

Conference Commentary

“The Importance of Research for Family Theory and Therapy”

By Victoria Harrison

Living Systems held a two-day conference on “The Importance of Research for Family Theory and Therapy” in March 2004. Dr. John Gottman and Dr. Michael Kerr were the keynote speakers. Dr. John Gottman is from the Gottman Institute, Seattle, Washington and Dr. Michael Kerr is from The Bowen Center for the Study of the Family, Washington, DC.

An audience of 135 people, many from California, Oregon and Washington State, packed Lecture Hall 2201 of Douglas College on the early spring weekend.

Dr. Gottman opened the conference with an overview of the history of psychological research on assessment of relationships and on treatment intervention evaluation. He focused in particular on the study of marriage and families. Both the scarcity of research and the discrepancy between studies convinced him to do research on his own. During this review of other research on family relationships, Dr. Gottman stated his conclusion that “Bowen theory was wrong theoretically and the therapy that Murray Bowen had formulated was poor therapy.” He referred to research in neuroscience that expands upon and challenges Paul MacLean’s formulation of the triune brain as the basis for error in Bowen theory as described in the work of Michael Kerr and Daniel Papero (Kerr 1988 and Papero 1990). The Gottman interpretation of “differentiation of self” is similar to that popularized by Don Williamson in his book, *The Intimacy Paradox* (Williamson). Gottman, too, understands “differentiation of self” to represent dominance of intellect over emotion rather than variation in the interaction between emotional reactivity and intellectual activity, ranging in the human population from greater degrees of fusion to great degrees of integration.

Dr. Gottman then quickly reviewed the decade of studies in which he identified characteristics that distinguish successful marriages from those that end in divorce. He discussed therapeutic and educational programs designed to alter communications in the marriage and between parents and children in the direction of those identified as healthier. Much of the morning lecture focused then on therapeutic intervention with marital conflict and conflict resolution and described current research aimed to evaluate and document changes brought about in therapy and educational programs based upon the Gottman approach. Dr. Gottman criticized Dr. Bowen and his therapy for avoiding strong emotion, for failing to present alternatives to dysfunctional communications and conflict, and for preferring intellectualization over expression of feelings. In the second part of the morning program Dr. Gottman showed a videotape of therapy between Dr. Julie Gottman and a couple, using actors with a script from an actual therapy session.

Dr. Kerr’s fifteen minutes of comment endeavored to distinguish therapy practice from Dr. Gottman’s description of Bowen therapy and the differences between Bowen therapy and Dr. Gottman’s portrayal of Bowen therapy. There was much good natured dialogue from the speakers and the conference participants.

The afternoon presentations began with a videotape of Catherine Rakow’s talk about the National Institute of Mental Health Research Project and its contributions to the development of family systems theory and with Randy Frost’s talk about “Gottman Research and Bowen Theory.” Kathleen Kerr’s presentation on her study of differences in emotional process involved in separation between chimpanzee mothers and infants and Robert Noone’s discussion of family factors that impact variation in development of stress reactivity concluded the first day. The afternoon panel discussions permitted Dr. Gottman and Dr. Kerr and the speakers to comment on the presentations. One might predict that the panel discussions held continued efforts to clarify between Dr. Gottman’s portrayal of Bowen theory and Bowen theory as illustrated in the research of the afternoon presenters. One would be correct.

The second day of the conference began with Dr. Michael Kerr’s presentations in which he discussed concepts of Bowen theory, placing particular importance on defining “emotional systems” in nature and the family as a foundation for understanding differentiation of self and the range of human functioning. Dr. Kerr illustrated theory and psychotherapy based upon Bowen theory with excerpts from videotapes of Dr. Bowen’s clinical interviews. During the second presentation on the progress in family psychotherapy, Dr. Kerr described the facts and factors in clinical families that illustrated theoretical concepts, such as emotional triangles and nuclear family emotional process, using excerpts videotapes of his own clinical sessions to demonstrate the impact of work on differentiation of self in marriage, with depression, and in relation to parents and siblings.

During his fifteen minute response, Dr. Gottman focused primarily on examples from the videotapes to illustrate criticism he had presented of Bowen's therapy and to present the alternative ways he would have approached coaching a couple in how to better relate to each other.

The afternoon began with Victoria Harrison's presentation of research designed to study measures of biological reactivity and facts of family functioning to identify their impact on reproduction. Phil Klever talked about observations about the importance of nuclear and multigenerational family to marriage research; then Elizabeth Showron presented on her research investigating social, cognitive and academic functioning of children in low income families based upon measures of differentiation of self from parents. The final presentation was Charles White's review of efforts to measure emotional cutoff using quantitative research.

Panels in the afternoon provided opportunities for Dr. Gottman and Dr. Kerr and speakers to comment upon research based in Bowen theory. One might predict that the panel discussions would focus on Dr. Kerr's response to Dr. Gottman's reply and on Dr. Gottman's efforts to clarify his thinking about therapy. One would be correct. Many of the conversations that occurred at breaks, in the elevators, during travel to lunch and dinner continued the efforts of many to clarify theoretical differences and to learn from Dr. Gottman's research and from Dr. Bowen's theory as applied in research and clinical practice by those who presented here.

The conference was quite an accomplishment for all involved. For those who want as objective and accurate a view of the conference as possible, CD's and DVD's can be ordered from North Shore Counselling Centre (visit www.livingsystems.ca). It is also probably necessary to refer to the work of John Gottman, Murray Bowen, Michael Kerr and other speakers, as well, for as objective and accurate a view as possible. One can likely best draw one's own conclusions about who says what and learn from each.

The study of Bowen theory permits, perhaps requires, one to take advantage of research and observations from diverse disciplines. It is a challenge to relate to different points of view without polarizing, without getting focused on what is wrong with the other, without attempting to dissolve basic differences and without selling one and discounting another. That is the nature of emotional reactivity in the world of ideas, in the sciences and in the humanities. Bowen predicted "that it will finally be possible to construct a total human theory from scientific facts alone and that the feeling elements of human existence will be handled in relationship with other human beings" (Bowen, 1988). This conference was another step in that direction. The initiator of this extraordinary conference, Randy Frost, commented that "The dialogue between Dr. Gottman and Dr. Kerr highlighted misunderstandings about Bowen theory prevalent in the mental health field. Those of us who work within this theoretical framework have responsibility to make better contact with others in defining and developing theory. I believe that John Gottman's research contributes to validation of Bowen theory and that it is possible to profit from his work in testing and operationalizing hypotheses about family systems. There is potential for fruitful ongoing exchange."

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