



*Coming to grips with family systems theory in a collaborative, learning environment.*

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## Going Home Again: A family of origin approach to individual therapy



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**SYNOPSIS:** Family therapy with an individual and the relevance of family of origin themes are not new topics in the psychotherapy world. However the richness and depth of Dr Murray Bowen's family systems and multigenerational approach to working with an individual has only been given scant attention in the Australasian context. Bowen's theory retains a strong following and solid research attention in parts of North America. In this article the author explores Bowen's model as it is applied to individual psychotherapy. Distinctions are made with traditional individual therapy where the in-session therapeutic relationship is the vehicle for change in contrast to Bowen's focus on the natural system of the client's own family. To illustrate, a case example of the author's own experience of family of origin coaching when grieving the loss of her parents will be described. This will illustrate the beginnings of reworking a narrow caretaking role amongst siblings to a more multidimensional role of welcoming help from others. The impact of this shift on the author's clinical work will be explored.

When a family systems framework is referred to in the psychotherapy field it is most often thought of as an approach to working with the family group to address a relational problem or a symptom in a child. In the "hey day" of family therapy in the 1970s and 80s, much of the field's concern was on the here and now, with a focus on techniques and strategies to unsettle the homeostasis (stability) of a family system in order to unlock new interactional possibilities. In contrast to other systemic approaches, Murray Bowen's Family Systems theory has always upheld the benefit of working with the individual using not only the present relational context as a basis for therapy, but also the previous generations of the individual's family. (Brown, 1999) Bowen's approach has compatibilities with mindfulness and CBT, with its emphasis on self regulation in the face of challenging emotions but is broader in its attention to relationship systems in which the clients' current challenges are embedded.

### **Background to Bowen's Model**

Bowen was a psychiatrist who in 1967 shocked the delegates at a national conference of family researchers, when he set aside his expected didactic paper and presented a description of his personal efforts to redefine himself in his family of origin. The rationale behind Bowen's presentation was his belief "that the family therapist usually has the very same problems in his/her own family that are present in families he sees professionally, and that he has a responsibility to define himself in his own family if he is to function adequately in his professional work." (p. 468, Bowen, 1972)

Bowen's theoretical concepts, as well as his coaching approach to therapy, emerged from his clinical research of inpatient family groups over a twenty year period, his observation of his work systems, and his own change efforts with his family which had been a 12 year effort. He observed that psychiatric residents who were undertaking family therapy training at the Georgetown Family Centre, did much better with a focus on their own family of origin than those who had traditional didactic teaching, or those that worked on self in their current couple relationship. Bowen reflected that after the trainees "could see it work in their own families, it became alive and real." (p. 531, Bowen, 1974) From these observations Bowen emphasised the value of trainee therapists undertaking their own family of origin work.

## Family of Origin Psychotherapy in a Nutshell

Coaching an individual to research their own patterns in their family and to redefine themselves in less anxiety driven ways is aimed at increasing their level of **differentiation of self**. This is not identical to the concept of **individuation** (Jung, 1954) or **self actualisation** (Maslow, 1968) which focuses on growing away from family symbiosis through realising intra-psychically one's separateness. Bowen's concept of differentiation places an equal emphasis on staying meaningfully connected to significant others, as it does on expressing individual thoughts and beliefs. "The ability to be in emotional contact with others yet still autonomous in ones own emotional functioning is the essence of the concept of differentiation."(p.145, Kerr and Bowen, 1988)

Prior to focusing on the family as a system, Bowen had trained in psychoanalysis and undertook many years of his own analysis. In reflecting on the outcome of his early analytic training, he stated that "during my psychoanalysis there was enough emotional pressure to engage my parents in an angry confrontation about childhood grievances that had come to light in the snug harbour of transference. At the time I considered these confrontations to be emotional emancipation.....The net result was my conviction that my parents had their problems and I had mine, that they would never change, and nothing more could be done." (p. 484, Bowen, 1972)

Bowen was not satisfied with this outcome as he began to see from his clinical research that each family member participated in a reciprocal (circular) process of making compensations for others. This meant that with careful research of family patterns it was possible for an individual to begin to relate more from self and less in reaction to others, and that over time the efforts of one person might shift the functioning of the whole system. **The desired outcome of Bowen's coaching of an individual was for them to move beyond blaming or labelling family members as saints or sinners, and towards being able to accept the patterns over the generations that shape the relationship roles that each person comes to occupy.** From this more neutral position, the individual is able to develop a person to person (not person to group or couple) relationship with each member of his/her family where differences can be expressed without attacking, defending or withdrawing. Bowen referred to this approach as '**coaching**' as opposed to '**therapy**' because the emphasis was on preparing for change efforts in the clients natural system of relationships, rather than a healing emphasis in the relationship between therapist and client. This has been likened to the coach of a sports team who is "on the sidelines. Both serve as teachers/consultants who prepare the players/clients, but the players/client(s) need to translate the learning into action on the playing field and the family turf."(p. 22, Titelman, 1987)

Given that most clients of psychotherapy are motivated to address a problem in the here and now, a family systems therapist will begin with a focus on the problem bearer and gaining symptom relief (working in the foreground). Nonetheless, as family members start to understand their part in the interactions that maintain the symptom and how patterns of managing relationship anxiety are passed down the generations, they may choose to continue working with the therapist to look at the broader generational context. In the early stages of this work the focus is on gathering information about the family relationship history and exploring the functional roles the client occupied in their family. (examples of functional roles are: problem solver - problem maker; anxiety generator-anxiety soother; supporter-collapse; energy lender-energy borrower)

A three generational family diagram/genogram is used as a way of mapping family history and looking for emotionally laden themes. Those readers interested in exploring the clinical use of genograms can consult McGoldrick, Gerson and Shellenberger (1999). The coach helps the client to identify gaps in knowledge, as highlighted by the genogram and hypothetical questions are used to explore what process is likely to ensue if the client is to get to know each family member better. When an understanding of the systems way of dealing with anxiety about relationship attachments is achieved they are encouraged to plan brief steps of contacting family members and subsequently observing and listening to them in a research minded way.

This information is brought back to therapy/coaching and further hypotheses are developed about the role the person plays in the system, what a less reactive role would look like and what might be the reactions of others to any changes they may make. The individual focuses their thought and effort on changing the way they relate in their family, not on trying to change others. There is rarely a termination of the work but rather a spacing of appointments to longer intervals and an encouragement to return at any time to continue the work of differentiating which is framed as a life long effort. The coaching effort aims to assist the client to work at being able to maintain their objective thinking, whilst in the midst of a tumultuous emotional family situation, yet still being able to stay in contact with family members.

## **Distinguishing Family of Origin Coaching from Traditional Individual Psychotherapy**

The key distinction between family systems coaching and individual therapy that has evolved from psychoanalysis is that the focus for change is in the natural system of the client's own family, as opposed to the in-session therapeutic relationship. Rather than the therapist seeking to facilitate a corrective relationship within the transference of the therapist client system, the therapist encourages the client to take action in their family system. Reflections are not on the individual's intra-psychic processes but on their own family's intergenerational patterns of relationships.

Similar to traditional individual approaches, family systems coaching emphasises the importance of the therapist managing their counter-transference. This is achieved by resisting the invitation to take sides (called 'triangling') and thereby staying out of the patterns of the client's system. Betty Carter and Monica McGoldrick, who have applied Bowen's approach to a feminist and multicultural framework, remember Bowen saying that 50% of the therapist's energy is directed into the work itself and 50% is directed into staying out of the client's family process. (p. 283, McGoldrick and Carter, 2001) A good deal of work on the self of the therapist is required in learning how to stay engaged with a client without getting drawn into alliances, over responsibility, or withdrawing. Hence when a therapist can work on managing their anxiety when in contact with members of their family of origin, it is viewed as a constructive way of learning how to resist client's invitations to loan support to their reactions to others. The premise is that "working toward becoming a more responsible and differentiated individual in one's own family provides an avenue for lessening tendencies to become over involved with one's clinical families, and it helps the family therapist avoid emotional "burnout", a common occupational hazard for psychotherapists." (p. 3-4, Titelman, 1987)

Researching, observing, planning and thinking are given priority over insight, emotional expression, support and interpretation in Bowen's Family of Origin approach. Questions are focused on observable patterns of reacting by asking "What happened? Who was involved? How did each person respond?" rather than on the particulars of a dispute, how one feels or what their interpretations are. The family systems therapist emphasises each person's participation in the system, not what motivates individual behaviour. Instead of asking the individual to give direct expression of affect to the therapist, they are asked to reflect on what their feelings tell them about the relationship patterns in which they are involved.

The following is a sample of the use of questions that focus on relational process rather than content and expression of affect:

- \* What are you most concerned about?*
- \* Can you give me a recent example of when you felt that concern?*
- \* When did it happen?*
- \* Who else was involved?*
- \* What was their response? What do you think was the trigger for your reaction? How did you react?*
- \* Where was A when this was going on? What do your feelings at the moment tell you about the dilemmas of the role you have in this relationship?*
- \* How is this role similar or different to the role you had in dealing with tensions in the family you grew up in?*
- \* What were the typical responses of other family members when stress was high?*
- \* How does this shed light on what gets you so frustrated in your current situation?*
- \* What would you need to express differently if you were to speak from your experience and not in reaction to others?*

## Potential Pitfalls of a Family of Origin Approach:

There has been plenty of lively discussion and critique of the use of family of origin exploration in the training of the therapist. (Young et al, 2003; Mason 2002.) A common concern expressed is that the focus on researching patterns without encouraging expression of affect might become too cerebral. My own experience of this approach and my observations of numerous clients, is that it is a deeply emotional experience which is contained within the respectful and calm therapist-client relationship. **If however, the work is viewed as more of an academic assignment rather than a personal journey of self it is likely to be devoid of a genuine shift in a person's way of relating.** Bowen stressed that this approach cannot be learned through an intellectual effort but needs to be put into lived experience. His experience in training psychiatric residents backed this up with their feedback that "the experience with their own families made it possible to better understand and relate to families in their clinics." (p. 532, Bowen, 1974)

The family of origin coaching model certainly presents challenges to those who come from unsafe abusive families where there is a fear that reconnecting may put the client or members of their current family at risk. In the research phase of coaching the client may decide with the therapist to choose a safer yet still significant relationship system in which to work on redefining self. The client may also choose to make some progress towards expressing their individual values by writing to family members who have behaved abusively, and state with conviction (not with attack) their view of this behaviour and what is/isn't acceptable for future connection to be possible.

Carter and McGoldrick (2001) warn of errors of judgment for a therapist coaching across cultures and gender, who may inadvertently misinterpret patterns of relating as fused or cut off when indeed this may simply be the cultural norm. To prevent such unhelpful blind spots the therapist remembers to collaborate with rather than direct the client's efforts. This means that the client is in charge of interpreting their own family experience, with the coach sharing some ideas from systems theory that may assist them to see their experience in a broader relationship context.

**Perhaps the greatest hurdle for therapists in learning this model is to accommodate a shift from promoting an intense restorative attachment with the therapist to focussing on the client's own effort in their current and past significant relationships.** The learning about feeling responses rather than encouraging a full expression of feelings in the safety of transference is often critiqued as being too intellectual and lacking in empathy. (Leupnitz, 1988; Knudsen-Martin, 2002) In reflecting on common objections to Bowen's approach Michael Kerr comments that the "idea that a person can be helped in "talking Therapy" without forming an intense, feeling based attachment to a therapist strongly conflicts with what is generally held about a therapeutic relationship." (p.120, Kerr, 1991) Kerr does acknowledge the gains for clients in being more aware of feelings and more able to express them with the key being the therapist's ability to respect ego boundaries by not exerting emotional pressure on clients to "conform to their notions of what is "good" for people." McGoldrick and Carter in commenting on the criticism levelled at Bowen for elevating the male attributes of rationality over female expressiveness, write that "Bowen was addressing the need to train one's mind to control emotional reactivity so that we can control our behaviour and think about how we want to respond rather than be at the mercy of our fears compulsions, instincts and impulses. This does not mean suppressing authentic and appropriate emotional expressiveness". (p. 285, McGoldrick and Carter, 2001)

## Case Example: Unresolved grief as an entrance back to one's family of origin.

In this case example the author describes her own beginning efforts to relate in a less reactive and over-responsible manner with her original family. This work was undertaken over a two year period from 1992-1994.

### Growing an awareness of self in the system.

My entrance into family of origin work was through an awakening awareness of family patterns around grief and loss. My personal struggle to define myself in my family system is poignantly expressed in the lines of the play *I Never Sang for My Father* (Anderson R. 1968) which reads: "Death ends a life but not a relationship, which struggles on in the survivor's mind, seeking some resolution which it may never find."

It was the realisation of unresolved grief from the death of my mother when I was 21 and my father 12 years later, that led me to do my own family of origin coaching. Among the vast learning during this journey is the lesson that my fixed view of each of my parents was continuing to impact my relationship with my four siblings, keeping me in an inflexible role of over-functioner (the compassionate expert). I was comfortable being responsible for the thoughts, feelings and behaviours of others at the expense of my own needs and behaviour. My role as the competent strong one was expressed in being happy to organise family events, be a shoulder to cry on and offer advice freely. (Perfect socialization for a psychotherapist!)

Previously I had been cynical of therapists spending time on their own issues, viewing it as a narcissistic indulgence that was a divergence from the important work of learning how to be a better therapist through more training, reading and practicing techniques. For example I recall a staff training day in the 1980's where the afternoon activity was to practice visualisations of our childhood experience. I found a seemingly legitimate client priority as an excuse not to return after the lunch break.

This position tells you a good deal about the emotional process in my family and my role in it. Being a white, Anglo, protestant family, the predominant defence to heightened anxiety is emotional cut-off. Families of British heritage tend "to be good at self reliance, self sufficiency and self control and rather less good at ...tolerating dependency, and integrating and expressing emotional experience." (p. 458, McGill and Pearce, 1982) When tension increases, the first response is to distance into rationalising about things or to just avoid the issue. Cut-off can be viewed as a safety valve in a system but at the same time it "leaves people primed for closeness...with greater vulnerability to intense emotional processes in current relationships." (p. 63, Papero, 1990) This pattern was evident over some generations of my family particularly around loss. One example was a rumoured falling out between my maternal grandmother and one of her sister in laws after the death of my Grandmother's first child, a boy age three. Apparently Gran blamed Aunt Gladys who was living with them at the time, because as a trained nurse she advised against needing to get medical treatment in town. These two women maintained polite but infrequent and superficial contact with each other for the rest of their lives. The issues were never talked about between the two of them.

## **The Learning Laboratory of Training Institute**

The idea of working on my self in my own family and thereby breaking through my intellectualising cut off was a gradual process. It was facilitated in the context of a training institute which provided a secure base to take risks in exploring new ideas about how my family had impacted me.

My first "news of a difference" was to see that my choice of career path was not just a rational decision based on what I could transfer in order to escape the tedium of legal studies. It was an emotional (unconscious) choice based on needing to experience the comfort of operating in a context that mirrored my role in my family. I detoured anxiety and was predominantly defined by my ability to help others.

The next shift in my thinking came during a presentation on mother-daughter relationships. Previously I had thought of my mother as someone to live up to and my father as a loveable dad, but not a person I held in high esteem. I began to think more objectively about my parents, considering how the family relationship dynamics had contributed to my upgrading of my mother and downgrading of my father. I started to relive my mother's fight with breast cancer and realised that if I kept idealising her and our relationship I would never be able to authentically mourn her loss or really say goodbye to her. Saying goodbye meant breaking through the stoic exterior modelled by my mother and expressing feelings that were never expressed in our relationship, such as deep fear, anger, and personal anguish. To get a system's view, I had to stop seeing my mother as the perfect role model and see her as a human being with strengths as well as weaknesses. This would have ripple effects on how I viewed my father, sisters and brother by moving them out of their labelled positions of strong or weak. For the first time I thought about my regrets about a relationship that I had idealised. Twelve years after my mother's death there was much to work through.

## **Supervision as a Feedback Vehicle**

The final impetus into my own therapy and coaching was a live supervision session in which I was seeing a family following the loss of the mother's father. I was called back from behind the screen and asked by the supervisor whether the family I grew up in had had any issues dealing with grief and loss? My subjective view of my conduct of the therapy session was that I had explored the impact of the death thoroughly, hence I was taken

aback to hear my supervisors question. If I had not been so directly confronted about my avoidance of this area I think I would have continued to think that I could sort all this family of origin stuff out in my head.

I realised that I was speaking clinically and intellectually about the death in my clients' family without allowing genuine contact with the dramatic relationship disruption that any death brings. My intellectualising is a version of emotional cut-off and this predominated the way I had managed the overwhelming anxiety of the emotions of loss in regard to the death of both my parents...with matter of fact-ness. With my father's death I had applied much of what I had learnt over the years as a therapist and was able to write a letter of goodbye to him; however I had not learnt to express any of my pain and vulnerability directly to members of my family of origin. I was so used to looking out for others that I was not particularly aware of my own vulnerabilities.

## **The Work of Coaching**

When I began my coaching I was clear that it was unresolved grief issues that had brought me there. I found that by simply giving myself permission to talk about the death of my parents enabled grieving emotions to readily surface. I remember my coach hardly reacted to my tears but it felt safe to express them. She invited me to use my feelings to reflect on what went on in my family at the time of my mother's terminal illness and consequent death. I was starting to learn about family interactions at times of stress and my part in them. In every day stress I managed anxiety by care-taking, while during severe acute stress the family modus-operandi was withdrawal and isolation. The effect of this way of functioning was that I was seen as a helpful responsible family member but this was at the expense of those whose own coping skills were diminished by being the focus of my caretaking and advice giving. Like in a game of monopoly where there are only so many properties to go around, I would buy up functioning from family members to build my own resources, and they would give up some of their self responsibility to me. The focus on others to validate myself meant that I was not in touch with my own vulnerabilities and was therefore prone to feeling overburdened leading to withdrawal from family members when stress is particularly high.

The therapist/ coach facilitated my self directed research and action by her use of questions that were well attuned to my stated goals and personal pain and struggles. She shared her thinking about how to understand some of the dynamics of my family but always invited me to connect her ideas with my own thinking and discoveries. What emerged from this was a challenging, empowering and self clarifying experience.

## **An Opportunity for Re-Entry to My Family**

After a number of sessions I started planning a re-entry to my family which would allow me to take a different position from my usual over-functioning one at the time. I was living on the opposite side of the world to my family but this was certainly not a barrier to planning a way to define myself differently. I had missed my father's funeral a year earlier due to delayed flights and was due to return to Australia for a visit in a few months time. I wrote a letter to my older sister which put her back into her eldest sibling position that I had usurped along the way in becoming more strongly aligned with my mother. The letter expressed how much difficulty I was having coping with my grief following Dad's death, especially being so far away. I also said how I was reliving my grief for our mother. I asked for her help to deal with my grief and wondered if it were possible for my siblings to get together for a memorial ritual of some kind.

I was coached to tell nobody about my letter, including my husband who, after years of marriage was right in the thicket of my family's emotional system. This was to prevent my being met by my husband's protective anxiety that could well have taken me off course from my efforts to express myself in a more authentic way. I had talked through in coaching my most feared responses to my letter including getting no response or a dismissive one. I was prepared for the predicted "change back" response from at least some members of the family. We talked through in coaching how the system tells you a version of 1) you are wrong 2) change back 3) if you don't there are consequences. I knew I was not only breaking out of my restrictive position in the family, I was breaking rules that had been upheld in the family over generations about expressing personal vulnerability around grief. My enormous anxiety about sending the letter was normalised by my coach. She reminded me that if I didn't feel anxious it would indicate that I was not really doing anything differently and hence it would not be a genuine differentiating effort. I had heard it said that it was not possible to understand the degree of anxiety our clients experience in contemplating a new stance in a relationship, until we as therapists had gone through this ourselves. Now I understood the poignancy of this.

My siblings' responses were both illuminating and challenging for me. My elder sister had called the other three and discussed my difficulties with them. It was certainly a reversal to have anxious discussions behind my back with me being the object of concern! My other two sisters were reluctant to do anything, saying that they had moved on from the pain of the loss and didn't really want to dig it up again. My brother, who had been the focus of most anxious concern in the family, was the one to step forward and declare that we should all rally to do this for my sake. This was a system shake up, with me out of the role of the strong one. With no templates to guide me through what would happen, it was a surprise to have the family member who had been viewed as least responsible emerge in the responsible care-taking role.

When I returned to Sydney I found that my older sister had researched grieving and obtained handouts from some counselling organisations. It was an "out of body" experience for me to graciously accept these resources when I was so used to being the one to dish out such advice. It was tempting at that point to reassure her that everything was actually much better however I knew the importance of soothing my discomfort without minimizing my neediness.

My siblings each rallied to have a simple memorial for our parents on a beach at dusk. They brought old photos that we passed around while laughing and crying as we relived memories of our parents. My brother read out a poem that my sister had found in her grief counselling research. It was an elevating and deeply moving experience for me to share real vulnerability with my sisters and brother. Remembering the preparation I had done in my coaching, my focus was to stay clear about what was going on for me rather than shift into reacting to the emotions of the others. This was a challenge as it would have been so easy to shift back into being absorbed by the feelings and anxieties of my siblings.

## **Follow up and maintaining the changes**

While this visit home had been an exhilarating and liberating experience, it was not life changing in itself. Over the years, much ongoing effort has been required to maintain the shifts. There have also been slip ups when I revert to my old one-sided caretaking or distancing position in times of stress. My key efforts have been to keep a person to person relationship with each family member -- not just the easy ones. Learning how to speak directly to family members about sensitive topics continues to be a challenge. It remains easier to discuss concerns about one person with a third party reminding me of the validity of Bowen's assertion that triangles are the "smallest stable relationship unit". (p.134, Kerr & Bowen, 1988) The challenge of raising my level of differentiation will be a life long effort.

## **Impact on clinical work**

Redefining myself outside of my strong responsible role has had significant ramifications for my therapy practice. I am less prone to taking on a support role in my clients lives and instead am free to invite them to access their own resources from within their current relationship network. I am also able to refrain from being too quick to offer suggestions to clients but instead ask questions that enable them to come up with their own best wisdom for their problems. I am willing to share my ideas but only when I have given adequate space for the clients own expertise to come through. Interestingly I notice that I less frequently find myself ruminating about my clients between sessions and going over time in sessions (or my old pattern of loaning books when I was anxious about not having been helpful enough!!). In contrast to my earlier years of counselling my clients rarely call me in between sessions apart from organising appointment times. I also keep a check on not allowing my work with clients to be a substitute for person to person relationships outside of work with significant others. I have in the past allowed work colleagues to be substitute family where the comfort of togetherness/group think was much cosier than dealing with difference and tensions in my real family. I also remind myself that my therapy has the potential to continue my old family role as a caretaker whose anxieties are absorbed by helping others rather than dealing with vulnerabilities of my self in relationship. If I start distancing from my extended family it is usually an indication of detouring connection needs to my work.

## **Conclusion:**

My experience of a family systems approach to coaching has taught me much about myself in relationships and has made it clear that death certainly does not end a relationship...although the pain of loss of presence remains. While my parents have not been around for a very long time now, I am still able to slip back into an alliance with

my mother by being the stoic one with my siblings. My caretaking role with my father had narrowed my view of him as weak, with my mother viewed as the strong one. I can easily transfer this triangle to the way I view men in my relationship systems. Hence the triangles remain active even beyond death.

I have learnt that the illusive resolution of relationships after death is not out of reach. There is no a quick fix but much to be gained with sustained effort on defining a self from a set of inner convictions while keeping in meaningful contact with each individual in the family system. Just as I have been able to express myself more humanly, so the labels and roles ascribed to others have appeared to lessen their hold. For myself and with the many clients I have the privilege to work with, I concur with Murray Bowen that the "more knowledge of one's distant families of origin can help one become aware that there are no angels and devils in a family: they were human beings, each with their own strengths and weaknesses, each reacting predictably to the emotional issue of the moment, and each doing the best they could with their own life course."(p. 492, Bowen, 1972)

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