

## A More Refined Kernel

**Date :** November 7, 2017

Murray Bowen defined what he saw as a new way of integrating empirical research with clinical practice by rooting a theory of human behavior in the philosophy of *natural systems*. Bowen's novel contribution stems from the assumption that all living systems, from the most complex vertebrate to single-celled organisms to protoplasm, arise as a function of mutual-causal, reciprocal relationships which organize an emotive, or *emotional* character. He used Darwin's definition of the term *emotion* to describe the driving forces which pertained to all species, and is "synonymous to instinct" (Papero D. V., 2016, p. 17) "as used in biology and the natural sciences" instead of the "special meaning in psychoanalysis" (Bowen, 1978, p. kpp 446). "The output of the emotional system is emotional reactivity or reactivity" (Papero D. V., 2016, p. 18). Abandoning essentialist notions, the natural systems paradigm views elements of living systems as a part of their context yet simultaneously defining their context by virtue of symbiotic interdependence (Gilbert, Sapp, & Tauber, 2012; Macy, 1991; Bowen, Family therapy in clinical practice, 1978).

This assumption formed the basis of Bowen's *emotional system* concept which defines living systems in terms of the patterns which emerge from reciprocal exchanges of emotional energy between individuals which regulate both individual and collective adaptation to the environment (Papero D. V., 2016). As a result, Bowen's *family systems theory* views human behavior more as a function of what humans have in common with other living things than of psychological factors which pertain to humans alone. The universality of the emotional system concept serves as a starting point for organizing knowledge from many species to enrich a science of human behavior (Noone & Papero, 2016). As with natural system theories pertaining to other species, *Bowen theory* is the product of the direct observation of human behavior as it is in nature as opposed to a superimposing *a priori* concepts from *general systems* (Bertalanffy, 2015) or *cybernetics* (Wiener, 1961) which are generated by the human mind (Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

Michael Kerr, a close colleague of Bowen, describes the potential importance of the emotional system concept as "comparable to the significance of Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection" (Kerr & Bowen, 1988, p. kpp 39). He writes that while "Darwin established this *physical link* between man and the lower forms, Bowen's concept of the emotional system has provided a basis for establishing a *behavioral link* between humans and other animals" (p. kpp 39). The concept is rooted in *systems thinking* as "the ability to be aware of the process of nature as opposed to simply the content of nature" (Kerr & Bowen, 1988, p. kpp 24). Similarly, the application of Bowen theory involves an individual developing the ability to observe the processes that define one's most sensitive relationships as opposed to simply the people and issues in those relationships (Papero, 1990). A fixation on issues instead of the processes leading to issues is seen to lead to linear, cause-and-effect thinking which loses the systems view. By studying the movement of processes and relationships, thinking systems aims to overcome polarization generated by essentialist thinking in the natural and human sciences (Laszlo, 1973). Thus, Bowen

theory represents a broad paradigmatic departure from mainstream perspectives on human suffering toward the development of a viable science of human behavior.

It is possible that the Buddha may have also defined a theory of human suffering that is better understood through natural systems thinking than through analogical comparison with psychological theory. This theory, known as *pa?iccasamupp?da*, known in the West as *Dependent Origination*, the *Second Noble Truth*, or “the cause of suffering,” defines life as an interaction of universal processes, for example, consciousness, perception, sensation, and reaction (Goenka, 2012). The most important aspect of this theory is the reciprocally interdependent nature of the elements in these processes, which implies a non-essentialist system of *mutual-causality* (Macy, 1991). Thus, the Buddha saw suffering as a function of a deeper processes that are universal to all of life, one which predates homo sapiens and will exist long after them. Though described as the “truth” of suffering, the theory is taught as a falsifiable hypothesis which stands to be disproven through rigorous experiment (Hart, 1987). The experiment consists of becoming aware of universal laws of nature by observing those laws as they play out in one’s own body and mind (Fleischman P. R., 2016; Young, 1994). This experiment represents the core of the Buddha’s teaching and is called Vipassan? meditation (Goenka, 1998).

This study proposes that the Buddha’s approach to understanding human suffering may share a degree of conceptual and paradigmatic compatibility with the natural systems approach reflected in Bowen theory. Together, these approaches may further support a viable science of human behavior by virtue of their *consilience* (Wilson E. O., 1999). A natural systems science may lessen the compartmentalization of mainstream psychology, for example between academic and professional psychology. This study examines that potential by asking the question, “To what extent did the Buddha define a natural systems theory?”