were interested in changing the quality of life for the individual, and both saw the individual existing in relationship to others. However, Freud saw people first as individuals and secondarily as members of a relationship system, and so he addressed the individual experience. Bowen saw the individual first as a member of a relationship system, the workings of which are ever becoming the internal experience. The address for personal change then was seen to be at the order of the relationship system.

Some confusion may derive from the fact that the two theories do have meta-structural similarities. By this I mean that they are both comprehensive theories that attempt to account for all aspects of human experience. They are theories with both a deep and a surface structure. Deep structures are inferred and viewed as the forces that motivate the behaviors that are seen and experienced. On broad stroke, in psychoanalysis, the unconscious is the deep, inferred structure motivating conscious experience, which is the surface structure. With Bowen theory, the interaction of anxiety and level of differentiation constitute the deep, inferred structure, which influences the observed patterns of system behavior as described by the interlocking concepts of the theory (triangles, nuclear family emotional system, projection, etc.).

In this similarity of meta-structure, however, can also be seen their essential difference. In psychoanalytic theory, the focus is on the intrapsychic or internal experience of the individual person, the pleasures and pains of one’s personal experience. In Bowen theory, the focus is on knowing the system, the structure of how it works, and moving self into the structure in order to rework one’s place in it, thereby changing one’s internal experience. It does not focus on the internal experience to change the internal experience.
Rather, the effort goes to opening up and coming to know the system through personal relationships with as many relatives as one can find, mapping out the areas of intensity, coming to see the triangles and one's place in them and detriangling the self. The effort for the self is focused on getting through these moves; seeing the impact of these moves on the system; the impact of the system's response on the self, and modifying one's reactivity accordingly. Self-understanding and change is derived from this purposeful action of the self in the system.

This is in contrast to psychoanalysis, with its focus on exploring and reworking one's emotional structures as they evolve in a transferential relationship with the therapist. In Bowen's theory, the knowledge or epistemology of a psychological theory. These two theories then are different at the deepest levels of epistemology.

Psychoanalysis sees psychological structure as fixed in the individual. In Bowen's view, it is fixed only to the degree that it is rigidly embedded in the triangular emotionality of the extended family system. One model goes then to rework it in the individual because it is seen to sit there; the other goes to change the fixed nature of the triangles because it is seen to rest there. The two theories address different orders of observation: psychoanalysis uses a close-up lens and Bowen a wide-angle lens. Both are accurate windows, but they are different windows.

**Thinking and Feeling**

A common misunderstanding is, "Bowen theory favors thinking over feeling." There is probably no aspect of Bowen theory that has generated more misunderstanding or negative reaction than his use of the words **thinking** and **feeling**. Like many comprehensive theories of human behavior, Bowen theory addresses the relationship between thinking and feeling, but it does not favor one over the other. The problem is in language. The confusion comes in largely because Bowen doesn't primarily use the word **feeling** as we commonly understand it. Rather, for the most part, he is referring to the automatic, visceral response of the organism emerging from what he calls the **emotional system**. The emotional system is also different from the humanly valuable capacity to be emotional, related, connected, empathic, intuitive. These relational capacities are more commonly associated with women and consequently devalued in our culture. The "emotional system" as it is conceptualized in Bowen theory has no relationship to gender.

Bowen theory sees both men and women as "in" the common emotionality between and around them. In our culture, men tend more to "isolate" from this common emotionality, and women reciprocally absorb more of it and "express" it, which is how they get labeled as more "feeling oriented," which of course means less differentiated. It is important to note here that the isolating of the male, for example, is a "feeling driven," distancing reflex to protect the self, even though the intellect can be hired to sound "objective" and "rational." This is not the objective, thoughtful use of the intellectual system that Bowen is talking about. Nowhere is this more graphically illustrated than in this story from the early years. Bowen and his research team were watching an interview of a family with a presenting problem of serious ulcers in the husband. In the session, the husband was talking very rationally about the problems in the family, and the wife was intermittently crying. A trainee commented on how much more differentiated the man was than his wife because he had less feeling and was able to talk more "objectively." Bowen turned quickly toward the trainee and said impatiently: "What do you mean he has less feeling? He's bleeding from his gut!" The Bowen method strives to help both men and women work towards thoughtful, self-defined positions that allow for a decrease in the anxious emotionality (i.e., the fusion) in which they are both absorbed to varying degrees and which eclipses each self and the relationship.

"Feeling-driven" people are only minimally capable of feeling in the sense of the "freedom to feel." Instead, they are more prisoners of their subjective emotional experience, which at worst produces numbness and at best eclipses meaningful affective and intellectual experience.
It is confusing, however, because feeling is used across the differentiation continuum in that poorly differentiated people are "prisoners of their feelings," and well-differentiated people have the "freedom to feel." In order to understand what he means as he talks about thinking and feeling, however, one would best "hear" his use of the word feeling as a reflective, reactive, automatic, anxious state of being, and thinking as the reflective capacity to over-ride the automatic, comfort-seeking response when this is desirable for the long-term well being of the organism.

In Bowen's theory, the emotional system is that part of a person that he or she shares with the lower forms of life and operates on the same principles of reflex and instinct. This refers to the automatic, visceral life forces of the organism. It is our "automatic pilot." It goes on naturally, largely out of our awareness and carries us through much of life, but it does lack options. As long as the sky is clear, automatic pilot is fine; but should there be a storm, somebody needs to be able to take over the plane and land it safely. Anxiety is an ever-present part of life; it is the storm. The person in the cockpit of life has to be able to see the storm for what it is, stay focused on navigating through it, not bail out, let the plane crash and then blame the weather. This is what Bowen means by defining an "I" position, taking responsibility for self, trying to stay steady on a thoughtful course in spite of how anxious it makes one feel and how motivated one might be to take a detour that is more immediately comfortable. Such options, purposeful action, became possible with the evolutionary emergence of the cerebral cortex, the seat of reason and reflection.

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In Bowen's theory, the intellectual system derives from the cerebral cortex. It is seen to be that part of a person that distinguishes him or her from the lower forms of life. It moves him or her beyond the limitations of instinct and reflex. However, deriving as it does from the cerebral cortex, it emerged much later in the evolutionary process. As such, it has nowhere near the power of the emotional system and often exists as merely an appendage of it. At the individual level, for example, the person does what "feels right," or what makes him or her less anxious, and the intellect is hired to justify it. The reflective use of the intellect to steer a life course is very different from the reflective process of intellectualizing, which occurs to justify comfort-seeking moves or the reflexive emoting that occurs as a consequence of the comfort-seeking moves. The emotionalizing hysterics or the intellectualizing obsessive are both examples of "feeling-driven" responders.

At the systemic level, the fused parts of the system, born of the individual family member's merged emotional systems, similarly often far outweigh individual strivings for distinctiveness or autonomy derived from the member's intellectual systems. At a behavioral level, forces for the common emotionality (i.e. the fusion) may be expressed as togetherness, agreement, sameness, or, at the other extreme, as conflict, splitting or emotional isolation. At either extreme, these forces can be so pervasive that they overpower any individual strivings for distinctiveness or autonomy. Extreme fusion can be behaviorally manifested in grown children either never leaving home or being totally cut-off and never coming home. "Enmeshed" families who finish each other's sentences or "disengaged" families who hardly speak to each other are equally "fused" in the terms of Bowen's theory. The underlying structure is the same, but it is managed very differently at the behavioral level. The more extreme the fusion, the more drastic will be the behaviors necessary to manage it.

The ultimate goal for the self in this model is to achieve the related but separate balance, wherein meaningful connection to the family system and the unique individuality of the self are simultaneously possible. This involves getting to "know" the system, by getting to know the people in it, as a separate, adult self. Otherwise one knows and is known triangularly as a function of one's parents' relationships to these people. One remains then, an appendage of one's parents. Through family of origin work, one gets to know people beyond the "cocktail party" level, establishes meaningful, personal relationships, and gets information and answers that are beyond what one is "supposed to know" about the family. Through this, one will come to see the triangles, the issues around which they are structured and one's place within them. One can then
detriangled the self and simultaneously achieve a more meaningful connection to the family and more independence, as well as more freedom from aspects of the emotional scripting that have hampered one's life. This is what it means to differentiate a self in one's family of origin.

In this theory, the term differentiation is defined in part as it is in biology. It refers to the gradual emergence of distinctive parts from an amorphous mass. Further, it implies the separate but related functioning of the parts in relationship to the whole. In Bowen theory, it specifically refers to the related but separate functioning of the emotional and intellectual systems. This related but separate functioning is deduced from the observed capacity to distinguish objective thought from subjective feeling.

Differentiation refers then to the degree to which the intellectual system has emerged from the amorphousness of the emotional system and achieved some measure of autonomy. If the intellectual system, the newcomer, can gain some ascendency, then the two systems can work together to allow the individual the capacity for experiencing the fullest range of human experience. Reflect plus reflex offers more options in the complexities of human life than does reflex alone. Reflex is the robot; it is pure programming. Reflect permits the option of genuine free choice. Bowen focuses on the intellectual system not because thinking is more important than feeling, but because as long as the uniquely human intellectual system is underdeveloped, the range of diverse experience, which is a uniquely human potential, is eclipsed.

**Too Cold? Too Cerebral?**

"Bowen therapy is cold, unempathic and too cerebral." This misunderstanding, again, derives in part from language problems in Bowen's writing such as described in the previous section. Also, it is hard to relay via the written word how a focus on thinking versus feelings in the therapy results in greater "freedom to feel." Unfortunately, it is hard to "know" this theory or its therapy without having implemented it in one's own family. Cold, unempathic and cerebral would describe a therapist who is emotionally fused to the family, not one who has achieved the related but separate balance necessary to properly implement the clinical method.

Students who have read a few Bowen articles are always so surprised to see him work with families on videotape. They don't expect the warmth and empathy that Bowen demonstrated. He considered warmth, empathy, compassion, and a profound sense of respect and caring for people as necessary, but not sufficient, characteristics of a good clinician. "I hear you," probably one of Bowen's most well-known lines, epitomizes the related but nonaligned position that he considered so essential to relating to a system but not becoming a part of it. His entire clinical method rests on the premise that any two people will resolve the difficulties between them best when defined in the presence of a third person who is actively related to both and aligned with neither. By interrupting the automatic triangular process, the clinician (the third) keeps the issues derived from their fused emotionality contained between them. Each listens while the other responds to the therapist's questions about the issue, and each is then invited to share what they were thinking while listening to the other. Through this process, their intellectual systems gain some ascendency from their fused emotionality. The uniqueness of each self emerges, and they become better defined to each other. This allows for the intimate sharing of two separate selves with all the "freedom to feel" that this involves.

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Of course, none of that can be accomplished unless the clinician has achieved a level of self-definition that allows him or her to stay out of the amorphousness of the client family system. How does one accomplish this? By defining a self relative to the amorphousness of one's own family system. This is why family of origin work is central in the training of the Bowen clinician.

Bowen did not think it possible for a therapist to know a client system and not get caught in it without having achieved a measure of ability to do this in one's own family. One can't stay out of what one can't see. When a therapist has seen, known, and reworked triangles involving the self in his or her own family, he or she can more easily see and stay out of them with clinical families. One just "knows" or "sees" in a way that only doing it in one's own family of origin makes clear. This has been an unpopular position, at least in part, because it imposes such a burden on the clinician. It's been called everything from unnecessary to unethical.

Good Bowen therapy is "perfect distance," not too in and not too out. If the related but separate balance is maintained, the clinician can purposefully navigate,
instead of being reactively bounced around, the emotional force field of the family. This balance allows for warmth, humor and availability as well as calmness and objectivity. Reactively remote, cold, or cerebral clinicians have probably not done their "home" work. Given the method’s focus on strengthening the intellectual system, a poorly defined clinician, caught in the anxious fusion of the family, could transform this thoughtful effort into an intellectualizing exercise devoid of human connection, unlikely to be effective, but highly likely to perpetuate this particular misunderstanding.

Bowen had a variety of ways for the clinician to check on the related but separate balance. One of them was the continual ability to stay less serious about the problem than the family, using, for example, humor and reversal to make points more palatable, reduce intensity and increase hearing. If one is overly involved, it's hard to think of reversals, and when one does, they came out sounding sarcastic rather than humorous. Other Bowen barometers for the therapist included: you’re caught if; you’re worrying more about the family than they are; you lose focus; you feel a need to give the expert advice or answer.

The Theory Comprehensively Describes All Families

A fourth misunderstanding is, “Bowen theory is only useful for motivated, functional, verbal families.” This is one of the most pervasive of all the misunderstandings surrounding Bowen’s theory. The model is indeed applicable across the range of motivation, human functioning and verbal sophistication. It is important to remember that this theory, along with most other family theories, evolved out of work with the most dysfunctional (i.e. schizophrenic) families, and the methods derived from this work were first applied to these families. One of Bowen’s earliest and most important contributions was to conceptualize all human functioning on the same continuum, from the least to the most differentiated, or mature. He saw the differences between people as quantitative not qualitative. Bowen’s therapeutic method provides the possibility for change for families at all places along this emotional continuum. The model, like any other useful model, takes the clients where it finds them and moves them as far as their capabilities and motivation will allow. The model is the model; it goes from A to Z. Clients will go to D, Q, X, or all the way to Z largely as a function of the emotional raw material (i.e. level of differentiation), and socioeconomic, familial resources they bring with them to the clinical situation as well as the skill of the clinician in implementing the method. For example, with child-focused families, same will stop when symptoms lift in the child. Othets will go on and look at their marital difficulties, make progress there and then stop. Others will move from making progress in their marriages to work on defining a self in the extended family.

What varies most with families of limited motivation or resource is how quickly and/or how far they can move from a focus on the proximate problems to the more distant solutions. The less able a family is to step back from the immediate problem to see the larger context involved in the immediate problem, the more the therapist starts with the proximate and moves toward the distant at a pace the family can manage. What is important here is that the way the therapist is "thinking" about the problem does not vary with the sophistication of the family.

Bowen’s concepts comprehensively describe the functioning of poorly functioning, unmotivated, nonverbal families. Such families, in Bowen’s terms, are at the lower end of the scale of differentiation, with high fusion of their emotional systems, high chronic anxiety, reactivity and rigidity. The triangular processes are pervasive, intense and rigidly predictable. The nuclear family emotional system finds fused spouses reactively engaged in peace at any price, or explosive conflict, with entrenched emotional distance between them. Fusion of the spouses to each other eclipses the self of each, resulting in emotional or physical symptoms in one or both. Projection to children results in physical or emotional symptoms of all varieties. Physical and/or emotional cut-offs prevail. Destructive multigenerational patterns such as abuse and alcoholism are frequent. This way of thinking then informs the method of interaction.

The well-trained Bowen clinician can intervene with such families with a maximum degree of effectiveness. As the fusion, anxiety and reactivity of families goes up, the calm self-definition of the therapist becomes ever
more important to the change process. As triangles are more pervasive and intense, being able to see and stay out of them, while staying actively related to all family members is more difficult but not less necessary. Unmotivated, dependent, passive families call out for the "fix-it," expert stance. Nowhere is it more important for the clinician to contain overfunctioning, caretaking and pursuit than with such families.

Most of what is important about the Bowen method has to do with how the therapist is, not what the therapist or the family says or does. If one is better defined and calmer, any family will "know" it and get calmer, which then allows them to step back and reflect on what is happening and potentially interrupt the automatic, reflexive cycles that are immobilizing them. The application of the Bowen method with such families has been underreported in the literature, which is a major factor in the proliferation of this particular misunderstanding.

The Bowen theory and its therapeutic method are, in fact, very broadly applicable, not just with the range of families but with systems of all kinds. It is routinely applied to a variety of organizations—public corporations, family-held businesses, hospitals, mental health care delivery systems, religious organizations and others. One of the most useful aspects of the theory is that one can take it wherever one goes, and it will help in better understanding the interacting forces in the environment, which then allows one to manage self more successfully.

Parting note

Murray Bowen gave the world a conceptually elegant, diversely useful theory of human functioning. I believe the theory reflects reality well and is capable of explaining and predicting human behavior with an impressive degree of accuracy. It is, however, a complex and demanding theory, operating from a unique set of assumptions about human functioning. As such, it lends itself to misunderstanding. Much has been said about what the theory doesn't address, and there is much more than could be said. Murray Bowen gave us much more than we usually get from the lifetime of one person. Now, each of us who is left with an interest in important specific issues that he didn't address can, and hopefully will, take his theory forward to ever increasing usefulness. Along the way, we also need to correct the misunderstandings and distortions of Bowen's theory so that we can begin our expansion efforts from a base of accuracy. It is my sincere hope that this article has been a contribution towards this end.

Goodbye, Murray, and thank you.