

Extraordinary Relationships

A New Way of Thinking About Human Interactions

Roberta M. Gilbert, M.D.

ISBN 0-471-34690-X

Read: 2009 December 19 to 2010 January 18

Reviewed: 2010 January 30

Although Dr. Gilbert is listed as the author of this book, she functions more as the Plato, the disciple or scribe to the real Socrates of this system of thought: Dr. Murray Bowen. From the three Introductions and one Preface to the Appendices, this book is really an organized and reverent presentation of the worldview of Bowen, like Plato's Republic is of Socrates, but not as long and complicated.

I found the book on my nightstand, on the pile of books waiting to be read, and assumed that it was one of those given me by a missionary about evangelism or some other form of ministry. In the first Forward (Dr. Michael Kerr), however, I read this:

“Bowen’s research and efforts to develop theory were based on the assumption that, in spite of the complexities and vagaries of human existence, *a science of human behavior could be developed*. [His emphasis] He believed that a major obstacle to the acceptance of human behavior as a proper subject for scientific inquiry is that, traditionally, humankind has tended to consider itself a unique form of life, one with a special place in God’s plan. *Such self-glorification precludes our seeing the myriad ways we act just like other forms of life*. [My emphasis] If we can shift our focus from differences to similarities, we can stay factual about all behavior, human as well as nonhuman. When humans are considered a special case, the floodgates spring open to imagination and subjectivity as a way of explaining what we do.”

Although I agree with this statement because I find that it matches observed reality quite well, I knew at once that this was no book from any missionary or minister I know.

(It seems that it was loaned me by my therapist, a Christian but not a dogmatic or “fundamentalist” or, I would say, “superstitious” one. This therapist considers himself a “passionate moderate,” which, if you think about it, is a difficult stance.)

Freud dealt with people as individuals. His contributions to (invention of?) psychiatry involved dealing with the inner person, the ego, the id, the subconscious. Bowen systems theory deals with people in relationship. It’s all about the family, particularly the family of origin but also other groups of relationships, like those at church or work. People function in groups, the basic social unit being the triangle. Triangles are unbalanced. One side is closer than the other two. Tension forms and transfers itself around the triangle in an attempt to find new equilibrium. Every set of relationships can be broken down into and analyzed with respect to all of its triangles. They get the math wrong several times (about the number of triangles for a given number of people, clearly they are not mathematicians) but that slight problem is only an aside to the idea itself.

The other fundamental concepts are “differentiation” of selves, as opposed to “fusion,” basic self and pseudo self, anxiety, over functioning and under functioning, emotions, and feelings. A glossary in Appendix A attempts to define and describe these terms and I found it necessary fairly early to flip back there and go through them so as to follow the jargon in the way intended. After all, in my field “differentiation” is an operation in calculus that measures the degree of change and “fusion” is a type of nuclear reaction.

An important usage distinction is “emotion” versus “feelings.” Emotion is the wired-in instinctive reaction of a person to a situation. A not well-differentiated person will spend a great deal of time and most of their energy attempting to attain and maintain approval in important relationships because much of their essential “self” comes from outside themselves, from those relationships.

Feeling is the instantaneous stimuli that elicits some reaction. An insult would cause an immediate feeling response, but emotion would internalize it. A high degree of differentiation would allow a person not to internalize it. I can thus extend my saying, “emotions *and* feelings are good slaves, not good masters.”

When I saw the word “instinct” in the definition of “emotion” used here, I was reminded of Dr. James Dobson who makes the authoritative claim that “human beings have no instincts.” He is clearly one of the “floodgates” people. (My first reaction on hearing this claim was that he must never have been present for childbirth, or seen an infant sneeze.)

It takes a long time reading into the book to figure out what they are talking about. Ultimately, a few examples are given. Sure, the family a person lives with determines a lot about who they are and how they behave. Sure, you can’t fix an individual without at least addressing their relationship systems. Apparently this wasn’t so obvious to Freud. (Maybe Freud was an introvert.) The Bowen people like to bring in entire families and diagram them and get everybody involved in working on issues. Preferably, they would like to bring in the entire family of origin if they are still available.

Great as this sounds in theory, it is clearly impossible in practice.

It takes a long time to pick up that differentiation is good and fusion is bad. This could be because the author is trying to separate the theory from value judgments and holds it as an accomplishment that, unlike Freud, they are not prejudging the rightness or wrongness of certain conditions or symptoms. Nonetheless, it is clear what the fundamental values of this system are:

An individual possesses a core self that is non-negotiable. This is by definition. Much of what others see of the self is the pseudo-self, (the “public persona” or “game face”) which *is* highly negotiable. People set up their pseudo-self to minimize the difficulties they have in their social relationships, but it is not possible to be in a close, familial relationship without the core self being known.

A person who is well differentiated understands his or her non-negotiable core self and accepts it as it is. (In this book, they occasionally refer to well-informed values, opinions, and views as part of the constituency of this self.) A person who is not well differentiated gets a lot of their self from someone else, perhaps someone who is stronger, perhaps someone who is equally weak or worse.

Sometimes a relationship will contain a person who is over-functioning and another who is under-functioning. The under-functioning person doesn't have enough self to be making it on their own. They don't make decisions but defer to their partner. This violates their personal integrity. They can even be physical invalids. It is unclear in this book whether that symptom is a cause or a result. From case to case it is probably both. The over-functioning person is therefore doing more than they should. They have unhealthy reach into the other person's space. A healthy step could be for the over-functioning (or under-functioning) person to become more of their own self, to withdraw (or extend) to their own boundaries. Such a change in a relationship is usually met with severe protests from the other side, but the claim here is that ultimately both people become healthier and eventually even glad for the greater separation. They go from fusion to differentiation, from bad to good.

The ideal, according to Bowen theory, is a person who is fully differentiated and doesn't need another person, physically, emotionally, or mentally, but *chooses* to be in relationship with another perfectly differentiated person and to make the sacrifices and do the work necessary for that.

Now, here is the bad news about all this. The claim is made that most of your differentiation stance or "score" is formed in your family of origin, thus the importance (over importance, I think) of sibling order in the discussion, then you choose or make your own grown up family to match your own level of differentiation, and nothing much changes throughout your life. The bad news is that nothing *can* much change, according to current working versions of the theory. At least they haven't figured out what to do to get much change, or to measure differentiation well enough to discern change. By working really hard and wanting to change, sometimes people make a little bit of progress. Sometimes it is even permanent and the claim is that even such small change vastly improves a person's life.

In any case, no one comes very close to "100" on the 0 to 100 scale of differentiation. The healthiest people that the author and her colleagues and professional community know about are in the 50-75 range, and most of the people in the world are under 50. After having gone through many variations on this poorly defined scale, I think I might be around 50, having been permitted to grow a little to reach that level over a few decades of struggle.

Ignorant as anyone, I have some differences with these theories. First, although I think families of origin are important in formation of personality, I think that people are born hardwired to much of what they are and remain to be. This, to me, explains the difficulty

of changing the adult better than the family of origin lock down. Sure, some of early life has an influence, maybe a big one, but I don't think there's much value in blaming your parents and your siblings for everything. (Or, as we say conversely, "parents take far too much credit and far too much blame for their children.") I found reading through the Appendix on sibling order to be a lot like reading a horoscope. "Oh, that is me, how did they know?" Oh, wait, I'm not a Leo (a younger brother of sisters or whatever). So I'm skeptical.

This all being said, I did find the book convicting and difficult to read. I do indeed have great personal distress from lack of differentiation from those who I admire or follow and this does indeed lead me into more pseudo-self than I can maintain. I've known for a long time that they are they and I am me and I can never be as good as they are at being them and that this is why people want to be in positions of leadership so it is they who get to decide who we try to emulate. The two big take away messages for me from this book were that differentiation is a good thing, not a selfish thing, "know thyself" Thoreau would say, and that my personal hook is approval. This realization, about 60% of the way through was very freeing, in a time of intense professional fusion-related distress. After a few days, I realized, more soberly, that requiring only approval from myself (and my God) was still a high standard, something for which I would still have to take personal responsibility and would still have to work hard to achieve, but that the work of doing that would have to be done while remaining on guard against those external approvals that are unwelcome and inappropriate to my own core self.

Or as my therapist says, three fourths of criticism says more about the critic than it does about you. The other fourth may contain something you'd want to think about.

Maybe those missionaries would be proud after all, even if we had to knock "man" down a notch to make this progress.

At the end, they try to extend Bowen theory to international relations. It is hard, after all, to have done all this research about family systems and built up a structure around it that gives some scientific understanding to it, and then not apply it to the biggest families of all: nations. On first thought, it seems to me like the theory, at least for now, might help us all understand international affairs better, and indeed it does, but until they come up with objective measurement and techniques for improving differentiation with mere individuals, I'd be surprised if there is much that can be done for entire nations. Anyway, international relations *are* individual relations.

As with any book review, there is much here that I haven't covered and as with most book reads, there is much that I haven't even absorbed. Would it be useful, I wonder, to do things like diagram family of origin, to look for relationship distances or cutoff and so on, as a follow on to this?