

Bowen Family Systems Theory & the Self of the Therapist

The Continuing Contribution of
Bowen Theory to the Family
Therapy Field



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A natural systems theory

- Triangles
- Differentiation of Self
- Nuclear Family Emotional System
- Family Projection Process
- Multigenerational Transmission Process
- Emotional Cutoff
- Sibling Position
- Societal Emotional Process



A natural systems theory

- Possible to see the broad patterns of form and movement that had been obscured by the close up view of the individual.
- The concept of the family as a unit – will involve a major change in the practice of medicine and the way the human thinks about him/herself and illness.

Origins of Family Psychotherapy, 2013, pp. 158-162

- To understand the behaviour of the human family in the natural world as the product of millions of years of evolution. - observations of human adaptive patterns.

Historical overview

- 1946 - mid 50s Bowen at Menninger Clinic -
- 1954 Murray Bowen became the first director of the Family Division at the National Institute of Mental Health.
- 1959 - 90 Georgetown - own family research - Multiple family therapy research project
- 1965 symposia; 1969 training program; 1970s move to engaging scientists.
- 1990 - 2011 M Kerr 90 -
- 2011 - A McKnight
- 2004 FSI Sydney - J Brown J Wright

A dynamic open theory

Engagement with
science to keep the
theory open to change
through facts not tribal
forces

Schools of thought can “get so caught up in the ingroup process that they can’t generate new knowledge from within, nor permit the admission of knowledge from without that might threaten the dogma...results in splintering and re- splintering”

(Bowen, 1978, FTCP, p. 342).



Science and Bowen Theory

“To a very great extent the term ‘science’ is reserved for fields that do progress in obvious ways. Nowhere does this show more clearly than in the recurrent debates about whether one or another of the contemporary social sciences is really a science. These debates have parallels in the pre-paradigm periods of fields that are today unhesitatingly labelled science”

(T. Khun, 2012, p. 159).

Science and Bowen Theory

“I believe that human behaviour will one day become an accepted science that can grow and develop with all sciences. I have presented some ideas that I hope will be helpful. When it does become a science, family concepts and relatedness to the lower forms of life will play some kind of part”

(Bowen, 2013, p. 106).

Science and Bowen Theory

“Bowen defined the family as an emotional system, placing it in the context of evolution and the automatic functioning of the unit and placing its members in the context of the automatic instinctual behaviour existing in all of life’s many forms. More basic than the feeling system, which requires complexity, the emotional system, in Bowen’s view is basic in all of life’s almost four billion year history”

(R. Noone 2019, p. 4).

Science and Bowen Theory

“My concept, multigenerational transmission process, defines a very broad pattern in which certain children emerge with lower levels of differentiation than the parents, and others emerge with higher levels of differentiation, while most continue in about the same level as the parents....from a strict definition of genetics, this process follows a genetic like pattern but it has nothing to do with genes as they are currently defined”

(Bowen, 1978, pp. 410—411).

Science and Bowen Theory

“...epigenetic has been defined as a functional modification to the DNA that does not involve an alteration of sequence”

(M. Meaney, 2010).

“Epigenetic modifications are the interface between the environment (either internal or external) and the genotype”

(D. Crews and R. Noone, 2015. p. 87)

Science and Bowen Theory

“The human family provides an interesting example of how context-dependent epigenetic modifications may shape the neurobiology and behaviour of individuals and how such modifications might occur over the course of development and over multiple generations” and

“... these modifications would vary amongst siblings based on their positions in the family during periods of fortunate and unfortunate events occurring over the course of development”

(D. Crews & R. Noone, 2015, pp. 96-97).



“Systems therapy cannot remake that which nature created, but through learning how the organism operates, controlling anxiety, and learning to better adapt to the fortunes and misfortunes of life, it can give nature a better chance” (Bowen, 1978, p. 410).



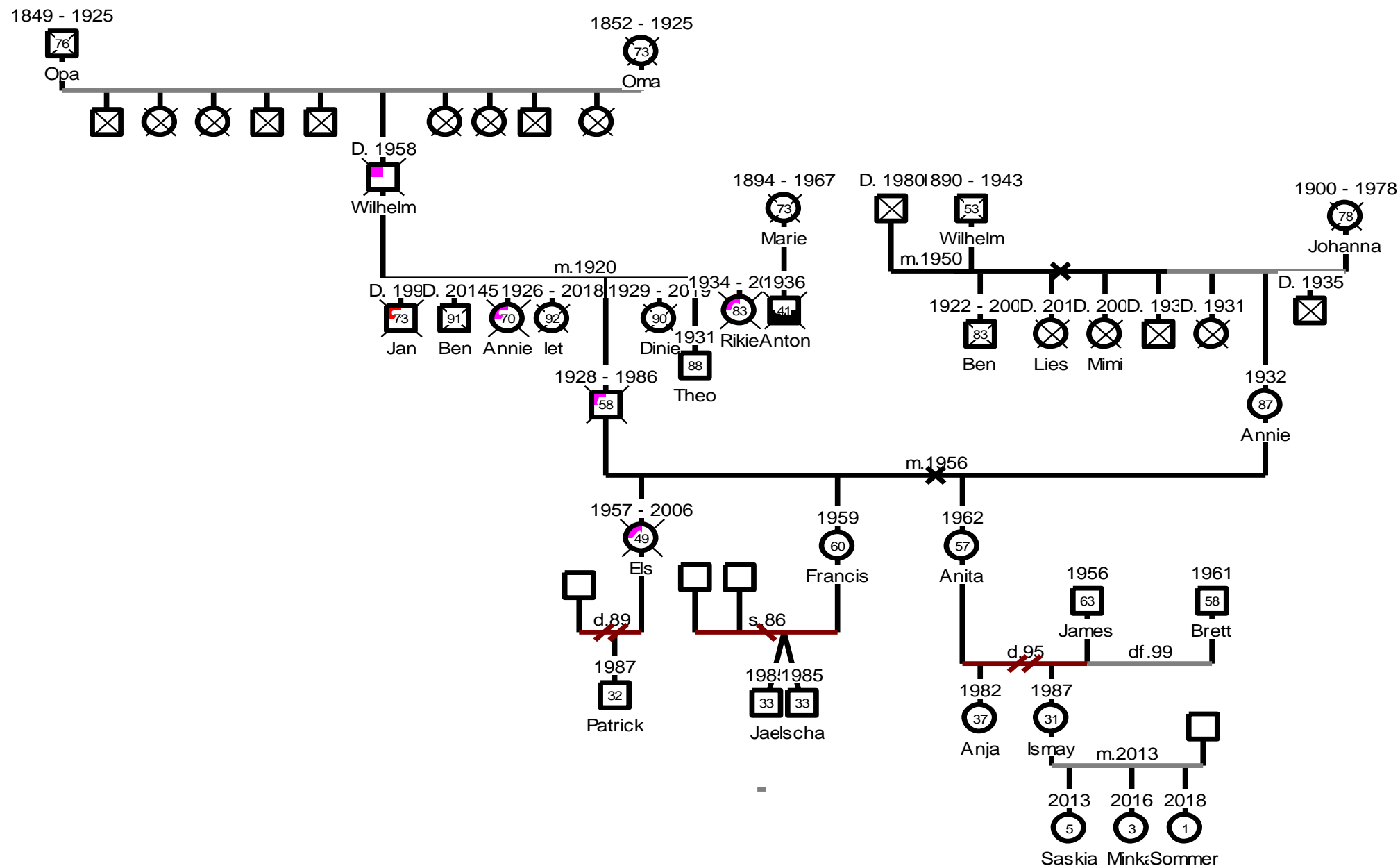
The more neutrality a person can develop through learning and thinking, and the more ‘self’ he can develop through action, the more his problematic feelings about himself and others will resolve (Kerr & Bowen, 1988).



The purpose of a family diagram

The facts of functioning of the multigenerational family are assumed to reflect emotional processes within the family (Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

The self of therapist



Family Diagram Anita van Aken

The self of therapist

Multigenerational family history reflections

- 'At lower levels of differentiation, people are under responsible for self and/or over responsible for others, guided primarily by emotions, consumed by relationships with little energy for self direction, and tend to have major physical, emotional, social and more marital disruption' - Phil Klever
- 'Marriages are sometimes formed to escape the intensity of emotions with one's parents. The illusion is created that one has found a way to break free of the unresolved issues with one's family, only to find that the same emotional intensity reappears in the marriage' - Phil Klever
- 'the more adjustments in functioning made by each family member to compartmentalize anxiety and maintain emotional equilibrium in the family system, the less the flexibility of each family member and of the family system' - Kerr and Bowen
- 'The greater the fusion, the more man is vulnerable to physical illness, emotional illness, and the less he is able to consciously control his life'

- Murray Bowen

'Run Anita Run'

Graduation
Presentation



- Video to be embedded...

Understanding Emotion - The Enduring Contribution of BFST to Clinical Work

- In BFST, emotion can be understood:

“as the most instinctual responses of the organism, those rooted in adapting and surviving”
- In the family, as in clinical work, we can become better observers of these emotional forces at work, when we become more aware of our own

“relationship dances and postures of all kinds: movement towards and movement away, alliances shifting and re-forming, the push for a separate boundary, the magnetic pull of togetherness and more” (Janice Norton, 2018, p. 3).

Reflections on Clinical Work

- How able are any of us to observe these emotional processes in action, in our own lives and in our clinical work? If we can get better at this, it is much more likely that we can “**get out of the soup**” as Murray Bowen often described it:
-**the soup** of our reactivity, of our need to help, to fix, or having to act to relieve our own anxiety, that is driven by our emotional responses to situations, events and even driven by not managing our own reactivity to the distress of others.....
- BFST privileges taking time to pause and reflect, to understanding our own contribution to getting in the way of family members and clinicians alike finding their own solutions to their problems, as they become able to function in their own lives and relationships
- What **better enduring contribution is there to make to the generations that come after us**, in our own families and professionally!



Mentoring systems professionals
