

## **Daniel Papero, PhD**

### **The Challenge of Complex Human Systems: Bowen's Contribution To Understanding Human Behavior**



Complex systems consist of multiple connected parts acting together as a whole, a unit or a system. This results in collective behavior of the unit that cannot be inferred directly from the behavior of the specific parts. For living systems, the behavior emerges from the interaction among the various elements reflecting, among other things, the retained effects of past collective behavior, the environment in which the parts interact and to which they must adapt, the particular characteristics of the individual components, and the shifting degrees of tension within and among the parts as they interact.

Murray Bowen, from direct observation of the interaction of human families, developed a theory that considered the family a unit or natural system. The family system represents one form of a complex living system. Bowen's work led him to propose that a few relatively simple mechanisms lay beneath the web of interlinked family behaviors, i.e., that complex emergent behaviors stemmed from simple interactions and, due to the retained history of the system, could be anticipated to re-emerge when the whole of parts, conditions within the family system, and environmental conditions or context once again reassembled the particular mix of factors that had earlier produced the behavior.

#### **3rd International Conference on Bowen Family Systems Theory**

Sörbyn, Swedish Lapland, Sweden June 15-17 2020.  
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The behaviors could reflect the competence of the unit to adapt to changing conditions and challenges while retaining the integrity of the unit and ensuring the well-being of family members, or they could reflect the incompetence of the unit to adjust to the demands upon it, leading to the fracturing of connections and the impairment of one or more family members.

Bowen's attention to the functioning of the family unit in terms of its efficiency and effectiveness in managing life's challenges represents a revolutionary turn away from conventional psychiatry and its focus on the individual. Its promise has yet to be fully grasped as families and social units scramble to adapt to the effects of increasing human population, migration, climate change, and shifting demographic factors. This keynote address will review Bowen's findings and their implications for human life in the 21st century.

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That model includes five dimensions ranging from optimal to dysfunctional; resourcefulness, tension management, connectedness and integration, systems thinking, and goal structure. At this point, a systems model for assessing family functioning remains a preliminary proposed schema.

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