

Can Human Behavior Become a Science?

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I am happy to have finally read Bowen's epilogue to Micheal Kerr's (1988) book, which I am calling the "Odyssey chapter." In it, Bowen outlines his opinions and assumptions that guided his seminal research project at NIMH, and includes his critique of "science" in the "social sciences." This chapter provided more stock in my sense that Goenka's particular dispensation of the Buddha's teachings as "pure science" share something unique with Bowen's attitude toward theory.

Bowen (1988) was convinced that the meaning of the terms "science" and "theory" have been lost in the development of the field psychology. He writes that Freud was "the genius who developed the first clear psychological theory about the origins of neurotic illness," and "had tried to develop a theory compatible with the science of medicine" which he later deemed a "science of the psyche" (kpp. 404). But Bowen claims that if science is specifically intended to separate material derived from "feeling states" from material derived from "thinking states" (i.e. confirmation bias), then Freud made a fatal mistake using terms and concepts that are rooted in literature and mythology. Bowen writes,

Well-known scientists have said that we have been to the moon and back, all based on pure science, but we will never have a science of human behavior. Such statements are based on the notion that the human is a feeling being, and the human will never have a theory about himself that is not tinged with feeling. My life work has been based on an opposing viewpoint. It says merely that the physical structure of the human is scientific, that the human brain functions to create feelings and subjective states, and that the brain is capable of separating structure from function (kpp. 404).

Bowen avoided using terms with preexisting or nebulous meaning, like "psyche", "triad," etc, and verbosely defined the terms he did choose to use, such as "differentiation," "triangle." Earlier terms like "undifferentiated ego mass" were eventually replaced with newer and better defined terms like "nuclear family emotional system." Even the term "self" in "basic self" and "functional self" were clearly laid out using language that lead itself to testing. I am now noticing how careful Bowen was to use the phrase "science of human behavior" instead of the term "psychology." "Psychology" comes from the term "psyche," an abstract concept derived from Psyche, the Greek god of the soul, yet another undefinable term. It is not hard to see how this importance of avoiding even the smallest misunderstandings worked its way into in family therapy itself. Bowen writes,

[Freud] made some unwitting errors in judgment that have prevented his theory from becoming an approved science. Basic theoretical concepts came from the literary history of

mankind...The early authors of the literature were human beings who had used feeling states in their writing. The theory has been extremely useful in therapy but it separated the theory from science...The use of concepts from literature separated his theory from facts that could be proven and validated by science (kpp. 407).

What I take away from this wonderful critique is that the entire field of psychology, at least as far as it exists in therapy, is rooted in the human imagination. I am starting to see how in my own clinical training every other term (e.g. attachment, object, self, ego, projection, abandonment, other, self, self-state, phantasy, drive, image, defense, etc) are quite vaguely defined yet accepted by all as a given. All of these kinds of "psychological" terms appear to be unique to psychology and so fail to provide highly testable hypotheses compatible with or communicable to the rest of the sciences. I laugh as I am simultaneously inspired by Jung and his notion of science, yet reject something about the use of these vaguely defined terms. Bowen writes,

The term *science* is distorted as much as other terms...For centuries the human has permitted his imagination to run free around the notion of science...This has come about by adding wild imagination to potential scientific discoveries...Beyond imagination, the word science has been added to the orderly study of certain nonscientific subjects...Almost everyone has a general understanding of the broad concept of science, but the specific meaning of the term has been lost in the societal loosening. (kpp. 399)

It is this lack of portability to the other sciences that appears like the big red flag to me. It is the unwavering conviction that we clinicians are all talking about the same idea while using vaguely defined terms that raises this flag even higher. I see this as a serious problem. The fact that I find myself confronting condescension when questioning our collective "understanding" of basic terms indicates to me that clinical therapists may be so invested in the status quo that change of the order I am implying is not possible within the current paradigm. In fact, it's not a far leap from this reasoning to wondering if the professional degrees (MFT, LCSW, etc) should exist at all without a fundamental involvement in research.

I agree with E. O. Wilson (1998) that *consilience* is a "diagnostic feature of science," that "The explanations of different phenomena most likely to survive are those that can be connected and proved consistent with one another" (Wilson, 1998, kpp. 82). Wilson suggests that the sciences will be limited so long as they are compartmentalized, which violates the diagnostic feature of consilience. In this spirit of consilience, the fact that psychologists as whole are not *primarily* interested in developing theory that is more in touch with the rest of the sciences represents the installation of hurricane-strength guy wires reenforcing that red flag against the elements.

Bowen (1988) writes that therapy that is not grounded scientific theory is a recipe for disaster. I believe I am finally starting to understand what he meant by this. He is known to have repeatedly

described the jumping on the bandwagon of what was fashionable in therapy technique vs adherence and development of theory that caused the rise and fall of the family therapy movement of the 80's. I have heard more than a few Bowenians state that clinicians families that are involved in a research attitude tend to do better. I am starting to observe myself how departing for therapy without an interest in research leads to following what is popular over of what is proven. What does it mean when therapists claim to bow "to no theory?" Are they able to see how a statement like that is contradictory, that they don't understand what a "theory" is? If the scientific method is meant to filter confirmation bias, how can terms like "intuition" be equated with science? It is statements like these that prevent me from identifying with this group of therapists and the field of "therapy" in general. What does it mean some therapists talk about "science" as something mutually exclusive to therapy, as if feeling and intuition cannot live with science? This deeply concerns me.

As such, this dissertation is beginning to include inquiry into the essence of science and a critique of psychology as a scientific discipline. It appears to me that both Bowen and the Buddha had a clear view of what was and what was not science. It may yet be possible that convergence in the philosophies of these two scientists could point to a serious flaw in the field of psychology as well to as solutions that might correct it.

The next post includes a list of research questions intended to pick apart and test the above opinions against the literature.

References

Kerr, M., Bowen, M. (1988). *Family evaluation*. New York, NY: Jason Aronson, Inc.

Wilson, E. O. (1998). *Consilience*. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc.