

Through the Lens #7

The “Bowenians” – In Organizations Roberta M Gilbert, M.D.

A few months ago, Tamara Hawk, in Kansas, during a Bowen Center webcast, used the term “Bowenians” most appropriately, to indicate someone who really didn’t understand much of Bowen theory and went about communicating that fact openly. Funny though it was at the time, it set me to thinking. It is a wonderful term, partly because Bowen hated it so much. He had ways of letting everyone know, whenever it came up—he was not above pounding the table—that the wonderful new theory he had given the world was never to be referred to as “Bowenian theory.”

But in the way Tamara used it, it is a great designation. Bowenians—I run into them quite often. They are people who, often trained by Bowenians, continue to preach, teach and write about their inaccurate view of what they consider to be Bowen family systems theory. I have even heard them use other peoples’ names with terms, or buzzwords connected with Bowen theory.

So, what are the characteristics of Bowenian thinking? I will consider seven categories for comparison and contrast. There are many others that could be looked at, and no doubt there are many other Bowenian versions I have not yet met, but these are what I run into most commonly, taken from the points of view of focus, methods, coaches, goals and expectations, time required, end results, and language.

Focus

Bowenians, for the most part are overly focused on the organization. They want other people—and the organization, specifically—to change. Many of them actually think that Bowen theory is about producing change in organizations.

Bowen theory, by contrast, is about producing change in oneself— becoming a more emotionally mature, better version of self. Thus, the focus for change, is work on oneself. As has often been said, Bowen family systems theory is a bootstraps operation, with great respect for the fact that it is impossible to change someone else (including an organization). At the same time, a Bowen theory-based thinker will be looking for relationship patterns and watching how relationships work in the system. They are always doing research, but the questions they are asking are based on Bowen theory.

Methods

Bowenians often go into an organizational system, as a consultant, researching everything and everyone in it, in the old fashioned style of organizational development specialists, that is

actually based on old theory. At the conclusion of this study, they write a report about their findings that often gets put in a drawer and ignored. For them, leadership coaching has been de-emphasized. When they develop leadership programs, individual coaching may be de-emphasized or completely ignored. The system is often blamed for whatever is going on. Old theory techniques may be mixed in with Bowen family systems theory language, belying their lack of understanding. Also, they seem to think that the old-theory technique of explicating and ventilating feelings can be useful.

Bowen theory-based professionals work primarily with self and the leadership of the organization. They will not work with the entirety of the organization any more than in family therapy they would see the whole family. They understand that in a family, where the theory was discovered and developed, it is far more productive to work with the leadership (the parents) of the group. For Bowen thinkers, that paradigm (the human family) informs organizational work. It is not that leaders, using this paradigm, are encouraged to treat anyone like children, (high level parents do little of that as well). Rather they learn relationship mastery, including the beauty of relating to everyone in the organization from an equal posture. Organizational leaders working on self can sometimes see the functioning of their group step up remarkably.

For a systems thinker, coaching is emphasized, especially one-to-one sessions, on an ongoing basis, for an extended time period. Group coaching is also useful, but sometimes won't get to personal patterns the way individual sessions do. They are essential if one means to work in earnest on the old patterns that are getting in the way of high level leadership. . Someone who has been thinking systems longer than oneself is a great short cut when it comes to applying the ideas in real life.

Leaders are encouraged to watch the system without over-focusing on it, but looking through the lens of theory in order to make sense of, and reduce one's reactions to, emotional patterns that are counterproductive. In this way, they gradually start to increase their ability to see anxiety in others, watching it without absorbing it.

In short, methods used by Bowen systems thinkers are based solely on Bowen family systems theory, in the purest form they can master.

Coaches

Bowenians often pay scant attention to the qualifications of coaches, often putting people into training programs as faculty members, or consulting to organizations without an adequate background. Many people seem to think that because Bowen theory is a new way of thinking; all the usual qualifications for such work can be thrown overboard. They seem to believe that anyone with good personal results or intentions can go into a position where they coach others or consult to organizations, difficult as that is.

Bowen himself was most careful about whom he picked as coaches in his programs. Even to be accepted as a participant, one needed a postgraduate education. Coaches needed to have a

postgraduate degree in one of the helping professions. They also needed to have studied the new theory for several years. They needed to have demonstrated their own work on themselves in their families of origin.

Goals and expectations

Bowenians, from my observations seem too often to have the goal of changing the organization, making it increase its functioning, or get out of its rut, just as most people, upon entering Bowen theory in the beginning think that they can change their families.

However, Bowen systems theory is clear on that point. The only one I can expect to change is myself. If I work hard on that goal, I sometimes see people around me step up in their functioning as well. Differentiating people often see family members with whom they are closely associated to go into the work with that idea, however, is misguided. In Bowen theory, the main goal is that of differentiation of self. Bowenians, by contrast talk little of that all-important goal.

Time required for results

Bowenians often offer weekend or less training sessions for their members. There is very little serious time or money commitment. They come away from these thinking they have received formal training in Bowen theory.

Bowen systems thinkers, however offer year-long training programs. They are relatively expensive because of the staff-intensiveness required by both small group and individual coaching. They talk of multiple years of training and working in their families before they begin to see results in themselves or their leadership. Bowen said that time on the calendar was required. But this presumed fairly constant exposure to the ideas in the meantime.

End results

From Bowenian trainings, the organization may learn some of the wording of Bowen theory. Many people in organizations, exposed to less than several years of intensive training opportunities, because they have learned some new words and ideas, have an erroneous idea that they know Bowen theory. However, organizations consulting with them see no change. Often, the crisis that called in the consultant results in the leader leaving.

In working with families, therapists who begin using Bowen theory often notice that their client families stay together more often than they did when they were thinking along the lines of traditional theory/therapy. If these families stay with theory, they are observed to continue to do better and better over time. In the same way, when leaders of organizations are coached according to Bowen theoretical concepts, they most often are able to stay with the organization. In fact, the organizations that may have turned against them often end up begging them to stay. Also, leaders report running much calmer, less stressed than they ever have in their lives.

There are several important differences between families and organizations, however. One important one is that while families routinely increase their level of differentiation when one member, closely connected, works of his/her own level of maturity in the generations, I don't believe it works out the same way in organizations. They usually make impressive gains in functioning, under the leadership of someone who is working on differentiation of self. This, in my experience, though, is a change that is dependent on the high level leader's presence. It does not necessarily hold up after this leaders leaves.

Language

Bowenians often give themselves away by the words they use. For some reason they seem to think that they can improve on the carefully selected lexicon selected by Dr. Bowen to describe the phenomena he was discovering. His words avoided, as far as possible, traditional theory, or writings of his colleagues who were also studying the family, to avoid confusion. Bowen's vocabulary was clinical and emotionally neutral. In this way he did not escalate the problem a family was describing. Where some might use a word such as "fight," he selected "conflict" for example.

In organizations, too, Bowenians often unwittingly add to the problem by not adhering to Bowen's original language. One of the most common violations I hear is when leaders refer to anxious, triangling people as "sabotaging." They can end up with ugly, unpronounceable words such as "self-differentiation." Nothing like this can be found in Bowen's writing.

To summarize the differences between Bowen family systems thinkers working with leaders of organizations and the Bowenians, the latter demonstrate a lack of knowledge of Bowen family systems theory. They have little interest in the all-important goal of differentiation of self. There is no understanding of how long it takes or what is involved in getting up a point or two on the scale, a lack of appreciation of what is needed to attain real and permanent change in self, and a lack of adequate training in theory. They head toward the wrong goals, by the wrong methods and show no respect for Bowen's careful attention to language.

**Bowenians vs. Bowen Theory in Organizations
-A Comparison and Contrast Chart-**

	Bowenians	Bowen Theory
Focus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • System • Its relationship patterns 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self • Relationship • Patterns

Methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work with system itself • Teaching • Write reports • Coaching de-emphasized, often no individual coaching in programs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DOS in own family, in relationship system • Work with self, leadership of system works with self, in relationships of system • Teaching • Coaching emphasized, especially individual • System observed • New theory observed rigorously
Coaches	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Qualifications of coaches not carefully thought out 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Qualifications of coaches important
Goals and Expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Change system 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • DOS of leader leads to higher functioning, but not permanent change of system unless it is a family system
Time Required	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weekend training courses for facilitators • Weekend training courses for organizations • More informal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Years of effort. The rest of your life. An ongoing project. • Training for leaders essential • Always doing better
End Result	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organization may learn some buzz words, changes little over time • The leader leaves 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leaders stay most often • Families do better • Leaders calmer • Organizations function better as long as leader is there, not necessarily long term

Language	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Different from Bowen's• Emotionally charged words	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Respectful of Bowen's carefully worked out language• Emotionally neutral words
-----------------	--	---

Know theory, know theory, know theory.

If you know it you can use it. If you don't you can't! ♦

Written in 2010

If you would like to contribute questions or comments to this column for Dr. Gilbert to address, please write her at: rgoffice136@gmail.com.