

Bowen Family Systems Theory
and Psychotherapy

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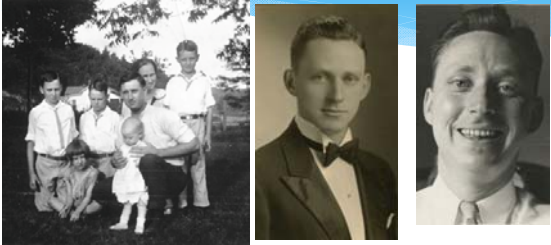
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History of Murray Bowen

- * Born in 1913, the eldest of five children of Mr. and Mrs. Jess Sewell Bowen, Sr.
- * Grew up on the working family farm in Waverly, Tennessee, in the midst of the natural seasons of animals and crops
- * Extended family was present, and the family business was funeral service and a general store
- * Undergraduate and Medical degrees from The University of Tennessee


History of Murray Bowen



History of Murray Bowen

- * Internships in New York, accepted to the Mayo Clinic for surgery residency training
- * Served in World War II as a physician at Fort Bragg, Fayetteville, NC and with his unit in France where he triaged wounded soldiers
- * Upon discharge from the Army, he declined the residency at the Mayo Clinic. He instead chose Psychiatry and entered into the first class of resident physicians at the Menninger Clinic in Topeka, KS

History of Murray Bowen



The Process of Developing Family Systems Theory

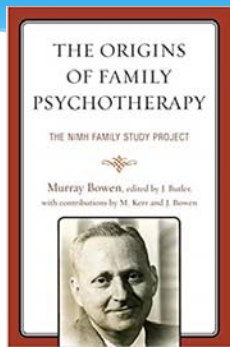


The Process of Developing Family Systems Theory

Bowen remained on staff at The Menninger Clinic past completion of his residency training

- * His clinical work with individuals and their families, and his study of natural sciences, prompted his move in 1954 from Menninger to the National Institute of Mental Health
- * The Family Study Project - Dr. Bowen hospitalized schizophrenic patients and their families in an inpatient formal study environment at the National Institute of Mental Health in Bethesda, Maryland (1954-1959) Detailed observations of the emotional process in each family, and how the families interacted with and responded to the staff were "data" that supported Bowen's developing family systems theory and family therapy

The Process of Developing Family Systems Theory



The Process of Developing Family Systems Theory

- * In 1959, Bowen joined the Georgetown University Department of Psychiatry Faculty, in Washington, D.C. He formalized the development of his theory, now known as Bowen Family Systems Theory.
- * In 1975, Bowen founded the Georgetown University Family Center. The center eventually evolved independently to, and continues as, Bowen Center for Study of the Family in Washington, DC

The Process of Developing Family Systems Theory

- * Murray Bowen's extensive writings about The Family Study Project and the process and evolution of developing Bowen Family Systems Theory –including books, book chapters, drafts of presentations, videos, etc.– are all a part of the Murray Bowen Archives housed at the National Library of Medicine, History of Medicine Division.
- * *The collected body of his works is greater than that of Sigmund Freud*
- * <https://www.murraybowenarchives.org>.

The Eight Concepts of Bowen Family Systems Theory

- * Bowen's study of natural sciences and the emotional process between and among individuals in a family supported his view of the family as an emotional unit. Anxiety, or emotional reactivity, is passed among individuals in predictable patterns.
- * Two basic life forces are present:
 1. Togetherness –holds us together as a human amalgam
 2. Individuality –drives a person to be an individual in own right

In times of calm, these operate in equilibrium
 In times of higher anxiety, there is less emotional separateness and more togetherness, or even fusion of selves

The Eight Concepts of Bowen Family Systems Theory

- Differentiation of self –ability to be a separate self in the context of the family unit
 - * Scale of differentiation –a theoretical scale that separates people using a continuum of zero to one hundred according to their ability to adapt over a lifetime
- Triangles –the most stable small unit of an emotional system
 - * Most primary triangle is that of the individual with their two parents

The Eight Concepts of Bowen Family Systems Theory

- Nuclear Family Emotional System
A two person system is unstable and with increased anxiety, they pull in a third person. Automatic postures and patterns occur; conflict, distance, overfunctioning/underfunctioning reciprocity, triangling
- Family Projection Process
Relationship fusions in the family affect some offspring more than others. Anxiety in the family is offloaded onto children in differing amounts.

The Eight Concepts of Bowen Family Systems Theory

- Multigenerational Transmission Process
Anxiety moves in patterns between members of a nuclear family, and then travels across generations manifesting in family stressors, themes, and different levels of functioning in different branches of a family
- Emotional Cutoff
This is the most extreme form of distance in relationships. It is produced by extreme emotional intensities that one or both parties ultimately find intolerable.
- Sibling Position
Described by both age, rank, and gender configuration within the family

The Eight Concepts of Bowen Family Systems Theory

8. Societal Emotional Process

Refers to the periods of chaos, disorderliness, and irresponsibility that occur in society at large, at times of greater anxiety

Bowen Family Systems Theory in Clinical Practice

“I believe a knowledge about the family system may provide the pathway for getting beyond static concepts and into the functional concepts of systems. I believe that family can provide answers to the medical model dilemma of psychiatry, that family concepts may eventually become the basis for a new and different theory about emotional illness, and that this in turn will make its contribution to medical science and practice.”

(M. Bowen, pg. 151)

Bowen Family Systems Theory in Clinical Practice

- * The family is a system –a change in one part of the system is followed by compensatory change in other parts of the system
- * Family psychotherapy is based upon the therapist “thinking systems” and observing the emotional patterns in the family, and how they are contributing to symptom development in the individual.
- * The therapist is more of a consultant, or coach, who manages self to stay outside the family unit, and ask questions that facilitates the individual, or individuals present, to become more observing themselves of the patterns

Bowen Family Systems Theory in Clinical Practice

- * The focus then is more on the emotional process occurring between and among the individuals, rather than on a “diagnosis” of one person.
- * Over time, as the individual, or individuals, gain more insight, more confidence in their understanding, and greater emotional neutrality and less emotional reactivity, he/she can take action to adjust their behavior in the patterns. If they can hold the course, others in the system will respond, and the system achieves a healthier equilibrium.

Bowen Family Systems Theory in Clinical Practice

- * “The overall goal was to help family members become system “experts” who could know the family system so well that the family could readjust itself without the help of an outside expert, if and when the family system was again stressed.”

(M. Bowen, pg. 157)

Bowen Family Systems Theory in Clinical Practice

- * In addition, when individuals, and families, can learn and operationalize systems concepts and thinking in their own lives, they develop an increased observational awareness of these patterns in other living systems interlocked with them (e.g. workplace, congregation, school, social groups), and in society on the whole.
- * For this reason, many professionals beyond mental health clinicians (e.g. pastors, organization consultants, corporate directors) gravitate to learning Family Systems Theory in order to enhance their leadership abilities. They, too, can be the coach, or consultant, alongside a living emotional system.

Bowen Family Systems Theory in Clinical Practice

- * If you know systems thinking, you can use systems thinking, for yourself, for your family, and in other important relationships.
- * Therefore, our efforts as psychiatrists to know systems concepts and emotional patterns in our own families increases our ability for observational awareness of the emotional process in the families and individuals who present for consultation in our clinical practices.

References



Bowen Center for the Study of the Family

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