

PY 555 Reaction Papers

This handout will serve as the set of instructions for the nine reaction papers you must complete for this class.

Purpose

The reaction papers should demonstrate the student's ability to process his/her internal responses personally and professionally. The ability to reflect upon and process feelings and thoughts – supported by informed information - is an important skill. Any sources used in the paper should be properly documented using the format provided by the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association. Graduate level spelling, grammar and style are expected, and grades will be greatly reduced if written expression is poorly presented.

Objectives

1. The assimilate the information from the weekly topic into a broader understanding of Systems Theory
2. Demonstrate the ability to present research from multiple sources into a single, coherent research document.

Preparation Instructions

1. Compose your *Reaction Paper* in Microsoft Word or a compatible word processing application.
2. The paper should be formatted and typed using Times New Roman, 12-point font, single-spaced, and one-inch margins (no exceptions).
3. The length of the paper should be one page in length (page number does not include the title page or references pages).
4. Use APA 6th edition formatting and use a minimum of 2 references.

Content Instructions

1. Write a one-page reaction paper reflecting upon your understanding of the weekly chapters.
2. Please keep in mind that a reaction paper is not a summary of what the author wrote but rather your analysis and critique of the presented topic.

Submission Instructions

- Save this assignment as "fname_lname_reaction_paper_chp#.doc." (i.e., john_smith_reaction_paper_chp2.doc). Replace the # symbol with the chapter number.
- Access the *Assignments* link located on the Course Menu to upload the final document as an attachment to the *Reaction Paper Chapter #* drop box by the due date listed on the Course Schedule. Replace the # symbol with the chapter number.

CHAPTER 2

Context

EVEN IF YOU have heard the story of the blind men and the elephant, it bears repeating. Most sources trace it back to India, and it shows up in Sufi, Buddhist, Jain, and Hindu traditions. Even coming from these different perspectives, the basics of the story are pretty consistent. A group of blind men are studying under a learned religious leader. They are instructed to go and observe as much as they can about an elephant. The seven blind men go in to observe the elephant, and then the teacher returns to quiz them. One of them says, "I know all about an elephant. An elephant is like a tree trunk; an elephant has a 40-inch diameter, it's sturdy, and it's strong." The next one says, "No, no, no, you are incorrect! An elephant is like a wall, it's broad, and it doesn't have that circumference. You're right that it is sturdy, but you've got the shape all wrong." Then the next student says, "I don't know how you could be so misguided. An elephant is like a rope, it's full of fibers and it's bristly." So of course, they all start arguing among themselves about the true nature of an elephant. The teacher listens for a while, then stops all of them in their tracks and makes one of my favorite statements: "You are all right and you are all wrong. You all describe the elephant, but none of you know the true nature of an elephant. An elephant is all of these things, but none of these things is an elephant."

MULTIPLE PERSPECTIVES

The story illustrates the systemic concept of context in a couple of different ways. On the most basic level, the story shows the fallacy in trying to understand the true nature of any type of phenomenon. Our perceptions will always be somewhat limited, and so certainly having a

narrower perspective is going to be problematic, and yet how do we have a perspective that is not narrow? The task of creating a sufficiently broad perspective often seems almost impossible. Part of what we learn from the story is that any understanding of reality is always limited by our own individual context, thus our understanding depends on the part of the elephant directly in front of us. In therapy, it is hard for me to forget this story, because so frequently, people in couples and families are similar to the blind men studying the elephant. It is not uncommon for me to hear an argument similar to the following:

"You need to be more firm and disciplined with our kids. They walk all over you! How are they going to learn to take care of themselves when you do everything for them? You've got to tell them no, and make them follow through on their chores. It is our job to be sure that they are competent and responsible."

"But you are always yelling and screaming, telling them what they are doing wrong. Family life is supposed to be warm and pleasant, not like boot camp. You are always ordering them around! I want them to feel content and good about themselves."

The irony of this argument is that it is highly likely that both parents are right. Like the blind men arguing about whether an elephant is a tree trunk or a rope, from a distance one can see that it doesn't make sense for parents to argue about whether children should develop responsibility or self-esteem, that it is almost certain that parents ultimately want children to have both. But systems theory also helps us understand the inevitability of multiple perspectives, in that each of us will base our understanding of any situation on our direct experience, which will be influenced by a number of contextual factors. In systems theory, this shift in perspective allows us to examine the difference between "either/or" and "both/and" kinds of thinking. When we engage in "both/and" thinking, the questions we ask begin to change. Instead of which perspective is correct, we can ask, "How do these two things relate to each other? What context does each person draw from in presenting a perspective? What is the possible overlap between perspectives, and how do they differ? When does this perspective fit best, and when does it fit least?" So with the arguing parents, we would want to know: "When does structure work well in this family, and when does support work well? How does the idea of order and responsibility relate to the idea of care and self esteem? How could these values begin to complement each other, rather than

competing against each other?" Referring back to the elephant story, it is easy to see that to understand the nature of the elephant, the multiple observers are going to have to listen to each others' perspectives. The parallels to human relationships are profound: the recognition that to truly understand a problem in context, it is imperative to listen to the perspective of each person involved in the problem.

The notion of multiple perspectives is also foundational to the practice of psychotherapy. Being able to say to a client, "I think there is more than one way to look at this" is a fascinating part of our role as therapists. Often, patients become mired in their experience of their problems and can't take a step back to see alternatives. We are implicitly invited to examine the problem in the broader context of the client's life, in the context of our expertise as psychologists, and in the context of our own experience with the client. We are actually allowed to be the wise person in the story and to share our metaperspective on the patient's issues. The trick is, of course, that once we are asked to act as the wise person in the story, we sometimes start to believe that we can actually see and understand the whole elephant. It is one thing to be able to say, "Have you looked at that from a different vantage point? There's more than one way to look at your struggle; let's try another perspective," but from there it can be surprisingly easy to believe that we know our clients' reality better than they do. While I applaud the wish for big-picture thinking that is inherent in systems theory, the fact that each of our perspectives is limited by our own context is equally essential in the theory. As we will see in greater depth when we talk about culture and postmodernist approaches in Chapter 8, there is a complex balancing act involved in using the expertise gained from our theoretical knowledge while also empowering our clients to develop their own expertise—especially when they are more familiar with a different part of the elephant.

MEANINGFUL WHOLE

Not only does systems theory recognize multiple perspectives, there is a second concept tied to the idea of context in systems that is equally foundational. The other concept is *nonsummativity*, a term used to describe the phenomenon that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts (Watzlawick, Bavelas, & Jackson, 1967). This is another idea that is not new, as it is frequently traced to the Greek philosopher Aristotle (Hanson, 1995). Part of the notion of nonsummativity can be understood through our human tendency to organize phenomena into



Figure 2.1 Young girl/old woman perceptual shift

meaningful wholes. Looking back to Gestalt psychology early in the 20th century, we are reminded of Max Wertheimer's work on human perception (King & Wertheimer, 2005; Wertheimer, 1959). This work illustrated the way that our brains will fill in the necessary information so that an ambiguous picture will make sense. One exercise used repeatedly to demonstrate perceptual wholes starts with the picture in Figure 2.1 and asks people to state what they see. This figure is credited to W.E. Hill, who published it in the *Puck* humor magazine in 1915 (Weisstein, 2010). Generally, subjects see either a young woman (who is turned away from the observer, with a fairly strong chin and a necklace) or an old woman, with a large nose, looking down.

This type of exercise is fascinating because we can observe a process that is typically unconscious as we make sense of our world. Most people naturally perceive one image or the other, showing that we immediately organize the drawing into something coherent. This helps to explain why we get too attached to the idea that our part of the elephant is the whole—our perception has organized it this way. For many people, seeing the other version of the picture involves changing the interpretation given to various aspects of the drawing. These exercises show the ways that our perceptions can shift, sometimes

suddenly, when the context around them shifts. When I have a student who has a hard time seeing one of the two images, I try to have them identify one piece of the drawing, knowing that then the context will shift around it and that the perspective will then become whole. If they are able to see the old woman, for example, I might focus on having them see her nose as the young woman's chin. Rather than simply focusing on the new whole (it is a young woman; don't you see her?), the ability to start with a key part of an object and then build a new whole seems central to our perception. This focus on other parts of the whole helps us to modify what we see as figure (in the foreground) and what we see as ground (in the background.) I find this shift in figure-ground perception similar to what happens in psychotherapy, as clients attend to the things that they find most significant and important. Looking at issues from multiple vantage points often allows a significant change in perspective, as the perception is organized into a new whole. Once the shift takes place, it can also be surprisingly difficult to return to the original perception.

A similar way of looking at nonsummativity is to examine the ways that groups of objects become whole entities. Laszlo (1972) makes the distinction between heaps and wholes, noting that a bowl of peanuts is a heap, but a peanut plant is a whole. Going back to our definition of a system, we see that a bowl of peanuts is not an organized entity that is maintained by the interaction of its parts, but clearly a peanut plant meets that definition. Deciding whether a group of people meets the definition of a system can be more difficult. As we examine the concept of non-summativity, it is easier to see the kinds of interactions and relationships that turn groups into a whole. We all know about that type of synergy that occurs in some groups, where a certain mixture of people creates a feeling or atmosphere that couldn't be predicted by knowing the individual members. Anyone who studies organizations and teams is also aware of the effect of getting just the right dynamic between players to maximize success. It doesn't mean that the individual parts aren't important, yet often what we seek in groups is the feeling of being part of something larger. Living in Chicago during the ascendance of Michael Jordan on the Bulls professional basketball team, I was fascinated to see the interplay between individual performance and group performance. Of course, any team would benefit from having a world-class player like Michael Jordan, yet initially his individual skills were not enough to guarantee success. Under Coach Phil Jackson, however, something on the team began to change. With leadership, time, and practice, somehow these individual teammates

were able to function much of the time as a cohesive whole. As any basketball fan knows, the Chicago teams headed by Jackson ultimately won six world championships. In this instance, it was clear that the whole was greater than the sum of the parts.

While the concept of viewing a system holistically may seem perfectly logical on the surface, we need to remember that a great deal of Western science is based on exactly the opposite concept. To go back to one of the founders of systems thinking, Ludwig von Bertalanffy, we know that much of our experimental procedure is based on isolating phenomena from their environment in order to reduce variability. To put Bertalanffy's worldview in context, the practice of biology was dominated by two opposing forces at the time of his training (Bertalanffy, 1968; Davidson, 1983). The first perspective, materialism, posited that there were key materials, or building blocks, that made up all living matter. Within the materialist tradition, the most important thing a scientist could do was break down any living thing into its core elements. In contrast, the vitalists felt that there was a significant life force that drove biological processes and that a mechanistic view of biology would ignore the primary force. This view can be illustrated through looking at two perspectives toward evolutionary adaptation. Within the mechanistic view, random genetic mutations occur that may or may not be favorable in the environment, and the vitalistic view suggests a master plan with a purposeful, final cause.

The brilliance of Bertalanffy's approach was that it ultimately bridged these perspectives by offering a third way to look at biology. Rather than simply arguing whether the mechanistic or the vitalistic approach was actually true, Bertalanffy took a step back to examine the ways that these ideas relate to each other and to see what the ideas don't address. In doing so, he noted that one major problem with the mechanistic view is that it works better with closed systems than with open systems. In closed systems, phenomena can be isolated from their environments and then reduced to their component parts. In contrast, in open systems, organisms are constantly exchanging information with the environment and are both adapting and being acted upon. The open system view reminds us that living things are always part of larger systems and are simultaneously comprised of smaller, component systems. As scientists, our wish is to break down anything we are studying into its basic, essential parts so that we can understand it, and of course, that methodology has given us great scientific advances. Yet the beauty of Bertalanffy's observation about open systems is that he identified the limitations involved in seeing parts outside the context of the whole.

LIMITATIONS OF LINEAR VIEWS

Scientists today continue to struggle with the limitations of this linear approach. One of my favorite examples comes from Michael Pollan (2006, 2008), who writes about the ways that an increase in the study of nutrition has actually led to a greater number of diet-related ailments. We are all familiar with the reversals in diet recommendations over the past few decades, but Pollan sheds light on the flawed science that leads to these fallacies. Using a reductionistic premise, scientists work to break food down into its elemental chemical components and then use this knowledge of the basic chemical process to address some type of an ailment. This logic has been used to address problems of obesity, and the application of this logic has had some surprising results. If we know that fat has more calories per gram than carbohydrates or proteins, then it would be logical to reduce the fat in foods, thereby reducing the caloric content. It should benefit both the health of the public and the profitability of the food industry to develop and market low-fat foods. Yet the unintended consequence of this seemingly sound scientific approach was an increase in the national levels of obesity. As Pollan points out, we don't know why this approach didn't work, but there are ample examples to suggest that this linear, reductionistic approach to studying diet and nutrition is inherently flawed.

An open systems approach would address the problem of obesity differently. Rather than trying to isolate the high-calorie components of the American diet and replace them with lower calorie substitutes, an open systems approach would look at obesity more holistically, trying to examine the ways that the pieces fit together. The diet and exercise patterns of people struggling with obesity might be compared with those who don't struggle, not only to look for single contributing factors (high-fat diet) but also to look for patterns of difference. For example, an open systems approach might look at the interplay between type and amount of food eaten, timing and amount of exercise, and family patterns in weight stability and weight gain over time.

Of course, by making the picture bigger rather than smaller, many of these questions can become overwhelming. While it is logical from a both/and perspective to say that heredity, number of calories consumed, freshness of foods eaten, culture of origin, daily duration of exercise, and daily intensity of exercise all interact to determine one's actual weight, this picture neither tells us what other variables we might be omitting nor tells us where to start in addressing the problem. Do we need to modify our patients' DNA, put them on a walking

schedule, or stop them from eating processed foods to help them lose weight?

CONTEXTUAL CONNECTIONS

The good news about applying a systems perspective to problems is that there are so many ways to put the problem in context. It reminds me of our new ability to find places on Google Earth: The program starts with a view of an entire hemisphere and then moves to smaller and smaller increments to end with a picture of a specific residence. Going through Google Earth provides a graphic, almost visceral experience of the parts/wholes nature of systems theory, as you can see that your neighborhood is part of your town, your street is part of your neighborhood, and your residence is part of your street. Such a perspective evokes the work of Uri Bronfenbrenner (1979), a developmental psychologist whose model was known as the ecological systems theory.

The model, depicted in Figure 2.2, shows that an individual child is embedded in a variety of environments at all times and that it would be a mistake to try to understand the individual without taking these contextual variables into account. In this application of the model, each context has a different level of influence on the particular issues that bring the system to treatment. While not all variables are addressed in treatment, the ability to look at all of these levels provides a richer, more realistic view of the factors that maintain the problem.

Using this contextual model, we can look at the case of Ryan, age 16, whose parents came to see me in therapy. Ryan had recently been diagnosed with a learning disorder, and the psychologist who tested Ryan referred his parents to me for couples therapy. Ryan's academic performance was slightly below average, but he was doing fine socially, performing well in sports, and holding a leadership position in student government. He had a good relationship with his sister, Erin, age 13, whose academic performance was at the top of her class and who was also performing well in her extracurricular activities. His recent diagnosis helped explain why his academic performance wasn't better, an issue that caused long-term conflict between his parents.

This couple was Lisa, 44, a litigator for a large local law firm, and Bill, 43, who practiced real estate law for a small firm. Lisa was from the East Coast and grew up in a large, working-class, Irish Catholic family. Lisa attended private schools on scholarship throughout her academic career. She has received medication for struggles with depression

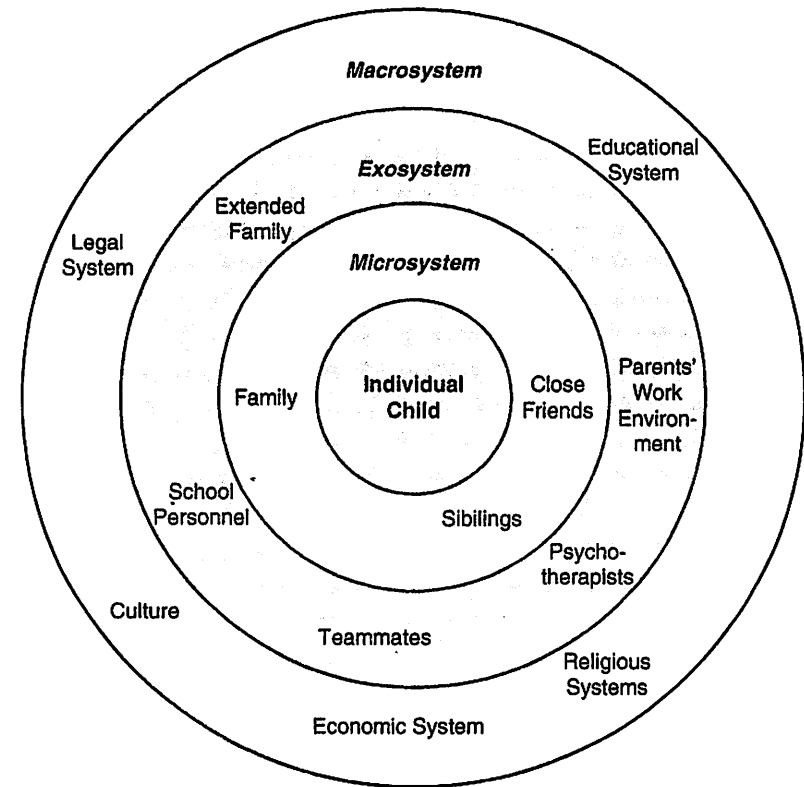


Figure 2.2 Adaption of Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model Applied to a Family System. Bronfenbrenner, 1979.

and anxiety at various points of her adult life. Bill grew up in a small town in Wyoming. His father was the president of the local bank, while his mother was involved in many charitable organizations, some affiliated with their Protestant church. Bill received a number of tutoring services throughout his schooling, and now that Ryan has been diagnosed with a learning disorder, Bill believes that he has an undiagnosed learning disability based on their similar academic records. Lisa describes herself as driven and hardworking, and she strives to pass along a strong work ethic to her children. Bill feels that his success has come from his interpersonal skills, and he values being warm and friendly. Lisa feels that Bill does not provide Ryan with enough structure and needs to hold him more accountable for academic progress, while Bill wants Lisa to be more encouraging and supportive to Ryan.

As we go through each piece of additional information, you can see that each contextual variable might change the focus of the therapy in some way. For example, we might say that Bill and Lisa were born with different temperaments, and that she is programmed to be more vigilant and strict, while Bill may have a harder time providing structure and order. Or we might say that working in different legal settings causes Bill and Lisa to look at their household structure and climate differently. One could argue that their religious traditions have emphasized different aspects of the parenting role, or one could say that their regional backgrounds make it difficult for them to understand each other. This list could go on, as we move to examine all of the potential contextual parts that contribute to the whole problem.

For the clinician, the issue of context increases the possibilities for intervention but can also increase the possibility of confusion and lack of clarity. As you will see throughout the book, systems concepts work best together and there are different therapeutic strategies that are aligned with particular theories than can help us select the most salient elements of context. But seeing the client or client system as an open system, as well as taking the time to focus on various elements of context, is a worthwhile antidote to the limitations caused by our biases. Taking this idea one step further, we also see that psychotherapy itself is a contextual process. I especially enjoy the work of Michael Karson (2008), who uses his knowledge of performance theory to explore the ways that clinicians use their role to either maximize or limit their effectiveness in the room. Applying a systemic lens, Karson notes that dyadic therapy is in essence a couples therapy experience, as the context of the interaction is created by what both parties bring to the relationship. An open systems view highlights the fact that both client and therapist are changed by their work together.

SEEING PROBLEMS IN CONTEXT

One therapy approach that is practically synonymous with context is Murray Bowen's (Bowen, 1985; Nichols & Schwartz, 2001). While Bowen's approach certainly rests heavily on an understanding of family dynamics, it is one of the family therapy approaches that is most frequently practiced with individuals. Further, Bowen modeled an open systems perspective through his candid discussion of work that he did with his own family. For Bowen, one of the key elements of understanding the human psyche was to look at the interplay between

the individual and the group. His theory provides a foundational view of the relationship between parts and wholes, as he focused on the ways that individuals simultaneously strive for autonomy and intimacy. According to Bowen, systems work best when they explicitly value the needs of both the group and the individual and when they have group norms that allow communication about these needs. Bowen's work exemplifies the use of multiple perspectives and shows the ways that functional families are open systems.

Bowen, born in 1913, was an analytically trained psychiatrist who became intrigued with the ways that family dynamics contribute to individual psychopathology. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Bowen did research on schizophrenia for the National Institute of Mental Health between 1954 and 1959 (Nichols, 2010) and had the opportunity to observe patients interacting with their families. While the prevailing notions of the time indicated that schizophrenia developed through the early interactions with the mother, Bowen was intrigued by the ways that current interactions might keep symptomatic behavior alive. Bowen also expanded the focus beyond the mother to include the entire family, and rather than looking only at early childhood experiences, he looked at the unconscious processes that continue to exist between family members at any given time.

Bowen is one of the family therapists known for developing the genogram (Bowen, 1985; Kerr & Bowen, 1988), a tool to diagram family membership and relationships, with shapes and lines representing each member of the system and their relationship to others. A sample genogram of Ryan's family is presented in Figure 2.3.

In this visual representation of the family context, Bowen stated that to truly understand a person's struggles, it was essential to see the problems in the context of at least three generations. Bowen borrowed from his psychodynamic roots by emphasizing the importance of unconscious processes that bind families together. He highlighted the patterns of shared beliefs and anxieties by exploring the family genogram.

BELONGING AND IDENTITY, THINKING AND FEELING

One of Bowen's key concepts is that of *differentiation* (Bowen, 1985), a term that he uses in two different ways. Bowen stated that individuals who are differentiated have the ability to experience both closeness and individuality and to utilize both thoughts and emotions in processing their experience. Both ideas have interesting ramifications for how

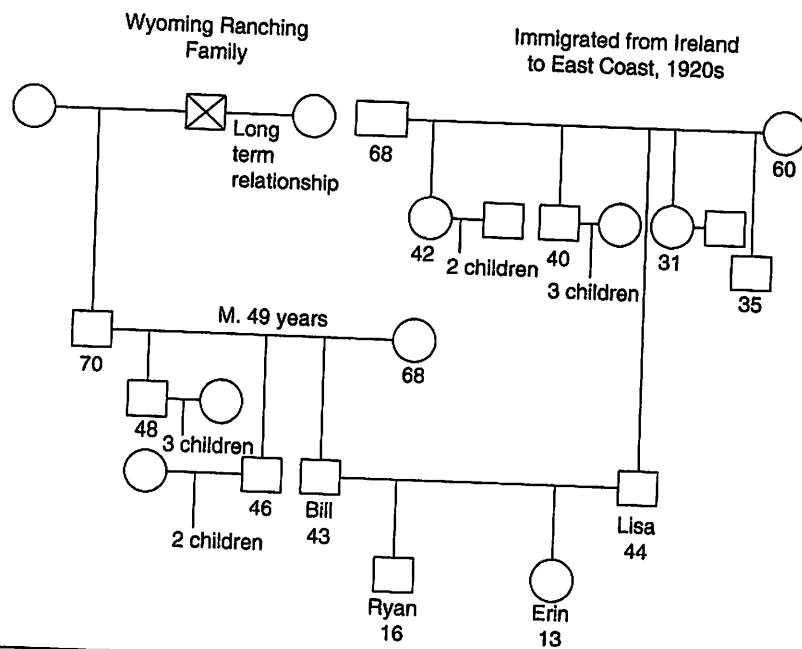


Figure 2.3 Bill and Lisa's Three-Generational Genogram.

people behave in the context of relationships. Through the concept of differentiation, Bowen provided an interesting perspective on the dynamic tension between the human needs for autonomy and intimacy. Bowen described someone as being differentiated if the individual had an established, separate identity and simultaneously had intimate connections with others. While the term *differentiation* may be confused with the concept *separation*, Bowen was clear that these ideas were different. More recent advocates of Bowen's theory, in particular, note that the idea of differentiation is a powerful antidote to the overly individual focus of Western psychology, as the concept promotes a balance between the needs of the individual and the needs of the group. More specifically, for Bowen, a healthy system will promote differentiation by providing opportunities for closeness and connection and also by valuing the unique identities of each group member. Sometimes these values can be expressed simultaneously, while at other times they are expressed sequentially, but obviously there are times when these values result in conflict.

Many schools of thought highlight the inherent tension between autonomy and intimacy, yet Bowen's concept of differentiation does an

especially nice job of providing a big-picture view of this struggle. Bowen notes that some relationships may appear to be overly close, or fused, because there is no room for the needs of the individual. At the other extreme are relationships that are estranged or cut off, but Bowen points out that both patterns represent a lack of differentiation.

I find the concept of differentiation so helpful because in therapy, it is common to hear one of the two following comments:

"I've resolved my issues with my family. I know this because I finally stopped speaking to them."

"I don't have issues with my family. We talk all the time, and we never have disagreements."

Bowen's concept of differentiation not only shows the flaws in the logic of each of these statements but also emphasizes the way that each of these strategies addresses the same underlying dynamic. As we would expect in the both/and nature of systems theory, autonomy and intimacy work best as complementary concepts. The more a person feels grounded and accepted in a secure relationship, the more she will be able to express and be true to her identity. Similarly, the more a person has developed a distinct and congruent identity, the more he will be able to experience authentic intimacy.

Bowen also used the term *differentiation* to describe the ability to separate thoughts and feelings and to use thoughts and feelings together in a constructive manner. At times Bowen's approach is judged to be overly cerebral, with too much emphasis on moving away from reactive emotion, but a careful reading of the theory highlights the need for both affect and cognition. Similar to the need for individuals to be distinct yet connected, Bowen believed that problems were exacerbated when individuals could not distinguish between thoughts and feelings. Without this distinction, we are prone either to react impulsively based on our feeling state or to intellectualize problems and become overly rational. A more differentiated perspective allows us to think through problems and employ the benefit of our reasoning abilities, while also tuning in to our feelings and using the wisdom of our emotional reactions.

While Bowen advocated clear and direct communication to facilitate differentiation in systems, he also pointed out our tendency to avoid direct communication through triangulation. While many systems approaches discuss the importance of triangulation, Bowen outlined the development and maintenance of problematic triangles in helpful

det~~er~~mining according to Bowen, one way for two people to address the inherent anxiety associated with conflict between them is by "triangulating in" a third person. If we think about human nature, we can see that one reliable way of creating a connection with another person is to do it at another's expense. There is ample evidence in the social psychology literature, as well as from history in general, to know that one way to create cohesion within a group is to set the group in competition with another group—to develop a common enemy—but Bowen goes further in helping us understand that phenomenon of the common enemy in more depth and highlights the difficulty in changing this type of dynamic. According to Bowen, when some kind of conflict exists between two people, this conflict will naturally raise some type of anxiety. In relationships between individuals who are differentiated, this anxiety can be tolerated because it can be both felt and understood. In addition, because both parties agree that they will respect the needs of the individual and the needs of the relationship, it will ultimately be safe to address the conflict directly.

Without differentiation, however, the conflict becomes more dangerous because it threatens either the loss of self or the loss of relationship. So instead of addressing the conflict directly, it is easier to find a sense of pseudo closeness by bringing someone else into the conflict. The anxiety of the original conflict is then reduced because there is a sense of fusion with the like-minded person and a sense of cutoff from the conflictual partner, and the system once again rests in a steady state. To complicate matters further, Bowen says that systems that use triangulation to manage anxiety are prone to many levels of shifting coalitions, which temporarily reduces anxiety but never truly resolves the underlying anxiety or the conflict.

REWORKING THE LEGACY

We can return to the case of Bill and Lisa to look at how Bowen would use contextual elements to understand and intervene in their conflict. As you can see from the genogram, Bill and Lisa have been married for 18 years and have two children, Ryan, 16, and Erin, 13. Bill is the youngest of three children and the only one of them to have moved away from the small town in Wyoming where he was raised. His great-grandparents came out West to homestead a ranching property, and Bill's family is well known and respected in the area. Both of his siblings are professionals who continue the family tradition of

community involvement. There was a scandal in the family when Bill was a teenager, as after his grandfather died, it became clear that the grandfather had had a mistress for many years. This woman was well provided for in the grandfather's will and was persuaded by the family to sell her share of the assets and move away. The family has not discussed this issue since it occurred. Bill's family tends to be polite, cordial, and emotionally inexpressive.

Lisa is the oldest of five children. Her grandparents on both sides immigrated to the United States from Ireland in the early 1920s. Her father drove a city bus, and her mother worked part-time as a hairdresser. Her siblings now live in different parts of the country and have varying levels of professional success. One of her sisters and one of her brothers graduated from law school, and both have successful corporate practices. Her youngest sister is a social worker. A second brother has had significant problems with substance abuse and is currently living with her parents. Lisa's parents frequently contact her for legal advice regarding her younger brother's issues. He has been in and out of treatment programs and has experienced various legal problems while actively using substances. He was accused of stealing from one of his employers and also received a DUI. These events often lead to emotional scenes in the family, either in person or on the phone. At these times, Lisa is called in to strategize about fixing whatever problem her brother has created, and to calm the emotional upheaval in the family. Consequently, Lisa has mixed feelings about the family's inability to handle these problems without her help.

Referring to Bill and Lisa's genogram, we see the counterpoint of family resilience and family challenge. It can be easy to focus only on the problems in the family, and yet Bowen's approach encourages us to look at our ability to gain strength from reworking family relationships. In this case, Bill and Lisa are stuck in chronic relational conflict over their different parenting styles, which have become more polarized as their children enter adolescence. By focusing on the family context, we can see that at least some of their contrasting styles can be understood from the conscious and unconscious beliefs and values of each family. When Lisa wants order, structure, and productivity, she is expressing the values that have helped her move forward and achieve success. At the same time, Bill values cordial relationships and keeping the peace. He wants relationships to feel harmonious and supportive.

To start with a both/and approach, we can understand why each of these positions is valid and compelling for Lisa and Bill, but Bowen's

level, we see unresolved issues in each family that make it hard for Lisa and Bill to differentiate. While their styles are different, their respective families exhibit an inability to deal with and move through the primitive anxiety that is generated by family problems or by family change. Bill's family dealt with his grandfather's secret relationship by getting the problem out of sight and detaching emotionally. Bill's family seeks harmony and positive appearance to the point that negative feelings are not acknowledged or addressed. This pattern is seen not only with his grandfather's hidden relationship but also in his parents' reaction to his learning problems. While he experienced a great deal of frustration in school and sensed that his parents were disappointed by his lack of academic achievement, these feelings were never discussed. The rational approach to the problem was to find tutors for Bill and to change the subject if it was raised.

Lisa's family moves in the opposite direction, engaging in loud and intense emotional battles when a family problem arises. There is a great deal of conversation and contact between family members, but like Bill's family, the patterns that exist between family members change very little over time. On a more practical level, the lack of differentiation is evident in the ways that each family participates in triangles. As Lisa becomes anxious about her son's uneven academic performance, she becomes angry with Bill's softer style, and the conflict between them increases. When Lisa talks to her mother at these times, they tend to commiserate about the ways that men are not helpful in raising children. Lisa's mother cautions her not to rely too much on Bill, because his family allowed him to be an underachiever and to fall back on the family business for his career success. Her mother often ends these conversations with negative comments about Lisa's brother, cautioning her not to let Ryan grow up to be like his Uncle John, which completes another act of triangulation. During these times of conflict, Bill is not likely to confide in his family. Instead, if an extended family gathering is imminent, he is likely to honor the needs of his family of origin over his current family. As a result, Lisa responds in an angry, emotional way, and Bill's family responds with perplexed, distant politeness.

A recent event served as a microcosm for all of these interactions. Lisa and Bill were driving to see Bill's family and celebrate his father's 70th birthday. As the plans were being made, it became clear that Ryan was going to have to miss one of his SAT preparation classes to leave in

that they would miss the Friday dinner and would join the events on Saturday, highlighting the importance of Ryan preparing for college and following through with his commitments. When Bill stated that Ryan has already done adequate preparation, Lisa became angry and was quite negative about Ryan's academic skills. She called her mother, who reinforced Lisa's view that Bill was too easy on the children. In the meantime, Ryan stormed out of the house after yelling at his mother for being so critical and unsupportive. In the end, Lisa backed down and the family went to the Friday night gathering. As expected, Bill was cordial and positive toward his family, showing no sign of the stress that preceded the event, while Lisa was on edge and subtly rude. The interactions once again confirm the family pattern: Lisa is emotional and angry and makes her point but ultimately doesn't feel effective. Bill absorbs Lisa's anger but doesn't really work with her and ends up glossing over the problem rather than addressing it directly.

So what would Bowen do with this couple? If we are thinking systemically, it is clear that a change in the individual will affect the system and that a change in the system will affect the individual. In this instance, the couple has presented for therapy, so the emphasis will be on improving the couple relationship by helping each member of the couple become more differentiated. The first step in the process is to share the genogram with the couple and get their reactions. While this might seem like a preliminary step, it tends to be a powerful intervention in its own right. One of the goals of doing the genogram is to put the problem in a broader context. Using this couple as an example, Bill believes the problem is Lisa's negativity and rigidity, while Lisa believes that the problem is Bill's avoidance and lack of responsibility. Rather than defining the problems as behaviors, the couple starts the process by defining the problem as the other person. Yet doing the genogram allows the couple to see that the behavior makes sense in the context of family dynamics. In addition, the genogram allows the couple to redefine the problem: They can see directly that the problem is that they don't know how to work together for the benefit of their children, instead choosing to repeat the legacies of unproductive conflict and avoidance. They can see that several family patterns are going to make it challenging for them to work together but will ultimately make this change possible. So while it might appear that doing the genogram is simply creating a visual representation of the family, the process of completing the genogram necessitates reflection and curiosity and generates insight

Following the explanation of the genogram, the therapist would help the couple discuss practical ways to increase their differentiation. If we remember the basic definitions of differentiation, we can see that this couple will have ample opportunities to practice greater differentiation with each other, as well as with their families of origin. When Lisa is worried about their son Ryan's grades and test scores, she can learn to feel the anxiety and talk with Bill about her fear as well as her anger. In addition, she can try to better integrate her thoughts and feelings by using information and affect together. Rather than simply assuming that Bill is trying to undermine her attempts to support Ryan's SAT preparation, she could ask Bill to help her find out exactly what Ryan will miss in Friday afternoon's prep session, and they could see if there is a way for him to make up what he would miss.

You are probably already thinking that Bill could participate in a similar endeavor, albeit for different reasons. Rather than passively trying to go around Lisa's wishes, he could be more active in expressing what he wants. Knowing that attending all of the family gatherings is important to him and to his family, he could look at the schedule ahead of time and make his wishes known to Lisa directly. You can also see that each action will be easier if both partners are involved in a different way with their own families. If Lisa were to call her mother to ask for advice rather than to complain about Bill and look for support for her own position, she might then approach Bill from an entirely different perspective. We can see that the act of differentiating feeling from thought, and learning to use them together rather than in opposition, is significantly easier when the triangulation isn't in place. When Lisa calls her mother to complain about Bill, the implicit agenda is to feel anger and rejection for his position and to be justified in this anger.

Bill's task is the mirror image of Lisa's. As Bill is more differentiated from his family of origin, he will be able to ask questions and risk conflict rather than keep the peace and focus on appearances. In this instance, Bill does not even consider calling his sister, who organized the Friday night party, and go over the possibility of missing the Friday event. Again, looking at unconscious anxiety in families, Bill feels that this kind of conversation just "isn't done" in his family. Without being able to articulate his discomfort, he knows that to mention that the needs of his nuclear family may conflict with the desires of the larger group is to threaten some kind of unspoken rule.

differentiation. Bowen thought that letters were particularly useful because they were likely to minimize the expression of reactive affect. Bowen was also known for working with individuals by having them invite various family members into the session to facilitate differentiation. Regardless of the specific technique, Bowen would always advocate negotiation between the needs of the individual and the needs of the group, as well as an ability to use thoughts and feelings. Throughout the work, making room for multiple perspectives is essential.

As I worked with Lisa and Bill, it was interesting to see the ways that their work with their families and their work with each other dovetailed. As Lisa was able to moderate her fear of chaos and failure with a realistic view of her accomplishments and with the strengths of Bill and Ryan, she became less reactive and more able to express her concerns in a way that they could be heard. When less of the time spent with her mother and sisters was devoted to scapegoating another family member (usually John or Bill), she began to recognize how much her self-esteem was drawn from contrasting her achievements with their limitations. This insight allowed us to focus more on her genuine strengths, and she was able to identify the ways that she longed for connection with her family around their appreciation of her. As she was warmer and softer with her family members, she also became more able to share these qualities with Bill.

At the same time, Bill was motivated to gather his courage to be more direct with Lisa and with his larger family. As he was able to identify and share the ways that Lisa's criticism had hurt him, it didn't take long for him to get in touch with the loneliness and disappointment that he felt around his family's distance. While they were not overtly critical, he frequently felt emotionally unsupported, and instead of shrugging these feelings off, he began to look for ways to address these feelings with them. At times it was easiest to do this around Ryan's needs, as he was very aware of trying to be more emotionally available to Ryan than his father had been to him. As Bill shared his struggles and aspirations with his father, he found opportunities to express some of these negative feelings with his family.

Of note, while I never saw Ryan in therapy with Bill and Lisa, this case nicely illustrates the connection between parts and wholes that began our chapter. When Bill and Lisa argued about parenting, each replayed individual themes that not only connected them to their families of origin but also were kept alive in their marriage. As Ryan witnessed the conflict, he became part of a triangle that would further influence his

CHAPTER 3

Causality

development. When Bill and Lisa began to work on their issues with their own families, they were also better able to remove Ryan from a triangulated position. We might argue that over time he had learned to play his mom against his dad to escape responsibility, as the family had numerous examples similar to the one in which he missed his SAT prep class. A traditional psychological view of the problems in the family would alternately focus on a manipulative, underachieving teenager; a depressed, critical, negative mother; and a passive-aggressive, emotionally unavailable father.

This case illustrates that putting this problem in a broader context helps us see both the truth and the limitations in these descriptions. By looking at the problem in context, the problems are more understandable and more difficult to simply pathologize. Further, using a Bowenian approach to the family of origin issues allowed each member of the couple to experience the validity of their own perspective, while also seeing the way that the perspective fit with the whole. Like the blind men with the elephant, Bill and Lisa were able to become even more expert at their part of the elephant, while also becoming more respectful of the expertise of the other.

To return to the general systems theory concept, the idea of context is ubiquitous and foundational. Understanding a problem in context means seeing all of the systems and subsystems in which a problem is embedded. Using the idea of multiple perspectives, we can see that our understanding of a problem will be limited by the systems in which we are embedded and can shift when the context shifts. This ability to use multiple perspectives provides numerous vantage points for addressing a problem. Further, the idea of nonsummativity turns our attention to parts and wholes, noting that the whole cannot be understood by simply summing the parts. Instead, using the idea of open systems, we can understand the creation of wholes and the relationship between parts and wholes by observing interactions. Perspectives such as Bowen's theory help us see that as individuals we are separate systems with unique identities who are also part of larger systems. This dynamic tension between parts and wholes means that systems are always moving targets, a phenomenon that we will revisit when we examine causality and change.

WHEN MY DAUGHTER was only a month old, we took a trip from Chicago to Denver for my husband and I to interview for jobs. While we were in Denver, my grandmother died, and my daughter and I flew to New Mexico for the funeral. The day after we returned to Chicago, we spent the afternoon and evening at a good friend's wedding. Although my daughter was relatively easy to soothe and manage during all of this upheaval, for three days after we returned to our (relatively new) routine, my daughter cried for hours each day. I took her to the pediatrician after a couple of days, thinking that she had picked up some strange illness during our travels or that she was developing an atypical form of colic. The doctor was unable to find anything wrong and encouraged me to be patient. I'll never forget pondering all of this with my own therapist, expressing my frustration that I didn't know why my daughter was crying. His response was "You'll probably never know what was wrong." I was shocked by his reply! It was inconceivable that I could tolerate not knowing why my baby had been crying.

THE NEED TO KNOW WHY

Just as human beings seem programmed to try to organize our experiences into meaningful wholes, we are also hardwired to understand and explain why things happen. Our philosophical and scientific traditions are based on this ongoing quest to find the causes for events that we experience. When something happens, we want to know why. This process of learning about cause and effect starts early in our cognitive development and continues throughout the life span. Think of the baby in the high chair, repeatedly dropping her spoon from

