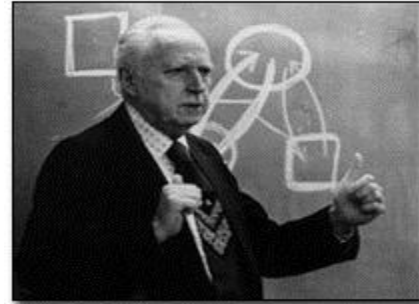


FUNDAMENTALS OF FAMILY THEORY

1. DR. MURRAY BOWEN

1.1. Biography



Murray Bowen, M.D., (January 31, 1913 - October 9, 1990) was an American psychiatrist and a professor in psychiatry at the Georgetown University. Bowen was among the pioneers of family therapy and founders of systemic therapy. Beginning in the 1950s, he developed a systems theory of the family. Murray Bowen was born in 1913 as the oldest of five and grew up in the small town of Waverly, Tennessee, where his father was the mayor for some time. Bowen got his B.S. in 1934 at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville. He received his M.D. in 1937 at the Medical School of the University of Tennessee Medical School in Memphis. After that, he had internships at the Bellevue Hospital in New York City in 1938 and at the Grasslands Hospital, Valhalla, New York, from 1939 to 1941. From 1941 to 1946, he had his military training followed by five years of active duty with Army in the United States and Europe. During the war, while working with soldiers, his interest changed from surgery to psychiatry. After his military service he had been accepted for fellowship in surgery at the Mayo Clinic. But in 1946, he started at the Menninger Foundation in Topeka, Kansas, as fellow in psychiatry and personal psychoanalysis. This psychiatric training and experience lasted until 1954.

From 1954 to 1959, Bowen worked in the National Institute of Mental Health, Bethesda, Maryland, where he continued to develop the theory that would be named after him: Bowen Theory. At that time, family therapy was still only a by-product of theory. Bowen did his initial research on parents who lived with one adult schizophrenic child, which he thought could provide a paradigm for all

children. After defining the field of family therapy he started integrating concepts with the new theory. He claimed that none of this had previously been described in the psychological literature. What began the first year became known nationally in about two years. From 1959 to 1990 he worked at the Georgetown University Medical Center in Washington, DC as clinical professor at the department of Psychiatry, and later as director of Family Programs and founder of a Family Center. He had a half-time research and teaching appointment. His research focused on human interactions rather than symptomatic cubicles. Bowen even focused on the prodromal states that precede medical diagnoses. For Bowen each concept was extended, and woven into physical, emotional, and social illness. Bowen criticized psychiatry's penchant to diagnose and treat mental illness, as limited and a dead end. This new work went beyond other family systems theories, and contrasted sharply with Freudian theory.

Besides this research and teaching, Bowen had other faculty appointments and consultancies. He was visiting professor in a variety of medical schools, for example at the University of Maryland from 1956 to 1963 and at the Medical College of Virginia of Richmond from 1964 to 1978. He was Life Fellow at the American Psychiatric Association and at the American Orthopsychiatric Association, and life member at the Group for the Advancement of Psychiatry. He was at the American Board of Psychiatry and Neurology in 1961 and first president at the American Family Therapy Association.

Murray Bowen received the following awards and recognitions:

- 1978-1982, Originator and First President, American Family Therapy Association.
- 1985 June, Alumnus of the Year, Menninger Foundation.
- 1985 December, Faculty, Evolution of Psychotherapy Conference, Erickson Foundation, Phoenix,
- 1986 June, Graduation Speaker, Menninger School of Psychiatry,
- 1986, Governor's Certificate, Tennessee Homecoming '86, Knoxville.
- 1986 October, Distinguished Alumnus Award, University of Tennessee-Knoxville.

Bowen was the first president of the American Family Therapy Association from 1978 to 1982. Unfortunately, he died of lung cancer in 1990.

1.2. Life's Work

Some people believe that growing up in the small town of Waverly, Tennessee, is what gave Murray Bowen the foundation for his concept that the primary source of human emotional experience is the extended family unit. Bowen studied psychoanalysis for several years at the Menninger Foundation in Topeka, Kansas. While at the Menninger clinic he studied patients with schizophrenia, and discovered a unique relationship between them and their mothers. This led to his concept of differentiation of self, which is autonomy from others and separation of thoughts from feelings. From there he moved on to the National Institute of Mental Health in 1954 where he began work on expanding the mother child relationship to include fathers and thus sparking the idea of triangulation. He believed that the triangle was the smallest unit in a relationship. The idea of a triangle is that one diverts a conflict between two people by involving a third. In 1959, he moved to Georgetown University Medical Center and began more extensive work on family systems during therapy. He believed that family members adopt certain types of behavior based on their place in the family.

He obtained a great deal of information while at Georgetown, including the need to remain an objective party. He first attempted to have sessions with families and staff on the assumption that togetherness and open communication would be therapeutic. His staff began to become pulled in different directions and the same effect carried through when he attempted multifamily meetings alone. He decided that families needed to be met with one at a time. During this time he coined the term emotional cutoff. This refers to the natural mechanisms people use to counter high anxiety or high emotional fusion, from unresolved issues with family. Cutoff can look like physical or emotional withdrawal, avoidance of sensitive topics, physically moving away from family members, and rarely going home.

His final large contribution was that of the idea of differentiation from other people (as opposed to fusion with others). The degree of differentiation determines the capacity of a person to manage his or her emotions, thinking, individuality and connections to others. Bowen thought of differentiation as an emotional capacity which could be conceived on a scale of 0 - 100, 100 being an imaginary ideal. Differentiation has also been defined as the measure of one's emotional maturity. Increasing one's differentiation is thought to be a lifetime project in which one grows in a capacity to better manage one's own connection as well as independence from one's family of origin and other close relationships. A higher level of differentiation would make one less apt to get drawn into other's emotional issues (being "triangled") and be less emotionally reactive to close relationships.

Bowen felt that severe problems within the family unit stem from a multigenerational transmission process whereby levels of differentiation among family members can become progressively lower from one generation to the next. He developed an extended family systems therapy with the goal to increase individual family members' levels of differentiation.

1.3. Interlocking Concepts

Bowen summarized his theory using eight interlocking concepts. Below is a review and an elaboration on a few of them;

- **Differentiation of Self (the most important concept)**
- **Nuclear Family Emotional System**
- **Triangles**
- **Family Projection Process**
- **Multigenerational Transmission Process**
- **Emotional Cutoff**
- **Sibling Position**
- **Societal Emotional Process**

Differentiation of Self

Differentiation of self is one's ability to separate one's own intellectual and emotional functioning from that of the family. Bowen spoke of people functioning on a single continuum or scale. Individuals with low differentiation are more likely to become fused with predominant family emotions. A related concept is that of an undifferentiated ego mass, which is a family unit whose members possess low differentiation and therefore are emotionally fused. Those with low differentiation depend on others' approval and acceptance. They either conform themselves to others in order to please them, or they attempt to force others to conform to themselves. They are thus more vulnerable to stress, defined as stressor(s) and psycho-physiological stress reactivity, and theirs is a greater than average challenge to adjust/adapt to life changes and contrary beliefs.

To have a well-differentiated self is an ideal that no one realizes perfectly because, like with Abraham Maslow's concept of self-actualization, it's a *quale*, a concept or idea without literal physical or material example. Even if total self-differentiation is achieved in a given moment or context, it is, like feeling states or thoughts, temporary and ephemeral. Those with generally higher levels of self-differentiation recognize that they need others, but they depend less on others' acceptance and

approval. They do not merely adopt the attitude of those around them but acquire and maintain their principles thoughtfully. These principles, morals, and ethics help them to decide important family and social issues, and to consciously or unconsciously resist lapsing into emotional reactivity and feelings-based usually impulsive thoughts and actions. Thus, despite conflict, criticism, and even rejection, those with greater capacity to self-differentiate can stay calm and rationally clear-headed enough to distinguish thinking rooted in a careful assessment of the facts from thinking clouded by emotion. What they decide and say matches what they do. When they act in the best interests of the group, they choose thoughtfully, not because they are caving in to relationship pressures. They're more objective observers, more capable of calmness under relationship and task pressures. Confident in their own thinking, they can either support another's viewpoints without becoming wishy-washy; or, they can reject another's opinions without becoming hostile with them, or passively disconnected from them. This is especially relevant to the family of origin, and as we grow and develop maturity, also with extended family members, friends, or associates.

Triangles

In family systems theory, whenever two people have problems with each other, one or both may triangle in a third member. Bowen emphasized the idea that people respond to anxiety between each other by shifting the focus to a third person, triangulation. In a triangle, two are on the inside and one is on the outside. For example, rather than talk with her husband about and deal with her frustration with him, a new mother might preoccupy herself with her new child. In this case, the wife diminishes her anxiety by ignoring its source (the relationship between her and her husband); the husband is on the outside and the wife and child are on the inside. Similarly, in the same situation, instead of talking with his wife about their marriage and dealing with his frustration with her, the husband might spend more time at work instead. He would thus be making work as the inside relationship excluding his wife. In either example, though anxiety is reduced, neither husband or wife resolve the source of their anxiety. Triangles usually have 2 individuals or entities in conflict, and another entity or individual uninvolved with the conflict is brought in. When tension is not high the relationship between the first two individuals is desirable. The two original people of the relationship or conflict are the inside positions of the triangle. The insiders bond when they prefer each other, but in the case of conflict, another entity or individual (the outsider) is brought in by one of the first individuals in effort to either defuse and avoid the situation or team up against the other. The insiders may actively exclude the outsider when

tensions are not low between the insiders. Being excluded may provoke intense feelings of rejection and the outsider works to get closer to one of the insiders.

Like musical chairs, the positions are not fixed. If mild to moderate tension develops between the insiders, the most uncomfortable insider will move closer to an outsider. The remaining original insider then switches places with the outsider. The excluded insider becomes the new outsider and the original outsider is now an insider. Predictably the new outsider may move to restore closeness with one of the current insiders. At a high level of tension, the outside position becomes the most desirable. If the insiders conflict severely, one insider may opt for the outside position by getting the current outsider to fight with the other insider. If the maneuvering insider succeeds, he gains the more comfortable position of watching the other two people fight. When the tension and conflict subside, the outsider may try to regain an inside position.

Emotional Cutoff

Emotional cutoff is the mechanism people use to reduce anxiety from their unresolved emotional issues with parents, siblings, and other members from the family of origin. To avoid sensitive issues, they either move away from their families and rarely go home. Or, if they remain in physical contact with their families, to avoid sensitive issues, they use silence or divert the conversation. Though cutoff may diminish their immediate anxiety, these unresolved problems contaminate other relationships, especially when those relationships are stressed. The opposite of an emotional cut-off is an open relationship. It is a very effective way to reduce a family's over-all anxiety. Continued low anxiety permits motivated family members to begin the slow steps to better differentiation. Bowen explained that it might be difficult for such a family, that has severe cut-offs, to begin more emotional contact with the extended family, but any effort toward reducing the cut-off with the extended family will soften the intensity of the family problem, reduce the symptoms, and make any kind of therapy far more productive.