



# Separations: A Personal Account of Bowen Family Systems Theory

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This paper is a personal account of my own family of origin research. It explores the impact of separations from parents, nuclear family, and extended family through a Bowen family systems theory perspective using concepts pertaining to Bowen theory such as chronic anxiety, differentiation of self, multigenerational family process, and the emotional system. An outline of the process of doing research in 'vivo' with my mother as well as conversations with my supervisor are included. Theoretical differences between individual and system models are discussed. A Bowen theoretical approach to the anxiety of separations is investigated. The efficacy of engaging in family of origin work and the effects of *thinking systems* is examined in light of how it assisted me to view family members, family system disturbances, and clients' emotional systems more objectively.

**Keywords:** anxiety, Bowen family systems theory, family of origin, family therapy, separation anxiety, systems thinking

## Key Points

- 1 Many psychotherapeutic models view separation anxiety as a disorder existing either within the individual or between parent and child. Bowen family systems theory offers an understanding of separation as a process inherently embedded in the family as a multigenerational unit.
- 2 A shift in perspective from individual models of therapy to systems thinking broadens the focus to appreciate the multiplicity of contributing factors and decreases the tendency to narrow the focus to a single cause.
- 3 Bowen family systems theory offers a biological, natural systems, and evolutionary perspective on how family systems adapt to stressful events.
- 4 From a Bowen family systems perspective the anxiety of separation pertains to the family as a whole and is passed on transgenerationally. A disturbance in an individual is therefore seen as a reflection of a disturbance in the overall family system.
- 5 Family of origin research leads to the understanding that anxiety emerges not *from* nodal events but in *response* to them. How one responds to separations is effected by a multitude of factors.
- 6 Inherent in Bowen theory is the work of growing oneself in relationship; clinicians work on themselves in their significant relationships at the same time as working with clients. Bowen theory presupposes that one is as good a therapist as one is differentiated from one's family of origin.

Recently, in a supervision session, I became aware of my sensitivity to clients terminating therapy. Intellectually, I knew this signalled progress for them, yet my internal response did not match my thinking. In order to begin to make more sense of this, my supervisor invited me to investigate my reactivity to separations from a Bowen family systems theory perspective (Bowen, 1978) by way of inquiring into how I had dealt with separations in my own life and family. Bowen theory invites clinicians to undertake their own family of origin work on the basis that one's clients function better if the therapist strives to become more differentiated, that is, able to act with

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greater emotional maturity in their family of origin and therefore be 'less reactive to others' (Bowen, 1978; Kerr, 2003, p. 7; Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

As it turns out, I have experienced several prolonged separations from my mother, father, and extended family in childhood and adolescence. Until recently I hypothesised that these were the cause of my anxious/insecure attachment and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), based on my understanding of two psychological lenses: that of attachment theory and the guide to mental health and mental disorders, as represented in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association A, 2013). From an attachment theory perspective, the way I conceptualised my reaction to separations was through my anxious-attachment with my mother (Bowlby, 1960). From a DSM-5 perspective, I viewed my reactive symptoms as emerging from *within* me; as the DSM-5 states, a mental disorder is a 'behavioural or psychological syndrome or pattern that occurs in an individual' (American Psychiatric Association A, 2013).

Separations have been discussed and viewed through attachment theory (Bowlby, 1960; Kobak & Madsen, 2008; Schore & Schore, 2008), object relations theory (Suárez-Orozco, Todorova, & Louie, 2002), relational psychoanalysis (Beebe & Lachmann, 2013) and feature as significant nodal points in mental health disorders, such as in the DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association A, 2013). Each lens has its own paradigm and theoretical frame of reference. It is beyond the scope of this paper to draw a comparison between these therapeutic models and Bowen theory, though some theoretical differences will be highlighted.

In working with the aforementioned cases, and in subsequent conversations in supervision, I was drawn into some new ways of thinking about separation, which offered less pathologising possibilities, providing me with a new way of relating to my own family experience, and also to my clinical work in this area. What follows is an account of my attempt to understand *separations*, as significant events in my family of origin, by doing research *in vivo* with my mother. I discuss the observations and effects emerging from family of origin research and comment on the process and impact of working from a Bowen theory perspective.

The struggle to discern fact from feeling and subjectivity from objectivity are at the heart of this paper. My motivation to do this work has been sustained by the following: the reprieve from blame that has emerged as a consequence of broadening my focus, allowing me to understand the interplay of a multiplicity of factors versus a single cause; my commitment to aligning with observable facts despite an innate tendency toward subjective perception; and the experience of the cooling element of neutrality at the boundary between myself and my family emotional system as well as myself and the emotional systems of my clients. All these outcomes influenced my personal and clinical work towards a Bowen theory frame.

### **A Brief Outline of Bowen Theory**

Through his clinical research of inpatient family groups and his broad reading of the natural sciences spanning over two decades, Dr Murray Bowen shifted his frame of reference from psychoanalytic theory to natural systems thinking, in the context of evolutionary biology (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). In the mid-20th century, with psychoanalysis prevailing in mainstream thinking, this systems perspective was not only seen

as a radical departure from an individual lens, it also reconceptualised a person's emotional functioning from a psychological into a scientific framework. Based on his study of Darwin's theory of natural selection, Hamilton's (1964) concept of inclusive fitness and E.O. Wilson's (1975) regulatory mechanisms of systems, Bowen viewed homo sapiens as having much more in common with other life forms than had been previously examined within the sphere of psychology (Kerr & Bowen, 1988, pp. 28–45). Bowen was particularly influenced by Wilson's (1975) definition of the regulatory mechanisms of systems whereby the 'rules' of organisation are present in species that have complex social organisations. Such species appeared to have evolved so that their relationships were ordered by some common basic principles resulting from natural selection that favoured development and survival within social groups (Kerr & Bowen, 1988, p. 50).

Bowen made a distinction between sociobiology and family theory, assuming that human beings, like all other living organisms, behave according to an *emotional system* originating in protoplasm, at a level more basic than genes (Kerr & Bowen, 1988, p. 48). While Wilson (1975) viewed the emotional system as having evolved through natural selection, Bowen believed the blueprint of the emotional system predated the origin of life and saw the organisation of natural systems as occurring not just *within* individual organisms but *between* organisms in enduring relationship with one another, such as in a family system (Kerr & Bowen, 1988, p. 51).

Meanwhile, psychiatry continued to move towards a paradigm of psychopathology and linear cause and effect thinking. The psychiatric paradigm did not take into consideration the role of systems in human behaviour but rather saw emotional dysfunction residing within the individual or resulting from poor parental care (Noone & Papero, 2015, p. 4). In contrast to this, Bowen theory saw human functioning motivated, at least in part, by a process embedded in the individual's relationship system. From this perspective, dysfunction is seen as a basic process present in many life forms. Further, a disturbance observed within the individual is a reflection of a disturbance in the group (Kerr & Bowen, 1988, p. 27).

### **Bowen Theory Expands Beyond Mother–Child to the Family System**

In an individual model, the development of the self of the child is seen to reside within the person or in the early attachment with the mother. Bowen (1978) stated: 'I believe "blaming" is inherently present, no matter how much it is toned down or denied, in any theory that views a person as "causal" to the problem in another' (p. 43). According to Bowen theory, the self of the child develops in the midst of two instinctually rooted life forces, *individuality*, driving the child to grow to be an emotionally separate individual capable of thinking, feeling, and acting for herself, and *togetherness*, a counterbalancing force spurring child and family to think, feel, and act as one (Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

From a natural systems perspective, the development of the child cannot be divorced from the emotional system within which the child's family is embedded. The mother–child relationship is an influential factor in the development of the child's self but it is always thought of as one amongst multiple influential relationships and factors within the context of the child's nuclear, extended, and multigenerational family system.

### What is Family of Origin Research?

In the late 1960s, Bowen made an ‘accidental’ discovery regarding the clinical effectiveness and success of defining a self in one’s family of origin (Bowen, 1978, p. 530). The aim of Bowen theory was to help clients differentiate, that is, to increase their levels of maturity within their family of origin. He saw that when a person could express their thinking and beliefs and act more autonomously whilst remaining connected to family members, the overall anxiety of the family decreased. The clarity of this therapeutic goal emerged from Bowen’s own clinical research with family groups with a schizophrenic member. Initial research involved the whole nuclear family demonstrating a decrease in symptoms in the short term however not in the long term. What Bowen observed was that there was a range of ways family members were ‘stuck together’ (Bowen, 1978, p. 529). Different methods of working with families were trialled with the focus to resolve the family ‘stuck togetherness’ in the long term.

Bowen discovered that the process by which individuals within a family develop a more robust sense of self occurs slowly and involves exploring how each is part of a multigenerational family system. The investigation necessitates that the motivated family member be able to calm her reactivity to, and visit her family of origin as much as needed, as well as aim to become a thoughtful observer of her family (Bowen, 1978, p. 539). This requires that she be more able to distinguish fact from feeling and when caught in emotional reactivity be able to down-regulate her limbic system, engage her neocortex, and thoughtfully consider how to respond to a given situation in a way that defines *herself* in relationship to family members, rather than be defined by the emotional group-think of her family:

*(As he begins to see) the part he (sic) plays in the family reaction patterns, he can begin the more complex process toward differentiating himself from the myths, images, distortions, and triangles he had not previously seen (Bowen, 1978, pp. 539–40, my italics).*

### Researching Separations

I originally trained in Gestalt psychotherapy and have also drawn my theoretical understanding of separations and child development from the object relations school and contemporary relational and intersubjective psychoanalysis, in addition to attachment theory. Consequently, I viewed abrupt or prolonged separations from the mother/primary carer as interrupting the development of self (Kobak & Madsen, 2008), with the intersubjective or co-created self (Beebe & Lachmann, 2013) being developed in the dyadic relationship with the mother/primary carer. Therefore, when my supervisor inquired into my sensitivity to clients terminating therapy, my response was that it was due to prolonged or unresolved separations from my mother, first pre-verbally, and later in childhood. Numerous examples came to mind of separations I had experienced from my mother, my father, and/or extended family. The following is not an exhaustive list of the separations I experienced, but I was aware they still held an emotional charge:

- My mother’s arrest: age five
- Temporary relocation to Nairobi: age six
- Temporary relocation to New York: age seven

- Relocation to Sydney: age eleven
- Temporary return to Rome: age fifteen.

A separation from my parents when I was one, for a period of two months, further informed my thinking about how separations affected me. This resulted from a hospitalisation due to an undiagnosed celiac disease which necessitated invasive medical procedures. In 1973 Italy, my parents were only permitted to visit me one hour per day. I mention this briefly and do not include it as part of the family of origin research. Nevertheless it is another variable that may contribute to my overall response to separations both developmentally and neurobiologically (Wallin, 2007, p. 130), given research into the effects of preverbal separation, post-trauma symptoms, and long-term stress response in animal populations (Wallin, 2007, p. 117; McEwen & Lasley, 2002; p. 177).

Bowen theory takes a long-term view in regard to symptom development. A clinical symptom is not understood as ‘the product of a biological “defect” or of something that has “suddenly gone wrong”’. It is, rather, an *outcome*. It is the outcome of a biologically rooted process that has many participants and has gradually taken shape over a long period of time’ (Kerr & Bowen, 1988, p. 13). From a Bowen theory perspective, an acute preverbal stressor such as my hospitalisation is viewed as a contributing factor, not as the *cause* of the long-term stress response to future separations. This is also important because Bowen theory does not solely look to the brain as the originator of stress but sees the process as rooted at an evolutionary level (Kerr & Bowen, 1988, p. 24).

Further, Bowen theory opens up the understanding of the role of the *family projection process* in impinging upon the functioning of the developing child. It is not only the disruption of acutely stressful events but the degree of fusion with his/her parents and other family members that renders the child more or less vulnerable to needing significant others for his/her own functioning:

People certainly feel pain from lack of significant emotional contact with important others and they certainly feel better if they get the contact they want. If a person’s distress is relieved by contact, however, that does not mean that his distress is ‘caused’ by lack of contact. In other words, an underlying emotional process influences both a person’s reactivity to reduced emotional contact and his ability to make and sustain adequate emotional contact. This process which is defined by family systems theory, is anchored in the anxiety and undifferentiation of relationship systems. (Kerr & Bowen, 1988, p. 208).

### **Supervision that Includes the Therapist’s Own Family**

It was through a systems thinking framework that my supervisor asked me questions exploring the broader family context of separations: What was happening for my mother at the time? What was happening financially? Between my parents? Health wise? Socially? What were the resources available in the family? How did separations assist in calming down some people or relationships in my family? Who was involved in making the decisions? How were they made? How did each family member respond? Where was everyone at the time the separations occurred and what was happening for them? I found, to my surprise, I could not answer many of these questions. My lens had been too narrowly focused on how these separations affected my

development as opposed to how they impacted each person in the system in different ways.

I found the investigation useful based on my reading of the family emotional system (Kerr & Bowen, 1988, pp. 27–58) and the multigenerational emotional process (Kerr & Bowen, 1988, pp. 221–255). My thinking widened to include not only *my* experience and sensitivities, but also those of family members and how we each responded to separations and to each other. So began my inquiry, predominantly sparked by a curiosity of what had happened in the larger context of my family surrounding the historical separations from my mother, father, and extended family, to which I still responded emotionally. A few days after my supervision session, I asked my mother if she would be willing to answer some questions. My plan was to meet with her face to face and record her answers.

### **The Process of Approaching my Mother**

In the days following supervision and after my mother accepted to meet with me my internal tension increased. Subsequently, I noticed a wish to alleviate my discomfort by cancelling the meeting. During the next two weeks I set up a meeting with my mother three times and cancelled each time due to being physically unwell. I was both disappointed and relieved. Meanwhile, I attended another supervision session and discussed my increased anxiety at the anticipation of the potential disturbance of my relationship with my mother, especially the fear of not being able to remain calm in response to her answers should they upset me. I was particularly worried about a familiar blame/defend/distance dynamic my mother and I can fall into when we discuss difficult topics. I could see that my heightened stress response was impacting my emotional state. This anticipation of potential relationship threat is what Bowen termed ‘chronic anxiety’ (Kerr & Bowen, 1988, p. 113). It is distinct from anxiety that naturally occurs from a real demanding event (acute anxiety).

The following questions and thinking were stirred in my second supervision session:

*Does the communication closure automatically occur in the relationship with my mother when there is fear of upset? Could I take responsibility for managing my reaction to my mother’s responses should they trigger me without resorting to closing down the conversation?* I knew that my chronic anxiety was stirred by predicting that my mother would say that she had prioritised her relationship to my stepfather over my need to maintain a connection to my father and extended family. I further predicted I would react to her statement by making accusations or distancing. I asked myself: *What did I need to work on to not be so hypersensitive to her views?* This got me thinking about how to deal with my reactivity: it would be useful to lower my expectations of my mother and view her like all human beings, with strengths and vulnerabilities. In addition, I also decided to locate where others were positioned in the family at significant nodal points to gain perspective on how decisions were made and not hold my mother solely responsible, as was my tendency, for how relationship stress was managed. I committed to not comment on my mother’s responses, especially should I find it difficult to calm myself.

My reading of Bowen theory had alerted me to the importance of managing emotional reactivity in important relationships in order to rise a little out of fusion (Kerr & Bowen, 1988, p. 362). I could reduce my intensity in relationships by allowing

another to have viewpoints without me automatically taking them personally. This was the essence of working on differentiating a self, to be a separate individual while also being connected (Kerr & Bowen, 1988, p. 97). As I prepared to take this research with my mother further, more questions emerged: *How clean were my intentions? Was I doing this to change my mother and our relationship; or was I genuinely committed to research and learning about myself and my family system?* I was aware that if my effort went to fix our relationship, I would increase my focus on my mother's responses rather than on what I was learning. Any focus on how my mother was responding, as opposed to how I was managing myself, would continue the established pattern of over-sensitivity and defensiveness, feeding the relationship fusion, coming up against 'many of the emotional obstacles and dilemmas that have characterised relationship development and the resulting reactive patterns that comprise the family emotional system' (Papero, 2014, p. 395).

One significant way I could begin to initiate less intense contact was by being a more objective researcher of my own family system and research, not only by investigating the effect of separations but also to find out how reunion took place between multiple family members. *How did my family members come back together?* In investigating the cycles of separations and reunions, I was re-entering my family's emotional system differently, reversing the way family members had typically reacted to this phenomenon. I was attempting to make contact with uncomfortable topics rather than distancing and avoiding.

## **Key Separation Events—A Broader Systems Lens**

### **Episode 1: My mother's arrest (age five)**

In 1978, Italy was in a period of socio-political turmoil coined 'The years of Lead', which was marked by government corruption and an unprecedented wave of terrorism. My mother, father, and maternal uncles had all been involved in the university-led left wing social movement fighting for equal wage rights for an underprivileged working class. My parents had recently separated, my paternal grandfather had just died of stomach cancer, and I was living with my mother in Rome. One morning my mother was driving me to preschool when a police car intercepted us, and she was arrested. We were accompanied by the police to preschool where we said goodbye. My mother had been a leader of one of the movement's political parties and twice, before I was born, she had been arrested for political activism. Though she hadn't been involved in activism for eight years, a political prisoner had implicated her. She was arrested for seven days. My father looked after me for the week, with my maternal uncles and aunts' support. When I saw my mother again I did not want to greet her. Later, at home, she sat with me and told me a story, weaving in the theme of prison; I warmed to her, and we reconnected.

### **Episode 2: Temporary relocation to Nairobi (age six)**

In 1979 my stepfather was transferred to Nairobi with work for one year. My mother and stepfather's relationship was in its beginning phase and the anxiety of their potential separation due to my stepfather's transfer increased between them. In order to calm their relationship-anxiety and because my mother was attracted to the prospect of Nairobi she decided on impulse that she and I would relocate to Nairobi. My stepfather offered both of us financial support and paid for my maternal grandmother and maternal cousin to visit, keeping some physical closeness in the family.

My father was unhappy about me relocating but neither opposed the decision nor proposed an alternative; my mother experienced guilt for taking me away from him whilst at the same time taking more responsibility for my upbringing. This would prove to be an ongoing reciprocal pattern between my parents during future interactions and decisions to relocate. My father's use of cannabis and alcohol increased while we were in Nairobi. In addition to this, he used heroin for one year. Using a Bowen theory lens, I now hypothesise that my absence was a *contributing factor* to my father's emotional dysregulation, which his substance use helped manage. With each relocation my father's functioning worsened. Bowen noted that 'A disturbance in the balance of the emotional system, both within an individual and within his relationship system, can trigger the development of symptoms.' (Kerr & Bowen, 1988, p. 256), and that 'Symptoms can also be generated by disruption of the togetherness process that has sustained someone's functioning' (Kerr & Bowen, 1988, p. 256).

In response to my maternal grandfather's death, my maternal grandmother shifted her emotional dependence to my mother and her two brothers: my grandmother's reaction to our relocation consisted of angry outbursts. In addition to this other members of the family avoided sharing how they felt about our relocation due to their fear of my mother's potential 'hot-headedness.' Six months into our move, my father asked if I could spend the summer holidays with him in Italy. My mother agreed, partially out of the guilt she regularly felt in relationship to the relocations. I flew back to Rome and stayed in part with my father and both sets of grandparents. When he was responsible for me, my father sought my grandparent's support. I was glad to return to Rome and reconnect with extended family. When I saw my mother again I was withdrawn and distanced, upset about leaving my father and grandparents.

### **Episode 3: Temporary relocation to New York (age seven)**

In 1980 my stepfather was transferred to New York and my mother decided she and I would join him. In November 1979, a political prisoner implicated my mother in a court hearing in relationship to a contested terrorist event to which my mother had not participated, but over which several of her peers had been given a seven-year sentence. The acute anxiety around this event accelerated our departure to New York. Our move to New York calmed my family's anxiety regarding my mother's potential arrest even though my father was upset. My paternal grandmother was unhappy and conflict between her and my mother erupted with my mother cutting off communication.

Six months into our relocation my father came to stay for a month and asked my mother if I could travel back to Italy with him. She agreed and I flew back to Rome. Three months later in a court hearing, my mother was denied the right to work in government institutions, effectively stalling her teaching career for ten years. I recall not wanting to greet her upon her return to Rome. My emotional withdrawal – an attempt to regulate my upset (Kerr & Bowen, 1988, pp. 32–33) – was met with my mother's intensity for closeness.

### **Episode 4: Relocation to Sydney (age 11)**

My hypothesis is that the isolation from extended family during this relocation intensified my mother's and stepfather's relationship as well as the one between my stepfather and me, and my mother and me, with conflict increasing between us all. My stepfather displayed outbursts of anger toward me and my mother; my mother attempted to mediate, and I emotionally withdrew from my stepfather. I became

increasingly dependent on my mother for emotional stability and continued to maintain open communication with her as long as I did not perceive her to be separating from me physically or emotionally.

The decision to relocate to Sydney was more thought-out than others. My father was opposed to this relocation as it was to be longer and further away than previous moves and about a year into it he suggested I move back to Italy. My mother did not concede, as my father's suggestion was to share-care with my grandparents. During our four years in Sydney my father moved an hour out of Rome, growing more distant from friends and family. My maternal grandmother was upset with my mother's decision to relocate permanently whilst my paternal grandfather expressed sadness. My mother recalled that as my father's functioning decreased, my paternal grandparents' anxious focus on my father's life problems increased.

I had difficulty adjusting to the displacement and isolation I experienced as a result of moving to Sydney. I blamed my stepfather for the loss of my extended family and became 'allergic' to my mother and stepfather's closeness. Owing to the distance from Italy we saw family less frequently, however we all kept close contact by mail or phone. My maternal grandmother came to visit yearly and my father and cousin visited twice. My mother and stepfather continued to feel enthusiastic about their decision to live in Sydney.

#### **Episode 5: Temporary return to Rome (age 15)**

When I was 15, we temporarily relocated to Rome for eight months waiting to be granted Australian permanent residency. Our visa was delayed because of my mother's previous political involvement, increasing my mother and stepfather's stress. I swung from compliance to rebellion. My extended family's concern about the next relocation was deflected onto my behaviour; the problem was seen to reside *within* me, rather than as a reflection of my family system's difficulties. I experienced pressure from worried family members to change, and I reacted by distancing.

My father, who was by now quite depressed, made less contact with family and friends, including me. My stepfather experienced migraines and continued to over-function by way of straining to financially support both his nuclear and extended family. Tension increased between all family members. I see this as reflecting a system that has lost its equilibrium as a result of the ripple effect of so many sustained stress-inducing disruptions that resulted in the emergence and/or amplification of a number of symptoms in some of the vulnerable family members.

#### **The Process of Meeting with My Mother: Taking a Research Approach**

My mother and I met at her house for two hours. I had already met with her a couple of times in the previous year to ask questions about my family as part of my personal work as a Bowen theory trainee and the experience had been positive for us both. I observed that in staying with factual questions I reacted less than usual: my mother in turn became engaged in the emerging family themes. The preparation I had done prior to meeting her helped me maintain a research orientation and to navigate the predictable relationship patterns. I kept the focus on the how, when, where, what, and who of the occurrences without inviting my mother's opinion. The aim of this was to re-engage with my family emotional system with increased neutrality and to gather facts rather than subjective interpretations of past events. During times when

my anxiety increased, such as when my mother acknowledged that her relationship with my stepfather had been favoured above others, I rapidly changed the subject to alleviate my own discomfort. At one point, in reflecting on how chaotic that period in my childhood had been, my mother apologised. In a knee-jerk response, I exclaimed, 'I haven't come here to get an apology!'

With hindsight, I can see the underlying reciprocal dynamic of her guilt and my emotional distancing as occurring automatically in our system of communication. Her implicit invitation to alleviate her guilt and my instant blame/distance is familiar and a marker of fusion (Kerr & Bowen, 1988, p. 346). The research effort focused on myself in my system involved both finding out the details of the family circumstances and also observing my own sensitivities and predictable responses while exploring the process. This resulted in both an interpersonal learning process as well as an intrapsychic observation process.

### **The Effects of Separations: A Systems View**

In childhood, my anxiety about separations emerged predominantly in relation to my parents, whereas in adulthood it mostly emerged in intimate relationships and occasionally in my work with clients terminating therapy. From a Bowen theory perspective, there is no *single cause* for the emergence of symptoms in an individual but rather several contributing factors; clinical symptoms are linked to the emotional system both within an individual and between individuals (Kerr & Bowen, 1988, p. 319). A separation, like any other important event in the course of family life which increases the overall family's anxiety, is viewed as problematic only if the stress of the family exceeds its ability to adapt to the event (Kerr & Bowen, 1988, p. 113). Moreover, functioning and symptom episodes increase and decrease depending on factors which are both external and internal to the family system.

*How* my family members responded to separation episodes contributed to the overall system stress in turn affecting the physiology, neurobiology, and emotionality of each member. Further, the unresolved emotional attachment to my parents contributed to how I continued to perceive, relate and adapt to separations. *Unresolved emotional attachment* is an emergent process reflecting a person's undifferentiated emotional separation from their parents. This is often observed as a person's dependence on their parents' emotional reinforcement and through the anxiety experienced by the parents in not having done enough, their 'failure' to have adequately nurtured (Kerr & Bowen, 1988, p. 207). The anxiety my parents experienced during separations is indicative of the inherited emotional climate and how our family historically responded to adverse events.

### **Reflections on Research**

The initial response I had to separations was appropriate and time-limited. However, it is the intensity of actions and reactions to the disturbance within relationships that speaks to Bowen's concept of chronic anxiety (Kerr & Bowen, 1988, p. 114). Chronic anxiety appears to be transgenerational and is a phenomenon which ranges in intensity from high to low amongst individuals and families depending on how each adapts to stress (Kerr & Bowen, 1988, p.113). While acute anxiety is a response to real threats, chronic anxiety is the reaction to relationships being out of balance

and to imagined threats. Chronic anxiety is therefore a reaction not to the event itself, but to the stress response to the event.

### **Effects of Research – Getting More Objective Data**

My perception of the separation events outlined in this paper has altered. I now understand that numerous family members contributed to how my mother's decisions were made and that multiple factors added pressure to the whole family both internally and socially. Much of the data I gathered were new and broadened the original picture I had of separations as nodal events and how my family organised itself around them. Some of the information immediately shifted my long-held assumptions, like, for example, the fact that my father had asked to have me for the summer holidays in both Nairobi and New York, indicating that the decision to be away from my mother was initiated by him *not* her. Other facts validated my assumptions – that many decisions were not thought through and that the relocations were attempts to lower the anxiety of the potential separation between my mother and stepfather above other relationship or individual anxieties. Each relocation incrementally intensified reactivity and symptoms in individuals and relationships.

At age 16, three months after we were granted Australian residency and relocated permanently to Sydney, my stepfather was diagnosed with cancer and died within three months, my father had his first psychotic episode and five months later, my maternal grandmother died of heart failure. Though I do not know to what extent, I wonder if the shock wave created by the intensity of these separations, reunions and life challenges effected my family's limited capacity to respond to relationship and external stressors:

Adaptiveness has been exceeded when the intensity of a person's anxious response to stress impairs his own functioning and/or the functioning of those with whom he is emotionally connected . . . (Kerr & Bowen, 1988, p. 113)

### **The Effort to Understand My Family's Behaviour through Systems Thinking**

What emerged from the research was that I was equally stressed when distant from my mother as when distant from extended family. When away from extended family, the conflict and dependence on my nuclear family intensified and when away from my mother, I was less stressed but my emotional withdrawal from her increased. Previously, through an attachment theory lens, I conceived of the physical distance between my mother and me as the *cause* of my separation anxiety. What has become evident is that my sensitivity to separations has been shaped by multiple people, relationships, and events. I now understand my mother's decisions as having been affected by factors both internal and external to the family. Moreover, even if my mother did not make some decisions that were in my best interests, it was because she too was caught within the confines of our family emotional system. This shift in perception goes some way to decreasing my reactivity toward her. I am less affected by who she is.

I have gathered evidence from my own family system that supports the view that it's not the events in themselves that create the issues even when we define them as traumatic: it's *how* we and our family *relate and react* to them that determines how impacted we are, depending on the levels of our chronic anxiety and level of

differentiation (Howard, 2014, p. 101). From this perspective, the anxiety emerging around separations did not belong within me or between my mother and me especially, but to the entirety of the family system. Just as the development of self occurs in relation to all family members, so too the degree to which an individual adapts to stressors is embedded in the system. How my parents and extended family adapted during the stress of separations impacted how I adapted in the context of the same events.

## Conclusion

Prior to undertaking family research, my tendency had been to focus on the impairment of my functioning due to the challenges of separation. However, I came away from family of origin work with a systems view of the complexity of my family emotional system and the understanding that one's functioning is affected by the functioning of each family member, the degree of chronic anxiety, differentiation, and the number of life events that affect the larger system equilibrium. A family systems lens does not discount the importance of disruptions to the mother/primary-carer child dyad, especially pre-verbally, or the impact on adverse events and highly stressful relationship disruptions. However, it does add an understanding of how all family members played a part in the way these coping patterns are embedded in generational adaptations over time and across generations of the family.

Clinically, I have been more able to put my anxiety aside and interfere less with my clients' process of termination since doing family of origin work. This has not meant my anxiety has always reduced at those junctures; rather I have been more able to respond thoughtfully in the service of exploring my clients' processes rather than in the attempt to calm my own chronic anxiety. How I relate to the events of separation, whether emotionally or factually, depends on my ability to be more objective, and equally, less reactive to others.

Whilst I am aware that focused family of origin work does not magically clear the slate of relationship sensitivities and that a sustained effort must be maintained in order to reduce the pull towards the fusion of the family system, I continue to appreciate how my family members struggled to manage themselves within the confines of their familial lot. I also more greatly value *how* I adapted, and that the process of meeting difficulties head on, leaning into one's own anxiety and discomfort *in relationship* can paradoxically grow more maturity and, more of a self.

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