

Bowenian Family of Origin Exploration

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Abstract

The purpose of this project was to explore my family of origin. In order to do this, I interviewed three members of my family and asked them a range of questions about our family. For this project I chose my brother, father, and an uncle. As a result of completing this project I was better able to understand my family and family background, and reveal aspects of my family, which I did not know about before.

I also completed a family genogram, which shows the important relationships between family members and based a lot of information on my family from a Bowen Family Therapy perspective, which shows my family very differentiated and lacking what Bowen would call “oneness.”

As a result, I understand what effect my family background will have on my professional life as I move forward with my counseling career. I can be more self-aware of those factors, which might affect my career and my interactions with clients.

Introduction

I recently interviewed three members of my family in order to complete Bowenian Family of Origin Exploration paper. This was done via a combination of email, Facebook messages, and telephone calls, because my family of origin is located in the United Kingdom. As a result of these communications, I was able to better understand our family strengths and challenges and how my family members cope with the various challenges, which our family has faced over the years. I chose to interview my brother, my father, and my maternal uncle. They are my closest relatives and were willing to be interviewed. I have other family members whom I asked to participate, but they were reluctant to answer the questions and participate in this study.

During the course of the interviews, I was able to understand a variety of issues that affected our family of which I was previously unaware, including financial challenges affecting my parents and the discussion about whether or not to have another child after my brother and me. In addition, I understood more about family members whom I had not met including my maternal grandfather who died nine years before I was born. Overall, this project revealed to me aspects of my family I did not know about or had thought about. It gave me a greater understanding of my own background and family of origin. This paper and the attached genogram outline family relationships and relational patterns according to Bowen Family theory and also demonstrate how we as a family have too great a distance in our relationships (Brown, 1999).

Family Interview Summary

My family is from a white British ethnic and cultural background and traditionally consisted of blue-collar workers in occupations such as electrician, pattern maker, painter

and decorators, and various unskilled laboring jobs. I was the first person in my family to go to college and, to date, only one other family member has attended college. Most of the family has no education beyond a high school level and some family members did not graduate from high school. The religious background of my family is Anglican and Catholic, although my family is fairly secular with few, if any, involved in religious worship.

My father is eighty-one years old and worked as an electrician of many years before becoming a parking lot attendant. He was reluctant to answer some questions and has never seen much value in college education. He was prepared to answer some questions but not others, so I worked with him on the questions he did answer.

At the start of interview my father wanted to say that he was born in Preston, England to a working-class family or a “working family” (R. North, personal communication, May, 2021). My grandfather was a line inspector at a local truck manufacturing plant (Leyland Motors) while my grandmother worked in a cotton mill. My father was close to both his parents and got along well with them and his older brother. When my father was young money was always an issue. My grandfather used to gamble a lot of money on horse racing which meant that money was always tight and some times you simple "had to do without" (R. North, personal communication, May, 2021). This issue sometimes led to arguments in the home between my grandparents but there was never any domestic violence. For the most part the family was close knit with what my father believed were equal amounts of affection for him and his older brother.

My grandfather carried out discipline in the family. My father was physically punished a number of times as he was growing up and when he became a father himself

he also performed the discipline in his home. According to my father, there is no history of significant mental health problems, substance abuse issues, or health problems.

However, I have observed several of my family members suffering from depression and my family has a history of blood pressure, heart problems, and strokes.

My knowledge of my parents before they were married this information is somewhat limited. I know my mother worked in confectionary before she met my father and spent a lot of time with her friends. Shortly before she met my father, she started a new job where my father worked which is how they met. Before they were married, my parents spent a lot of time going on trips to the south of England, sometimes with my paternal grandparents. When they decided to get married, they made the decision together and there was no proposal. Three years after they met they were married. I was born five years later.

My father said the greatest challenge the family has faced was dealing with the death of my mother in 2019 and his own declining health. He referred to my mother's death as a "disaster" (R. North, personal communication, May, 2021). He said his greatest challenge was being able to cope on his own while also dealing with his health problems. My father said our family's greatest strength was its thriftiness and ability to start from nothing and yet now have money. He said this was true of his brother and also himself, but he was concerned that other, younger family members might fritter the money away.

My younger brother was more willing to be interviewed and answered all of the questions asked. During his interview, he reiterated we are working class family from a northern town in England. He, like several other members of my family, is a painter and decorator. He has been in that job since leaving school at just 16 years old. Early on in

the interview my brother said all of the family gets along pretty well except for a rift between him and I that lasted three years. He and he said it was instigated by my sister-in-law from whom he is now separated. Other than that relationship breakdown the family gets along well although it is “not what you would consider a close family” (D. North, personal communication, May, 2021). He also stated that when growing up he could feel the lack of closeness in our family, he felt it was different from other families whom he thought displayed more closeness and affection. He believed this was a definite weakness in our family and explains part of why I now live in the United States and why we rarely see other members of the family. My brother also argued this could be considered strength because it “encouraged each of us to be self reliant and be able to stand on our own in life” (D. North, personal communication, May 2021). From the Bowen perspective, my parents had a tendency “to produce offspring at the same level of differentiation as themselves” (Gladding, 2019, pg. 230) something, which Bowen describes as “family projection” (Kilpatrick, 1980, as cited in Gladding, 2019, pg. 230).

My brother was aware at a young age money was an issue in the family but later considered the possibility that our father did not like to spend money and indeed “hoarded money away” (D. North, personal communication, May 2021) in stocks, shares, and savings accounts. There was one period of time when my brother was very young were our father was laid off and did not have steady employment for more than a year. My brother later found out as an adult that during that period money was a real issue and our parents had to dip into savings to cover bills, which including the mortgage. Without the money from savings there was a possibility they would not have been able to keep the house.

As far as my brother knew, no one in the family has ever been incarcerated or arrested and there is no history of substance abuse or anyone needing counseling for mental health illnesses. He did think that when we were growing up our parents had some mental health issues. He said he remembered a time when our mother considered going on tranquilizers for anxiety, stress, and mental health issues.

When addressing the issues of privacy, intimacy, and sex, my brother stated these issues were never discussed in the family. He had to learn about them from friends and from "stuff he read at school" (D. North, personal communication, May, 2021). My brother felt the issue of sex education was lacking in our family and was for some reason, a taboo subject. It was never brought up or discussed as children. During this part of the interview, I pointed out when I was about 13 years old our mother raised the topic of sex and discussed it with me, but it was the only time the issue ever came up. My brother stated the issue was never raised by either of our parents with him and he had to learn about sex and intimacy on his own.

Like myself, my brother did not know much about our parents before they married other than "some general stuff" (D. North, personal communication, May, 2021). He knows where our father was born, when he was younger he liked to fish and ride his bike, and left school at fifteen in order to start an apprenticeship as an electrician. He also knew our father's first girlfriend was a woman called Dot and his first car was a Wolseley (British made car). He also knew that our father liked to attend matches of our local professional soccer club and was a serious follower of the team in the 1950s. He also liked to play soccer and my brother said our father considered himself a pretty good player.

My brother had fewer stories about our mother, but knew our mother had rheumatic fever when she was five years old and was very ill for a time. He also knew that one of her best friends died from leukemia when she was just 15 years old and our mother sometimes liked to talk about her friend. He also said she was not a strong student in school and like our father left school at 15 years old to follow a career in baking and confectionary. She initially began her career in a local shop in her hometown, Leyland and then got job in the canteen at Leyland Motors where she met our father in 1962. She got married three years later and continued working until I was born. My brother went on to say the greatest challenge our family has faced was the death of my mother, and it has been a big adjustment getting used to the idea she is no longer here.

My maternal uncle. He is 85 years old and was willing to share family stories from when he was younger. My uncle talked extensively about my grandparents and had stories about them during their marriage and before they were married. At the start of the interview, my uncle talked how his side of the family were mostly white, working class and, for a long time, consisted of weavers. He himself was a lath operator at Iddon Brothers for 47 years making precision components for other businesses. My maternal grandfather worked on the assembly line at Leyland Motors doing a variety of jobs to help build busses and trucks while my grandmother was a secretary for a company called BTR, which made tires and rubber products.

My uncle has lived in the same house his entire life having never left home. He pointed out the land for the house was purchased in 1928 for £10 (\$13) and then it cost £500 (\$650) to build the house and he was born eight years later. He remembers the Second World War and German fighter planes flying over the house on their way to

bomb factories in both his hometown of Leyland and my hometown of Preston. He also talked about how my grandparents built a bomb shelter during the war. He and the entire family used to shelter there during the German bombing raids. During the war my grandfather was deemed to be in a vital industry and had also served in World War I so was not required to join the British Army or the Home Guard.

During the conversation, my uncle talked about how our family was of white British background and members of the Church of England (Anglican Church). Both grandparents were regular churchgoers and required both my uncle and my mother to go to church and Sunday school. As my uncle and mother got older the requirement for church and Sunday school was no longer enforced although my grandparents remained committed to the church and were religious until the end of their lives. After the death of my grandfather, the church became even more important to my grandmother and she attended church regularly until infirmity prevented her from doing so.

According to my uncle, there is no history of mental illness in the family and no history of substance abuse or incarceration. When my uncle was growing up he learned about sex and intimacy from my grandmother although the information was rather limited. My uncle said the issue of sex rarely came up in their family and my grandfather never discussed it at all.

When discussing the issue of strengths and challenges, my uncle said the greatest strength was continuity. He said the family had managed to continue over the years when he has seen other families for one reason or another fall apart. He also touched on our family's lack of mental health issues and lack of legal problems as being additional

strengths for the family. My uncle said most people in the family were reliable and dependable, although he felt the family could be a little closer knit in their relationships.

Based on my family interviews, my family is not fused based on Bowen Family Theory. Instead, my family is, to a great extent, “emotionally cut off” (Gladding, 2019, pg. 228) from one another. I feel this has been something that started with my grandparents and to a degree has continued with other family members. In most families, a “person’s basic level of emotional functioning is established in that person’s nuclear family of origin, which constitutes a natural system of emotionally interdependent people functioning reciprocally in relationship to one another” (Bregman & White, 2011, pg 6). In my family, this system has broken down as family members can go weeks or months without talking to each other. This makes individuals within my family very differentiated, is more so when compared to other families.

In the three interviews I conducted, two of them discussed self-reliance. This is a theme I have considered runs in our family and explains part of the reason why our family is not close. In many ways, our family lacks “family oneness” (Bowen, 2013, as cited by Noone & Papero, 2015, pg. 17) whereby families are a system and individual family members are part of that system. All families have a certain degree of family oneness, it is not strong in my family and we are not a close. The implications of this lack of oneness are we have high levels of differentiation among family members. Our greatest challenge is to avoid or develop an ability not to be emotionally cut off from one another.

Many of our family traits have been passed down from one generation to the next in what is known as the “multigenerational transmission process” (Noone & Papero, 2015,

pg. 30). This concept states that our differentiation of self is not just a result of the course of our development, but “but is a product of preceding generations” (Noone & Papero, 2015, pg. 30).

While Bowen's "focus was on patterns that develop in families in order to defuse anxiety” (Brown, 1999, p. 95), in our family, we are too differentiated which has led to too much stress and anxiety. Our family would benefit from Bowen Family Therapy so we can become less differentiated as a family. A balance would be achieved between fusion and differentiation where our family would be better able to deal with stress and anxiety and be more flexible when crises occur.

Professional Implications

Based on what I have learned completing the interviews and paper, there are some professional implications for when I become a mental health counselor. In order to be an effective mental health counselor, I need to be aware of the problems and issues in my own family. In Bowen Family Therapy, “the therapist is responsible for working on differentiation of self in his or her own family as the basis for the ability to engage and transmit differentiation in clinical practice” (Metcalf, 2011, p. 51). In my case, the main issue that needs to be considered is my family is too differentiated. This increases the possibility of becoming emotionally cut off from my family and which could cause anxiety in family members and myself. However, a certain degree of emotional cutoff is to be expected since I live thousands of miles away from my family of origin. The solution for me is to seek my own counseling using Bowen Family Therapy and working with a therapist to avoid becoming completely emotionally cut off from my family. In recent years, I have been receiving counseling and this process has helped me come to

terms with the existing relationships I have with my family. This counseling will continue and will deal with my high degree of differentiation.

As a future counselor, I find Bowen Family Theory appeals to me. It is something I will want to incorporate into my own counseling techniques. The use of genograms and seeing a family's problems and patterns of behavior as multigenerational are something which makes sense to me and I would use as a future counselor. Helping clients resolve their patterns of behavior, which have lasted for generations, will be of great help to the client family but also helps future generations of the same family.

When working with families as a counselor, I will have to be aware of my own family issues and see how to resolve them. I also have to ensure in my own counseling career I use "knowledge and experience...to establish a neutral position" (Metcalf, 2011, p.51). Being neutral and acting as coach and facilitator would be my main role as a counselor as I adopt Bowen theories into my counseling methods.

Being self aware of my own family issues and working as a neutral facilitator in the counseling process will make me a better and more effective counselor and will put me in a better position to help my clients. By completing this assignment, I have become more aware of family relationships and the members of my family I am close to. It is also important to be aware of other family relations and how, collectively, these relationships affect the functioning of our family. Overall, the insight I have learned will contribute to my professional development and functioning.

Conclusions

By developing a genogram, interviewing family members, and learning about Bowen Family Therapy, I have a better understanding of how my family functions and operates.

I have been able to map relationships and some patterns of behavior to understand certain behaviors and traits have been passed down through at least the last three generations.

In the future, I will be more mindful of my own family's relationships and behavior patterns and will take those into consideration when entering into my own counseling career. Bowen Family Theory is an idea I can use in counseling with clients and may be used to map patterns of behavior and relationships in almost any family.

As I continue through the counseling program, I will strive to learn more about Bowen's theories so I may better understand them and to use them in my own counseling sessions. I will also strive to better understand my family of origin, taking what I have learned about my family and using it to be a more mindful counselor.

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Appendix

North Genogram

