“Man created the environmental crisis by being the kind of creature he is...The type of man who survives will be one who can live in better harmony with nature.”

MURRAY BOWEN
Friday, April 3, 2020

8:30 **Introduction and Review of Guidelines for Online Participation**
Anne S. McKnight, EdD, LCSW
Victoria Harrison, MA, LMFT, Day 1 Moderator

8:45 **Wrestling with Complex Systems: Natural Systems Thinking about Human Participation in Climate Change**
Daniel V. Papero, PhD, MSSW

10:15 **Discussion**

10:45 **Break**

11:00 **Climate Change and Bowen Theory: Connecting the Dots**
Ann V. Nicholson, RN, CS, MS

11:30 **Discussion**

12:00 **Lunch Break**

1:00 **The Evolution and Impact of Human Ultrasociality with Climate Changes and Coronavirus as Examples**
John Gowdy, PhD

2:00 **Discussion w/Audience**

2:45 **Break**

3:00 **The Growth Dynamic**
Stephanie Ferrera, LCSW

3:25 **Discussion**

3:45 **Domesticating the Landscape**
Joanne Bowen, PhD

4:10 **Discussion**

4:30 **What Does the Family Have to Do with It?**
Anne McKnight, EdD, LCSW

4:55 **Discussion**

5:15 **Concluding Remarks**

5:35 **Adjournment**
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John Gowdy, PhD
gowdyj@rpi.edu

John M. Gowdy is Professor of Economics and Professor of Science and Technology Studies at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in Troy, New York. He is the recipient of the Herman Daly Award for contributions to ecological economics. Dr. Gowdy has served as president of the U.S. Society for Ecological Economics and President of the International Society for Ecological Economics. He is the recipient of the Herman Daly Award for contributions to ecological economics.

“Throughout my career I have been interested in the relationship between economic systems, social institutions and the natural world. My current research, in collaboration with evolutionary biologists, focuses on the evolution of economic systems. I feel fortunate to be an economist in this period of rapid change in the field. After several decades of intellectual stagnation economics is opening up to new ideas from the behavioral sciences, biology, and systems theory. This awakening holds the promise to make economics once again relevant to the daunting challenges confronting our species.”

Source: faculty.rpi.edu/node/36004
John M. Gowdy, PhD will discuss *The Evolution and Impact of Human Ultrasociality with Climate Changes and Coronavirus as Examples* and *Alternative Futures: Collapse or Change* with presenters and participants at the Bowen Center Spring Conference. Dr. Gowdy draws upon anthropology, economics, and community planning for research, writing, and teaching. He is a pioneer in recognizing the impact of human economic and social institutions on the natural environment.

As Emeritus Professor of Economics and Professor of Science and Technology Studies at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Dr. Gowdy devotes much of his current research toward understanding the implications of ultrasociality in humans for sustainability.

His collaborations with Dr. Lisi Krall and Dr. David Sloan Wilson at The Evolution Institute, along with other biologists, economists, and behavioral scientists provide direction for changing systems through human capacities for individual responsibility and collective action. Dr. Gowdy is active in organizations that establish environmental and economic policies to further sustainability and solutions to climate crises.
Wrestling with Complex Systems: Natural Systems Thinking about Human Participation in Climate Change

Murray Bowen, from direct observation of the interaction of human families, developed a theory that considered the family a unit or natural system. The family system represents one form of a complex living system. Bowen’s work led him to propose that a few relatively simple mechanisms lay beneath the web of interlinked family behaviors. These behaviors could reflect the competence of the unit to adapt to changing conditions and challenges while retaining the integrity of the unit and ensuring the well-being of family members, or they could reflect the incompetence of the unit to adjust to the demands upon it, leading to the fracturing of connections and the impairment of one or more family members.

In the 1970s he extended his thinking beyond the family to other human systems, in particular the functioning of institutions, organizations and other formal and informal collectives that together comprise the greater society. His observations of societal functioning led to the conclusion that similar mechanisms and processes underlay complex social behavior and could lead to increased or decreased competence of social units to address the challenges faced, depending upon how aware individuals are of the mechanisms and forces at play in the human system and how they choose to use that awareness to govern their own behavior.

Many of the challenges to competent human functioning that Bowen and others (notably John B. Calhoun and others of the World Future Society,) have now become evident. The markers of the breakdown of competence (regression) outlined by Bowen can now be noted in many societal institutions and in the apparently deepening and intractable polarizations of human groups in many areas.

Bowen also suggested how a more competent human response to the problems faced might begin and be conducted. The foundation of that more competent response requires that individuals “function up” — that they use the human ability to observe, to collect information and knowledge, and to reason to produce more competent responses to challenges than those driven by automatic and undisciplined reactivity. The guidance for the processes of “functioning up” lie in Bowen’s concept of differentiation of self, the effort each person makes to be the most responsible person he or she can become.
Climate Change and Bowen Theory: Connecting the Dots

This presentation will address the relevance and importance of Bowen theory in understanding the functioning of the human species as it relates to mankind’s impact on the planet and the growing threat of climate change. Although Dr. Bowen’s research was based on the human family, he saw that all concepts of the theory and specifically the emotional system could be applied to larger groups and society as a whole. This he clearly formulated in societal emotional process, the eighth concept of his theory.

He observed that the emotional system, the instinctive automatic forces that govern a large part of human behavior and the total behavior of other life forms can override the most developed part of the human brain, the cerebral cortex, specifically the prefrontal cortex, where thinking occurs. Dr. Bowen noted that more mature people have a greater capacity to regulate the emotional, feeling oriented, instinctive part of self in order to access thinking. Less mature people are more influenced by the feeling world and the automatic processes that could erase the capacity to think.

The environmental crisis was created by the biological, instinctive, feeling part of man. Its solution is dependent on the ability of man to overrule his automatic instinctive urges in order to access thinking and act on objective facts. Bowen stated: “The main ally in finding a solution to the environmental problem is in the most mature, best integrated segment of society that is capable of acting maturely and treating this as a problem to be solved” (Bowen, Presentation to Energy Forum, 1974).
The Growth Dynamic

Growth is the natural activity of all living organisms. According to Darwin:

“There is no exception to the rule that every organic being naturally increases at so high a rate, that if not destroyed, the earth would soon be covered by the progeny of a single pair. ...A struggle for existence inevitably follows from the high rate at which all organic beings tend to increase” (On the Origin of Species, 116-117).

The rate of increase is countered by the rate of destruction. Among the checks on population, Darwin notes the vast destruction of eggs, seeds, and seedlings, epidemics, predation, and the physical conditions of life, most importantly, climate.

The story of human evolution can be seen as the story of how humans overcame nature’s constraints, slowly and incrementally over many thousands of years, with increasing speed after the advent of agriculture, and with marked acceleration with the discovery of fossil fuels. Despite setbacks and a great deal of destruction, humans moved always toward growth: in population, production and consumption of resources, knowledge, division of labor, specialization, trade, and complexity. The engine of growth is driven by the dynamic interplay between these components, and underlying all else by the compelling instinct for growth as proposed by Edward O. Wilson.

This presentation will include a brief overview of human economic evolution, a look at how the growth dynamic has impacted human relationships with one another and with the Earth, and a comment on the interface between Gowdy’s thinking on the biological and economic forces that drive expansion and Murray Bowen’s thinking on the instinctual, emotional forces that drive human behavior.
What Does the Family Have to Do with It?

One of the interfaces between Bowen theory and evolutionary thinking is that the family system is a unit of adaptation organized to sustain human functioning and insure the survival of the next generation. In the human species, the family unit has been central to the development of the social brain and is the foundation of collective cooperation. Human society has been based on family ties that evolved to clans and tribes. Yet in addressing the environmental challenges that result in warming oceans, extreme weather, droughts, migration, and flooding, the family is rarely mentioned.

The family unit has three basic functions in every culture: The family provides protection from external threat; it generates resources for the family group; and it nurtures the young. The functioning of the family can vary based on the capacity of the family members to cooperate toward these necessary tasks. This involves the ability of family members to work together as a unit as well as to maintain proactive individual initiatives in relationship to environmental threats and challenges.

Emigration is an example. Millions of families are emigrating all over the world. Many individuals who leave their family work to maintain the family unit through remittances, while family members raise the children at home. The capacity of the family members to work separately but with a common goal to sustain the family members is core to the migration experience. The response to hurricanes and flooding is similar. The capacity of the family to navigate these weather conditions is at the heart of human resilience.

In today’s world, there is much coverage of the plight of the individual, the community, and the group in surviving the outcomes of climate change, without recognizing the centrality of the family system as an adaptive unit in the midst of crisis.
Natural Systems Thinking about Environmental Challenges

One of the challenges presented by climate change is humanity has never faced a comparable threat since we emerged as a species 300,000 years ago. Greenhouse gases accumulate slowly and the full impact of what we do now won’t be evident for decades. We can’t look back and learn from the last time human behavior drove a comparable rise in global temperatures. So it can be easy to minimize the threat.

We can, however, learn from variation in how nations have managed their responses to a different, slow developing threat to a limited, but valuable natural resource—fisheries.

Every factor that will influence the outcome of global warming has affected fisheries throughout the world—the impact of technology, the use and misuse of science, partisan politics, financial hardship for affected families and businesses, not to mention considerations of national sovereignty.

The intensity of the emotional process and how leaders think about the problem has contributed to variation in the outcome—whether fisheries flourish, collapse or muddle through. Lesson learned from the challenge of managing fisheries can inform how we respond as a species to the global challenge of climate change.

Special Discount Code

Special code to purchase video recordings at a discounted rate (up to 50% off): **climatechange**

Recordings are set to release on April 27 at noon.

[thebowencenter.org/meetings/spring]
Migration through a Bowen Theory Lens

Migration has been an issue for the United States since it was founded but today it has become a major focus for the country. Dr. Bowen’s concept of societal emotional process provides us with tools to study this phenomenon not as a political issue but rather as a phenomenon that has historically been present on earth and to understand it as a phenomenon of natural forces as well as by “man’s disharmony with nature” (Bowen p. 279).

Migration issues have been present in our news cycles not only in the United States, but also in Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador and Venezuela in this continent, and also in the Middle East and Africa among other continents with issues of societal emotional regression.

My study will take the lens of Bowen theory to make a historical review of the process of migration, the factors that brought it on, what the consequences have been in terms of progressive and regressive impacts on man, as well as on the lands that the migrants left and the lands that received them. It will strive to connect the commonalities of migrations in the past with those present in today’s world.

This study will take a historical look at the issues of population explosion, depletion of natural resources and the disharmony that triggers the anxiety in a group, a family or a population. It will also look at the factors of instant communications as well as technology as factors that increase the anxiety of the migrating groups as well as increasing the anxiety in the receiving land.
The Emotional Side of SES

Can Bowen’s observations about the health effects of one’s position in the family be extended to understand the significant effects of socioeconomic status on health and wellbeing?

According to Robert Sapolsky, primate societies, with complex social and dominance hierarchies, pose a greater stress on individuals than the stresses of the physical environment, and one’s position in the group has adrenocortical, cardiovascular, reproductive, immunological, and neurobiological consequences (Sapolsky 2005). And these consequences apply to the human as a preeminent social species.

Health, illness, and longevity are linked to socioeconomic status, or class rank, based on income, occupation, and level of education. The health effects cannot be fully explained by differences in food quality, neighborhood safety, transportation, and health care. People view themselves in a ranked relationship to others, perceiving how they are valued in their family or other social group. Is the stress of low SES due to financial hardship or due to chronic stressful feelings of not being good enough compared to others?

Behavior driven by the emotional reactivity to a status-oriented society, whether at the lower or higher ends of socioeconomic status, contributes to economic and socio-political decisions that affect the environment. Bowen theory may contribute to research of SES and its effects.
Understanding and Managing Anxious Reactions to Facts about Climate

Bowen theory defines anxiety as reactions to the perception of threat, real or imagined, that are present for all forms of life. Changing environmental conditions and relationships between kin and kind elicit social and biological reactions that operate outside awareness, reactions with effects that often are only recognized in hindsight. Fight or flee, delay or accelerate, approach or avoid, associate or cutoff are reactions stirred in the face of threats. Consuming more than one's share, operating at the expense of others, sacrificing self for the good of others, cooperating and competing are reactions associated with adaptation and with failures to adapt. Biological and physiological changes accompany relationship patterns. Symptoms are common. Evolutionary history provides examples both of adaptation and of extinction to consider in facing our own anxious reactions to climate changes.

Multigenerational family history also holds examples of anxious reactions to fluctuations in climate that challenge survival. I will describe ones from my own family history and examine differences between descendants who represent a branch that denies the human impact on climate crises and a branch that is chair of this conference.

This presentation will consider the challenges of managing anxious reactions in relation to facts about climate crises. Bowen theory expands methods for managing anxiety reactions beyond psychological techniques. They include knowledge of history and family history, person-to-person contact with more members of one’s own family, focus on facts, and recognizing and managing one’s own anxious reactions. Participation in community action as well as individual responsibility are important. Understanding and managing anxiety reactions are especially important for constructive action.
A Different Kind of Human

People of all religious traditions, and others with whom they share this planet, are awakening to a changed scientific, intellectual and moral landscape with respect to climate change. We may have passed the point of no return in terms of a preventative solution to anthropogenic global warming. Murray Bowen predicted that human beings created the climate crisis by being the kind of creatures we are and that we are not likely to make the kinds of changes necessary to avert environmental disaster. Bowen anticipated a series of crises of “unparalleled proportions,” different than any we have previously faced, occurring with increasing frequency for several decades. After many failed attempts to deal with these crises symptomatically, he thought, we would face a final major crisis sometime in the mid-21st century. The type of human who survives that crisis will be one who learns to live “in better harmony with nature”—a different kind of human.

Faith communities of all sorts face this crisis along with everyone else. How might these leaders help their constituents find a way forward in such times? What challenges will they face in doing so? How might they function responsibly in the face of the climate crisis and in the presence of increasingly anxious congregations?

This presentation will be directed toward the better personal functioning of congregational leaders during the environmental crises that lie before us in this century. A focus on responsibilities over rights will call these leaders and their congregants to make responsible personal and corporate choices regarding their own lifestyles, even if the hope of reversing anthropogenic global warming has diminished. A principled approach to the issue in which individuals choose to do what is right regardless of “success,” learning to live in greater harmony with nature, is the best way forward. Such modification of self is the cornerstone work of effective leaders of faith communities and institutions in the face of the current crisis. This will be challenging, difficult work requiring a different way of thinking, drawing lines in our lives regarding our use of the earth and its resources.

The presenter will describe his own efforts to connect more fully with nature through a project of prairie restoration on family land inherited in 2007.
Steps Toward Fostering Harmony

My presentation will draw on material from the chapter I have written for the recently published *Handbook of Bowen Family Systems Theory and Research Methods: A Systems Model for Family Research*. The chapter (24) appears in Part VI, “Implications for Future Directions in Family Research.”

Entitled, “Extension of Bowen Theory to Include Natural Systems of Human Societies and Their Sustaining Environments,” the chapter reflects my efforts over many years to figure out how to apply Bowen’s theory and theory-building methods to manage the complexity of relationships in large natural systems comprised of human societies and their sustaining environments.

During the period from 2003-2006, I offered a seminar on societal emotional process. I served as co-organizer of a seminal conference, co-sponsored by the Bowen Center and Georgetown University’s Department of Sociology, “Societies, Families and Planet Earth: Exploring the Relationships.” The conference stimulated other centers, including the Center for the Study of Natural Systems and the Family (CSNSF), the New England Seminar on Bowen Theory (NESBT), and the Western Pennsylvania Family Center (WPFC) to extend their programs to address societal questions. *Creating a Climate for Change* reflects the growing interest in extending research using Bowen’s legacy. Today that interest is worldwide, with particular interest in applying the theory to the study of societal questions and toward improved understanding of the human’s relationship with Nature.

My presentation will focus on how I have used my understanding of the triangle as the basic building block of all human emotional systems to devise a strategic approach to consensus-based multi-national negotiations to create behavioral norms that are universally acceptable and applicable to the countries participating in the negotiations. I will also illustrate how I have used that knowledge and experience in pro bono work that deals with complex environmental issues at the local, i.e., grass-roots level.
Training Programs

Postgraduate Training Program

The Postgraduate Training Program is designed with a strong emphasis on theory, the various concepts necessary for understanding the family as an emotional unit, and the application of this knowledge. Essential to understanding Bowen theory is understanding one’s own family and one’s own functioning. Trainees meet four times a year for three-day sessions.

Each session includes:
- Presentations and discussion with the Director of the Center and faculty members
- An afternoon of consultation with Bowen Center faculty members on clinical practice, work systems, or other applications
- Presentations by each participant to the entire group
- Recorded lectures by Murray Bowen
- Monthly contact with faculty for ongoing consultation

We are currently accepting applications. For more information, please contact Mr. Douglas Murphy at dmurphy@thebowencenter.org or visit thebowencenter.org/training/postgraduate-program.

Online Training Program

The Online Training in Bowen Family Systems Theory Program is offered for professionals in various fields who do not have prior experience in substantial study of Bowen theory and who do not have access to local training. It provides an online space to learn and use Bowen theory in one’s own family and field of work. The program begins in October and meets in monthly classes through May.

The program includes:
- 8 two-hour livestreamed faculty presentations with discussion
- 8 one-hour individual monthly coaching/consultation via webcast
- Reading assignments from Murray Bowen’s original work
- Online access to teaching videos by Dr. Bowen and members of the Bowen Center faculty
- 16 CEU/CEs can be earned in this program

We will begin accepting applications on June 1st. For more information, please contact Dr. Carrie Collier at ccollier@thebowencenter.org or visit thebowencenter.org/training/intro.
**Meetings**

**Annual Symposium**

**Save the Date:**
November 6-7, 2020

**Distinguished Guest Lecturer:**
David Sloan Wilson, PhD

The Annual Symposium on Family Theory and Family Psychotherapy is the most important meeting on Bowen theory and its applications. It brings together the liveliest minds in the Bowen network to present, question, and discuss their latest research and ideas. The Symposium also features a Distinguished Guest Lecturer from another scientific discipline whose research is relevant to Bowen theory.

**Find out more:**
thebowencenter.org/meetings/symposium

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**Clinical Conference Series**

The Clinical Conferences combine presentations by Bowen Center faculty with recorded clinical interviews with families. This conference series offers stimulating learning opportunities for experienced clinicians, students, and those interested in better understanding Bowen theory’s application to the family.

**Find out more:**
thebowencenter.org/meetings/clinical-conferences
**Family Systems Journal**

*Family Systems Journal* is an interdisciplinary journal, published since 1994, by the Georgetown Family Center. The aim of the journal is to advance the understanding of human emotional functioning and behavior based on Bowen theory. Reflecting the assumption of Bowen theory that the human family is governed by the same natural forces that govern all life, the journal publishes articles that contribute to a better understanding of any living system.

Subscription to the journal includes a hard-copy edition and a complimentary PDF edition. Digital-only subscriptions are also available.

**View our website for more information:**
thebowencenter.org/journal

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**Family Matters**

*Family Matters* is a series of half-hour TV shows jointly produced by the Bowen Center and the University of the District of Columbia since 2006. The format is a one-on-one interview designed to bring out the best and most in-depth observations from professional people with experience in Bowen family systems theory who have spent their professional lives learning about the issues that matter to families.

**Watch episodes of Family Matters:**
youtube.com/thebowencenter
About the Center

Established under the auspices of Georgetown University in 1975, the Center was founded by Dr. Murray Bowen. Dr. Bowen, a pioneer in family research, developed a new theory of human behavior and a different approach to the treatment of human problems. Today, through the various activities of the Center, the theory continues to be refined by the latest knowledge from the various scientific disciplines. The Bowen Center is a 501(c)3 non-profit organization.

Consider Donating to the Bowen Center

Your ongoing generosity is important and makes possible the continued development of theory and engagement for students of Bowen theory around the world. Your tax-deductible donation supports the following initiatives:

- Scholarships to Training Programs
- Spanish Speaking Outreach
- Sliding Scale Clinic
- Family Systems Journal
- Training & Events in-Person and at a Distance
- Caskie Research Fund

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