

My Differences with Current Bowen Theory (2016)

Thomas J. Schur

Introduction

Bowen theory has been the foundation of my work over the course of my career for 40 years. I have operated with this theory through years of interacting with my own clients as therapist, my supervisees as clinical supervisor and my students in graduate school as their professor. As a result I have now come to a point where, not only can I define a set of my clear differences from current Bowen theory, but in addition feel a strong need to present them to a wider audience. This need stems from my recent life stage transition into retirement. Before I die, I want to make this coherent set of differences available to those interested in the development of Bowen theory, and give them the opportunity to interact with me about these ideas.

To be clear, this presentation of my differences is not at all a repudiation of Bowen theory, but an enhancement of it. My concern is that as I see current presentations of Bowen theory, the focus is predominantly on its practical application to a variety of fields, populations, problems, issues, and so forth, but not to the development of the theory itself. There seems to be an orthodoxy invested in preserving the theory. I understand this dynamic as a generational one that is not unusual when members of the founding generation want to pass on what they have learned, and the succeeding generations want to take this learning and make it their own. The problem of course is the anxiety in the multigenerational system. How each generation handles this anxiety, determines how well the theory survives.

My efforts as a supervisor, trainer and college professor have been to ground myself in a focus on self as best I can, and monitor the other-focused reactivity of trying to “train” my supervisees or “teach” my students. Engaging in this generational process has led to my own personal development, a continual deepening of my understanding of the theory, and productive experiments with new ideas based on Bowen theory, as the next generation interacts with me. These next generations have been the proving ground for my experiments, whether it is the work of my own clients in their therapy, or the work on self of my supervisees in their practice with their clients, or the exploration and learning by my students in the classroom.

So, this paper is my attempt to present self today as I define my differences with Bowen theory that have developed over the years of my working with it. There are three essential points of difference:

1. Language as an additional concept that needs to be incorporated into the theory

2. Existential anxiety as a further distinction of anxiety
3. Objectivity as not possible, or necessary

Language

There have been several attempts over the years to define a “9th Concept” in Bowen theory. They seem to have been an effort to relate to the need to have some conceptualization of a larger meaning, some kind of transcendence. It does make sense that this need would arise due to the theory’s strong focus on the core work of managing anxiety overall through differentiation. These efforts to include an additional concept often came from a context of religion, and it is reported that Bowen eventually abandoned this project. Gilbert (2004) states: “Bowen briefly thought about adding a ninth. He called it “The Supernatural.” He did not continue the work, he said, because of the intense reactivity of the profession to it, and it never became part of the formal family systems theory.” (p. 118).

I contend there is indeed a need for a conceptualization of meaning in Bowen theory. But this concept does not need to be invented; it already exists. That is the phenomenon of language which is how we create meaning.

Bowen (1978) defined the self as “made up of clearly defined beliefs, opinions, convictions and life principles” (p. 365). What is this but language? Bowen takes language for granted in his definition of the self, like fish do the water they swim in. We are immersed in language. No one seems to notice the obvious. But why is this important?

It is important for two reasons.

It is important because the self is at the core of Bowen theory, and if it requires language to exist, then it makes sense to have this essential process as a component in the theory. However, language is understood here as a physiological process, not as a vehicle of communication. Rather than thinking of language as an output-input transmission of information from one person to another, think of it as a very sophisticated, neurological process of coordination between two living systems, more like one brain than two.

Bowen was so careful to ground his theory in nature and natural systems, it would be incongruent to not define a major construct in the theory, such as an additional concept, in anything other than natural terms. Neuroscience has been studying language for many years and so this science is a very appropriate fit for understanding language as a physiological process. While the study of the brain generally is certainly based in systems theory, it is still limited in some domains of neuroscience to the functioning of individual people, which is not congruent with Bowen's interpersonal concept of the Family Emotional System. However, there is the field within neuroscience that does operate from a framework of interpersonal/family systems theory. That is the field of Interpersonal Neurobiology (Cozolino, 2006)).

Existential anxiety

The second reason for why it is important to understand the self in terms of language, leads directly to my second area of difference with orthodox Bowen theory – existential anxiety.

Bowen identified anxiety as the primary force all living systems must manage in the effort to maintain integrity in the struggle to survive. This is certainly true for humans as living systems, which is one of the major contributions of Bowen in his theory of human functioning. "The Bowen theory involves two main variables. One is the degree of anxiety, and the other is the degree of integration of self." (p. 361) However, I contend that there is an additional dimension to this ubiquitous anxiety in all living systems that is specific to the human. That additional anxiety is existential anxiety.

Bacteria and animals respond in automatic ways to threats to the survival of their integrity as an organism or living system, as do humans to the threat to their physical survival. There is difference however for the human. That difference is that the human can have an understanding of this threat as it presents itself, as it is happening; and then in reflection after the physical threat subsides. Of course, it is language that provides this ability. But what is even more germane to my point, is that the human has this ability when there is no imminent threat at all. Humans know they are mortal, and this knowledge creates anxiety, existential anxiety.

Because it is language that creates the phenomenon of existential anxiety, consequently it is through the use of language that humans can do the work of differentiation that is the cornerstone of Bowen theory. This is the second reason language needs to be one of the concepts of the theory.

Objectivity

For Bowen the work on differentiation of self for the human is based on the operation of distinguishing feeling from thinking, so that one's functioning in the system can be less determined by feelings. He was very interested in creating a science of human behavior, and saw this was possible if one could create a theory developed from facts based on thinking, with feelings sorted out. Then one could trust the theory as being more objective.

My contention is that distinguishing feeling from thinking is a language process, and that because it is physiological, it is a brain process. I further contend that one cannot get outside one's own brain to observe its functioning; the process is always "subjective." Actually, from this point of view, the distinction of subjective/objective is not a useful one.

However, Bowen's distinction about the reactivity of thought processes is a very useful one. If fusion is a process of yielding self to the dynamics of the emotional system, based on attempts to manage anxiety, language can provide a way to better manage that anxiety and thereby fuse less. If thinking is the antidote to automatic responses to anxiety, I would argue that a person can learn to control his/her use of reactive language, and in this way change the long-term reactive patterns of behavior. To think differently means to recognize the old patterns of language and tolerate the anxiety of thinking differently, in order to allow more adaptive behavior. A brief example may help clarify this powerful and complex idea.

Given that the self is a construct in language as stated above, one person may think of their self as inadequate, generally prone to failure, discounting any successes as luck. To think differently, that they are not inadequate but usually make poor decisions based on this assumption, that person could use language to control this automatic response of assuming inadequacy. This would mean thinking through options and making choices that allow the possibility of success, while tolerating the anxiety they might succeed (or fail), but are not inadequate. This would be a change in self and a higher level of differentiation, as they make better decisions and their behavior is more functional and less reactive.

Or, another person may think of their self as generally very competent and their behavior almost always successful, discounting failures as insignificant. To think differently, that they are not invincible but often make risky decisions based on this assumption, that person could use language to control this automatic response of assuming invincibility. This would mean thinking through options and making choices that allow the possibility of failure, while tolerating the anxiety they might fail (or succeed), but are not invincible. This would be a change in self and a higher level of differentiation as they make better decisions and their behavior is more functional and less reactive.

Then, in these examples, one could understand how the language patterns of these individuals manifest the reactivity in the family system, and how their changing their self through language, can change the dynamics of the family system.

(These are examples of a “Minifier” and a “Magnifier” from my book (Schur, 2015), which encapsulates in depth my conceptualization of language in Bowen theory, and presents a practical way to use it in the work of differentiation.)

It bears repeating that this understanding of language is based in physiology, so that changes in self through language are changes in brain function and the organism’s mechanisms for handling anxiety and survival. Language here is understood as much deeper and more complex than the common assumptions about “communication” patterns.

This conceptualization of language in Bowen theory reframes his important goal of distinguishing feeling from thinking, and moving from subjective to objective thinking, to one of distinguishing more reactive from less reactive patterns of language.

So What

So why should anyone care about these differences of mine?

Bowen theory is a theory. The function of theory is to explain. For a theory to thrive, it needs to evolve to handle new circumstances that come up (e.g. globalization and terrorism today) and not just interpret new phenomena in a reflexive way back to what the theory has always said. The next generations learn the theory, and work to make it useful to them in their world, which is not the same as the world of the founding generation in which the theory was first developed.

For Bowen theory, incorporating language as a concept provides the opening for the theory to evolve into the next generation, because it fills in an omission that has hampered the theory. Without language as a concept, the self and differentiation are simply assumed to be elements of the theory without being able to explain what they are. While in contrast, the explosion of discoveries in neuroscience provides a way to explore and understand language, which is part of the functioning of the Emotional System (one of the major concepts in Bowen theory). Without this evolution the theory remains static, and conflicts emerge between the founding generations maintaining orthodoxy, and the next generation interpreting the theory on their own, in ways that can vary in the consistency with the basic theory. They can invent their own versions untethered from the core of the theory.

The key for maintaining the continuity of the theory is the ability of the generations to manage the anxiety in the multigenerational, emotional system through self-focus and differentiation, as they engage each other and monitor their reactivity in language.

With language as a concept, Bowen theory can evolve to handle the challenges of existential anxiety and objectivity presented above, as the generations interact. In this multigenerational process, language can provide a tool to understand and regulate self in managing the anxiety that is more specific than just 'anxiety in the system.' In addition, language frees people up from the limitation imposed by the need for objectivity, allowing them a new way to work on distinguishing feeling and thinking.

In conclusion, these differences offer a pathway for further development of Bowen theory as it needs to evolve through a generational process of conversation and exploration.

Bowen himself articulated my concern very well back in 1976:

I have tried to point the theory in the direction of the sciences, hoping that future generations can keep going on basic research which will eventually make enough contact with the sciences to use new discoveries from the sciences in extending and refining the theory. I believe that basic research, directed toward the accepted sciences will keep it "open" for a long time to come. If it ever makes viable contact with the sciences, it will then be able to share knowledge with the sciences, and contribute to the other sciences, and it will have become a science. To this point, most of the people who have learned the theory and are practicing it, still rely on my formulation of the theory as their source of knowledge. If this should continue into the future, then this theory will also have become another closed belief system. (Bowen, 1978, p. 407)

Bowen, M. (1978). *Family therapy in clinical practice*. New York: Jason Aronson, Inc.

Cozolino, L. (2006). *The neuroscience of human relationships*. New York: Norton.

Gilbert, R. M. (2004). *The eight concepts of Bowen theory*. Falls Church, VA: Leading Systems Press.

Schur, T. (2015). Mag or Min – Which are you? Two patterns of decision-making that make you who you are.