

## **Katherine Kott, PhD**

### **Challenges and Opportunities for Bowen Theory Research in Work Systems**



Bowen theory is a natural systems theory and as such may be applied to a variety of human systems in addition to the family. With his eighth concept, societal emotional process, Bowen gives us “permission” to apply his theory to nonfamily groups such as work systems.

However, societal emotional process is a more general concept than most of the other concepts Bowen put forth in his theory. This offers both challenges and opportunities to researchers and practitioners who wish to use Bowen theory in their work. This presentation will explore barriers and offer solutions to this dilemma.

#### **Challenges:**

- Bowen theory concepts and terminology may not apply as directly to work systems as to family systems and may need to be adjusted (e.g. nuclear family emotional process)
- Lack of published research in mainstream journals outside of the family therapy field
- Distribution of practice-oriented material at scale to managers and leaders in work systems
- No standardized natural systems framework for representing organizations similar to the family diagram

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

### Opportunities:

- Propose an alternative vocabulary for use with work systems, based on proposals from organization development practitioners; develop Bowen theory concepts such as differentiation of self, emotional process, and transmission specific to work systems
- Collaborate with academics—perhaps people outside of the Bowen network who might be interested in writing and publishing material on Bowen theory; comparing and contrasting with theoretical frameworks that are better known could be particularly fruitful; consider partnerships with degree or certificate-granting institutions
- Collaborate with practice-oriented organizations outside of the Bowen network to present/publish/distribute material
- Develop a natural systems-based concept of work systems that could be encoded into an application like the Family Diagram App.

The presenter will discuss these challenges and opportunities based on her experience as a researcher applying Bowen theory to work systems as well as consulting to researchers who have been frustrated in their attempts to use Bowen theory in their work.